

SCREWTAPE LETTERS

STUDY GUIDE

**A Bible Study on the
C.S. Lewis Book The Screwtape Letters**



By Alan Vermilye

Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.

Screwtape
The Screwtape Letters

Screwtape Letters Study Guide

A Bible Study on the C.S. Lewis Book

The Screwtape Letters

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Foreword



In advising how to keep his *patient's* life with God ineffective and arbitrary, a senior devil admonishes a junior to, “Keep his mind on the inner life . . . For if he ever comes to make the distinction, if ever he consciously directs his prayers ‘Not to what I think thou art but to what thou knowest thyself to be’, our situation is . . . desperate.” And so C.S. Lewis launches us into a collection of devilish letters from Uncle Screwtape to his “nephew” Wormwood in his classic and widely popular, *The Screwtape Letters*.

Lewis wrote about the inspiration for the book in a letter to his brother who had recently been rescued from Nazi-surrounded Dunkirk during WWII. Lewis explained that in church on July 21, 1940—the morning after he had listened to a very persuasive radio speech by Hitler that made even Lewis wavier in his convictions—he had been “struck by an idea for a book which I think might be both useful and entertaining. It would be called *As One Devil to Another* . . . The idea would be to give all the psychology of temptation from the *other* point of view.”

As much as *The Screwtape Letters* did indeed prove to be very ‘useful’ to thousands during the confusion of WWII, it is a book equally valuable for us in today’s culture of rapid change and confusion. Recognizing an enemy of truth and the Christian faith in the complex world around us is challenging, yet recognizing the subtle, shadowy whispers and twists of an enemy within is often even more difficult. But before there can be hope of progress in dealing with any enemy, that enemy must first be recognizable. Therefore any assistance and wisdom in this recognition is genuinely welcomed. And this what Alan Vermilye has done with his study of Lewis’s *The Screwtape Letters*.

Vermilye walks the reader through each Screwtape letter and wisely asks questions to bring out turns and twists in the thoughts and emotions that we each experience and that Lewis wanted us to recognize. He helps us to see where crippling “truths” are often nothing more than half-truths and lies that enslave us with pride and defensiveness or shame and reticence.

From his years of teaching Bible study classes, Vermilye also smartly adds Scripture to weigh in on the discussion. For anyone or group that wants to become more intimate with God by re-assessing some of the enemies strongholds within, I highly recommend Alan Vermilye's study.

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INTRODUCTION



For some time I wanted to read *The Screwtape Letters*. I would start, and then, for whatever reason, stop. Let's face it: some of Lewis' writings can be an intellectual exercise that require dedication to seeing them through. I would say this is especially true for me. However, having read his *Mere Christianity* several times and completing the *Mere Christianity Study Guide* by Steve Urban twice, I felt I was finally up to the challenge.

I committed myself to both reading the book and creating a Bible study guide for it. Recognizing the daunting task before me, I decided to lead the study at my own church while writing it. I knew this would help develop the study and provide the accountability I would desperately need to see it through.

The Screwtape Letters is not a very long book. There are 31 letters that are only five pages each and at the most six paragraphs. I began with research and found some insightful posts, commentaries, and a few discussion questions to help prime the pump. I also kept Google handy since Lewis was a very articulate man with a vast vocabulary.

Creating a Bible study around the content seemed to flow effortlessly. Obviously Lewis already provided excellent content; I simply had to draw parallels with various Scripture passages to help us relate to the main theme of each letter. I have also included answers for each question that are available at www.ScrewtapeLettersStudyGuide.com.

Facilitating group discussion at my church was probably the most valuable part of the experience. Not only did it help better refine the study, but I also learned from each class member as they shared their interpretation of what they read. I'm eternally grateful for their participation and input on the study.

I'm not a biblical or Lewis scholar nor do I consider this study guide the most comprehensive work available on the book. However, it has helped me and others in my class come to a better understanding of Lewis' great classic. I hope it does for you as well.

BOOK SUMMARY

Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys. - Screwtape

Why do we sometimes succeed spiritually, and at other times we fail? Are there a host of spiritual forces battling to influence the choices we make, or are we left to our own devices?

