

C. S. LEWIS AND THE
CRISIS OF A CHRISTIAN

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WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCING C. S. LEWIS

A young man who wishes to remain a sound Atheist cannot be too careful of his reading. . . . God is, if I may say it, very unscrupulous.

C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*

I AM WRITING THIS BOOK FOR ONE PRIMARY PURPOSE. THIS IS NOT A biography of C. S. Lewis, a critical denunciation of his theology, nor a piece of hagiography. Instead I am addressing the question of why Lewis remains so popular, selling more books today than when he died in 1963, and why, after decades of reading his work, he still speaks to me. Here's my answer: *Lewis's voice still resonates because his crises and their resolutions in his work reflect our own crises and guide us toward resolution.*

Though not writing a biography, I will begin by telling the story of Lewis's life through the troubles and complexities that shaped him. I will then pursue his thought through his writings—which is what he's best known for—and the way his books, articles, and published addresses offer us access to his wisdom. I approach it this way because Lewis's crises informed his writing, and they give it the power that still resonates today for his readers.

Crises are, as Webster's puts it, "an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs whose outcome will make a difference for better or worse."¹ Whether positive or negative, they always carry with them momentous change. I will describe Lewis's life story line around six main chapters, each (except the first and the last) broadly defining a decade of his sixty-five years. In keeping with the theme of this book, each of these chapters contains critical points when the story of his life altered dramatically, when he confronted these crises and sought to resolve them.

Chapter 1: Lewis was born just before the turn of the twentieth century, on November 29, 1898, in Belfast, Ireland, in a family of four that included his older brother and his best friend, Warren, called "Warnie." His early childhood was happy until his beloved mother, Florence, died of cancer when Lewis was almost ten. Soon after and for the next six years, his father sent him to a series of boarding schools—all of which he detested. Around fourteen, he abandoned his faith. From sixteen to eighteen, Lewis prepared for his university entrance—and more importantly his education was revived—when he moved to Surry and was privately tutored by W. T. Kirkpatrick, or Kirk, whom Lewis named "The Great Knock."

In August of 1908, C. S. Lewis, a nine-year-old boy from Belfast, Ireland, experienced the first major crisis of his life. His beloved mother, Flora, died of cancer. His later reflections reveal the depth of this trauma. By the way, the first thing to do when writing *about* Lewis: read something *he* wrote—something as beautiful, as winsome, as wise, and as touching as what follows.

With my mother's death all *settled happiness*, all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life. There was to be much fun, many pleasures, many stabs of Joy; but no more

of the old security. It was sea and islands now; the great continent had sunk like Atlantis.²

Lewis never had a stable, or especially happy, relationship with his father. It was his mother who provided him with tenderness and security. This closing paragraph from the first chapter of his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, alludes to both how he later described this tragic moment and how he resolved his crisis. Indeed, this first crisis—the loss of childhood security and its innocence—was deepened as Lewis got sent to boarding schools less than a month after his mother’s death. The death of his mother also began gradually to separate him from his father, a relationship that never fully healed. Having knocked out this “settled happiness,” he searched to respond and gradually found recourse in cynicism and atheism.

A fight between imagination and reason took hold in Lewis’s life. His staunch and rather prickly atheism did not ultimately satisfy him, but he tamped down its voices and found focus and meaning in the dialectics of his beloved teacher Kirkpatrick and the glories of great literature. Consequently, his atheism deepened and became more poignant. Although he was later able to resolve his faith with the suffering of life, that resolution did not happen until after seventeen years of bitterness, cynicism, and depression marked by his potent atheism. “I maintained that God did not exist. I was also very angry with God for not existing.”³ Nonetheless, within this long period of atheism, the seeds of a metamorphosis were sown. At seventeen, he picked up George MacDonald’s *Phantastes*, and his imagination, as he phrased it, was “baptized.”

In 1917, he began studies in Oxford at University College, but he soon volunteered for military service in WWI, experiencing the horrors of the trenches of the Great War, and he came home wounded in April 1918. Lewis did not write much directly about the war—aside from the stirring sections in *Surprised by Joy* and a few other allusions—but he saw suffering,

the depth of which led to a depressive period that wasn't really resolved until his conversion in 1931. The reality of evil in the world—and its companion, pain—worked their way through almost everything he wrote.

