

# The Screwtape Letters

## Study Guide

For the novel by C.S. Lewis

by Michael S. Poteet

CONFIDENTIAL

OFFICIAL

INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM

TOP SECRET

TO: Wormwood, Patient Care Division

TO: *I Illustrious Screwtape, Home Office* RECEIVED

TO: Wormwood, Patient Care Division

TO: *The Illustrious Screwtape, Home Office* RECEIVED

TO: Wormwood, Patient Care Division

TO: *Illustrious Screwtape* PRIORITY RECEIVED

TO: Wormwood, Patient Care Division

TO: *Illustrious Screwtape, Home Office* RECEIVED

TO: Wormwood, Patient Care Division

TO: *Illustrious Screwtape, Home Office* RECEIVED

TO: Wormwood, Patient Care Division

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TO: *Screwtape* RECEIVED

TO: Wormwood, Patient Care Division

TO: *Most Illustrious Screwtape, Home Office* RECEIVED

TO: Wormwood, Patient Care Division

TO: *Uncle Screwtape* RECEIVED



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**The Screwtape Letters Study Guide**

A Progeny Press Study Guide

by Michael S. Poteet

edited by Michael S. Gilleland

cover design by Michael S. Gilleland and Andrew Clausen

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PO Box 100, Fall Creek, WI 54742-0100.

Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN: 978-1-58609-382-2 Book

978-1-58609-260-3 CD

978-1-58609-474-4 Set

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## Synopsis

Screwtape, an undersecretary in the Lowerarchy of Hell, has undertaken the guidance and tutelage of his nephew Wormwood, who has been assigned a human patient to secure for eternity. In a series of letters, Screwtape guides the young demon through the finer points of temptation, the weaknesses and foibles of human beings, and the disaster of his patient becoming a Christian. Though this certainly complicates things, the two infernal beings won't let it stop them.

From this very skewed perspective, C. S. Lewis digs into human nature, revealing some interesting, and sometimes embarrassing, tendencies. Touching on everything from sleeplessness to the “absurdity” of God’s love for humanity, Screwtape imparts his wicked wisdom to Wormwood. Though the mirror he holds up to humanity is warped and cracked, it is still painfully revealing. Wit and parody mask a very serious analysis of what makes humans tick; and though it may make readers smile, it will also make us squirm as Screwtape picks at the cracks in our façades.

## Preface, Epigraphs, and Letters 1–4

### Vocabulary:

Choose the best definition given for each underlined word below. Consider the word's context (surrounding material) when deciding on your answer.

1. [H]undreds of these adult converts have been reclaimed after a brief sojourn in the Enemy's camp and are now with us.
  - a. departure
  - b. temporary stay
  - c. arrival
  - d. tour
  
2. "[S]ons" is the word He uses, with His inveterate love of degrading the whole spiritual world by unnatural liaisons with the two-legged animals.

#### **inveterate:**

- a. habitual
- b. curious
- c. temporary
- d. eternal

#### **liaisons:**

- a. connections
- b. experiments
- c. improvements
- d. communications

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3. . . . his attention is therefore chiefly turned at present to the states of his own mind—or rather to that very expurgated version of them which is all you should allow him to see.
- a. blemished
  - b. censored
  - c. detailed
  - d. untruthful
4. Aggravate that most useful human characteristic, the horror and neglect of the obvious.
- a. weaken
  - b. punish
  - c. illuminate
  - d. intensify
5. It is, no doubt, impossible to prevent his praying for his mother, but we have means of rendering the prayers innocuous.
- a. dangerous
  - b. effective
  - c. harmless
  - d. acceptable
6. I have had patients of my own so well in hand that they could be turned at a moment's notice from impassioned prayer for a wife's or son's "soul" to beating or insulting the real wife or son without a qualm.
- a. motivation
  - b. misgiving
  - c. temper
  - d. thought

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7. Is she at all . . . piqued that he should have learned from others, and so late, what she considers she gave him such good opportunity of learning in childhood?
- a. excited
  - b. saddened
  - c. confused
  - d. angered
8. There will be images derived from pictures of the Enemy as He appeared during the discreditable episode known as the Incarnation: there will be vaguer—perhaps quite savage and puerile—images associated with the other two Persons [of the Trinity].

