Learning in Wartime

Timeless Wisdom from C.S. Lewis (1939)

In 1939, as war loomed over Britain, C.S. Lewis delivered a sermon to students at Oxford. He asked a question that feels just as relevant today: In a time of crisis, why should we bother with learning? This guide explores his powerful answer.

The "Enemies" of Learning in a Crisis

Lewis identified three challenges that attack our ability to focus when the world feels chaotic. Think of them as hurdles we all face today.



1. Excitement

The constant storm of news, updates, and anxiety makes it hard to focus. It's like trying to read a book while your phone is buzzing with endless notifications. Lewis reminds us that "human life has always been lived in the shadow of some menace."



2. Frustration

We start to feel like our efforts are pointless. "Why bother with this assignment when there are huge problems in the world?" Lewis challenges the idea that an activity's value is only in its immediate usefulness.



3. Fear

Worry about the future, suffering, and death can make learning feel trivial. "Why start something I might not finish?" Lewis acknowledges this deep human fear but argues we must not let it paralyze us.

✝️ Why Learning Still Matters: A Christian View

Despite the "enemies," Lewis argues that learning is not a luxury—it's a vital human and Christian duty.

🧠 Learning is a Human Vocation

God made us to be curious! Exploring subjects like math, history, and science is a legitimate and good way to use the time we are given. It's part of what makes us human.

✝️ Learning is a Christian Calling

For Christians, our "natural activities" aren't replaced by faith; they are given a higher purpose. Think of Jesus' first miracle: turning water into wine at a wedding. He didn't cancel the party; He elevated it! God doesn't erase our normal lives; He "supernaturalizes" them when we offer them to Him.

💡 Excellence for God's Glory

Lewis believed Christians should aim to be *more* intelligent and cultivated, not less. A Christian society, he argued, should produce "better historians, better scientists, better literary critics." The ultimate goal of any work, whether making a horseshoe or composing a symphony, is to "dig to the glory of God."

Lewis's Practical Advice for Hard Times

So, how do we put this into practice? Lewis offers this straightforward advice.

Do Your Ordinary Duty

Your main job right now might be to be a student, a parent, a worker. Do it well. For a Christian, using your God-given talents is not just a good idea; it's a "super-added reason" to give your best effort.

Focus on the Present

Don't be paralyzed by an uncertain future. Live and work in the here and now. The critical question is not whether you feel "Christian" but whether, "at this moment, for this second, we are doing God's will."

Stay Intellectually Ready

Learning prepares you for future service. Lewis warns, "If you do not go on thinking rationally, you will think irrationally." Keeping your mind sharp is a form of readiness.

Learning as Resistance

Continuing to learn and create culture is an act of defiance against the forces of barbarism and chaos. By valuing knowledge, you help preserve the good things in the world.

Conclusion

"Learning in Wartime" is a powerful defense of intellectual life in a crisis. Lewis urges us to see learning not as an escape, but as a vital part of our duty to God—a way to develop our talents and preserve human culture, even amidst chaos.