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## CHAPTER ONE

# AN INCONSOLABLE SECRET

## OUR LONGING FOR JOY



*Early* in his spiritual memoir, *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis recounted a moment from childhood when he stood beside a flowering red currant bush on a summer day and was suddenly overcome by a feeling of overwhelming desire, a sensation of wistfulness and longing, “without warning, and as if from a depth not of years but of centuries.” He struggled to find words to describe what he felt, although later he would say that Milton’s phrase, “the enormous bliss of Eden,” came close. And then, just as quickly, the experience was gone. “The world turned commonplace again.” The sensation had lasted for just a brief instant and yet, he realized all other pleasures were nothing compared to this.<sup>1</sup>

Most of us have known that experience, that fleeting glimpse of paradise that steals over us unbidden, often when we are not looking. I remember sitting on a bus crowded with commuters one fall morning, quite early. I was looking over my notes for the class I would teach later that day when the bus passed a small lake at the base of a sloping hillside blanketed by oaks and maples ablaze in the full color of autumn. I looked up and instantly felt the sensation of sweet desire, the ache of beauty, the

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<sup>1</sup>SJ, 16.

mixture of longing and sadness all flood over me. Lewis later called it “the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.”<sup>2</sup>

The oddest things can trigger these feelings: a particular view, a memory, certain smells or sounds. For the narrator of Marcel Proust’s famous novel, *Remembrance of Things Past*, a mere bite of a madeleine cookie dipped in a hot drink unleashed a stream of nostalgia:

No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory—this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was me. . . . Whence did it come? What did it mean?<sup>3</sup>

In those moments we are lifted out of our anxiety and self-consciousness. The sensation of timelessness breaks into our experience, a sensation captured in Paul Tillich’s pregnant phrase, the “eternal Now.”<sup>4</sup> But then, just as suddenly, the moment is gone and we are plunged back into the “reality” of our day-to-day lives.

What are we to make of those experiences? Do they have anything to do with God or with the life of faith? What would it mean for us if they did? In his famous sermon to the citizens of Athens, recorded in Acts 17, the apostle Paul explained that God, who had given humans “life and breath and all things” (Acts 17:25), had deliberately left traces of divine love all around us, in the hope that we would seek God and find life—although, he added, God is not far from each of us. Lewis came to see

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<sup>2</sup>WG, 5.

<sup>3</sup>Marcel Proust, *Swann’s Way*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 48.

<sup>4</sup>Tillich described how at certain moments eternity “breaks powerfully into our consciousness.” Paul Tillich, *The Essential Tillich: An Anthology of the Writings of Paul Tillich*, ed. F. Forrester Church (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 127.

these moments of blissful longing as signs of God's presence, traces of God's love that captivated his heart. That sensation, which he called joy, fell upon him before he even had words to describe what it was. In his early years, it became alternatively an obsession and a haunting that sometimes made day-to-day life a challenge. But eventually those strands of joy formed the cord through which God drew Lewis to faith. They also became the foundation for one of his most compelling arguments for the existence of God and the basis for what he had to say about the spiritual life. For Lewis, joy held the secret of living with gladness in the moment and hope for the heavenly life to come, a realization that came out of a personal spiritual journey marked in its early years by a persistent tension between joy on the one hand and religion on the other. And so, although this book is not a biography, we begin with a brief account of his journey, tracing that tension between his religious life and these glimpses of what he called the "inconsolable secret."<sup>5</sup> First, however, let us consider our own glimpses of joy.

### THE ENORMOUS BLISS OF EDEN

In a haunting episode from *The Pilgrim's Regress*, which he published in 1933 soon after becoming a Christian, Lewis offered this image of joy. At the beginning of the story, the main character, John, who is languishing under the yoke of oppressive religion, has a glimpse of beauty that stabs his heart with desire. One day when he is out wandering along a road by a stone wall, he notices something odd up ahead—a window in the wall. He approaches the window, and when he looks through it, he sees trees and primroses.

