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# SURPRISED BY JOY

THE SHAPE OF MY EARLY LIFE

*C. S. Lewis*

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## INTRODUCTION

Lewis wrote *Surprised by Joy* over a period of seven years (1948–1955), intending it to be a particular account of his conversion rather than a general autobiography. The book chronicles Lewis’s early life from 1898 to 1931, and in it we are largely presented with an adult perspective on the younger Lewis. The title is taken from a poem by Wordsworth, which begins:

*Surprised by Joy—Impatient as the Wind  
I turned to share the transport—Oh! with whom  
But Thee, deep buried in the silent tomb.*

The *Times Literary Supplement*, in its review of *Surprised by Joy* (1995), said: “The tension of these final chapters holds the interest like the close of a thriller. Nor is this lessened by the fact that the spiritual experiences here recorded follow—intellectually, at least—no common pattern. Few other Christians can have been convinced by just such strategy; few ever could be. God moves, indeed, in a mysterious way, and this book gives a brilliant account of one of the oddest and most decisive end-games He has ever played.”

(Adapted from Walter Hooper’s *C. S. Lewis: A Companion and Guide*.)

## SUGGESTIONS

The two sets of questions in this section are meant to cater to different needs. The study questions are for those who want to concentrate on the text itself, and the more generalized questions for those who would like to generate a more fluid discussion of issues raised by the text. You may wish to mix and match questions from both sections or add some of your own.

## STUDY QUESTIONS: UNDERSTANDING LEWIS'S LIFE AND THOUGHT

1. "How far the story matters to anyone but myself depends on the degree to which others have experienced what I call Joy" (p. xi). What is Lewis's definition of Joy?
2. In the preface, Lewis expresses a fear that his autobiography is "suffocatingly Subjective" (p. xii). Did you find this to be so?
3. Discuss the influence that the following people had on Lewis: "Smewgy"; W. T. Kirkpatrick; Arthur Greeves and Owen Barfield; Nevill Coghill, Hugo Dyson, and J. R. R. Tolkien.
4. "The imaginative experience of those [childhood] years now seems to me more important than anything else" (p. 15). How does Lewis see God working through his imagination?

5. How does Lewis describe his life at school?
6. “I was in that state of mind in which a boy thinks it extremely telling to call God Jahweh, and Jesus, Jeshua” (p. 213). How does Lewis judge his past self?
7. “‘Why damn it—it’s medieval!’ I exclaimed; for I still had all the chronological snobbery of my period” (p. 252). What does Lewis mean by chronological snobbery?
8. “And nearly everyone was now (one way or another) in the pack; Plato, Dante, Macdonald, Herbert” (p. 275). How instrumental were books in leading Lewis to God? Which authors in particular were a help to him?
9. “Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about ‘Man’s search for God.’ To me, as I then was, they might as well have talked about the mouse’s search for the cat” (p. 278). What kind of initiatives did Lewis see God using to precipitate his conversion? How much of a free choice was it on his part?
10. “Remember, I had always wanted, above all things, not to be ‘interfered with’” (p. 278). Lewis speaks, many times, of his resistance to Christianity. Discuss the fears and false assumptions that had to be dismantled before he could come to God.
11. What conclusions does Lewis come to about Joy?

**GENERAL QUESTIONS: LEWIS'S COMMENTARY AS AN  
AID TO PERSONAL REFLECTION**

1. Do you think Joy, as an experience or an impulse, is a common factor in driving people to seek God?
2. “[As a child] I had rendered my private practice of that religion a quite intolerable burden” (p. 73). In what ways can children, especially, misunderstand faith?
3. “Equally working against my faith there was in me a deeply ingrained pessimism; a pessimism, by that time, much more of intellect than temper. I was now by no means unhappy; but I had very definitely formed the opinion that the universe was, in the main, a rather regrettable institution” (pp. 75–76). Do you think most unbelievers could relate to this?
4. “My secret imaginative life began to be so important and so distinct from my outer life that I almost have to tell two separate stories. The two lives do not seem to influence each other at all. Where there are hungry wastes, starving for Joy, in the one, the other may be full of cheerful bustle and success; or again, where the outer life is miserable, the other may be brimming over with ecstasy” (p. 94). Do you think it's common for people to live divided lives in this way?

5. “I was at this time living, like so many Atheists or Anti-theists, in a whirl of contradictions. I maintained that God did not exist. I was also very angry with God for not existing” (pp. 140–41). Do you think many atheists live in such a “whirl of contradictions”?
6. “I insisted that [God] ought to appear in the temples I had built him” (p. 205). Can you relate to this impulse?
7. “I think that all things in their way reflect heavenly truth” (p. 206). Do you agree?
8. “What I like about experience is that it is such an honest thing. You may take any number of wrong turnings; but keep your eyes open and you will not be allowed to go very far before the warning signs appear” (p. 218). What did Lewis’s experience teach him about God? Would you agree that as long as people “keep their eyes open” they will be able to discern the path of life?
9. “One of the first results of my Theistic conversion was a marked decrease (and high time as all readers will agree) in the fussy attentiveness which I had so long paid to the progress of my own opinions and the states of my own mind” (p. 284). In what ways does conversion influence our behavior?
10. What practical lessons, if any, would you draw from your reading of *Surprised by Joy*?

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