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RENDEZVOUS WITH DEATH: C. S. Lewis on Mortality and the Afterlife

by Michael Ward

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President John F. Kennedy's violent exit from this life on November 22, 1963, is undoubtedly the most famous single death of the twentieth century. Everyone old enough to recall the date remembers where they were when they heard the news: the leader of the free world, cut down in an instant; the handsome young husband and father, blown to pieces in front of his wife.

And even those of us too young to remember it feel almost that we were there in Dallas, witnessing the events of that fateful day. Thanks to the Zapruder footage, anyone with access to YouTube can watch the moment of assassination.

If ever we should need a reminder of the inexorable nature of death, here it is. The motorcade turns the corner, and the president dies. The most powerful man in the world can't outrun that curving blade of the Grim Reaper's scythe.

Kennedy had preoccupations with mortality. He often asked his wife to recite to him Alan Seeger's poem, "I Have a Rendezvous with Death." "I have a rendezvous with Death / At some disputed barricade... / And I to my pledged word am true, / I shall not fail that rendezvous." On that day in November 1963, he kept his pledge.

Less than an hour earlier on that same day, several thousand miles away, in Oxford, England, another notable death occurred. This death, however, was not violent or public. News of it did not flash round the world within minutes. It has not spawned a thousand conspiracy theories.

C. S. Lewis, scholar, author, and Christian apologist, died in his own home of natural causes at the age of sixty-four. His brother, Warren Lewis, tells what happened:

22nd of November 1963 began much as other days: there was breakfast, then letters and the crossword puzzle. After lunch he fell asleep in his chair: I suggested that he would be more comfortable in bed, and he went there. At four I took in his tea and found him drowsy but comfortable. Our few words then were the last: at five-thirty I heard a crash and ran in, to find him lying unconscious at the foot of his bed. He ceased to breathe some three or four minutes later.¹

Lewis's demise, compared with that of Kennedy, was unremarkable, and if it weren't for the fact that the two deaths happened in the same hour, we would have no reason to put them together. And yet they did coincide, and their coincidence cannot fail to interest and intrigue us, given that time is one of the means by which God's providence works itself out.

Comparison of the two men shows us the different kinds of power there are in the world. By most reckonings, Kennedy must be considered immeasurably more powerful than Lewis. But if we are assessing power not by the prominence of the office the person held or by the urgency of the issues with which he dealt, but by the depth and durability of the influence he exerted, Lewis must surely now rank as the one with greater power. How many lives has he shaped? How many conversions to Christ has he helped bring about?

Of the many dimensions to Lewis's influence, let me mention just one: mortality and our attitude toward it. Through his depictions of death and of "something after death,"² Lewis has engaged generations of readers at profound levels of mind and soul. The millions of people who have read the seven Narnia Chronicles (and in particular the apocalyptic conclusion to the series, *The Last Battle*) have received from Lewis's pen a way of thinking about these things that is well worth considering. Since beliefs about death affect approaches to life, what we feed on imaginatively in this area is no small matter.

But first, a few biographical facts will show how Lewis came to his own views on death and its aftermath. Lewis's earliest encounter with bereavement was at the age of nine when his mother, Florence, died in 1908. Writing years later about the experience of being taken to see her body, he said, "To this day I do not know what they mean when they call dead bodies beautiful. The ugliest man alive is an angel of beauty compared with the loveliest of the dead."³

Fast-forward a decade, and we find Lewis, on his nineteenth birthday, entering the trenches of the Great War, having been commissioned as an officer in the British army. He remembered "the horribly smashed men still moving like half-crushed beetles, sitting or standing corpses"⁴ and noted how "familiarity both with the very old and the very recent dead confirmed that view of corpses which had been formed the moment I saw my dead mother."⁵