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<sup>5</sup>WG, 3. A number of excellent biographies of Lewis are available, including these: Alister E. McGrath, *C. S. Lewis—A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2013); Devin Brown, *A Life Observed: A Spiritual Biography of C. S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2013); George Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005); Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Their Friends* (London: HarperCollins, 1997); and Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1974). For a brief but very informative overview of Lewis's life, see Art Lindsley's essay, "C. S. Lewis: His Life and Works," *C. S. Lewis Institute*, [www.cslewisinstitute.org/node/28](http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/node/28).

He remembered suddenly how he had gone into another wood to pull primroses, as a child, very long ago—so long that even in the moment of remembering the memory seemed still out of reach. While he strained to grasp it, there came to him from beyond the wood a sweetness and a pang so piercing that instantly he forgot his father's house, and his mother, and the fear of the Landlord, and the burden of the rules. . . . A moment later, he found that he was sobbing.<sup>6</sup>

Although our own experiences might differ in detail, most of us have known what it feels like to have that ache of longing fall upon us, to yearn deeply for that place, that possession or achievement, that relationship that will finally fulfill us, that will take us out of our loneliness, anxiety, and striving. We have all had experiences that we look forward to or remember or daydream about that make our hearts throb with desire. They are glimpses of Eden.

Mine often involve the memory of times away from the typical routines and demands of my life—a camping trip we once took to the Grand Canyon when my boys were small or the week we would spend each summer with dear college friends in Maine. In one especially vivid memory, my wife and I are in a tiny village in the Sierras, set in a small valley ringed by mountains crowded with tall pines that give way to soaring granite cliffs. It is early in the morning. The sky is a deep blue. The air is cold. I can see my breath. The snow on the ground, hardened during the night's freeze, crunches under my boots. As I walk, I catch the scent of pine mixed with wood smoke.

As that last example shows, the sensation of desire often comes over me in the presence of nature's beauty—the view of mountains covered with frost that I see from my office window when I look up from my desk or the scene I caught from the bus on that early morning commute. Being near the sea has that power over me. I hear the rhythm of the surf as waves break on the shore again and again. An ocean breeze caresses my cheek. The sun is warm on my face. The smell of the sea brings back

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<sup>6</sup>PR, 24.

a flood of memories from childhood vacations at the ocean. But I have also experienced it listening to music or at certain moments when I am watching a movie or reading a good book.

The feeling sometimes comes when I look ahead to some event in the future—a trip I hope to take, the approach of fall, or maybe the first snow of winter. I often experience it when I daydream about the coming of Thanksgiving or Christmas. In my vision, I am surrounded by my family. The house is filled with the sound of conversation and laughter and the smell of food.

Just thinking about these moments creates intense longing in me. It aches and stabs. I want to be there so badly. I know what it is to look forward to those moments—to have the kind of feeling, Lewis said, that comes over us when we first fall in love or we daydream about taking a journey to a distant country.<sup>7</sup> When I know that one of those times is coming, the anticipation of being there is almost overwhelming; indeed, part of the richness of the experience is the anticipation itself. Because I know that when I am there, all will be well. I will be completely content; all of my worries and cares will fade away. I will be lifted out of insecurity and self-consciousness. All my fears about the future or my regrets from the past will melt away. I will be able to enjoy the people I am with completely. Finally, I will be *There*.

I also know what it is like to look back on those experiences in the past. I remember them as being perfect (not like my life at present). My mind re-creates of those times a memory of paradise.

But, if I am honest with myself, I know that when I'm actually in those moments, they are never quite as perfect as I thought they would be. I have been given the gift over the years of vacations in the mountains or by the seashore, as well as wonderful family gatherings. In so many ways they were magical, and they remain the source of many of my richest memories. But I know that, in the moment, they were not perfect. There were still stresses and worries, traces of tension. Running through all was

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<sup>7</sup>MC, 119.

the painful sense that the time was flying, like sand slipping through my fingers. When the long-awaited moment finally comes, it's as if I've been eagerly awaiting Christmas morning and at last have opened my gifts, and then I look around with a sense of loss and disappointment and ask, "Is this all?"