**discreditable:**

- a. slanderous
- b. remarkable
- c. distasteful
- d. worthless

**puerile:**

- a. mature
- b. juvenile
- c. ruthless
- d. rash

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### Questions About the Preface:

1. According to C. S. Lewis, what two mistaken beliefs about devils can human beings hold? What do you see as the dangers inherent in each view? What is your belief about the literal existence or non-existence of devils? Why do you believe as you do?
2. *The Screwtape Letters* is an *epistolary novel*—that is, a novel told in the form of letters. Authors use this style to create *verisimilitude*—to make it look as real and true as possible. What details in the Preface allow Lewis to create verisimilitude?
3. Apart from verisimilitude, what other motives might Lewis have had for using the epistolary approach in this book?
4. Lewis tells us that Screwtape—the narrator through whom we “hear” the book—is unreliable. What does Lewis’s evaluation of Screwtape have in common with Jesus’ words about the devil in John 8:44? Why would Lewis tell us that the voice through which he is speaking is unreliable?



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### ***Epigraphs:***

5. An *epigraph* is a quotation put at the beginning of a piece of literature that sets a tone or introduces a theme. What do the epigraphs from Martin Luther (1483–1546) and Sir Thomas More (1478–1535) suggest about *The Screwtape Letters*?

### **Parody:**

A *parody* imitates something else, usually for satirical effect. Often parody is for comic effect—sometimes to make fun of, but often to have fun *with*. An example of comic parody might be a Veggie Tales cartoon like *Larry Boy and the Fib from Outer Space*, which parodies superhero cartoons. Some parody, however, may use the form, style, or subject of another work to add insight or perspective to the original work or to bring insight to the new work.

6. What specific items from scripture or Christian theology do you see parodied in these letters? Add to your list as you read the rest of the book.
7. Throughout *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis presents Hell—and its representatives, including Screwtape—as a parody of Heaven. Why do you think Lewis presents Hell in this semicomical way, rather than with more traditional images of “fire and brimstone”? What serious theological claim about Hell might Lewis be making through his use of parody?

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**Questions About Letters 1–4:**

1. What is the relationship between Screwtape and Wormwood?
2. Why does Screwtape refer to the man who is the subject of Wormwood's letters as "the patient"?
3. How would you summarize the strategy Screwtape suggests that Wormwood adopt in these four letters?
4. From Screwtape's point of view, who is "the Enemy"? Who is "Our Father"?

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### **Analysis:**

5. The word “Wormwood” is found in Scripture, though generally not as a proper name. In the King James Version or the New American Standard Version of the Bible, read Jeremiah 9:15; Lamentations 3:15, 19; Amos 6:12; and Revelation 8:10, 11. What connotations does this name have (you may also wish to read the verses in the New International Version)? Why do you think Lewis chose it for Screwtape’s nephew?
  
6. Throughout the book, Lewis satirizes several modern philosophies by having Screwtape remark that Hell can take credit for them, or for human beings’ response to them. In Letter 1, for instance, Screwtape encourages Wormwood to keep the patient devoted to “materialism” as “the philosophy of the future.” Based on inferences you can draw from this letter, what is the philosophy of materialism, and why does Screwtape view it as an ally in the devil’s cause?
  
7. Screwtape encourages Wormwood to keep his patient’s attention fixed on “real life.” What does Screwtape mean by “real life”?

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8. Though presented as fictional correspondence, *The Screwtape Letters* is a work of *apologetics*—a defense of faith through rational argument—though in these letters the Christian point of view is revealed by negative inference rather than directly stated. Screwtape steers Wormwood away from using rational argument, however. “The trouble about argument is that it moves the whole struggle onto the Enemy’s own ground.” Why does Screwtape see argument as problematic?
  
9. Why do you think Screwtape tells Wormwood to keep his patient from reading science?

### **Dig Deeper:**

10. In Letter 1, Screwtape mentions an “abominable advantage” that God has over Satan. He also alludes to it in Letter 4. Read Matthew 1:18–25; John 1:1–18; Colossians 1:15–20; and Hebrews 1:1–4; 2:10–18. To what is Screwtape referring? In what way is this advantage also an advantage to Christians?