The Screwtape Letters by C.S. Lewis provides unique insight into the battles that are being waged in the spiritual world. The story is told through a collection of letters from Screwtape, an undersecretary in the lowerarchy of Hell, to his incompetent nephew, Wormwood. Wormwood is a junior devil who has just been given his first human, a young man (referred to as the patient), to corrupt and secure for eternity.

The story takes place in England during the tumultuous years of World War II with the man contemplating Christianity. However, another setting could very easily be his consciousness where another war is taking place for his soul. Each letter is filled with detailed instructions from Screwtape to Wormwood on how to best enter the man's thoughts and subtly influence his choices thereby guiding him closer to Hell.

There is nothing extraordinary about this man's life, but from the moment of contemplating faith until his last breath, he undergoes spiritual attack. Like most young adults, he is influenced by culture, materialistic friends, and the media. Each provides excellent distractions from his spiritual journey, but his quest for spiritual truth wins out, and eventually he becomes a Christian.

Early on, he struggles with balancing the unrealistic expectations of being an ideal Christian with what he encounters in the world, the church, his family, and daily life. The strange habits and hypocrisies of fellow church members and the prospect of his own mother doubting his new-found faith were unexpected, but they did not discourage him.

Building a dedicated prayer life becomes one of his top priorities. Battling everyday distractions, he quickly learns that being completely transparent with God is hard but also refreshing.

Living during a time of war, the man knows it's only a matter of time before he must make a stand. What is the Christian response to war? Should he take up arms and fight for his country against an evil tyrant, or should he refuse on moral grounds? He decides in favor of military service and now must learn to control his fear and hatred of a distant enemy whom he has never met.

As with life, the Christian journey is filled with mountain-top and valley experiences. Various trials and temptations common to all men come his way. He resolves to rise above each and finds himself strengthened with a renewed sense of self along the way.

He soon becomes aware that building relationships in a world hostile to his faith is difficult. He knows that he is to be in the world but not of the world. As a result he must distance himself from the negative influences in his life while maintaining relationships that he can either positively influence or be encouraged by.

Overtime with the busyness and noise of everyday life, he finds himself drifting away from his faith. It's so gradual at first that he does not notice he's slipping back into old habits. He's quickly awakened from his spiritual drift by experiencing real, simple pleasures that allow him to recover and recommit fully to his faith.

This experience has a dramatic impact on his life. He develops a true sense of humility and becomes less anxious about the war. He continues to battle sensual temptations, but he fully commits himself to abstinence prior to marriage and monogamy if he is to get married.

He soon falls in love with a dedicated Christian girl. Her charitable and loving family welcomes him into their home and introduces him to a new circle of friends who all share the same values and beliefs. He feels content in his new circumstances but also humble and grateful.

The war is moving closer to home, and his prayers intensify appealing directly to God for guidance. During an air raid he does not perform any spectacular act of heroism, but he sticks to his post and fulfills his duties even in the face of great danger and fear. He learns to manage his emotions and fatigue while still maintaining hope.

The climax comes at the end of the book when the man dies in a subsequent air raid. As he is ushered into Heaven, his eyes are opened to witness the spiritual warfare that has surrounded his life. In this state of grace, he fully realizes that his death was the apex of the battle for his soul, and now he can rest knowing that he is safe.

Lewis masterfully provides a great analogy between the external war and the spiritual war raging inside the man. Both require great endurance, perseverance, and bravery, and the man's response to it, as with all life circumstances, is what ultimately shaped who he was and whose he was.

This story can easily be our story. In everyday life situations, we can choose God's will or evil's will, but we always have a choice. From the Christian perspective, to be ignorant of the spiritual realm and demonic strategies to influence choices and exploit our weakness is dangerous. Fortunately, as Christians we have been sealed with the Holy Spirit who provides us clarity of thought and cuts through devilish manipulations so that we might discover refreshing, simple, and straightforward truth.

CHARACTER SUMMARY

SCREWTAPE

Screwtape is a very formidable demon and an undersecretary in the lowerarchy of Hell. He is subtle, smart, arrogant, clever, hate-filled, and vicious with no love or regard for human beings. His job is to provide guidance and direction to young tempters out in the field. He is an experienced, older demon who understands a great deal about human nature and would love nothing more than to corrupt and damn man to an eternity of Hell.