More than any other author I have ever read, Lewis has helped me make sense of that experience. He invited us to consider the possibility that our own longing, this "inconsolable secret,"<sup>8</sup> might be a window on the nature of God, a clue to the purpose for which we were made, and the key to living the good life. His conviction of that possibility grew out of a struggle to come to terms with his encounters with Joy, a struggle that lay at the heart of his own spiritual journey.

### **JOY VERSUS RELIGION: LEWIS'S SPIRITUAL JOURNEY**

As *Surprised by Joy* makes clear, much of Lewis's early spiritual journey was marked by a tug-of-war between the opposing forces of faith and religious observance on the one hand and these recurring glimpses of joy on the other. He described his earliest years, when he was a small child, as an idyllic time often spent in imaginative play with his older brother, Warnie. This was also the time when he had his first glimpses of joy. During these years, he was clearly exposed to religion, but it was a religion in which God was a distant figure and in which faith had nothing to do with joy. We get a hint of the nature of his view of God when his mother, Flora, became sick and eventually died. The year was 1908, and Lewis was just nine years old. He had been taught that God would grant his prayers if only he would pray with enough faith, so he set about trying to muster a sense of conviction within himself (which was what he thought it meant to have faith) in order to secure her healing, almost as if by sorcery. As he saw it, God was a magician who might, if conditions were right, grant his wish and then go away and leave him alone.

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<sup>8</sup>WG, 3.



In the years of adolescence that followed, the battle lines between religion and joy seemed to move back and forth in Lewis's life. At first religion seemed to gain the upper hand while joy retreated into the background. In the fall of 1908, his father, Albert Lewis, engulfed in his own grief over Flora's death, sent his two sons to the Wynyard School, a boarding school that Lewis called "Belsen," after the concentration camp in Nazi Germany.<sup>9</sup> The school was ruled by a despotic, mentally ill headmaster the students called "Oldie." There, Lewis became a believer in the sense that he attended church and tried to actually practice his religion, but it was a fearful faith dominated by what Lewis characterized as a persistent, oppressive "fear for my soul."<sup>10</sup> Almost at the same moment, the glimpses of joy he had known in his earliest years vanished from his life entirely.

The lines shifted, however, when at age thirteen he was sent to a second boarding school, the Cherbourg School, which he called "Chartres," and where, by his own admission, he lost his faith. Although a number of influences hastened this process—among them dabbling in the occult and being exposed to parallels between Christianity and pagan mythology, all overlaid with the deep pessimism toward the universe that he had imbibed early in his life—what he most remembered about his loss of faith was simply how eager he was to be rid of it, so onerous had it been. It was a burden from which he "longed with soul and body to escape."<sup>11</sup> Ironically, this was also the moment of rebirth, when the rich experiences of joy returned to his life.

The two decades that followed represent the season of Lewis's life when he was first an atheist and then an Idealist, holding to a philosophical position that admitted the possibility of some impersonal force or Spirit guiding history.<sup>12</sup> Throughout this time, he arduously resisted the prospect that Christianity might be true. Yet it was also the period

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<sup>9</sup>For the identification of the schools Lewis attended, see McGrath, *C. S. Lewis—A Life*, 26.

<sup>10</sup>*SJ*, 33.

<sup>11</sup>*SJ*, 62.

<sup>12</sup>On Lewis's embrace of Idealism, see *SJ*, 208-11.

when the quest for joy became his master passion. In 1913, he transferred to a third boarding school, Wyvern College, which he attended for just one year. It was a year marked by the contrast between his “inner” and “outer” lives. The outer life was marked by the overwhelming drudgery of surviving the school culture’s ruthlessly competitive social hierarchy, which was centered on sports, and the school’s system of involuntary servitude known as “fagging.” Lewis’s inner life, by contrast, was suffused with glimpses of joy so extravagant and beautiful that they almost hurt. After one year in this purgatory, he found release in the person of William T. Kirkpatrick, who tutored Lewis over the next two years in his home in order to prepare him for Oxford. Lewis came away from his time with Kirkpatrick more deeply confirmed in his atheism but also with a sharpened intellect and a lifelong passion for logical argument—a facility that would play a crucial role in his coming to faith, by compelling him to make sense of the recurring experiences of joy. He would speak of Kirkpatrick with reverence and gratitude for the rest of his life.

