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EDITORIAL

Pursuing Scholarship in a Pandemic: Reflections on Lewis's "Learning in War-Time"

— Brian J. Tabb —

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The first time I wore a facemask and plastic gloves to our local grocery story, I was struck by the reality that things were not "normal." In January 2020, the world first learned about a "novel coronavirus" outbreak that infected thousands of people in China. But by March, this faraway epidemic had become a worldwide pandemic that had infected millions and killed thousands, caused dramatic upheavals in the global economy, and fundamentally disrupted business-as-usual for most societies.[1] Church buildings were closed on Easter Sunday. Schools at all levels from preschool to post-graduate studies were forced to adopt online and distance learning options and to hold "virtual" commencement services for graduates. Many universities and seminaries also eliminated faculty positions and degree programs due to declining enrollments, significant budget shortfalls, and uncertain futures.[2] Even as "stay-at-home" orders lifted and businesses and churches began to reopen, an article in *The Atlantic* offered the sober assessment: "There's no going back to 'normal.'"[3]

An eighty-year-old sermon by C. S. Lewis offers timely perspective for these abnormal times. T. R. Milford, the vicar of St. Mary's in Oxford, turned to Lewis—a veteran of the Great War and well-known Christian lecturer at Magdalen College—to address the concerns of Oxford undergraduates at the beginning of World War II. So, on October 22, 1939, Lewis addressed a large, attentive crowd of Oxford students and faculty with the sermon "'None Other Gods': Culture in War-Time." The address was initially published as a pamphlet entitled "The Christian in Danger" and later appeared in a collection of Lewis's occasional messages as "Learning in War-Time."[4]

[1] See further Brian J. Tabb, "Theological Reflections on the Pandemic," *Themelios* 45 (2020): 1–7.

[2] For example, Liberty University laid off philosophy professors and cut its philosophy program. "Enrollment Trends a Factor in Ending Philosophy Degree Program," *Liberty University*, 12 May 2020, https://tinyurl.com/yd2kb729.

[3] Uri Friedman, "I Have Seen the Future—And It's Not the Life We Knew," *The Atlantic*, 1 May 2020, https://tinyurl.com/ydbhpda7.

[4] Walter Hooper, "Introduction," in C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (1949; reprint, New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 17–18.

Lewis reminds us that "life has never been normal."[5] He explains why and how we should pursue serious learning for the glory of God—whether in war or peace-time—and highlights three acute challenges that distract or discourage such scholarship. This article seeks to glean wisdom from Lewis's "war-time" address to inform and encourage pastors, theological students, and other readers who labor during what the apostle would call "the present distress" (1 Cor 7:26).

1. The Need for Serious Learning

Why would any sane person undertake serious study in theology, humanities, or the arts in the middle of a world war or a global pandemic? Such pursuits may seem futile and misguided: an unwise investment of resources and time given the uncertain job market. Some pundits might even proclaim it socially irresponsible to have one's head in the books when the lives of millions of people hang in the balance. We might be tempted to think that engaging in patient, careful scholarship at such times is analogous to "fiddling while Rome burns" (p. 47). Lewis addresses these sorts of objections to traditional university studies due to the uncertainties and urgencies of World War II by arguing that we must attempt to "see the present calamity in a true perspective" (p. 49). A war—or a pandemic—does not really create a "new situation"; rather, it forces us to recognize "the permanent human situation" that people have always "lived on the edge of a precipice" (p. 49). "Normal life" is a myth; if people wait for optimal conditions before searching out knowledge of what is true, good, and beautiful, they will never begin. Lewis reminds us that past generations had their share of crises and challenges, yet human beings chose to pursue knowledge and cultural activities anyway. It's not possible to suspend our "whole intellectual and aesthetic activity" during a crisis (p. 52). We will go on reading even in war-time—the question is whether we will read good books that challenge us to think deeply and clearly or whether we will spend our time on shallow, banal distractions.