Chapter 2: In January 1919, he returned to Oxford, the great city of learning where he would live until his death. During his academic work, he took three exams: Honour Moderations (midway examinations), Greats (classics and philosophy), and English Language and Literature. He received the highest marks, or “firsts,” on all three—a feat rarely accomplished. In 1921, as a result of a pact with a fellow soldier, Paddy Moore, that either would support the other's parent if the son died, Lewis moved in with Paddy's mother, Janie Moore, and her daughter, Maureen. He would care for Mrs. Moore until her death in 1951. He began tutoring in 1924 at University College, though his hope was to be a great poet. In 1925, he was elected fellow in English Language and Literature at Magdalen College, Oxford.

Lewis loved the beauty of Oxford as well as its legendary intellectual climate. This was a period of significant intellectual growth and further development of Lewis's rationalism, especially cultivated by the empiricist Logical Positivism and Oxford Realism of the early twentieth century, two philosophies—despite their differences—that argued we can only reasonably talk about what we see and touch. During this time, he also began his life with Janie and Maureen Moore. They moved together to the Kilns outside of Oxford in Headington from June 1921 onward. In fact, even when he was a resident of Magdalen College during those years, the Kilns would be his home for the rest of his life.

So Lewis began his twenties with relative stability, and this stability provided him the opportunity to examine his

philosophical convictions. In addition, Lewis desired fame, particularly to be recognized as one of the great poets of the twentieth century. But the tide of poetry was moving away from the metered, rhyming poems that he cherished and wrote. Finally, this brilliant young scholar with three “firsts” could not find a teaching job, and for all his three decades at Oxford, he never moved beyond being a tutor. Consequently, he struggled with financial concerns.

Chapter 3: His father, with whom he had a tumultuous relationship, died in 1929. The next year he became a theist.⁴ Then, in 1931, he professed faith in Jesus Christ and became a communicant in the Anglican Church.

Lewis fought against God, especially the idea that God would take away his ability to command and determine his own life. In his room at Magdalen College, every time he lifted his mind from his work, he sensed God’s approach. Finally he relented, “admitted that God was God,” and became (with pardonable overstatement) “the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.”⁵ Becoming a theist, and then a Christian, represents the most significant resolution of crisis in his life. It is the crisis that will fill the following pages more than any other.

Lewis described this famous late-night stroll on the one-mile Addison’s Walk outside Magdalen College in Oxford in September 1931, at age thirty-two, in a letter to his childhood friend, Arthur Greeves. After walking with fellow Oxford professors J. R. R. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson, he admitted that his struggle was between pagan “myths”—which, as a lover of classical literature, he cherished—and the uniqueness of the story of Jesus and his discovery that “Christ is simply a true myth.” Interestingly, his first adult Christian communion on Christmas Day 1931 occurred at about the mathematical midpoint of his life.

The way he resolved the crisis of his unbelief first, and then of believing in Jesus Christ as the Son of God secondly, echoes through his apologetics and really through all his writing. His argument against naturalism (a belief that the world of nature is all there is), the argument from desire (or joy) for natural law as it points to the lawgiver, and their fulfillment in Jesus Christ as Lord, as well as his conviction that Christianity doesn't invalidate, but instead fulfills, the best of paganism—all derive from this intellectual breakthrough. It also allowed him to combine his great imagination with his searching reason in a potent blend.

Chapter 4: His first major breakthrough in religious writing came after his broadcast talks for the BBC—first recorded in 1941 and later published in 1952 as *Mere Christianity*. This began a periodic of significant literary output. It also presented a new crisis: the crisis of fame.