Lewis successfully completed his scholarship examinations in the winter of 1916 and was admitted to Oxford the following summer, but before he could begin in earnest, he enlisted in the army and, in November 1917, found himself in the frontline trenches of northern France where he witnessed the carnage of the First World War and where he was wounded in April of the following year.<sup>13</sup> Returning to Oxford in January 1919 at the end of the war, he spent the next four years studying Greek and Latin literature, philosophy and ancient history, and English literature, before being appointed as a tutor in philosophy at University College in 1924 and, the following year, a fellow and tutor in English literature at Magdalen College, where he served until his appointment to the chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge University in 1954.

As Lewis recounted it, it was during this time, when he was a student and then a fellow at Oxford, that his quest to find joy reached its most fevered pitch. He became something of an expert in Norse mythology

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<sup>13</sup>SJ, 158.

in the belief that it would lead him to joy, but once he had built the temple, he awakened only to discover that “the God had flown.”<sup>14</sup> His earlier boarding school experience had already convinced him that ambition offered no answer, and over time he considered but finally eliminated both sex and the occult as possibilities. During this period he also found the defenses he had erected against God beginning to crumble. He came to realize that his favorite writers, if not all actual believers, were “dangerously tinged with something like religion, even at times, with Christianity.”<sup>15</sup> He found himself surrounded by close friends whom he truly respected and enjoyed, who were either Christians or at least sympathetic to Christianity, among them Owen Barfield, J. R. R. Tolkien, Hugo Dyson, and others. And in a development we will consider in greater detail in the next chapter, he was forced to the logical conclusion that there had to be a source to which these experiences of joy were pointing, if not in the natural world then in a world beyond this one. From there, it was but a short distance to that point when, on a summer evening in 1929, with great reluctance, he surrendered to God.<sup>16</sup> As we shall see, coming to terms with the experience of joy not only led him to admit that there was “another country” ruled by the God he had all his life avoided; it also hinted at the fundamental character of that God—the God of joy. In this way, what for most of Lewis’s early life had been completely separate, these experiences of longing and his faith in God, finally came together, a process driven by the haunting of our “inconsolable secret.”<sup>17</sup>

### THE INCONSOLABLE SECRET IN LEWIS’S WRITINGS

In a number of his early writings, we find traces of Lewis’s haunting glimpses of joy. One compelling expression of that longing occurs in the first book he ever produced, an edition of poetry titled *Spirits in Bondage*:

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<sup>14</sup>SJ, 165.

<sup>15</sup>SJ, 214.

<sup>16</sup>SJ, 228. McGrath, with others, has argued that the correct date was actually 1930. See his *C. S. Lewis—A Life*, 146.

<sup>17</sup>WG, 4.

*A Cycle of Lyrics*.<sup>18</sup> Lewis published the book in 1919, just after returning from World War I—and before he had returned to Christianity, or even theism. Published under the pseudonym Clive Hamilton (his first name and his mother’s maiden name), the slim volume contained poems he had been writing as early as his teen years, along with others that he wrote during the war. In some we hear anger at a God who, at this point, Lewis doesn’t even believe exists.<sup>19</sup> In others we get a hint, rare in Lewis’s writings, of the suffering he witnessed during World War I. But especially we sense the stabs of longing. Yet at this stage in his journey, there was no God to which they pointed. The best Lewis could hope for was to savor those rare moments in the midst of the hopelessness of mundane human existence. One particularly poignant expression was the poem “Dungeon Grates,” which depicts joy as a tiny stream of light coming through the bars of a prison.<sup>20</sup>

Lewis began the poem by trying to convey what he saw as the human condition, that of being caught in an endless chain of cause and effect, within a meaningless, materialistic universe. We are trapped in a grim and hopeless world, inescapably entangled in the gears of “unrelenting fate,” and we would die from the utter dreariness of it all were it not for the rare, unsought glimpses of beauty that steal over us, those moments when we sense a “fragrant breath” that comes wafting to us from the distant country for which we ache “with overstrong desire.”<sup>21</sup> We cannot control those moments; no amount of effort on our part will produce them—they are beyond our will. Instead, they come upon us

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<sup>18</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Spirits in Bondage: A Cycle of Lyrics*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984).