Lewis argues that we should not sharply distinguish between our "natural" and "spiritual" human activities since "every duty is a religious duy" (pp. 53–55). Whether someone is a composer or cleaner, a classicist or carpenter, their natural work becomes spiritual when they offer it humbly "as to the Lord" (pp. 55–56). Thus, intellectual pursuits of knowledge and beauty even in war-time can and do glorify God, though Lewis warns against making scholarly success into an idol if we "delight not in the exercise of our talents but in the fact that they are ours, or even in the reputation they bring us" (p. 57).

What vocations are "essential" in a modern society? During the COVID-19 pandemic, most federal, state, and local governments temporarily closed many sectors of society while allowing only "essential" workers to remain on the job. The work of philosophers, historians, and theologians (for example) may seem expendable, while the work of emergency doctors and vaccine researchers is deemed critical in a society pummeled by a deadly disease. However, such an assessment is short-sighted if we consider the long-term flourishing of human society.

Philosophy concerns the pursuit of wisdom.[6] Students of philosophy learn to make sound arguments, reflect deeply on what is true, good, and beautiful, and consider how we should live in a complex world. A society with little regard for truth, logic, aesthetics, or morals would be "a brave new world" indeed! Lewis calls on Christian scholars to serve the church by working harder and thinking more deeply to

[5] C. S. Lewis, "Learning in War-Time," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (1949; reprint, New York: HarperCollins, 1949), 49. Hereafter I cite Lewis's address with parenthetical page references.

[6] Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* 1177a.

promote "good philosophy" that offers true answers and reasonable defenses against the philosophical fads and fashions of the age (p. 58).

Similarly, we need to study the past to rightly evaluate the challenges and concerns of the present. As the Preacher reminds us, "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl 1:9). Words like "unprecedented" have often been used for the coronavirus pandemic, yet ours is hardly the first generation to face the threat of deadly disease. Good history allows us to "relativize ourselves and our times," leading to greater understanding of our world and our place in it.[7] By analyzing past times and peoples, Lewis suggests that the serious student of history builds up intellectual antibodies that offer some immunity "from the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and the microphone of his own age" (p. 59).

Lewis does not directly address the nature and need for serious theological study in "Learning in War-Time," but elsewhere he reasons that "any man who wants to think about God at all would like to have the clearest and most accurate ideas about Him which are available."[8] He insists that theology is practical, particularly in war-time, as everyone has their own ideas about God (many of them wrong) and is susceptible to various theological novelties "which real Theologians tried centuries ago and rejected."[9] While the coronavirus pandemic has disrupted the global economy, claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, and radically altered "normal" life for most people, it has also forced many to wrestle with their own mortality and ultimate questions. Lewis reasons, "War makes death real to us.... We see unmistakably the sort of universe in which we have all along been living, and must come to terms with it" (pp. 62–63). Applying Lewis's words to our present crisis, we realize that there is a critical need and urgent opportunity for serious biblical and theological scholarship that expounds "the bed-rock foundation of the historic faith" in humble service to Christ and his church.[10] Wars and pandemics remind people that something is deeply wrong in our world. Christian theology informs that intuition by revealing that armed conflicts and rogue viruses are symptoms of the deepest problem in the universe: humans have rebelled against the Creator God, who will judge everyone according to their works. Thus, the true solution to our ills runs not through the White House or the W.H.O. but through Calvary, where the Son of God suffered and died for sinners and then disarmed death by conquering the grave.

A search of the library archives reveals that many students did indeed go on "learning in war-time" at Oxford and other universities.[11] The noted scholar of the early church, W. H. C. Frend, completed his DPhil thesis on North African Christianity at Oxford in 1940. George B. Caird finished his Oxford doctorate in 1944, writing on the New Testament concept of glory, and went on to serve as the university's Dean Ireland's Professor of the Exegesis of Holy Scripture. To these examples we could add war-time Oxford theses on Bacon's use of Scripture (1940), post-biblical Hebrew syntax (1943), Bucer and the English Reformation (1943), the worship of the English Puritans (1944), Barth's conception of grace (1945), Augustine's work *Against the Academics* (1945), and dozens more. This historical perspective

[7] Carl R. Truemann, *Histories and Fallacies: Problems Faced in the Writing of History* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 174.

[8] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 153.

[9] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 155.

