

“Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing; nevertheless, at thy word I will let down the net.” (Luke 5.5)

C.S. Lewis, the English writer responsible for the Chronicles of Narnia, is no stranger to doubt. Despite being raised in a Christian household, as a teenager he denounced his faith and pursued atheism. He served in the First World War and suffered depression and anxiety after being wounded by a misfired British shell which killed two of his colleagues. Later, through his time at Oxford University, he became friends with the deeply religious J.R.R. Tolkien, who eventually rekindled his desire to be a Christian. Looking back, Lewis is one of the more important theologians of the 20th century – even despite the entire abandonment of his faith.

In his book, *The Screwtape Letters*, which is a collection of weekly columns he printed in a newspaper in 1941, Lewis tells a story from the perspective of a fictional devil named Screwtape, who is writing encouraging letters to his nephew, Wormwood, who is a newly employed tempter. These letters reveal the inner workings of a fictional devil’s temptation of a recently Christian Patient, and how that devil’s work interacts with the work of “the Enemy” also known as God. In “Letter 10”, Screwtape congratulates his nephew for helping the patient to become friends with a crowd of people who will sew doubt into his faith, and with a little prodding, hopefully enable the patient to abandon his faith in “the enemy” altogether. In “Letter 12”, Screwtape encourages Wormwood to let the patient continue thinking he’s a Christian while simultaneously eroding his actual faith. *“While he thinks that, we do not have to contend with the explicit repentance of a definite, fully recognized, sin, but only with his vague, though uneasy, feeling that he hasn’t been doing very well lately...If such a feeling is allowed to live... it increases the patient’s reluctance to think about the Enemy.”*¹ Screwtape continues that the dim uneasiness the patient feels translates to his reluctance to pray truthfully, to attend church, and eventually to confess the name of Christ at all – which is perfect for them, the tempters. What Lewis is describing here through Screwtape is a perfect spiral of doubt leading to unbelief, being egged on by temptation. It brings us, eventually, into a deep darkness where we no longer think we believe in God.

Occasional unbelief, if I understand it correctly, is a very normal occurrence in the life of a Christian. We are all riding on the roller coaster of faith. Some of us might be riding at the peak, while others are in a valley, and others are somewhere in between. Acknowledging that we are at different stages of our respective journeys is an important first step, and knowing that our position changes is important, too. No matter where you are on your journey, God is calling you. Jesus is calling you to follow him.

You might be an Elijah. He seemed earlier in the chapter to be discouraged by the apostasy of the people of Israel, rather than keeping in focus all the miracles he did at the Lord’s command. He says, “I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life to take it away” (1 Kgs 19.14). God tells him to go forward and anoint Hazael king over Syria, and Jehu king over Israel, and to find Elisha, the son of Shaphat, and anoint him as prophet in his own place (19.16). Elijah was discouraged, but when the Lord gave him his marching orders, he went ahead and did them. The Lord still had a use for him in his discouragement.

At other times, you might be an Elisha. He was working hard on his farm when Elijah came and put his cloak on him. Elisha responded to this call to accompany him by asking to go close up his affairs before he hit the road. He bid farewell to his parents and sacrificed the oxen – the very tools of his livelihood – and fed them to the people, before leaving to follow Elijah. He was enthusiastic and ready to give up everything at once. Our faith may not always be steady enough to be an Elisha, but the call is still issued to us.

Peter provides yet another example of faith, but one that seems to bridge both the discouragement of Elijah and the enthusiasm of Elisha. When Jesus bid him to row to the deep and cast his net, Peter told him he thought it was a bad idea, but obediently followed him anyway – like

¹ “Letter 12”

Elijah. When the fishers pulled up the nets, they were astonished to find so, so, SO many more fish than they knew how to handle. So many that the boats began to take on water from the weight, and their nets started to break. His response was immediately one of repentance. Peter didn't yet fully realize who Jesus was but knew that he was sent by God since the seas were somehow at his command. Peter did not feel worthy to be in the presence of such a holy person. But Jesus responded to them to encourage them that they were in safe hands by saying, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men" (Lk. 5.10). Peter turned from being like the doubting, despairing, Elijah, to the quick thinking of Elisha to give everything up and follow Christ.

The doubt of Elijah and the eagerness of Elisha are captured here in Peter due to the miracle Jesus performs. As St. Ambrose says, though Peter could not understand with his human mind what was happening before his eyes, the fullness of his faith led him to understand enough to follow Jesus anyway. This is not much different than we are. We, like Wormwood's Patient are easily malleable beings. If we think too hard, we can rationalize everything or deconstruct anything we want. The seeds of doubt are always being planted, but the strength of our faith determines who gets to reap the harvest. Where there is enough faith in us to listen to Christ, his good can be found. No matter how deep and dark the depth is where we are told to cast our net, no matter how well-fished and dry it seems, when we follow Christ's command we will find more fish than we'd ever expect.

Following the Lord, encourages St. Peter himself in his later Epistle, allows those who are sympathetic, loving, and humble – those who do not repay evil for evil, or abuse for abuse, but rather pay evil with a blessing – to get a blessing themselves. For this section, he quotes Psalm 34, the opening line of which says, "I WILL always give thanks unto the LORD; / his praise shall ever be in my mouth." And which closing line says, "The LORD delivereth the souls of his servants; / and all they that put their trust in him shall not be destitute." The Lord orders all things in righteousness: give thanks to him and praise him, and he will deliver your soul.

Even when we are doubting, keep the praise of the Lord on your lips and you will be saved. Like Lewis, who threw away his faith, God works through the deep troughs of unbelief we all have at times. Just do not let the tempter, whether they be a Wormwood, a Screwtape, something on TV, something somebody says to you, or something you decide yourself – do not let the tempter take control of your faith. Latch on to the saviour who stretched his arms on the cross for us all, and even when you are facing the darkest depths, you will catch an abundance of fish.

According to historians writing in the 19th century, today's collect was likely written during the tenure of Leo the First as Bishop of Rome in the mid-400s A.D. This was a time that Rome was under threat of invasion by Atilla the Hun, and the Western Roman Empire was beginning to crumble. It was a time of fear, a time of instability, a time of doubt. This prayer, possibly written by Pope Leo himself, is a prayer for peace, but also a prayer of dedication – a prayer that all that may be done would be according to God's will. It is a prayer that despite the tumult of the wars around the empire, that God would reign supreme and those who were faithful to him would be delivered. When everything seems to be going off the rails, God is in control and he can be trusted, just as he directed Elijah to Elisha, and just as he urged the disciples to cast their nets. As the love of God is manifested in grace to sinners, and in mercy to sufferers, so is it also shown in giving the blessing of peace to His people in their trials and dangers. As He has grace for sin, mercy for misery, so He has peace for discord, and this peace is to be found in His Church, as promised in St. John's Gospel.

May we, the Church, in times of doubt, look to Christ who is the bringer of peace and grace. May we follow him even when we don't feel like it, perhaps especially when we don't feel like it, so that he can help us find fish in the deepest and driest lakes of our lives.

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