<sup>19</sup>Lewis said of this period, “I was at this time living . . . in a whirl of contradictions. I maintained that God did not exist. I was also very angry with God for not existing. I was equally angry with Him for creating a world” (*SJ*, 115).

<sup>20</sup>C. S. Lewis, “Dungeon Grates,” in *The Collected Poems of C. S. Lewis: A Critical Edition*, ed. Don W. King (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2015), 88-89. In an essay published some twenty-five years later, Lewis described another moment when a small beam of light shone in a dark place, not a dungeon but a toolshed. Only then he spoke not simply of looking at the beam but of looking *along* the beam and, by it, seeing the world. C. S. Lewis, “Meditation in a Toolshed,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 212-15.

<sup>21</sup>“Dungeon Grates,” 88.

when we are not expecting them. And yet, in those glimpses of transcendence, we are “one with the eternal stream of loveliness,” that ocean of beauty in which we long to “sport and swim.”<sup>22</sup> Much later, Lewis returned to this notion of our hunger for oneness with the beauty we see around us in his “Weight of Glory” sermon, where he described our response to the beauty of nature as a longing not simply to gaze from the outside but “to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.”<sup>23</sup> As a Christian, he came to see that experience as a foretaste of what awaits us:

At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendors we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get in.<sup>24</sup>

But again, at the point in his journey when he published *Spirits in Bondage*, Lewis possessed no answer for this persistent longing.

In some poems from the same collection, Lewis railed in anger at the meaningless universe, as in the poem titled “In Prison,” where he cried out

For the pain of man . . .  
Against the hopeless life that ran  
Forever in a circling path.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>“Dungeon Grates,” 89.

<sup>23</sup>WG, 8.

<sup>24</sup>WG, 8.

<sup>25</sup>C. S. Lewis, “In Prison,” in King, *Collected Poems of C. S. Lewis*, 84. Although Lewis was attracted to what he called this “Promethean defiance” early in his life, he came to see as a logical contradiction the very idea that a meaningless universe could, through a process of random, “natural” selection, produce creatures who are aware of that meaninglessness and who expect that it should be otherwise. As he put it in *Mere Christianity*, “A man feels wet when he falls into water, because man is not a water animal: a fish would not feel wet. . . . If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning” (MC, 45-46). He called this “a futility which seems to vitiate Lord Russell’s stirring essay” (SJ, 205)—a reference to Bertrand Russell’s famous essay, “A Free Man’s Worship.” This observation served as one of the foundations for his arguments for the existence of God in *Mere Christianity* (45-46), *Miracles* (17-36), and *The Problem of Pain* (1-15).

In others, he wished he had never known the siren call of desire, as when he romanticized the life of the “stout, suburban people” who “water flowers and roll the lawn” then “sit and sew and talk and smoke” while he sits alone in the cold, wet night vexed by “homeless longing.”<sup>26</sup> How much better to be these “solid folk” who, “after their work and doze and smoke, are not fretted by desire.”<sup>27</sup> But having been touched by that longing, the most positive response he could muster as he ended “Dungeon Grates” was to express a resigned determination to hold onto the memory of that glimpse of light. Perhaps we will find in that glimpse the strength to bear the dreary hopelessness of the universe, the strife that mars our social relationships, and the burdens and disappointments and pain of our lives:

One moment was enough . . .

We have seen the Glory—we have seen.<sup>28</sup>

Like the theme to which a musical composition returns again and again, we hear throughout the poems in this collection the despair of finding himself trapped in a meaningless existence, yet haunted by the glimpse of something more.

