C S Lewis – sin and salvation

Week 2: Sin and salvation
Books: ***The Great Divorce****; Perelandra*

Essay: 'Equality' (1943) originally published in *The Spectator*

George MacDonald: Unspoken sermons, first series: 'The consuming fire' and 'It shall not be forgiven'; second series: 'Life' and 'Self-denial'

The religious books that made Lewis famous, prior to the publication of the Narnia series, develop quite a distinctive account of sin. We will look in detail at the account of sin that is given in *The Great Divorce*, and a few extracts from the sermons of George MacDonald that inspired it. We will also see if there are any tensions between the account of sin that Lewis develops in *The Great Divorce* and his appeals to the moral law in *Mere Christianity*, and consider his commitment to an account of an historical fall.

Notes

In *Beyond Personality* (part of what became *Mere Christianity*), and elsewhere, Lewis presents the ultimate goal of Christian life in terms of *theosis*: participation in the life of God; becoming a 'begotten son' rather than a 'created son'. He says that as far as he can see, it appears that this is what the whole universe is made for; appealing to passages from the beginning of Ephesians, John, Colossians, etc. In this sense, he has what theologians call an 'supralapsarian' account of incarnation: the idea that the deepest meaning of incarnation is God's desire to summon humanity into God's life, rather than as a pre-condition of the atonement, which responds to the sin of humanity.

And in this vein, Lewis also wants to understand sin in terms of the resistance to being brought into heaven. This idea is presented vividly in *The Great Divorce*. Particular sins are understood in terms of existential attitudes which are ultimately revealed to be orientations towards the call to participate in heaven. So, for example, the sin of pride, as presented by 'the Big Man', is the insistence on getting what one is due; but this insistence is ultimately revealed to be a refusal to receive *more* than what one is due; i.e. participation in the divine life (in the wordplay of the book, the refusal of 'the Bleeding Charity'). Or, the absurd intellectual vanity of the clergyman, who refuses heaven because it will not guarantee him the opportunity to continue to explore ideas with 'like-minded folk'. In this case, his vanity is revealed to be a preoccupation with self that is threatened by the disinterested attention and wonder that life in heaven involves.

This basic idea is heavily influenced by the sermons of George MacDonals, as Lewis acknowledges with his use of the quotation at the start of the book, and in his appearance in the story itself. For example, in MacDonald's sermon 'The consuming fire', he writes:

> 'For love loves unto purity. Love has ever in view the absolute loveliness of that which it beholds. [. . .] Therefore all that is not beautiful in the beloved, all that comes between and is not of love's kind, must be destroyed. And our God is a consuming fire.'

The sermon stresses that the love of God is relentless and completely uncompromising: nothing that is alien to love will be allowed to endure. This means that, in a sense, we are right to fear God, because from our perspective, God really does represent destruction:

> 'For, when we say that God is Love, do we teach men that their fear of him is groundless? No. **As much as they fear will come upon them, possibly far more**. But there is something beyond their fear,—a divine fate which they cannot withstand [. . .] **The wrath will consume what they call themselves**; so that the selves God made shall appear, coming out with tenfold consciousness of being, and bringing with them all that made the blessedness of the life the men tried to lead without God. They will know that now first are they fully themselves. The avaricious, weary, selfish, suspicious old man shall have passed away. The young, ever young self, will remain.

Lewis returned often to the thought—an important theme in the Pauline epistles—that sanctification, of life in Christ, involves a kind of destruction. MacDonald expresses it like this:

> 'It is the law of Nature—that is, the law of God—that all that is destructible shall be destroyed. When that which is immortal buries itself in the destructible—when it receives all the messages from without, through the surrounding region of decadence, and none from within, from the eternal doors—it cannot, though immortal still, know its own immortality. The destructible must be burned out of it, or begin to be burned out of it, before it can partake of eternal life. [. . .] Many a man's work must be burned, that by that very burning he may be saved [. . .] **and the man who acquiesces in the burning is saved by the fire**'

The image of fire, here, often associated with punishment, hell, etc. is understood in terms of the passing away of 'all that is destructible', and therefore of a transformation or passage to something beyond the human. This is interesting, because as these ideas are developed in *The Great Divorce,* it seems as though Lewis is casting sin not primarily in terms of transgression of the rules given by the moral law, but as personal

resistance to divine purpose, understood in Christological and Trinitarian terms: God's purpose is to bring all people into 'sonship', so as to share in the life of The Eternal Son.

This is worth noting, because traditionally, eschatological claims like this have been taken, by theologians, to be beyond the scope of reason, and therefore outside of the reach of apologetic argument of the sort that Lewis often engages in (e.g. in *Mere Christianity*, in the first book especially). We may be able to show what reasons there are to believe *that* there is a First Cause, but the same does not apply to the belief in the Trinity, or to the hope that human destiny is to participate in the life of the Trinity. But Lewis is also very committed to the thought that there is a universal, and universally accessible moral law – which he calls 'the Tao', and this thought plays a key role in his apologetic arguments. In *Mere Christianity* he positions the Christian doctrine of sin in relation to this moral law, rather than in relation to Christian eschatology. He even suggests that the Christian doctrine of sin is the best 'explanation' for the facts about sin that are available to us simply through observation and reason.

In the first book of *Mere Christianity*, Lewis presents moral conscience as a kind of 'clue' that the universe must have a morally good ground; conscience is taken as a sign of the meaning of the universe:

> 'It begins to look as if we shall have to admit that there is more than one kind of reality; that, in this particular case, there is something above and beyond the ordinary facts of men's behaviour, and yet quite definitely real — a real law, which none of has made, but which we find pressing on us.'