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11. In Letter 2, Screwtape says “the Church itself” is an ally to the diabolical cause. In what sense? Read Matthew 16:18; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Ephesians 1:3–14; 4:1–6; Revelation 7:9–17. Why are these texts about the nature of the Church important?
12. How important do you think specific expressions of the church are (e.g., denominations; forms and styles of worship, etc.)? When can such things become barriers, rather than aids, to worshiping and serving God?
13. In Letter 2, what “anticlimax” does Screwtape expect the patient will experience? According to him, why does God allow Christians to go through such experiences? Have you faced these experiences in your own spiritual life? What has resulted? Discuss your experiences with other, especially older, Christians.
14. In Letter 2, Screwtape claims that Wormwood’s patient is not fully convinced of his own sinfulness: “He has not been anything like long enough with the Enemy to have any real humility yet. . . . At bottom, he still believes he has run up a very favourable credit balance in the Enemy’s ledger by allowing himself to be converted. . . .” Read Genesis 6:5; Psalm 19:12; Jeremiah 9:23, 24; 17:9; Luke 18:9–14; Romans 3:21–28; Ephesians 2:1–10; and 1 John 1:5–10. How

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do these passages speak to the issues of (1) our ability to know fully the extent of our sin; (2) the meaning of true humility; and (3) whether or not we can, as Screwtape puts it, “run up a very favourable credit balance” with God?

15. In Letter 3, Screwtape implies that true conversion is not a merely internal process. Read Luke 3:7–14; Romans 12:1, 2 and Ephesians 2:8–10. What is to be one of the results of true conversion? In your opinion, what biblical figures best exemplify true conversion? How have you seen true conversion in the lives of Christians you know or know about?
16. How might you apply Jesus’ words in Matthew 7:1–5 and Paul’s in Romans 12:10–18 to the patient’s relationship with his mother? How has the behavior Jesus condemns here been a problem for you? How have you dealt, or might you deal, with that problem?
17. In Letter 3, Screwtape notes that Wormwood’s patient has tricked himself into praying for “an imaginary person”: his mother’s “soul,” rather than the body-*and*-soul mother with whom he actually lives. Read Matthew 6:11 and James 5:13–18, and skim the book of Psalms. What do all these texts suggest about praying for tangible needs and real people? Why do you think it is so easy to

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“spiritualize” our prayers, emptying them of any reference to our daily experiences and concerns?

18. In Letter 4, Screwtape makes much of the fact that human beings “do not start from [a] direct perception” of God. Read Exodus 33:17–23; 1 Corinthians 13:8–12; and 1 John 4:12. What do these texts suggest about how we see God?
  
19. In Letter 4, Screwtape tells his nephew, “teach them to estimate the value of each prayer by their success in producing the desired feeling; and never let them suspect how much success or failure of that kind depends on whether they are well or ill, fresh or tired, at the moment.” Do you think we often judge the quality of our relationship with God by how we feel? Read 1 Kings 18 and 19. How does Elijah’s experience compare with Screwtape’s statement? What can we learn from both?

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20. In Letter 4, Screwtape says true, effective prayer is very difficult for us because “humans themselves do not desire it as much as they suppose,” and so are easily distracted, partly because we fear the “nakedness of the soul in prayer.” Do you think this is true? Why or why not? Read Romans 8:26–27. What consolation do you think these verses could offer a person struggling to pray?

### **Optional Activities:**

1. *Written Report:* You may wish to research and prepare a brief report on the lives of Martin Luther and/or Thomas More.
2. *Write a Prayer:* You may on your own, but preferably as part of a group, write a prayer that—contrary to the Screwtape’s instructions!—prays for the real needs of real people, both others and yourself. You might ask your pastor, priest, or other religious leader if your prayer could be used in an upcoming service of worship.
3. *Research/Position Paper:* In the first paragraph of Letter 2, Screwtape berates Wormwood for allowing his patient to become a Christian, but then says, “There is no need to despair; hundreds of these adult converts have been reclaimed after a brief sojourn in the Enemy’s camp and are now with us.” Keeping in mind Lewis’s caveat in the Preface that “not everything that Screwtape says should be assumed to be true,” the implication is that a person can become a Christian but then lose his or her Christianity—we can have God’s salvation and then lose it. This is an issue that has been hotly debated within Christianity. The two main positions can be generally described by the terms *Calvinist* (Christians cannot lose salvation) and *Arminian* (Christians can lose salvation). [Note that is a descriptive summary, not a full explanation.] Write a fully researched position paper examining both sides of the question:



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Can a person become a true Christian and then lose his salvation? The topic is complicated and positions are hotly defended, so feel free to seek help from religious leaders in finding good resources. Some (certainly not all) relevant scriptures follow:

*Calvinist (Christians cannot lose salvation):* John 3:6; 3:16–18; 5:24; 10:28; 19:30; Romans 3:24; 4:4, 5, 16, 22–24; 6:23; 8:1, 9, 28–30; 11:6, 29; 1 Corinthians 1:30; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Ephesians 1:13, 14; 4:30; Philippians 1:6; Colossians 1:13, 14; 2:8–14; 3:1–4; Hebrews 5:9; 7:25; 10:17; 12:5–11; 2 Timothy 1:12; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 1:5; 1 John 1:6–9; 5:11, 13, 16.