For readers who cherish—or perhaps even idolize—Lewis's specifically Christian writings, the 1940s were the period of great flowering; here, for example, one finds *The Screwtape Letters*, *Mere Christianity*, and *Miracles*. It is for me, and for those I've talked with, a time when a treasure trove of Christian insight was unleashed. Nonetheless, there are at least two attendant crises in his later fame. For Lewis, fame represented a kind of crisis—becoming a spokesperson. It was a task, according to the *Time* article that accompanied his front-cover picture, that he found a chore and blamed on the unscrupulousness of God. For example, when Lewis's picture appeared on the September 8, 1947, cover of *Time* magazine, the heading read "Oxford's C.S. Lewis, His Heresy: Christianity." In the article, Lewis said, "I certainly never intended being a hot gospeler. If I had only known this when I became a Christian!"⁶

But Lewis wasn't just a spokesperson, he was a popularizer, or better yet, a *translator*. "People praise me for being a translator. But where are the others? I wanted to start a school of translation."⁷ Without others alongside, and seeing this critical need, he took up the task of translation and became the best-known Christian apologist of the twentieth century. And with it came a sea of letters—to which he dutifully responded daily—as well as jealousy and resistance among his intellectual and unbelieving colleagues at Oxford.

Chapter 5: After losing a debate in 1948 at the Oxford Socratic Club with the famous philosopher and Catholic Elizabeth Anscombe, Lewis moved from apologetics proper and into fiction. He began publishing his famous series *The Chronicles of Narnia* in 1950, which continued until 1956. Mrs. Moore died in 1951. The next year, he met Joy Gresham in person for the first time. Having been voted down for a professorship at Oxford, Cambridge subsequently offered him a chaired professorship in Medieval and Renaissance Literature, and he started teaching there in January 1955. That same year he received the greatest honor for any scholar in the humanities: election to the British Academy.

This period marked a transition to another kind of religious writing. He also confessed in a letter from 1950 that his well of creativity was dry, and he had submitted his craft to whatever God designed. His muse soon returned, and he moved into a period of focusing on fantasy writing and began to write *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Many—notably A. N. Wilson in his vivid, yet somewhat snarky, biography of Lewis⁸—have argued that Lewis's defeat in the debate with Elizabeth Anscombe occasioned his retreat from apologetics. But it seems more clear—as I'll develop below—that through this crisis, Lewis realized the weakness of direct apologetics. Instead he

sought to show rather than tell his readers why they ought to take Christian faith seriously and joyfully. The debate with Anscombe, though difficult, represented not simply a defeat but a recognition for Lewis. He realized he had not kept up with the currents in academic philosophy.

Another major transition was the death of Mrs. Moore. Although Lewis cared deeply for her, her passing was also a relief and allowed him more time to read books and write. Though he was disappointed that he did not receive a professorship at Oxford, receiving one at Cambridge freed him from his tutoring duties, giving him more time. He also found Cambridge more congenial to his faith. These two critical changes opened a new space for his imagination.

Finally, during his fifties, he met Joy, sixteen years his junior, a divorcée from New York City with two young boys.

Chapter 6: He married Joy Davidman, an American divorcée with two young sons, in 1956. She died on July 13, 1960. In response, he wrote *A Grief Observed*. After a brief, serious illness—including a coma the preceding summer—he died on November 22, 1963.

I'll have more to say about the details in the pages that follow, but this final chapter of Lewis's life initiates both great delight and profound sorrow for Lewis. Marrying this brilliant writer from New York City, he ultimately discovered an intellectual and romantic companion. He respected Joy's mind, and for her part, she devoured and cherished his writings. And yet, when he learned of Joy's illness, Lewis faced a familiar crisis: a mother dying of cancer with two young sons. He probably even saw his own early life being replayed. Despite prayers for recovery and a subsequent brief reprieve, Joy succumbed to bone cancer after a few brief, but happy, years of marriage.

Lewis was crushed, although it did not destroy his rational faith, as many have argued. It helped him to draw a full circle back to his first apologetic work, *The Problem of Pain*. Most significantly, Lewis's own death gives special poignancy to his reflections on afterlife. He did not begin with a robust faith in a life to come, but he realized this was the only way to resolve the crisis of death—that our life on this earth comes to an end and presents a great question about the goodness of God.