[10] Brian J. Tabb, "*Themelios* Then and Now: The Journal's Name, History, and Contribution," *Themelios* 44 (2019): 4.

[11] The examples in this paragraph come from the British Library's EThOS catalog, https://ethos.bl.uk/Home.do.

should offer encouragement to contemporary seminarians and graduate students committed to learning in pandemic-time despite financial pressures, library closures, and uncertain employment prospects.

2. Three Enemies of Serious Learning

Lewis identifies three "enemies" that rise up against scholars in times such as war: excitement, frustration, and fear.

2.1. Excitement

The first such enemy is *excitement*, by which Lewis means "the tendency to think and feel about the war when we had intended to think about our work" (pp. 59–60). That is, scholars can become distracted by a current crisis and fail to invest their full energy in their scholarly pursuits. Today, danger of "excitement" takes the form of preoccupation with social media, constantly scrolling Twitter and searching Google to follow the latest news and analysis about the number of confirmed coronavirus cases, the perilous economic situation, and the state of political turmoil in Washington, London, or Johannesburg. This is not an obvious enemy to scholarship; it feels natural to stay up-to-date on current events, and who wants to appear uninformed when people are losing their jobs and suffering from a lethal virus? Such "excitement" or distraction hinders us from pursuing what Cal Newport calls "deep work"—activities in which we focus our full concentration and push our cognitive capacities to their limits.[12] Distraction-free work hones our abilities and harnesses our energy to creates something of true and lasting value. It's much easier to write tweets and scan headlines than it is to analyze Hebrew syntax, develop philosophical proofs, or read dense Puritan prose.

Lewis reminds us that "there are always plenty of rivals to our work" (p. 60). COVID-19 did not create the enemy of "excitement" but only aggravates our preexisting condition. Long before the recent coronavirus outbreak, people spent far too much time consuming social media on their smart phones and watching CNN "breaking news." Tony Reinke writes, "The human appetite for distraction is high in every age, because distractions give us easy escape from the silence and solitude whereby we become acquainted with our finitude, our inescapable mortality, and the distance of God from all our desires, hopes, and pleasures."[13] We crave what seems immediate, exciting, and relevant, and we are often all too willing to break from our deep work that feels tedious or mundane to make sure that we do not miss out on a friend's status update or the latest headlines about today's troubles. Lewis cautions, "If we let ourselves, we shall always be waiting for some distraction or other to end before we can really get down to our work" (p. 60). There's never really an optimal time to learn an ancient language or to write a monograph or a thesis. We must pursue knowledge and the work of scholarship even when conditions seem unsuitable, because "favourable conditions never come" (p. 60). We may imitate the awareness and resolve of the men of Issachar, "who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do" (1 Chr 12:32). For a proper perspective on our present circumstances, "we need intimate knowledge

[12] Cal Newport, *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 3.

[13] Tony Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 44–45.

of the past" (p. 58). Thus, the pastor unsure how to lead his church amid a pandemic may learn from how Christians responded to epidemics and pandemics in previous generations.[14]

2.2. Frustration

Frustration or anxiety is the second foe that scholars must face—"the feeling that we shall not have time to finish" (p. 60). The Oxford undergraduates and others who gathered to hear Lewis's 1939 address had family and friends on the front lines of the war. They worried about German air raids and experienced the challenges of war-time blackouts and paper shortages.[15] Lewis reasons, "If our parents have sent us to Oxford, if our country allows us to remain there, this is *prima facie* evidence that the life which we, at any rate, can best lead to the glory of God at present is the learned life" (p. 56).