*Arminian (Christians can lose salvation):* Matthew 7:21–23; 24:13; Luke 8:13; Romans 11:20–23; 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10; 15:2; Galatians 5:4; 5:19–21; Hebrews 3:14; 6:4–6; 1 Timothy 4:1; James 2:26; 2 Peter 1:20, 11; 2:21; Revelation 3:5.

**Caveat:** It is easy to get into proof texting in argumentation—pulling scriptures out to prove one’s point without regard to their true context. Do not be misled by this, and guard against proof texting in your paper.

4. *Creative Project:* Given our limited vision of God, we often rely on mental impressions of God. Spend some time searching the Scripture for various images of God. With which images are you most comfortable? Which images surprise you? Which images seem to be most prominent in your particular denomination or faith tradition? Make a collage of the images of God that you find, either using pictures cut from magazines or your own artwork, or write a poem using some of this imagery in a poetic prayer.
5. *Essay:* In Letter 4, Screwtape quotes from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem “The Pains of Sleep,” saying “That is exactly the sort of prayer we want.” Find this poem and read the entire thing. (You should check your local library or search the internet for a copy of the poem.) Write a one- to two-page essay discussing what you think the poem means and how it relates to Screwtape’s statement.

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3. To blind the patient to the reality that his spiritual life has grown steadily worse or to subtly aggravate a vague sense of guilt.

### *Dig Deeper:*

4. Screwtape says Wormwood should exploit these new friendships by postponing the patient's realization that his faith opposes his friends' worldview. Once that realization does occur, however, the patient should be induced to lead "two parallel lives"—i.e., to think and act one way among his new friends and a different way among fellow believers. He should also encourage the patient to think he is better than both groups because he sees the "other" side of life.

5. Responses will vary.

6. Students will think of various biblical friendships based on their knowledge of the Bible; possible responses include Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan, or Jesus and the disciples. Proverbs 17:17 and 18:24 point to faithful loyalty as a defining characteristic of godly friendships; 22:24 advises the faithful not to make friends with the "hot-tempered," and 27:6 speaks of a friend who inflicts "wounds," but only for another's good. James states that we cannot be friends with both "the world" and God. Jesus is our friend because, as he tells his followers, he laid down his life for us and has shown us God.

7. Joy comes from abiding in obedience Christ's love (John 15:10–11) and in living in relationship with God the Father through the resurrected Christ (John 16:22).

8. Screwtape is referring to the guilt we feel because of our sinfulness versus God's perfection. If we do not confess our sin, we are claiming to be sinless; John identifies this as self-deception (1:8). If, however, we confess our sin, we can expect forgiveness and purification (1:9) through "Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (2:1) who is "the atoning sacrifice" for sins (2:2). Our guilt will be replaced by reassurance, but only through confession.

9. Screwtape says the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the road we do not recognize we are on until it is too late. Matthew 7:13, 14 teaches that the road to destruction is broad (i.e., easy to follow), while the road to life is narrow (i.e., more difficult to follow).

### *Letters 13–16*

#### *Vocabulary:*

Accept reasonable responses; consult a dictionary or thesaurus. Some possible responses are: 1. suffocating/encouraging breath; 2. brutal/gentle; 3. observable, obvious/hidden, concealed; 4. pride/humility; 5. one full of expertise, expert/one lacking expertise, philistine; 6. trite comments/profound comments

#### *Questions:*

1. He allowed the patient to experience true pleasures.

2. Pains and pleasures are both "unmistakably real" and, as the previous letters have demonstrated, Screwtape and the other demons lead us away from God by way of unrealities and falsehoods.

3. As long as the patient does not act on feelings of piety, he will not draw nearer to God; also, lack of action leads to lack of further feeling.

4. Screwtape advises Wormwood to draw the patient's attention, and therefore pride, to his own humility. Screwtape also tells Wormwood to lead his patient to mistake self-deprecation for genuine humility.

5. That God really loves human beings.

6. The past is like eternity because "it has a determinate nature"; in other words, it IS. In contrast, the future is unknowable to humans, and is "the most completely temporal part of time"—i.e., that part of time most subject to change. For this reason, the demons want us to live in the future, because so doing produces uncertainty, vice, and reliance on ourselves rather than on God. God only wants us to focus on the future to the extent that we can plan "acts of justice and charity" for it.

