

"Learning in War-Time"
(excerpts)
by C. S. Lewis (1898–1963)

(From an Evensong message delivered to students at Oxford University, 22 October 1939.)

The learned life then is, for some, a duty. At the moment [at the start of World War II] it looks as if it were your duty. I am well aware that there may seem to be an almost comic discrepancy between the high issues we have been considering and the immediate task you may be set down to, such as Anglo-Saxon sound laws or chemical formulae. But there is a familiar shock awaiting us in every vocation — a young priest finds himself involved in choir treats and a young subaltern in accounting for pots of jam. It is well that it should be so. It weeds out the vain, windy people and keeps in those who are both humble and tough. On that kind of difficulty we need waste no sympathy.

But the peculiar difficulty imposed on you by the war is another matter, and of it I would again repeat what I have been saying in one form or another ever since I started — do not let your nerves and emotions lead you into thinking your predicament more abnormal than it really is. Perhaps it may be useful to mention the three mental exercises which may serve as defences against the three enemies which war raises up against the scholar.

The first enemy is excitement — the tendency to think and feel about the war when we had intended to think about our work. The best defence is a recognition that in this, as in everything else, the war has not really raised up a new enemy but only aggravated an old one. There are always plenty of rivals to our work. We are always falling in love or quarelling, looking for jobs or fearing to lose them, getting ill and recovering, following public affairs. 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. The only people who achieve much are those who want knowledge so badly that they seek it while the conditions are still unfavorable.

Favourable conditions never come. There are, of course, moments when the pressure of the excitement is so great that only superhuman self-control could resist it. They come both in war and peace. We must do the best we can.

The second enemy is frustration — the feeling that we shall not have time to finish. If I say to you that no one has time to finish, that the longest human life leaves a man, in any branch of learning, a beginner, I shall seem to you to be saying something quite academic and theoretical. You would be surprised if you knew how soon one begins to feel the shortness of the tether, of how many things, even in middle life, we have to say "No time for that," "Too late now," and "Not for me."

But Nature herself forbids you to share that experience. A more Christian attitude, which can be attained at any age, is that of leaving futurity in God's hands. We may as well, for God will certainly retain it whether we leave it to Him or not. Never, in peace or war, commit your virtue or your happiness to the future. 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." It is only our *daily* bread that we are encouraged to ask for. The present is the only time in which any duty can be done or any grace received.

The third enemy is fear. War threatens us with death and pain. No man — and specially no Christian who remembers Gethsemane — need try to attain a stoic indifference about these things, but we can guard against the illusions of the imagination. We think of the the streets of Warsaw and contrast the deaths there suffered with an abstraction called Life. But there is no question of death or life for any of us, only a question of this death or of that — of a machine gun bullet now or a cancer forty years later.

What does war do to death? It certainly does not make it more frequent; 100 percent of us die, and the percentage cannot be increased. It puts several deaths earlier, but I hardly suppose that that is what we fear. Certainly when the moment comes, it will make little difference how many years we have behind us.

Does it increase our changes of a painful death? I doubt it. As far as I can find out, what we call natural death is usually preceded by suffering,

and a battlefield is one of the very few places where one has a reasonable prospect of dying with no pain at all. Does it decrease our chances of dying at peace with God? I cannot believe it. If active service does not persuade a man to prepare for death, what conceivable concatenation of circumstances would? Yet war does do something to death. It forces us to remember it.

The only reason why the cancer at sixty or the paralysis at seventy-five do not bother us is that we forget them. War makes death real to us, and that would have been regarded as one of its blessings by most of the great Christians of the past. They thought it good for us to be always aware of our mortality. I am inclined to think they were right. All the animal life in us, all schemes of happiness that centred in this world, were always doomed to a final frustration. In ordinary times only a wise man can realise it. Now the stupidest of us knows. We see unmistakably the sort of universe in which we have all along been living, and must come to terms with it.

If we had foolish un-Christian hopes about human culture, they are now shattered. If we thought we were building up a heaven on earth, if we looked for something that would turn the present world from a place of pilgrimage into a permanent city satisfying the soul of man, we are disillusioned, and not a moment too soon. But if we thought that for some souls, and at some times, the life of learning, humbly offered to God, was, in its own small way, one of the appointed approaches to the Divine reality and the Divine beauty which we hope to enjoy hereafter, we can think so still.

Copied from C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Essays* (ed. Walter Hooper; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980), pages 49–52.

Consider also the excerpts from Lewis's essay "The World's Last Night":

<http://www.hebrew-streams.org/works/texts/worlds-last-night.pdf>