Scholars will never finish every book and article that they aspire to write; pastors will likely retire or die before completing the sermon series that they have planned. Virgil—the greatest Roman poet—died in 19 BC before finishing his epic work, *The Aeneid*.[16] Likewise, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Franz Kafka, Mark Twain, and countless other writers left behind unfinished novels. One also thinks of "America's theologian" Jonathan Edwards, who died before completing his great magnum opus, *A History of the Work of Redemption*.[17] And the great biblical scholar J. B. Lightfoot left unpublished commentaries and detailed exegetical notes on John's Gospel, Acts, 2 Corinthians, and 1 Peter that were discovered and published over a century after his death.[18]

Lewis reminds us, "Happy work is best done by the man who takes his long-term plans somewhat lightly and works from moment to moment 'as to the Lord.' … The present is the only time in which any duty can be done or any grace received" (p. 61). Thus, we should not respond to the foe of "frustration" with inaction like the foolish servant who hid his master's money in the ground rather than investing it (Matt 25:18, 24–27). At the same time, we must guard against the proud presumption that James 4:13–16 warns about by recognizing that whenever we enroll in a degree program, plan a sermon series, or sign a book contract, we must humbly acknowledge, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that" (Jas 4:15).

2.3. Fear

Fear is the third enemy that confronts those who would learn in war-time. "War threatens us with death and pain," yet Lewis urges us to remember, "100 percent of us die, and the percentage cannot be increased" (p. 61). War—or a coronavirus—may impact the cause or timing of death, but it does

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[14] See, for example, Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 114–19; Geoff Chang, "5 Lessons from Spurgeon's Ministry in a Cholera Outbreak," *The Gospel Coalition*, 17 March 2020, https://tinyurl.com/y7scygfh; Jonathan Leeman and Michael Haykin, "Pastoring in a Pandemic, Episode 10: How Christians throughout the Ages Have Responded to Plagues and Pandemic," *9Marks*, 15 May 2020, https://tinyurl.com/yccujywm.

[15] Alister E. McGrath, *C. S. Lewis, A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2013), 191–92.

[16] F. J. Miller, "Evidences of Incompleteness in the 'Aeneid' of Vergil," *The Classical Journal* 4 (1909).

[17] George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 193–94.

[18] Ben Witherington III explains the circumstances of this discovery in his introduction to J. B. Lightfoot, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Newly Discovered Commentary*, ed. Ben Witherington III and Todd D. Still, The Lightfoot Legacy Set 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 21–25.

not change its certainty. In fact, a perilous crisis such as a world war or a global pandemic forces us to "remember" death and "be always aware of our mortality" (p. 62). The World Health Organization began publishing daily situation reports about the coronavirus on 21 January 2020, when there were only 282 confirmed cases; four months later, the global count exceeds 6 million cases and 375,000 reported deaths.[19] These swelling numbers are shocking and sobering, yet they also remind us of what has been true all along: we are mortal and will all die. This realization that we "are not here to live forever" in fact moves us to live more fully today for others and for God.[20] As creatures living in uncertain and abnormal times—because times are *never* certain or normal—Lewis challenges us to humbly offer to God our pursuit of learning as "one of the appointed approaches to the Divine reality and the Divine beauty which we hope to enjoy hereafter" (p. 63).

Moses powerfully confronts us with our own mortality and offers us needed wisdom in Psalm 90.[21] We must reckon with our creaturely limits—"the years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty"—and say to our Maker, "From everlasting to everlasting you are God" (vv. 2, 10). Whether we face armed conflict, coronavirus, or some other toil and trouble in this life, we pray, "So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom" (v. 12). Our days have already been numbered by the one Daniel calls "the Ancient of Days." With our mortal span in mind, we ask the everlasting God to gladden and satisfy us for all of our days and then to "establish the work of our hands" (vv. 14–15, 17).

This closing prayer fittingly expresses the dependence and determination of Christian scholars committed to learning in war-time, as well as all followers of Christ who trust that their labors "in the Lord" are not in vain (1 Cor 15:58).[22]

[19] "Coronavirus Disease (COVID-2019) Situation Reports," *World Health Organization*, https://tinyurl.com/y9uuc9t9.

[20] David Gibson, *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End* (Wheaton, IL Crossway, 2017), 114. See also Daniel Strange, "The Rolling Stones Will Stop," *Themelios* 43 (2018): 173–77.

[21] See Mike Bullmore, "Numbering and Being Glad in Our Days: A Meditation on Psalm 90," *Themelios* 41 (2016): 289–92.

[22] Thanks to Kristin Tabb, Andy Naselli, and Matthew Westerholm for sharing helpful feedback on an earlier version of this article.