In the 1920s, in the wake of these terrible experiences, Lewis wrestled with questions of good and evil. He was not yet a Christian, but an important intellectual milestone on that journey to faith was his realization that, if the universe were actually as bleak as he felt it to be, he would have no reason for calling it bleak. As he would later observe, an atheist's criticism of the cruelties of the cosmos

is really an unconscious homage to something in or behind that cosmos which he recognizes as infinitely valuable and authoritative: for if mercy and justice were really only private whims of his own with no objective and impersonal roots, and if he realised this, he could not go on being indignant. The fact that he arraigns heaven itself for disregarding them means that at some level of his mind he knows they are enthroned in a higher heaven still.⁶

In the medieval view of the heavens, which Lewis studied intensively as an academic, the heaven of Saturn was considered the place from which many of our greatest griefs came. The planet Saturn, shedding its influence on Earth, was associated with death, pestilence, and disaster. When he became a Christian, Lewis realized existentially that there was a higher heaven than Saturn's—a place the medievals called the Empyrean, the home of God and all the elect. It is because we all (consciously or unconsciously) acknowledge the existence of this higher heaven, the seat of ultimate sovereignty, that we rail against any attempted usurpation of its authority by the forces of Saturnine malignity.

Lewis described the seven heavens of the medieval cosmos as “spiritual symbols of permanent value.”⁷ Indeed, he thought they were “especially worthwhile in our own generation.”⁸ Why so? Because his own generation was, as he put it, “saturnocentric”⁹—inclined to imagine that Saturn's qualities were central and ultimate, whereas in fact they can at most be only passing and penultimate. “Of Saturn we know more than enough,” he wrote, “but who does not need to be reminded of Jove?”¹⁰ Jove (Jupiter) symbolised true divine sovereignty, summer-time, peace. Not malignity but magnanimity. In short, joviality.

But often enough it does actually *seem* as though Saturn is enthroned at the heart of things, and therefore Lewis felt it was right and proper for Christians to acknowledge and express emotions of hopelessness and grief. Jesus Himself wept at the grave of Lazarus and sweated blood before His crucifixion. We should not be ashamed to admit our sorrows and fears.

Lewis was impatient with Christians who uttered bromides about death being a small thing; he thought them naïve and sentimental. In his final Narnia story, *The Last Battle*, he spends the first three quarters of the tale depicting an increasingly bleak and frightening world. He takes his readers down to the very bottom rung of the ladder of sadness as he orchestrates a story of apocalyptic terror. In fact, he dares to do something hardly associated with so-called “children's literature”: he kills off every single character with whom the story opens, and the whole Narnian kingdom itself is brought to an end.

Who brings Narnia to its close? Father Time. “His name was once Saturn,”¹¹ as Lewis wrote in one of his academic works. “Our traditional picture of Father Time with the scythe is derived from earlier pictures of Saturn.”¹² In an early draft, Lewis had named this character “Saturn” rather than Father Time.¹³ We should be in no doubt that they are one and the same figure.

When Father Time awakes in *The Last Battle*, he is told by Aslan to “make an end”¹⁴ of every created thing. He extinguishes the sun by squeezing it in his hand like an orange, and instantly the whole landscape freezes. The result is death in abundance.

But Father Time makes “an end,” not “the end.” Saturn's influence, symbolically speaking, is penultimate, not final. We name Saturday for Saturn and how appropriate that Holy Saturday, the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, should be what links the cross with the resurrection. For Saturn is an ambiguous symbol. As Lewis

wrote in his poem "The Planets": "Melancholy drink / (For bane or blessing) of bitter wisdom / He [Saturn] pours for his people."¹⁵

Although we do not love the draught that Saturn pours, it can nonetheless be drunk for "blessing" and not just "bane." Suffering and death, though evils in themselves, may work together for good for those who love God. And so Lewis deploys Saturnine symbolism to good effect, using it to meditate on that aspect of the Christian life that perhaps we need to hear about more often than any other: divine presence in human loneliness and suffering.

Of all biblical passages, the one that occurs most frequently in Lewis's writings is Christ's cry from the cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46 and Mark 15:34, quoting Ps. 22:1).