THE PROMISE OF CRISIS

The road I'm treading, "Lewis through crisis," represents the difficulties and complexities Lewis faced and their resolutions. But I am also writing about interlocking crises and their resolutions. This book addresses the crisis of my own life that found satisfying responses (and keeps discovering more) in Lewis's writings, and I've seen that satisfaction mirrored in readers of Lewis's works whom I've met, read, or pastored over the past two decades. They have also found resolution of their crises in Lewis's work.

Because I'm talking about *readers* of C. S. Lewis (and not, for example, those students or friends who knew him in life), I have focused my research for this book on reading what Lewis wrote. I have concentrated on rereading his corpus. When I have done research at the two libraries that house Lewis's papers—Wheaton College's Wade Collection, housed in the beautiful suburbs of Chicago, and the materials at Oxford University's glorious Bodleian Library—I have focused on Lewis's manuscripts and personal library to see how *he* wrote. I have learned a great deal from the biographies of Lewis—from the one written by George Sayer, Lewis's former student and later close friend, which offers an intimate and sympathetic yet realistic rendering of Lewis;⁹ from Wilson's exquisitely written, compelling, and generally more critical portrait;¹⁰ and

most recently from Alister McGrath's meticulous, unparalleled but somewhat drab work on the fiftieth anniversary of Lewis's death.¹¹ But these I've studied as secondary sources, focusing on what I've learned through reading Lewis's books. All research for this book focused on reading Lewis rather than reading *about* Lewis.

So I am addressing how C. S. Lewis tackled his crises. For the discerning Lewis reader, I need to defend myself briefly against what Lewis called "the Personal Heresy"—the idea that a book or idea derives solely from an author's biography and therefore discusses not the work, but the author.¹² Though it was fashionable when Lewis practiced literary criticism, he detested this approach and countered that, in reading criticism of poetry, we need to learn more about the *poem*, not the personality of the poet. I take much of what he argued to be accurate, particularly in how it focuses us as readers to attend to the words authors actually write. We attend to what is on the page, not behind it. If I need, nonetheless, to defend my searching out the crises that formed Lewis's writing, my response is this: first of all, I am not writing primarily about Lewis's fiction. Fiction is designed to work primarily as a story; nonfiction invites personal engagement and questions about *why* the writer is interested in the topic at hand.

Secondly and most importantly, Lewis was fundamentally a practical, not speculative, thinker. So he forged his insights from his experience. Put simply, I'm not trying to discern Lewis's personality through his writings but to discern his philosophy of life. As Sayer writes, "He never merely thought ideas; he also felt them. . . . It was consistent with Jack's character, given his practicality and sense of purpose, that philosophy did not remain for him a purely speculative occupation."¹³ Or as Lewis himself recounted in *Surprised by Joy*, in a conversation with Dom Bede Griffiths and Owen Barfield where Lewis referred to philosophy as a "subject," he received this

response: “‘It wasn’t a *subject* to Plato,’ said Barfield, ‘it was a way.’” Lewis then commented that Griffiths’s agreement and a glance between the two exposed his “frivolity.”¹⁴

He knew something had to change. For that reason, he was glad to have left the “bleak and questioning” atmosphere of pure philosophy when he decided to take up the study of literature.¹⁵ There is a point at which enough speculation has taken place, Lewis concluded, and something needed to be done—his philosophy (and later theology) needed to become practical and therefore practiced. This insight into Lewis’s mind will recur as an important theme throughout this book. For this reason, Lewis brought his own crises to his writing.

And why read Lewis’s crises through his *writing*? Here I take in what his stepson Douglas Gresham records about Lewis’s response to the death of his wife, Joy, in July 1960:

He did what he always did under extreme stress. He sat down at his desk, and looking into himself and carefully observing what was happening deep in his mind where we keep our inmost secrets, he picked up his pen and an old exercise book and began to write.¹⁶

Lewis worked out his most complex problems—here a particularly poignant and painful one—through his writings. Most of us would simply cry, engage in self-pity, or mope. But Lewis resolved his crises through his scratchy, nibbed pen. In fact, to read his voluminous correspondence—now collected in more than 5,000 pages—is to comprehend that he wanted to relieve others’ doubts, spiritual confusion, and despair. And we are the better for all Lewis offers us in our crises.