7. The vicar is "watering down the faith" for a congregation he considers too dull to understand it to such a degree that he "shocks his parishioners with his unbelief." Also, he ignores the full testimony and teaching of Scripture in favor of his own favorite passages. He is not searching for, nor communicating, truth. Father Spike, in his preaching, aims to "shock, grieve, puzzle, [and] humiliate his parents and their friends" out of hatred. Yet Father Spike's defect is that "he really believes." Neither is he searching for nor communicating truth, but because he believes he may still be sensitive to it.

#### *Analysis:*

8. Screwtape says the patient has undergone repentance and renewal and may be even closer and more committed to God than before. Personal responses will vary and should be treated with respect and sensitivity, especially towards those

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students who may feel they are seeking but not arriving—whether through repeated “conversions” or because of no conversion or a dry relationship with God.

9. When we are innocently true to our own likes and dislikes, we reflect God’s call to self-forgetfulness.

10. Personal responses will vary. As Screwtape says, when we do what others want without agreeing with it, or change our behavior just to go along, we are not being honest. Sometimes it even puts our will into someone else’s power—we are controlled by what someone else says is “good,” “popular,” “proper,” or “right.”

*Dig Deeper:*

11. True humility is a proper, balanced recognition of our God-given gifts. Screwtape actually gives a very good analysis of it: “[God] wants each man . . . to be able to recognise all creatures (even himself) as glorious and excellent things.” In contrast, Screwtape wants Wormwood to foster a false humility: an attempt to have a lower opinion of himself than is deserved. As Screwtape says, we are to use our gifts for the good of our neighbors and for the glory of God, without any thought of glory for ourselves. The command to “[l]ove your neighbor as yourself” in Mark 12:31, 33 confirms Screwtape’s analysis. Answers regarding the difficulty of true humility may vary, but, based on Letter 14 (e.g., “they might as well be proud of the colour of their hair”), the main problem seems to be realizing that our gifts *are* gifts and not our possessions. Psalm 8 expresses proper awe that God, creator of all, is concerned with humanity; Psalm 100 reminds us, “It is [God] who made us, and we are his.” The truths in these psalms can help us regard ourselves positively, as valued, gifted creatures of God, while never forgetting that we are creatures among other creatures, dependent upon our Creator.

12. The real war is defined in Ephesians 6:12: “[O]ur struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the . . . spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

13. As Screwtape rightly points out, Paul urges the Romans and the Corinthians to act so as not to offend those who have qualms or reservations, so as not to become a stumbling block to fellow believers. Responses will vary.

14. This can be a very complicated and touchy area, and answers will vary. The Romans and 1 Corinthians passages *seem* to be contradicted by the Colossians passage, but the contradiction disappears if we note that in the Colossians passage we are being warned against living by rules, and in the Romans and 1 Corinthians passage we are being instructed to not distress honest but weaker Christians—to be sensitive to their concerns, not necessarily ruled by their weakness. It also appears that there may be two general guidelines: proclaiming salvation and a person’s intent. Requiring that certain things must be done or not done to be a Christian (such as in the Galatians 5 passages, where some were claiming circumcision was required for salvation) would be adding to what God requires for salvation, much as the Pharisees did, and that is to be strongly resisted. However, if our freedoms or actions distract from the person and message of Christ (as apparently happened in the Acts 16 passage, where Timothy was circumcised before working among the Jews) then we must change our actions. We are told not to use our freedom to indulge the sinful nature, and Christ warns us that we must be more righteous than the Pharisees, whom he condemns for their adherence to rules. In the Matthew passage Christ makes the point that our actions are less important than our intent and our heart—and then, in a sense, makes the guidelines harder than the rules! We are to live our lives led by God’s spirit, not by rules, to ask whether our actions are pleasing to God. In several of these passages, we are warned to not judge each other, but exhibit “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”

### *Letters 17–21*

*Vocabulary:*

1. languishing, *tete-à-tete*; 2. slothful; 3. insatiable; 4. intrinsically, jocular; 5. panacea, dossier; 6. titular; 7. querulousness, amenable, nuptials; 8. overweening, fornication, chattels, prodigal; 9. continence, asceticism; 10. teetotalism; 11. meritorious; 12. peevishness; 13. transitory

*Questions:*

1. She is guilty of the “gluttony of Delicacy”—a ravenous desire, not for large amounts of food, but for getting her own way.

2. The patient’s mother, by insisting on her own way, is actually insisting on a remembered past, and not the present (cf. Letter 15). That she cannot come to terms with the fact that the past is gone, and that her memories of the past are inaccurate, produces “daily disappointment [which in turn] produces daily ill temper,” and ill temper draws her away from others and from God.