The cry of dereliction, although not directly quoted in *The Last Battle*, may be heard echoing in King Tirian's cry from the tree, where he stands bound and bleeding: "And he called out, 'Aslan! Aslan! Aslan! Come and help us now.' But the darkness and the cold and the quietness went on just the same."¹⁶

In spite of such desolation, Tirian persists with his prayer: "'Let *me* be killed,' cried the King. 'I ask nothing for myself. But come and save all Narnia.' And still there was no change in the night or the wood, but there began to be a kind of change inside Tirian. Without knowing why, he began to feel a faint hope. And he felt somehow stronger."¹⁷

Tirian's newfound hope is admittedly somewhat vague. Aslan does not "come and help" in the way Tirian wants, but ultimately the king is stronger for calling on him. Tirian becomes a true contemplative, acquiring "the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1), finding Aslan perceptible despite his invisibility. He becomes resolved to take "the adventure that Aslan would send,"¹⁸ for "we are all between the paws of the true Aslan."¹⁹ Jewel the unicorn likewise keeps the faith, trusting that the ominous-looking stable "may be the door to Aslan's country and we shall sup at his table tonight."²⁰ In all this we are to discern a parallel with Christ's faithful contemplation of His Father, for even in Christ's own cry of dereliction He addressed the One by whom He felt abandoned. As George MacDonald, Lewis's great hero, wrote, "[Christ] could not see, could not feel Him near; and yet it is 'My God' that He cries."²¹

Tirian sees Aslan not with his eyes but with the eyes of his heart, and so is able to heed the truth of the words spoken by the aptly named eagle, Farsight: "Remember that all worlds draw to an end and that noble death is a treasure which no one is too poor to buy."²² Tirian dies nobly, keeping the faith even as his kingdom collapses around him. As a result, after death, Tirian receives the divine accolade from Aslan himself: "Well done, last of the kings of Narnia, who held firm in the darkest hour."²³

The darkest hour is said to be the one just before dawn, and it is the dawning of eternal life that Lewis's depictions of death and disaster are oriented toward. Father Time throws down his horn and is given a new name—presumably Father Eternity, though it remains unspecified. More poignantly, Saturn's defeat is signified in this exchange: "'Isn't it wonderful?' said Lucy. 'Have you noticed one can't feel afraid, even if one wants to? Try it.' 'By Jove, neither one can,' said Eustace, after he had tried."²⁴

Lewis presents us with a Christian vision of mortality that is ultimately Jovial, not Saturnine. Saturn will have his day, to be sure. Each of us faces a rendezvous with death, which may be violent and unexpected like Kennedy's, or natural and domestic like Lewis's. The key question is whether it will be like Christ's, with faith maintained in the Father. —*Michael Ward*

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NOTES

- 1 *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. W. H. Lewis (London: Geoffrey Bles Ltd, 1966), 25.
- 2 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (Act III, Scene i, line 78).
- 3 C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (London: Collins, 1982), 22.
- 4 *Ibid.* 157.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 C. S. Lewis, "De Futilitate," *Christian Reflections* (London: Collins, 1988), 95.
- 7 C. S. Lewis, "The Alliterative Metre," *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 24.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 C. S. Lewis, "Donne and Love Poetry in the Seventeenth Century," *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 113.
- 10 C. S. Lewis, "The Alliterative Metre," *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 24.
- 11 C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1954), 356.
- 12 C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 105.
- 13 See Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 200.
- 14 C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (London: Collins, 1981), 149.
- 15 C. S. Lewis, *Poems*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Geoffrey Bles Ltd, 1964), 15.
- 16 C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (London: Collins, 1981), 45.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Ibid.*,90.
- 19 *Ibid.*,103.
- 20 *Ibid.*,123.
- 21 C. S. Lewis, ed., *George MacDonald, An Anthology* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 18.
- 22 C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (London: Collins, 1981), 88.
- 23 *Ibid.*,140.
- 24 *Ibid.*,164.