However, the book in which Lewis described the experience most explicitly was *Surprised by Joy*. In the opening pages, he recounted one of his earliest memories from around the age of seven, when his brother, Warnie, showed him a little “toy garden” he had created on the inside lid of an old cookie tin, “covered with moss and garnished with twigs and flowers. . . . That was the first beauty I ever knew.” He went on to say, “As long as I live my imagination of Paradise will retain something of my brother’s toy garden.” During this same time from early childhood, he recalled, he and his brother would gaze at a series of knolls that were visible from the nursery window, which they called “the Green Hills.” His

<sup>26</sup>C. S. Lewis, “In Praise of Solid People,” in King, *Collected Poems of C. S. Lewis*, 98-99.

<sup>27</sup>We will meet the “solid folk” again in Lewis’s fantasy, *The Great Divorce*, where they represent the glorious condition of humans who have embraced the utter reality of heaven. But here, without the perspective of Christian faith, Lewis could only romanticize that state as one of blissful ignorance of the inconsolable ache.

<sup>28</sup>“Dungeon Grates,” 89.

description of them captures the ache that would become a theme of his life—though not that far away, they seemed “quite unattainable. They taught me longing—*Sehnsucht*.”<sup>29</sup>

Later in the book, he described other such recurring moments from young childhood (including the one when he was standing next to the flowering red currant bush), one of which came to him when he read Beatrix Potter’s *Squirrel Nutkin*, a book that haunted Lewis with what he could only call “the Idea of Autumn.”<sup>30</sup> Again, the book evoked such longing, and he found himself returning to it in order to arouse that sense of desire. A third glimpse he found in poetry, particularly in a passage from Longfellow’s *Saga of King Olaf*, where he read these words:

I heard a voice that cried,  
Balder the beautiful  
Is dead, is dead—

Although he knew nothing of Balder, somehow the poetry lifted him up “into huge regions of northern sky.” As with his other experiences of joy, the longing that came over him was “almost sickening” in its intensity and then, almost as quickly, it was gone.<sup>31</sup> In every case, he was left with the yearning to feel it again.

By contrast, he saw his passage into adolescence as a journey into the desert or into winter. He was shipped off to that first “concentration camp” of a boarding school (Wynyard) and the indiscriminate cruelty of Oldie, the headmaster, and then soon after enrolled at the school he called “Chartres” (the Cherbourg School), where he abandoned his faith

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<sup>29</sup>SJ, 7. Paul Brazier offers a helpful explanation of this German concept, which, he observed, is not easily translatable because “it is more than simply a word—it is ‘a yearning,’ ‘a longing.’ . . . A yearning for, a longing for, implies an object, an object of desire, but there is so often with *Sehnsucht* no object, it is the sensation itself. Therefore, *Sehnsucht* is often seen to have mystical overtones relating to something unattainable. It is . . . characterized by a fervent and passionate desire or longing, a yearning or craving, a hunger or even an addiction. In many ways this feeling, the concept of this desire, is destructive, negative, even seen by some as self-defeating because of the regret and, simultaneously, the deeply corrosive sense of unattainability and loss.” Paul Brazier, *C. S. Lewis—Revelation, Conversion, and Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 29.

<sup>30</sup>SJ, 16.

<sup>31</sup>SJ, 17.

and where he learned to smoke and to take on the dress, speech, and demeanor of pompous dandy.<sup>32</sup> Early in his time at Chartres he came to know ambition and had many experiences of pleasure, but “the authentic ‘Joy’ . . . had vanished from my life: so completely that not even the memory or the desire of it remained.”<sup>33</sup>

But then one day everything changed. Joy returned. It is a mark of the kind of religion Lewis had been taught that this rediscovery of joy only happened after he had ceased believing in God. He described that moment in language that will be familiar to anyone who has read of Aslan’s return to Narnia in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*; he said that it was as if the “long winter” had suddenly given way to “a landscape of grass and primroses and orchards in bloom, deafened with bird songs and astir with running water.”<sup>34</sup> The winter ended so abruptly when he happened on a literary magazine that someone had left lying on a classroom table one afternoon. As he entered the room, he saw a headline that read “Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods” and, below it, an image drawn by the famous illustrator Arthur Rackham. That magazine cover instantly took him back to those powerful experiences from childhood that he had all but forgotten. Overcome with what felt “almost like a heartbreak,” he found that he had returned “at last from exile and desert lands to my own country.”<sup>35</sup> Then, just as quickly, the moment was gone and he found himself in the same drab, unswept classroom. But from that moment on, he was determined to recapture that sensation.