My conviction is that crises generally open us up to new insights and free us from previously held patterns. The resolutions we seek are, as a rule, much deeper than when we “are at ease in Zion” (to use one of Lewis’s favorite phrases, found in Amos 6:1). Thus, to look at Lewis in crisis demonstrates the

depth of his work. In these critical moments, we are exceptionally open to new insights. Lewis had them, and I will describe the way these moments transformed readers throughout this book. Crises have past, present, and future implications: we take what has come before, all our personal preparation of character; we experience the crisis; and then we define our future. In these crises, the person or idea that mediates our discoveries is key because that helps define the “new normal” after the crisis transformation is over. We will explore ways Lewis is a trustworthy mediator and mentor.

I have become convinced that most readers of Lewis are drawn to his writing because they find resolution to their crises in his work. One particular example is found in my own blog, where I have posted on Lewis for the past few years as I’ve done research for this book. The most popular post, which dwarfs all others by about twenty to one, is “C. S. Lewis and the Crisis of Suffering.” (I return to that topic in chapter 8.) It’s clear: people want Lewis to help them make it through places of pain. And pain initiates crises.

To be sure, the issues in Lewis’s work, particularly his theological breakthroughs, are not just personal. He spoke Christianly in a Western culture he clearly saw moving toward being “post-Christendom” (as he made clear in his opening lecture at Cambridge¹⁷), if indeed that state hadn’t already arrived. Honestly, when this fact struck me as I was heading toward the final drafts of this book, I found myself saying, “It’s amazing C. S. Lewis ever became so popular.” It’s not amazing that Dante or Milton were well regarded in their day, but Lewis in post-Christian England? That makes his accomplishments—of speaking about Christian faith to an increasingly secular world—that much more impressive.

I think that’s why Lewis might be even more relevant today to the United States. In some similar ways, American society, which has lagged behind Europe in its de-christening, is also in

a spiritual crisis, and for this reason his resolution of crises in a post-Christian society resonates for us in the United States. I write this book at a time when atheism and those who profess no religious identity (or the “Nones”) have only become stronger. Lewis’s ideas are again finding themselves put to the test. By some counts, 30 percent of our country now professes no religious belief or an outright belief in atheism.¹⁸ So that leads to several pointed questions, and Lewis, who clearly thought of himself as living in a “post-Christian” Europe, posed these questions himself. Is belief in God legitimate? Is belief in God rational? Is belief in God something worthy of our attention? I will look at the way Lewis presents Christian faith while taking modern context into account; we live in a time when books by the New Atheists, such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett, fill the bookshelves.

Certainly, Lewis did not take on the New Atheists, but the older, mid-twentieth-century ones, especially their use of science as a bludgeon against Christian faith. Questions about whether science invalidates belief and whether the increase in natural knowledge has edged out supernatural occurrences such as miracles—these concerns fill the papers he presented during the 1940s at the Oxford Socratic Club, which openly debated the truth of Christianity.¹⁹ Lewis believed that “the Scientific Outlook,” as he named it in one of these papers (that science defines all truth),²⁰ needed to be countered by good argument. I will return to that topic in chapter 2.

ST. CLIVE IN MY CRISIS

Admittedly, some are offended by the clear Christian elements in Lewis’s books, perhaps concluding that he hadn’t fully resolved crises for them. As I strolled through a bookshop in the hipster beach town of Santa Cruz a few years ago, I browsed some staff recommendations, including one for *Till*

We Have Faces. It suggested that if readers liked the Narnia books but found their Christian allegory a bit too obvious, they might enjoy this retelling of the Cupid and Psyche story from the viewpoint of the “ugly” older sister. *Till We Have Faces*, the recommendation said, offers a poignant meditation on changing our minds, even about everything we think we know.

