

Feature Article: JAF3345

## C. S. LEWIS ON HELL

by Louis Markos

This article first appeared in *Christian Research Journal*, volume 34, number 05 (2011). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

---

Rob Bell's new book, *Love Wins*, has stirred up a great deal of controversy, not only because it seems to suggest universal salvation (that all people will eventually be saved), but because many supporters of Bell have insisted that the controversial aspects of *Love Wins* have already been proposed by the greatest apologist of the twentieth century: C. S. Lewis. Rather than critique Bell's book, I would like to set the record straight on what Lewis did and did not believe.

### THE JOURNEY OF THE MAGI

Those who claim that Lewis advocated universal salvation point to a passage near the end of the final book in the Chronicles of Narnia: *The Last Battle*. In Chapter XV, a noble pagan named Emeth (Hebrew for *truth*) dies and expects to meet the vulture-headed god (Tash) that he has worshipped all his life. He meets instead Aslan (the Christ of Narnia), who tells him that the good that Emeth did for Tash was actually done for Aslan, and that his search for truth has led him to Aslan. Emeth accepts the lordship of Aslan, rejects the falseness of Tash, and is invited into Aslan's Country (heaven).

Now, *if* Emeth had politely asked Aslan to direct him to the Tash part of heaven, and *if* Aslan had sent him on his way to spend eternity with his god, *then* critics of Lewis would be justified in accusing him of teaching universal salvation. But that is not at all what happens! As Emeth stands before Aslan, he realizes that Tash and Aslan are not two different names for the same God, but that they are complete opposites. Rather than learn that all religions are the same, Emeth learns that Aslan alone is the true end of his pagan longings. "Beloved," Aslan explains, "unless thy desire had been for me thou wouldst not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek."

### Revelation

Like the Magi (Matt. 2), or the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8), or Cornelius (Acts 10), faith and salvation in Aslan mark for Emeth the end of a long spiritual pilgrimage. When the true Lord reveals Himself to Emeth, he recognizes Him as the one he has sought all his life. Remember that when Paul preached before the Areopagus in Athens, promising that what they had long worshiped in ignorance he would proclaim to them as known,

there were a few who accepted the revelation. Yes, most laughed at Paul and dismissed his seemingly nonsensical suggestion that the body would be resurrected, but there *were* some who believed, who recognized that this is what they had been seeking all of their lives.

### **POSTMORTEM SALVATION**

Lewis does not teach universal salvation, but he does suggest something that comes very close to postmortem salvation, the belief that we will have chances (or a chance) to accept Christ after we die. Traditional, orthodox Christianity has always held that once we die, all bets are off, and the decision for Christ must be made before we breathe our last breath. The orthodox Lewis, however, seems to say that more chances remain to us.

#### **Time and Eternity**

The reason, I would argue, that Lewis's "flirtation" with postmortem salvation does not take him out of the realm of orthodoxy is that Lewis's point has less to do with doctrine than it does with time. We simply do not understand the difference between time and eternity. Eternity does not mean time going on forever; it means no time at all. God, who dwells in eternity, does not *foresee* the future; He *sees* it as we see the present. On the basis of this vital distinction, Lewis insists in many of his works that God's absolute knowledge of past, present, and future does not obliterate human free will. If my seeing of a present event does not determine that event, why should God's eternally present seeing of our future choices determine or predestine those choices? Since God's knowledge is ever and always a *present* knowledge of our *present* choice, our freedom is not violated.

#### **Searching for Salvation**

Now, let us extend this insight about time and eternity to the end of our lives. The moment we die, we step into an eternal moment that includes within it all other moments (past, present, and future). Might it not be that if I am a person who had no opportunity to accept Christ (either out of ignorance or mental illness or a wretched upbringing that made it psychologically impossible for me to trust the promises of the Christian faith), but whose heart has been yearning for and desiring the true God to fill the God-shaped vacuum within me, might not the living Christ reveal Himself to me in the midst of that eternal moment? And if, in that moment, I recognized (as Emeth does) that Christ is the end of my lifelong search for truth—just as He is the end, not only of the Jewish Law and Prophets, but of all the highest yearnings of the pagans—might Christ not take me to Himself?

### **HEAVEN AS YIELDING**

Notice how often I use the word "might"? Lewis is just as tentative in his suggestions about heaven and hell. In *The Great Divorce*, Lewis conjures for us a lovely fantasy, but he makes it clear that it is a fantasy. He is not recounting a vision given him by God nor preaching a new doctrine. He simply wonders what might happen if the souls of the

damned were allowed to climb aboard a special bus and ride on it to heaven. What if, when they got to heaven, the souls of the blessed who knew them on earth met with them and tried to convince them, even now, to let go of their sin and their narcissism and embrace the love and grace and mercy of Christ? What happens in Lewis's story is that every single soul (except one) willingly chooses to return to hell.

