

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

The Screwtape Letters- by C.S. Lewis

Part 7: Dryness¹

Many of the great spiritual authors throughout the centuries have written on the experience of “dryness” that frequently accompanies our prayer. By “dryness,” they mean those times when we do not *feel* God’s presence. During these times, things might seem dark and prayer might be difficult and full of distractions. We might feel like the time we spent in prayer did not accomplish anything. We might even think of a million other things that we could be doing rather than “wasting” time in prayer.

While spiritual dryness is never a pleasant experience, it is a very necessary part of spiritual growth. It is during these spiritually “dry” times that we cling to the only thing we have left—faith. During this time, we are invited by God to faithfully make ourselves present to Him in prayer, not desiring to feel or know His presence and love, but simply being present to Him and trusting that He is present to us.

In The Screwtape Letters, Lewis notes that evil spirits love these periods of spiritual dryness and make every effort to distract us from our presence with God. The seasoned demon, Screwtape, relishes the fact that, during these times of dryness it is easy to distract us. He writes to his nephew, “A few weeks ago, you had to tempt [the Christian] to unreality and inattention in his prayers: but now you will find him opening his arms to you and almost begging you to distract his purpose and benumb his heart. You no longer need a good book, which he really likes, to keep him from his prayers or his work or his sleep; a column of advertisements in yesterday’s paper will do.”²

Calling these times of dryness, “troughs,” Screwtape continues, “I have always found that the trough periods of the human undulation provide excellent opportunity for all sensual temptations, particularly those of sex.”³ He explains this method of attack by writing, “The attack has a much better chance of success when the man’s whole inner world is drab and cold and empty.”⁴

As if it was not bad enough that Satan tempts us when we are struggling to faithfully surrender to a God who seems distanced, Screwtape mentions a second plan of attack for us. “Let [the Christian] assume... that his present dryness is an equally permanent condition. Having once got this misconception well fixed in his head, you may then proceed in various ways.”⁵

Screwtape understands the two ways of proceeding as depending on the type of Christian that is being preyed upon by the demon. If the person is the “desponding type who can be tempted to despair,” then Screwtape suggests that he be kept from other “experienced” Christians and make him think that by his own will-power he can recapture his feelings of God’s presence.⁶ The other type of Christian is the “wishful-thinking type.” The evil spirits are encouraged to tempt him to substitute and accept apathy for spiritual dryness.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola suggests that during times of spiritual dryness we maintain our usual spiritual practices and prayer times. Additionally, he suggests that we spend time meditating on previous experiences of God’s loving presence, continuing to excavate inspiration and grace from them. Rather than succumbing to Satan’s temptations, we are called to stand in opposition to them, trusting that our God is present to us whether we *feel* Him or not.

¹ This article is part seven of a twelve part series that I am writing on C.S. Lewis’ The Screwtape Letters.

² The Screwtape Letters, C.S. Lewis, HarperSanFrancisco, 2001, pg. 59.

³ Ibid. pg. 43.

⁴ Ibid. pg. 43.

⁵ Ibid. pg. 45.

⁶ Ibid. pg. 45.