Others have argued that Lewis made the resolution of crises too easy, so we can't trust his resolutions. I remember when I was at Berkeley studying medieval literature, I told another student I wanted to read Lewis. He opined (and I paraphrase), “Be careful—his analogies are very crafty and deceptive.” I think he was offering a warning about Lewis's apologetics, and apparently his feeling was that Lewis resolved crises too quickly . . . and even maliciously. But his concerns seemed overwrought since I was just reading Lewis's scholarly treatment of courtly love poetry, *The Allegory of Love!*

More importantly, by that time I didn't need his warning: I had already accepted Christianity as a freshman in college. I entered Cal as a functional atheist, but I began to have a crisis about my doubting God. Clive Staples Lewis—or as I jokingly call him today, “St. Clive”—accompanied me on this journey and eventually led me to finding God.

How did he do that? For one thing, I rarely found Lewis simplistic or pat. In fact, in him I found a kindred spirit—one for whom faith was by no means self-evident or devoid of serious reflection, a person who struggled with Jesus as a unique revelation of God, who took religious faith seriously with all his powers of thought. I found in his writings a fluidity of style and of mind that slowly engaged and even entranced me as a fellow lover of books and a soon-to-be undergraduate in comparative literature. And I also found in him a fellow seeker who spent his life in a secular, world-class university, a place where Christianity, if treated at all, was passé, a vestige of Western civilization that had long ago thrown off such infantile beliefs.

It was sometime in the last year or two of high school that I had read *Mere Christianity*, Lewis's presentation and defense of Christianity (two tasks that almost always appeared together for him no matter what the subject). Frivolity—the sort that's commonly called “senioritis”—led me to set Lewis aside for a year. So when I returned to *Mere Christianity* in college, I was astonished: here a writer, a *Christian* at that, was somehow making the whole Christian faith reasonable. I mean, I had been taught that Christianity was anything but reasoned. The most reasonable author I had read to date was also a proponent of this severely unreasoned faith. Lewis taught me that Christian faith requires and sustains serious reflection, but it is not ultimately somber. The content of faith is important, serious but never frivolous: “Christianity, if false, is of *no* importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important.”²¹ In fact, faith and the experience of God lead to joy. In this way, Lewis both presented, and later resolved, a crisis.

And although I didn't fully know who this Lewis guy was, nor what a truly world-class mind he possessed, he *made sense*. It was so similar to a sentiment that Lewis himself would record—and which I read many years later—about his own reading, as a young atheist, of the Catholic journalist G. K. Chesterton and his book *The Everlasting Man* that set out “the whole Christian outline of history” in a quite reasonable form, concluding that he was “the most sensible man alive ‘apart from his Christianity.’ Now, I veritably believe, I thought—I didn't of course *say*; words would have revealed the nonsense—that Christianity itself was very sensible ‘apart from its Christianity.’”²²

Even in this citation, Lewis demonstrates that, though witty (i.e., the irony of attempting to believe Christianity is sensible “apart from its Christianity”), he was never frivolous. As his friends would remind us, Lewis was a very *funny* man.

As his former student Alastair Fowler once remarked, “Lewis seemed always on the verge of hilarity—between a chuckle and a roar.”²³ But he knew that humor could also lead to trivializing important topics. In his famous, imagined correspondence between a senior and a junior devil about how to tempt the human soul, *The Screwtape Letters*, he called it Flippancy when the joke is always assumed. “No one actually makes it; but every serious subject is discussed in a manner which implies that they have already found a ridiculous side to it.”²⁴ Accordingly, his humor supported his exposition but never dominated or diminished it.

Lewis taught me that Christian faith could withstand serious intellectual engagement. And Lewis engaged instead of simply defending in his apologetics. In fact, as I interrogated other philosophers—the thought of French post-structuralist Michel Foucault was hot at Berkeley in those days—they actually didn’t stand up as well. And so I was being won over, and I began to engage it. Or better, through Lewis’s writings, God began to engage me. “I read in a periodical the other day that the fundamental thing is how we think of God. By God Himself it is not! How God thinks of us is not only more important, but infinitely more important.”²⁵ And God, I was learning, apparently thought enough of me to send Christ and to take my questions seriously. I was taken so seriously that I was being shaken—shaken so that I could then be stabilized. My crisis of doubt found an answer in the gospel, and I can attribute a fair measure of this to Lewis.