And the one soul that does, in the timeless eternity of heaven, turn to Christ is the one we least expect. It is not the joyless landscape painter who has made painting an end in itself, nor the mother who has sacrificed herself to the memory of her dead son, nor the Episcopal ghost who so "bravely" spoke out against doctrines that no longer appealed to his conscience, nor the wife who devoted herself to making her husband a "success," but a young, pathetic man whose life has been twisted by an addiction to pornography and masturbation who reaches out for mercy. Can this be? Can art, a mother's love, conscience-driven religion, and wifely "sacrifice" keep someone out of heaven more effectively than lust? Yes, Lewis explains, because the "good" things more often make better substitutes for God than the "bad" things. Did not Jesus Himself say that it is the sick who need a doctor and not those who are well? Is that not why the prostitutes and tax collectors (who knew their need) flocked to Jesus, while the self-righteous Pharisees (who thought they were doing quite well) rejected Him?

### **Submission and Salvation**

In *The Great Divorce*, only the lustful ghost cries out for help: he does it softly, tentatively, almost imperceptibly, but he does it. He opens the tiniest rift in his heart, and the love of Christ floods in, transforming the man and the evil lizard who whispers lewd things in his ear into a giant blessed spirit and a noble, powerful horse on which the spirit mounts and rides. Is Lewis then saying that Christianity is only about feeling? No, it is not about feeling; it is about *yielding*: yielding not only to the doctrinal truths of Christianity but also to the person of Christ.

In that moment of death, which is an eternal moment, this poor, twisted, tormented man, like Emeth, yields to both the authority and mercy of Christ. And therein is found the good news and the bad. Heaven and hell, Lewis writes in *The Great Divorce*, work backward. For those who yield, who say to God what Jesus did at Gethsemane, "Thy will be done," it will be as if they were always in heaven; for those who do not, who fight tooth and nail to hold on to their petty idols, it will be as if they were always in hell. That is the final division, the great divorce.

### **GRACE AND CHOICE**

In Book IV, Chapter 10 of *Mere Christianity*, Lewis explains as clearly as possible the earthly process that leads up to that eternal moment of choice that I have discussed thus far and that Lewis embodies so powerfully in his fiction:

*There are people (a great many of them) who are slowly ceasing to be Christians but who still call themselves by that name: some of them are clergymen. There are other people who are slowly becoming Christians though they do not yet call themselves so. There are people who do not*

*accept the full Christian doctrine about Christ but who are so strongly attracted to Him that they are His in a much deeper sense than they themselves understand. There are people in other religions who are being led by God's secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity, and who thus belong to Christ without knowing it. For example, a Buddhist of good will may be led to concentrate more and more on the Buddhist teaching about mercy and to leave in the background (though he might still say he believed) the Buddhist teaching on certain other points. Many of the good Pagans long before Christ's birth may have been in this position.*

This is a bold statement, and with it Lewis pushes the envelope just about as far as it can go. Does he push it too far? I do not think he does. Far from denying the perseverance of the saints or questioning that salvation is in Christ alone, Lewis attempts in this passage to delve into the mysterious nature of what it means to be born anew in Christ—to become what Lewis calls, a little later in the same chapter, a “New Man.” Will we allow Christ to change us (will we yield), or will we move away, not just from doctrine, but from the transforming power of Christ?

### **Recognizing the Revelation**

The Buddhist is not saved by his Buddhism, but his slow, incremental yielding to the Spirit of Christ that reaches out to him through general (as opposed to special) revelation, prepares his heart for what we might call the Emeth moment: that eternal moment at the end of all things when Christ reveals Himself, and we know whether or not it is toward Him that we have been journeying all our lives. God does not judge us on the basis of our raw material (which includes the country where we are born), but on what we do with that raw material. Will we recognize our need and yield to Him, or will we cling on obstinately to our pride, greed, and lust? I know that to some, Lewis's strong focus on choice will sound like a disguised version of “works religion,” but it is not. It is a yielding to the transforming power of Christ. Yes, we must allow Christ to take away our sinful nature and throw it on the scrap heap before He can rebirth us, but such surrendering does not “earn” us our salvation—it merely makes it possible.

It is the rift in the heart that enables the flood of grace to wash in.

**Louis Markos** ([www.Loumarkos.com](http://www.Loumarkos.com)), professor in English and scholar in residence at Houston Baptist University, holds the Robert H. Ray Chair in Humanities. He is the author of *From Achilles to Christ* (IVP Academic, 2007), *Lewis Agonistes* (B&H, 2003), and *Restoring Beauty* (Biblica, 2010). Portions of this essay have been adapted from chapters 8–10 of *Apologetics for the 21st Century* (Crossway, 2010).