

# The Screwtape Letters (II)

by C. S. Lewis (~1941)



## Chapter 12

### Nothing

January 11, 2026

# Key words

**Patient = Man**

**Enemy = God**

**Wormwood = Young Devil in training  
(Nephew)**

**Screwtape = Older / Experienced Devil  
(Uncle)**



# The Screwtape Letters, Chapter 12

**MY DEAR WORMWOOD,**

Obviously you are making excellent progress. My only fear is lest in attempting to hurry the patient you awaken him to a sense of his real position. For you and I, who see that position as it really is, must never forget how totally different it ought to appear to him. We know that we have introduced a change of direction in his course which is already carrying him out of his orbit around the Enemy; but he must be made to imagine that all the choices which have effected this change of course are trivial and revocable. He must not be allowed to suspect that he is now, however slowly, heading right away from the sun on a line which will carry him into the cold and dark of utmost space.

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**Wormwood has reported that he is making good progress with the patient. His uncle cautions him not to move things along too quickly, or the patient may begin to realize his precarious position, which is moving away from the Enemy.**

For this reason I am almost glad to hear that he is still a churchgoer and a communicant. I know there are dangers in this; but anything is better than that he should realise the break it has made with the first months of his Christian life. As long as he retains externally the habits of a Christian he can still be made to think of himself as one who has adopted a few new friends and amusements but whose spiritual state is much the same as it was six weeks ago. And while he thinks that, we do not have to contend with the explicit repentance of a definite, fully recognised, sin, but only with his vague, though uneasy, feeling that he hasn't been doing very well lately.

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The fact that the patient is still a churchgoer and receiving Holy Communion is a good sign. The patient can deceive himself into thinking that his spiritual state is unaffected by his new friends and activities. Therefore, he will not be feeling repentant of specific sins, only uneasy that "he hasn't been doing very well lately."

**This dim uneasiness needs careful handling. If it gets too strong it may wake him up and spoil the whole game. On the other hand, if you suppress it entirely — which, by the by, the Enemy will probably not allow you to do — we lose an element in the situation which can be turned to good account. If such a feeling is allowed to live, but not allowed to become irresistible and flower into real repentance, it has one invaluable tendency. It increases the patient's reluctance to think about the Enemy. All humans at nearly all times have some such reluctance; but when thinking of Him involves facing and intensifying a whole vague cloud of half-conscious guilt, this reluctance is increased tenfold. They hate every idea that suggests Him, just as men in financial embarrassment hate the very sight of a pass-book. In this state your patient will not omit, but he will increasingly dislike, his religious duties. He will think about them as little as he feels he decently can beforehand, and forget them as soon as possible when they are over. A few weeks ago you had to tempt him to unreality and inattention in his prayers: but now you will find him opening his arms to you and almost begging you to distract his purpose and benumb his heart. He will want his prayers to be unreal, for he will dread nothing so much as effective contact with the Enemy. His aim will be to let sleeping worms lie.**

**These vague feelings of guilt can be used to further distance the patient from his faith. They will cause him to avoid thinking about the Enemy, as this would involve "facing and intensifying" his guilt. Furthermore, the patient will increasingly dislike his religious duties, although he will continue to perform them. He will be willingly distracted—without temptation—from his prayers to avoid drawing the Enemy's attention to himself.**

As this condition becomes more fully established, you will be gradually freed from the tiresome business of providing Pleasures as temptations. As the uneasiness and his reluctance to face it cut him off more and more from all real happiness, and as habit renders the pleasures of vanity and excitement and flippancy at once less pleasant and harder to forgo (for that is what habit fortunately does to a pleasure) you will find that anything or nothing is sufficient to attract his wandering attention. You no longer need a good book, which he really likes, to keep him from his prayers or his work or his sleep; a column of advertisements in yesterday's paper will do. You can make him waste his time not only in conversation he enjoys with people whom he likes, but in conversations with those he cares nothing about on subjects that bore him. You can make him do nothing at all for long periods. You can keep him up late at night, not roistering, but staring at a dead fire in a cold room.

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All the healthy and outgoing activities which we want him to avoid can be inhibited and nothing given in return, so that at last he may say, as one of my own patients said on his arrival down here, "I now see that I spent most of my life in doing neither what I ought nor what I liked". The Christians describe the Enemy as one "without whom Nothing is strong". And Nothing is very strong: strong enough to steal away a man's best years not in sweet sins but in a dreary flickering of the mind over it knows not what and knows not why, in the gratification of curiosities so feeble that the man is only half aware of them, in drumming of fingers and kicking of heels, in whistling tunes that he does not like, or in the long, dim labyrinth of reveries that have not even lust or ambition to give them a relish, but which, once chance association has started them, the creature is too weak and fuddled to shake off.

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There is an added benefit here for Wormwood. As the patient moves away from the Enemy, he will need less and less temptation. He will seek out distractions and empty pleasures for himself to occupy his attention. He will read anything, talk to anyone, or do nothing at all without Wormwood's prompting. All the healthy, outgoing pastimes can be displaced and nothing worthwhile provided to fill the emptiness. He will be like one of Screwtape's former patients who, upon arrival down below, said, "I now see that I spent most of my life in doing *neither* what I ought *nor* what I liked." The dreary "Nothing" that is strong without the Enemy will steal the patient's life.

You will say that these are very small sins; and doubtless, like all young tempters, you are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness. But do remember, the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy. It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one — the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts,

Your affectionate uncle  
**SCREWTAPE**

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Screwtape assures Wormwood that the accumulation of small sins rather than "spectacular wickedness" will separate the patient from the Enemy. It will edge him "away from the Light and out into the Nothing." In fact, it is the barely perceptible path leading gradually away from faith that is the surest road to Hell.

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C. S. Lewis

## Patient's situation

- Still a Churchgoer
- A young Christian (few months)
- Growing nonchalantly
- Has a vague idea of his sins
- Easy to distract; less focused
- Unknowingly develop habits to move away from the Enemy
- Habitually doing less. Spent most of his life in doing neither what he ought nor what he liked
- Gradually separating from God

## Wormwood's recommendation

- Focus on “the uneasy feeling”/ “half conscious guilt”
- Build reluctance to face the Enemy
- Help the patient become distracted by anything and nothing
- Create small sins and let them accumulate; not spectacular events!
- Edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing
- The safest road to Hell is the gradual one — the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts,

# Is Knowing Devil's Strategy Helpful?

1. The patient is heading away from God. How does ST recommend furthering this process?
2. After WW is able to separate the Patient more from God, what becomes easier for the devils?
3. According to ST, what is the safest road to hell?

# Is Knowing Devil's Strategy Useful??

1. The patient is heading away from God. How does ST recommend furthering this process?

**Slowly, small distractions. He wants him to remain a churchgoer so that he thinks he is still a Christian.**

1.

2. After WW is able to separate the Patient more from God, what becomes easier for the devils?

**Distractions. They don't have to work as hard at providing temptations**

1.

3. According to ST, what is the safest road to hell?

**The gradual one**

## Does any of this apply to you?

- Recognize “distractions in your own life to do nothing of importance/significance”.

List known Nothing distractions, that steal your time

- Be more selective of who you hang out with? Is your time and effort rewarded by being drawn towards God, or to “nothing of significance”?

List your friend and activities that have proven to be “meaningful”

- Can you make a plan and follow it (gradually) to move away from “Nothing”. It is likely you may need a close friend to help you with accountability