Through all of these experiences, Lewis traced the common thread of joy, which he defined as “an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction.”<sup>36</sup> Joy, he insisted, was different from happiness or pleasure (the latter of which we, at least, have some power to produce for ourselves). Joy might just as easily be described as a kind of bittersweet sadness, and yet no one who had truly known that feeling would trade it

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<sup>32</sup>SJ, 68.

<sup>33</sup>SJ, 72.

<sup>34</sup>SJ, 72.

<sup>35</sup>SJ, 73.

<sup>36</sup>SJ, 17-18.



for any other gratification the world could offer. It was this uncanny melding of transcendent bliss, intense longing, and bittersweet sadness that I felt that fall morning on the bus riding past the lake and the trees in fall color, a sensation all of us have known in our own glimpses of Eden.

As Lewis made clear, these momentary visions of bliss mingled with longing and sweet sadness were the richest experiences of his life. Although he came to realize that the longing's fulfillment was unattainable, that it was always over the next hill or around the next bend, he also found that simply to feel the longing itself, unfulfilled though it was, was more to be sought than any other satisfaction that might be attained in his life. As chapter two will show, when Lewis moved further through his education and into his early career as a scholar, the juxtaposition of desire's intensity with its ultimate frustration in this life became a vexing existential problem for him. Complicating the matter, of course, was the logical conviction he came to that the universe could not be dismissed as meaningless or random, indeed, that attempting "to keep our minds, even for ten seconds at a stretch, twisted into the shape that this philosophy demands" was simply impossible.<sup>37</sup> Coming to terms with that problem would be a key to his conversion—and would provide him with one of his most compelling arguments for the reality of heaven. Although he offered that argument in several places, one of the most explicit is in his "Weight of Glory" sermon, where he spoke movingly of the "inconsolable secret . . . which hurts so much that you take your revenge on it by calling it names like Nostalgia and Romanticism and Adolescence," that secret which is our "desire for our own far-off country."<sup>38</sup> In our search for desire's fulfillment we likewise come to realize that the longing does not reside in the things that aroused it—the music, the book, the sexual encounter, the accomplishment, the vacation, wherever the place or image was that we thought would bring joy. Rather, we find that

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<sup>37</sup>C. S. Lewis, "The Empty Universe," in *Present Concerns: Essays by C. S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 83-84. Lewis cites the ironical alternative to seriously contemplating nihilism, which was recommended by David Hume—retreating into a game of backgammon.

<sup>38</sup>WG, 4.

it only came *through* them. . . . These things, the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, he concluded, “We remain conscious of a desire which no natural happiness will satisfy.” Yet he looked around and realized that every other desire we have finds its fulfillment in *this* country, save this one, which is the longing that haunts us above all others. Might this tell us that we were ultimately made for *another* country? While a man’s hunger does not prove that he will get bread, surely it “does prove that he comes of a race which repairs its body by eating and inhabits a world where eatable substances exist.”<sup>40</sup> For Lewis, then, this excruciating desire, uniquely potent and yet unattainable in this life, would eventually become the key to his understanding of God’s vision for human existence. But not yet.

### SIGNPOSTS

On the final page of *Surprised by Joy* Lewis asked, “But what, in conclusion, of Joy?” He answered by saying that after he became a Christian, the subject “lost nearly all interest for me.”<sup>41</sup> It wasn’t that he no longer felt the pull of that deep longing. But now he realized that its value really lay in the way it pointed to something beyond itself. In one sense, this was true. He came to believe that the longing was never intended for fulfillment in this life, but only in God. Once he realized its true purpose, finding it in this life no longer held the urgency that it once did.