Each letter is written by Screwtape and addressed to his nephew, Wormwood. The narrative is told in his voice. At times he appears affable to Wormwood, but he can also be very condescending with little patience for this young demon and easily frustrated by his irresponsibility. He quickly lets him know who the more superior demon is when Wormwood tries to betray him.

Screwtape refers to God as the “Enemy” and Satan as “Our Father Below.” He is a bureaucrat well versed in history as well as rules and regulations. He knows how to manipulate the inner workings of the departments of Hell to obtain what he needs, and he is an ardent patriot to his cause and a connoisseur of those demons who are not.

WORMWOOD

Wormwood is Screwtape's incompetent nephew serving under his tutelage. This young demon's job, to whom all the letters are written, is to condemn the patient he has been assigned to Hell.

Wormwood is irresponsible, lazy, and immature. Being portrayed as one full of youthful ignorance, Wormwood would rather put his efforts into less effective methods while allowing Uncle Screwtape to do all the heavy lifting. Even though he is constantly chided by Screwtape for his numerous blunders, he remains optimistic that everything will be all right.

He would love nothing more than to reveal himself to his patient and to spend his time enjoying the human suffering brought about by war. Screwtape believes the irresponsible Wormwood is shirking his duties of performing the necessary research about his subject and human nature for more fanciful but less damaging methods of condemning the patient.

In the end, his failure is evident, and Wormwood appeals to his Uncle Screwtape for mercy of which there is none.

THE PATIENT

The patient is an ordinary young man living in England during the tumultuous years of World War II. His contemplation of Christianity and subsequent daily actions and thoughts are the subject of the letters between Screwtape and Wormwood.

He is thoughtful, honest, intellectual, sincere and fully aware of his weaknesses. His newfound faith and the realization of the power negative influences have on his life bring about an examination of those friends whom he enjoys spending time with. He also learns that simple, ordinary pleasures are enough to sustain him when he finds his faith drifting.

The patient finds moral strength within him as he battles a series of sexual temptations that lessen with each resistance. His courage is also put to the test as he bravely and honorably serves his country during the war. As a soldier, he eventually gives his life and is immediately ushered into presence of God.

THE PATIENT'S FIANCEE

The patient's fiancé is a kind, loving, attractive, and dedicated young Christian woman. She is a virgin, full of virtues, and portrayed as an extraordinarily good person—just the sort of human that Screwtape loathes. He sees her as vile, sneaking, mouse-like, watery, and insignificant. She is just the type that Screwtape would have loved to see fed to the lions in the early days.

The girl comes from a charitable and loving Christian family who welcomes the patient into their home. They also introduce him to a new circle of friends who all share the same values and beliefs. Her one weakness that Screwtape desires to exploit is a narrowly defined understanding of her faith, but this is mostly due to ignorance and not spiritual pride.

THE PATIENT'S MOTHER

The patient lives with his mother who is a Christian. Having taught her son Christianity as a boy, it appears there might have been some friction between the two after his passionate conversion as a young man. The mother battles a form of gluttony that keeps her occupied with a strict diet and inevitably creates division between her family and friends.

THE ENEMY (God)

God is characterized as an ever-present, powerful being capable of loving “human vermin”—something Screwtape cannot understand. God is portrayed as participating in a spiritual battle with the Devil for the souls of men. God is distinguished by actually caring for and responding to their thoughts, needs, and concerns. However, God has left humans with the ability to choose which is where Screwtape and other demons get their foothold.

OUR FATHER BELOW (The Devil)

The Devil, worshiped by Screwtape and other demons, is unable to understand God’s love for his creation. He claims to have left Heaven on his own accord and that all other stories are just rumors. He desires to damn as many souls to Hell as possible by corrupting human nature. There is no love in his dominion of Hell, even among fellow demons, but rather a competitive nature of eat or be eaten.

SLUBGOB (The Head of the Training College)

Slubgob is the principal of the Training College for Young Tempters. Screwtape portrays him initially as inept—churning out incompetent young demons, but later he treats him very graciously at an annual dinner.

GLUBOSE (The demon in charge of the patient’s mother)

Glubose, possibly a combination of "Gluttony" and "Obese", is the demon in charge of the patient's mother. Although rarely mentioned, his job is to busy himself causing discord between her and her son as well as making her constant dietary restrictions a problem with her family and friends.