This leads me back to my reason for writing this book: Even though Lewis has been dead for more than half a century and lived in a world quite different from ours, I believe he can do this—resolve the crises we have with unbelief, belief, and simple human travails—for this generation.

AN OUTLINE OF THIS BOOK

When I finally made my way—by a long and winding road—into the Christian church as a pastor, I found that I gradually leaned more and more on “St. Clive” to describe what this life of faith looks like or ought to resemble. His words and his thoughts have accompanied me into the pulpit, given me inspiration in adult education classes, and wound their way into moments where I needed to offer comfort to those grieving and particular insights about belief in an increasingly unbelieving world.

I offer a brief outline of the key sections of this book. I organized these sections around Lewis’s own engagement with these topics: first of all, three chapters on the crises particular to atheism that describe why atheism proved ultimately unsatisfying for Lewis; then two chapters on the crises specific to the Christian faith; and finally, three chapters on crises that no human being—whether believer or not—can escape, even if Lewis learned to resolve these crises through his faith.

The Crises of Atheism

Lewis was a profound thinker who grappled with significant intellectual issues. He struggled with his own doubt about God and whether his atheism could withstand scrutiny. For that reason, his apologetics have helped many and can be grouped as follows: the crisis of materialism, the argument with the most contemporary resonance that naturalism is self-defeating; the crisis of meaninglessness, his case that we sense there is something more than the things of this world; and finally, the crisis of anomie, the argument that natural law implies God as the lawgiver.

The Crises of Christian Faith

Lewis also wrestled with two significant topics particular to Christian belief. First of all, the crisis of other myths: How do I believe in the uniqueness of Christ when there are so many religions? Lewis took this question on more personally in his letters, but it is also featured in his most famous argument—found in *Mere Christianity* and presented in other short articles such as “What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?”—that Jesus is liar, Lord, or lunatic. Secondly, the crisis of the Bible: How can the Bible have unique authority among all other books?

The Crises of Human Life

Finally Lewis worked hard with three issues that no human being can escape. The crisis of feeling: What do I do when “it doesn’t feel right”? This is a problem that plagues Americans who have become convinced to believe the dictum that “if it feels right, do it,” and thus when it doesn’t feel right, something must be wrong. The crisis of suffering: How are we to live in a world of pain, and is there any purpose to suffering? The crisis of death, which offers a fitting end to our study of Lewis as we face the ultimate and final crisis: What do I do when I stand before my own death? Lewis pointed to the God who gives us hope for our true destiny: a life with the God who created us.

FRANCIS COLLINS AND THE RESOLUTION OF CRISIS

Through these reflections on Lewis, I’ll weave narratives of those who have read Lewis and found resolution for their own crises (some of whom I’ve cared for and known as their

pastors). These stories are to come, but I will also close this introduction with one such encounter.

Lewis's writings resolved a critical spiritual and intellectual crisis for the famous geneticist and head of the National Institutes of Health, Francis Collins, perhaps the most prominent scientist in the United States. In his important best-selling work, *The Language of God*, which seeks to reconcile Christian faith with contemporary evolutionary genetics, Collins recounts his experience of reading Lewis as a seeker in medical school. A patient whose faith supported her through terrible heart pain asked him, "What about you? What do you believe?" He could only mutter, "Well, I don't think I believe in anything." He realized that he had never looked at the evidence for or against God and found this a "thoroughly terrifying experience." Upon request, a Methodist pastor handed him a key apologetics text.

The book was *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis. In the next few days, as I turned its pages, struggling to absorb the breadth and depth of the intellectual arguments laid down by this legendary Oxford scholar, I realized that all of my constructs against the plausibility of faith were those of a schoolboy. Clearly I would need to start with a clean slate to consider this most important of all human questions. Lewis seemed to know all of my objections, sometimes even before I had quite formulated them. He invariably addressed them within a page or two.²⁶

Collins represents exactly the kind of person Lewis so often becomes associated with—a seeker honestly looking for God in moments of deep personal crisis. Lewis did speak, and continues to communicate powerfully, to these seekers at critical times. He can do the same today.