This point is a frequent concern of Lewis's, and we will examine it in more detail next week: the rejection of a subjective account of morality is ruled out, which means that we need to 'explain' the existence of moral intuitions and beliefs by positing something real – another 'kind' of reality. According to this line of argument, we should have then to understand sin primarily in terms of transgression of law; the whole logic of the argument demands this. Lewis thinks that our sinful condition can be seen and understood easily, without any reference to revelation:

> 'I am only trying to call attention to a fact; the fact that this year, or this month, or, more likely, this very day, we have failed to practise ourselves the kind of behaviour we expect from other people.'

In fact, he thinks that our experience of the moral law (it's existence and our failure to follow it) constitutes naturally-available 'evidence' about God, and what God must be like:

> 'We have two bits of evidence about the Somebody. One is the universe He has made. if we used that as our only clue, then I think we should have to conclude that He was a great artist (for the universe is a very beautiful place), but also that

> He is quite merciless and no friend to man (for the universe is a very dangerous and terrifying place). The other bit of evidence is that moral Law which He has put into our minds. and this is a better bit of evidence than the other, because it is inside information. You find out more about God from the moral Law than from the universe in general just as you find out more about a man by listening to his conversation than by looking at a house he has built. Now, from this second bit of evidence we conclude that the Being behind the universe is intensely interested in right conduct — in **fair play, unselfishness, courage, good faith, honesty and truthfulness**. in that sense we should agree with the account given by Christianity and some other religions, that God is "good." ’

On the other side of things, Lewis thinks, is the recognition that we are deeply at odds with the goodness of God. And again, this, he thinks, is something that we could know through rational reflection and observation:

> ‘On the other hand, we know that if there does exist an absolute goodness it must hate most of what we do. That is the terrible fix we are in. If the universe is not governed by an absolute goodness, then all our efforts are in the long run hopeless. But if it is, then we are making ourselves enemies to that goodness every day, and are not in the least likely to do any better tomorrow, and so our case is hopeless again.’

So at this point, Lewis seems to position human sinfulness (or, ‘fallenness’) as something that we could know independently of revelation through Christ. We have the resources to know that there exists a moral law that we have, nevertheless, consistently failed to live up to, and therefore that we are alienated from its foundation (whatever that may be). In his *The Problem of Pain*, he describes our situation as follows:

> From the moment a creature becomes aware of God as God and of itself as self, the terrible alternative of choosing God or self for the centre is opened to it. [. . .] Thus all day long, and all the days of our life, we are sliding, slipping, falling away — as if God were, to our present consciousness, a smooth inclined plane on which there is no resting. And indeed we are now of such a nature that we must slip off, and the sin, because it is unavoidable, may be venial. But God cannot have made us so.

This, again, presents sin as only comprehensible in relation to a call to love God above all else; and this seems to suggest that we understand sin only by first understanding what it means to love God. And the picture of sinfulness developed in *The Great Divorce* also seems to work in this direction: we know what sin is primarily with reference to the divine call to participate in divine life, in heaven. From this perspective, sin is not so much transgression of perceptible moral law, as resistance to divine call. The decisive

‘sins’ in *The Great Divorce* seem to be rather different to the behaviour ruled out by the moral law: they are not transgressions of law; they are something more personal – intrinsically related to the gracious call of God, which explains why it is that the clergyman and the law-abiding ‘Big Man’ exclude themselves from heaven when a murderer is eager to enter. They don’t have the ‘taste’ for life in heaven, and so cannot accept the offer. The call that the residents in hell have refused, and become deaf to, is not, it seems, something that could be known through apologetic argument about a moral law, based on reason, because it is a call to a form of life radically different to earthly existence.

So one question we might ask is this: how did Lewis understand the relationship between these two different pictures of sin: sin-as-moral-transgression and sin-as-spiritual-refusal? This is certainly a question that we find more generally within Christian thought: on the one hand, the tendency to regard sin as transgression of law, roughly similar to what, in modern thought, we understand under the term ‘wrongdoing’. But on the other hand, there is also the tendency to understand sin with reference to a spiritual trajectory, or supernatural calling.

The picture that Lewis paints in *Perelandra* might be understood as an attempt to connect the idea of sin as transgression with the idea of sin as refusal of invitation. In a fascinating passage, the human Ransom encounters a woman on an alien planet: like him, but unaffected by sin, and ignorant of the possibility of disobedience, or of willing a good other than that which is given by God. Ransom tries to explain the meaning of death, and from there the idea of passionately not wanting something. But this awakens in ‘the Lady’ the realisation both of the possibility of willing something other than the good that is offered to her, but at the same time something deeper. She realises what she has not known until that moment: that she has, all along, been actively willing the good herself, rather than simply passively receiving the good that is given to her. From there, she realises that this active willing of the good that is given is itself a great good:

> ‘I thought’, she said, ‘that I was carried in the will of Him I love, but now I see that I walk with it. I thought that the good things He sent me drew me into them as the waves lift the islands [in the book, islands float upon the sea]; but now I see that it is I who plunge into them with my own legs and arms, as when we go swimming. [. . .] I feel it is delight with terror in it! One’s own self to be walking from one good to another, walking beside Him as Himself may walk, not even holding hands.’

Here he Lewis is reflecting on the old problem of how to account for the sin of Adam: how could it be that a being with a clear grasp of the goodness of God, and the freedom to will the good would nevertheless will something other than the good? Lewis here presents the origin of sin as the act of willing a good other than the one given, and alongside this, the failure to trust that the good actually given is best – to suspect that the good *not* given may be preferable. For ‘the Lady’, the task to is trust that the

command that has been given to her, and her obedience to it, is itself something good, a way of receiving from the One she loves. This narrative locates sin as distrust, rooted in selfish pride that wants to grasp or cling to the good, rather than continually receive what is given.

In a future week, we will consider how all of these themes are further developed in *Till we have faces*.