SLUMTRIMPET (The demon in charge of the patient’s fiancé)

Slumtrimpet is a young female devil in charge of the patient’s fiancé. She has very little success tempting the young woman into any kind of serious sin.

Course Notes and Study Format

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

In most editions, *The Screwtape Letters* consists of thirty-one letters and the additional *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*. This study guide does not include discussion questions for the toast, but you will find that available on line at www.ScrewtapeLettersStudyGuide.com. This study guide can be used for individual study or as a group study meeting weekly to discuss each letter.

STUDYING

Each week you will read three letters, which are approximately 5 pages each. Each letter is short but not easily digested, so allow time to ponder each letter thoroughly. As you read, make notes in your book and underline or highlight sections that interest you. You will find it helpful to number each paragraph within each letter as the study questions make reference to them. As you work through each session, make note of any other questions you have in the Notes section at the end of each study. The answers to each question can be found at www.ScrewtapeLettersStudyGuide.com. However, do not cheat yourself. Work through each session prior to viewing the answers.

GROUP FORMAT

For group formats, the study works well over 12 consecutive weeks. The first week is an introduction week to hand out study guides (if purchased by the church), read through the introduction and character sketches, and set a plan and schedule for the remaining 11 weeks. You might also have those who have previously read the book share their thoughts and experiences with it.

This study can certainly be used by Sunday school classes, but recognize that Sunday morning time in many churches is relatively short. Thus, the study lends itself very well to midweek times at the church or in the homes of members. Session length is variable. Ideally, you should allow at least 90 minutes per session. For longer sessions, take a quick refreshment break in the middle.

As a group leader, your role will be to facilitate the group sessions using the study guide and the answers found at www.ScrewtapeLettersStudyGuide.com. Recognize that you are the facilitator.

You are not the answer person; you are not the authority; you are not the judge to decide if responses are right or wrong. You are simply the person who tries to keep the discussion on track and in the time frame allowed while keeping everyone involved, heard, and respected.

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The following are some suggestions for shaping the learning environment for group sessions that help manage time, participation, and confidentiality.

- Ask the Holy Spirit for help as you prepare for the study. Pray for discernment for each member of the group, including yourself.
- Before each session, familiarize yourself with the questions and answers as it may have been several days since you completed the session. Consider reading the weekly letters again.
- Be prepared to adjust the session as group members interact and questions arise. Allow for the Holy Spirit to move in and through the material, the group members, and yourself.
- Arrange the meeting space to enhance the learning process. Group members should be seated around a table or in a circle so that they can all see one another. Moveable chairs are best.
- Download the quick Bible reference handout which includes all the verses for each study available at www.ScrewTapeLettersStudyGuide.com and distribute at the beginning of class to save time.
- Bring Bibles for those who forget to bring one or for those who might not have one. (If someone is reading aloud, you might ask the person to identify from which Bible translation he or she is reading.)
- If your teaching style includes recording responses from participants or writing questions or quotations for discussion on a board you may want access to a whiteboard or an easel.
- Agree on the class schedule and times. In order to maintain continuity, it would be best if your class meets for twelve consecutive weeks.
- The suggested session time is 90 minutes. Because each letter can lead to substantial discussion, you may need to make choices about what you will cover, or you may choose to extend your group sessions to allow more time for discussion.
- Create a climate where it is safe to share. Encourage group members to participate as they feel comfortable. Remember that some will be eager to give answers or offer commentary while others will need time to process and think.
- If you notice that some participants are hesitant to enter the conversation, ask if they have thoughts to share. Give everyone an opportunity to talk, but keep the conversation moving. Intervene when necessary to prevent a few individuals from dominating discussion.