But this is not the entire story. Although these glimpses of Eden no longer had power over him in the way they had before he came to faith, they nevertheless remained a foundational element of his spiritual life, pointing him to the presence and goodness of the God he had come to know. As he would put it in “The Weight of Glory,” they are the “faint, far-off results of those energies which God’s creative rapture implanted

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<sup>39</sup>WG, 4-5, emphasis in original.

<sup>40</sup>WG, 6.

<sup>41</sup>SJ, 238.

in matter when He made the worlds.”<sup>42</sup> In Lewis’s view of the spiritual life, they were sacraments, signs of grace and gifts from God, the glad Creator.

Lewis would also come to see in these experiences the foundation of our hope, a perspective also captured on the final page of *Surprised by Joy*. He described what it was like to find a signpost when we are lost in the woods. We all excitedly gather around it. But once we’ve found our way and are passing signposts regularly, we no longer stop and gaze at them as we did at first. Of course, they encourage us, and we are grateful to the One who put them there. “But we shall not stop and stare, or not much; not on this road. Though their pillars are of silver and their letters of gold, ‘We would be at Jerusalem.’”<sup>43</sup> As signposts, they were never ends in themselves but instead pointed beyond themselves to God. Lewis would frequently warn against the dangers of focusing on pleasures apart from the presence of God. In *The Great Divorce*, hell turns out to be the place where you can have anything you want, just by wishing it to be—the kind of place that most of us imagine (and that most advertising offers) as pure paradise. Yet the people there are quarrelsome, lonely, and miserable. Even the new, larger house that one gains by wishing it into existence cannot keep out the rain. And yet, Lewis also came to believe that as Christians, we ought to savor these experiences as glimpses of the coming glory vouchsafed to us who now live in this “valley of tears.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, for Lewis, what began in that nursery before he had the language to put it into words became the basis for his understanding of God, as well as a theme running throughout much of his writing.

In almost thirty years of talking about that longing with audiences young and old and at dramatically different stages of faith, I have yet to find one that hasn’t felt it, in spite of Lewis’s advice in the opening pages of *Surprised by Joy* to anyone who had not experienced that ache, that they should put the book down and move on. Rather, what I always see come over people’s faces is a knowing, if also a faraway, wistful look.

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<sup>42</sup>WG, 14.

<sup>43</sup>SJ, 238.

<sup>44</sup>LM, 92.

We've all felt it. And I always ask these questions: What do these glimpses of joy mean? What might they be pointing us to? To folks who are not yet followers of Jesus, I acknowledge that they might not mean anything. But wouldn't that be the ultimate tragedy, if the richest, most exquisite moments of our lives, when we are overcome with transcendent longing, didn't point to anything, but instead were just a cruel joke played on us by our brains. On the other hand, what if they *do* mean something? What if they actually *are* signposts pointing us to the purpose for which we were made? Wouldn't that be a possibility more wonderful than we can imagine? Wouldn't it at least be worth serious consideration? For Christians, of course, the question goes deeper. What do these experiences tell us about the nature of God and the life that God intends for us? What would it mean for us if our faith and our deepest longing were brought, finally, together?

That is the question that runs through all of Lewis's Christian writings. He believed that we are each imprinted with a desire that, for all our attempts to fulfill it in other ways, is really the longing for one thing: heaven. In *The Problem of Pain*, he said that, although he had sometimes wondered if we desired heaven at all, more often he was convinced that we have never desired anything else. The longing for heaven is "the secret signature of each soul, . . . the thing we desired before we met our wives [or husbands] or made our friends or chose our work, and which we shall still desire on our deathbeds, when the mind no longer knows wife [or husband] or friend or work." All our lives this "unattainable ecstasy" has hovered just beyond our consciousness. In our happiest moments we have only known "hints of it—tantalizing glimpses, promises never quite fulfilled, echoes that died away just as they caught your ear." And yet, he said wistfully, if you should ever find it, "if there ever came an echo that did not die away but swelled into the sound itself—you would know it. Beyond all possibility of doubt you would say 'Here at last is the thing I was made for.'"<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>PP, 133-34.

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