- If no one answers at first during a discussion, do not be afraid of silence. Count silently to ten, and then say, “Would anyone like to go first?” If no one responds, provide your own answer and ask for reactions. If you limit your sharing to a surface level, others will follow suit. Keep in mind that if your group is new, cohesion might take a couple of weeks to form. If group members do not share at first, give them time.
- Encourage multiple answers or responses before moving on.
- Ask, “Why?” or “Why do you believe that?” or “Can you say more about that?” to draw out greater depth from a response.
- Affirm others’ responses with comments such as “Great” or “Thanks” or “Good insight”—especially if this is the first time someone has spoken during the group session.
- Monitor your own contributions. If you are doing most of the talking, back off so that you do not train the group to listen rather than speak.
- Honor the designated time window. Begin on time. If a session runs longer than expected, get consensus from the group before continuing.
- Involve participants in various aspects of the session such as offering prayer and reading Scripture.
- Because some questions call for sharing personal experiences, confidentiality is essential. Remind group members at each session of the importance of confidentiality and of not passing along stories that have been shared in the group.

LETTER 1

REASON AND REALITY

Summary

In this letter, we learn that Wormwood has been making sure that his patient spends plenty of time with his materialistic friends. Wormwood believes that by using reason and argument he can keep the man from belief in God. Screwtape does not disagree that it is good to influence the man's thoughts, but he reminds Wormwood that his main job is to keep the patient from thinking too deeply about any spiritual matter. Instead he should use ordinary everyday distraction to mislead the man.

The trouble about argument is that it moves the whole struggle onto the Enemy's own ground. - Screwtape

Discussion Questions

1. In what way does Screwtape say that Wormwood is being naive? ¶ 1

2. What is Screwtape's explanation of why Wormwood should avoid reliance on "argument"? ¶ 2

3. What is the connection between “thinking and doing”, and how does this impact our daily lives? ¶ 1

4. Screwtape claims that people “having a dozen incompatible philosophies dancing together inside their head”. What specifically does he credit for this? What do you think the other “weapons” are today? How can they be used to destroy argument? ¶ 1

5. If, according to Screwtape, people are not persuaded by what is true or false, what does he say people are concerned with? Why do people believe what they believe? ¶ 1

6. Read Hebrews 2:14-18. What is the “abominable advantage” God has over Satan? How should this encourage us in our Christian walk? ¶ 3

7. The story of the atheist in the British museum provides a dark and somewhat disturbing insight into rather pleasant distractions that can draw us away from spiritual matters. In this particular instance, the atheist's appetite was enough to pull him away from his train of thought in which God was working. How can Satan use common distractions to create detours in the course of our daily lives? ¶ 3

8. Why would Screwtape advise Wormwood to "Keep pressing home on him the *ordinariness* of things."? What "comfort zones" in our Christian walk do we need to be cautious of? ¶ 4

9. Read Luke 10:39-42. What ordinary everyday distractions was Martha concerned with? Who did it make her resent? What did she miss out on?

Answer Guide Available at www.ScrewtapeLettersStudyGuide.com

Discussion Notes:

LETTER 2

DISTRACTING THE CHRISTIAN MIND



Screwtape begins this letter by rebuking Wormwood for letting his patient escape him and become a Christian. However, all is not lost. If he can cause the man to become disillusioned with the church by highlighting the strange habits and hypocrisies of its members, Wormwood still might succeed. Screwtape tells Wormwood to attack the man's spiritual immaturity in an effort to win him back.

*The Enemy allows this disappointment to occur
on the threshold of every human endeavour. – Screwtape*

Discussion Questions

1. “There’s no need to despair,” Screwtape writes. “Hundreds of these adult converts have been reclaimed after a brief sojourn in the Enemy’s camp and are now with us.” What is Lewis alluding to in this passage? ¶ 1

2. Why does Screwtape suggest, “All the habits of the patient, both mental and bodily, are still in our favor”? ¶ 1

3. Screwtape claims, “One of our great allies at present is the Church itself.” What strategies might tempters employ with new Christians to create dissatisfaction with the church? ¶ 2

4. Consider yourself a new Christian who has just walked into your church for the first time. What expectations might you have about fellow church members, the leadership, the church, and the worship service?

5. Screwtape tells Wormwood to keep the patient focused on the visible church. St. Augustine wrote there is a “visible” and “invisible” church in Christianity. How would you describe these two churches, and why does Screwtape believe it is important to keep the patient fixed to the “visible”?

6. Screwtape claims the patient “has an idea of ‘Christians’ in his mind, which he supposes to be spiritual but which is, in fact, largely pictorial.” What romanticized view of Christianity might a new convert have of their spiritual life? ¶ 2