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# A Prisoner's Duty: The Sacred Role of Reading in the Christian Life

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# **INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume VIII**

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Joint Meeting of

The Eighth

FRANCES WHITE EW BANK COLLOQUIUM ON C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

and

THE C.S. LEWIS AND THE INKLINGS SOCIETY CONFERENCE

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## **A Prisoner's Duty: The Sacred Role of Reading in the Christian Life**

John Stanifer

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# A Prisoner's Duty: The Sacred Role of Reading in the Christian Life

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Indiana University Kokomo

Of all the tragedies that may befall us as believers, one of the most serious is the loss of the art of reading. This loss can take many forms. The most obvious form is a lack of interest in reading as a whole; the type of person who suffers under this malady may read very little or not at all. Another form, less obvious perhaps, is visible in the well-intentioned reader who is stifled by the notion that there are certain types of books they should read and certain types of books they shouldn't. As we will see, this loss in all its forms and permutations is destructive to a believer's spiritual and moral growth and may render them incapable of playing the part God meant them to play in the world around them.

The object of the present discussion will be twofold. First, we will examine the loss of the art of reading in more detail and its consequences for us as believers specifically. Secondly, once we understand the problem, we will be able to explore its solution in the development of a *sacred* art of reading. Our companions in this fellowship will include writers as various as J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Alan Jacobs, James Stuart Bell, Rick Nañez, Paul the Apostle, and Daniel of Biblical fame.

Rick Nañez, in his book *Full Gospel, Fractured Minds?* tells a personal story that aptly illustrates the problem at hand. In 1996, at a library sale, Nañez purchased a book he describes as being "in mint condition—no dog-eared pages,

no underlining or scribbling, not even a pocket wherein a checkout card was to be lodged" (206). The book had only two marks, one indicating how long the library had owned the book and the other a single word in "bold red letters" (206). The word was "discard," and the work in question was *The Discarded Image* by C.S. Lewis, an ironic twist of fate if ever there was one. The book "was never checked out in thirty-two years" (206).

Lewis would not have been surprised by this. As James Stuart Bell reminds us in his introduction to *From the Library of C.S. Lewis*, "Lewis called himself a 'dinosaur' who was a repository of the old Western values, one who upheld the legacy of classic Western civilization. In today's postmodern environment this vanishing world is dismissed or vilified" (2).

It would hardly be fair to expect the sales and borrowings of books like *The Discarded Image* to rival those of more accessible modern classics such as *Captain Underpants* or *He's Just Not That Into You*, but the absolute neglect of this lesser-known Lewis work by the patrons of Nañez's local library is a symptom of a much larger problem.

According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, an oft-cited 2003 survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, just thirteen percent of American adults can be described as "proficient" in their ability to perform "complex and

challenging” literary activities. By contrast, *forty-three* percent of adults are reading prose at a level that is considered “basic” or “below basic.”

Such broad statistics are sobering in themselves, but what of Bible reading specifically? After examining the results of a series of studies conducted by his research firm, George Barna concluded in 2009, “There is shockingly little growth evident in people’s understanding of the fundamental themes of the scriptures and amazingly little interest in deepening their knowledge and application of biblical principles.”

A different survey commissioned by the Catholic Biblical Federation and reported by Catholic News Service in 2008 found that even among those who reported having read a Bible passage in the last year, the majority of respondents—as high as seventy percent, depending on the country—found the Bible difficult to understand. It is tempting, in light of these reports, to allude to Chesterton’s famous maxim: “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried” (29).

Whatever the reasons for these disturbing trends in the state of public literacy in general and Biblical literacy in particular, it is necessary to ask ourselves at this point why any of it should matter. As believers, we may understand the value of reading the Scriptures, but in the end, does it matter that most of the American public will never read a book like *The Discarded Image*? More precisely, is a Christian who reads prolifically better prepared to shine their light before men than one who reads little outside of the Bible?

The answer depends in part on understanding the gravity of our circumstances. C.S. Lewis, in a famous passage from *Mere Christianity*, says we are living in “enemy-occupied territory,” whether we realize it or not. “Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has

landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us to take part in a great campaign of sabotage” (46).

What is this “great campaign of sabotage” Lewis is referring to? Obviously, the phrase could have several meanings, but clearly Lewis saw our situation as one in which we are living in the midst of hostile forces and are being asked to act *against* those forces in some way.

The Biblical prophet Daniel knew something about living in enemy-occupied territory. Taken from his home at a young age by the Babylonians, he was chosen, along with three other young Judean men, to be trained at Nebuchadnezzar’s court. Their job was to learn the language and literature of the Chaldeans (Dan 1:3-5, NRSV). The Biblical text is sparse when it comes to details about this learning, but other sources are helpful in determining just what sort of language and literature the youths may have been exposed to.

For one, *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests that Daniel and his friends would have been expected to learn the three primary tongues spoken in Babylon. These included Aramaic, the language “of ordinary business and diplomacy” (Spence and Exell, 13), Assyrian, “the language of historical and legal documents” (14), and thirdly Accadian, in which “the bulk of the magical formulae and ritual directions of Babylon and Nineveh were written” (14).

Daniel 1:17 indicates that, “To these four young men God gave knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom” (NRSV). Based on the language used in this verse, *The Pulpit Commentary* also states it is likely the four “would [have been] associated in their studies from the first,” (24). They were “certainly...educated so as to become members of this sacred college of augurs and astrologers.” A modern reader might be tempted to see in all this a sort of Babylonian equivalent of Hogwarts.

We know from the Biblical record that Daniel and all three of his friends obtained high positions of authority in the Babylonian kingdom. Daniel himself eventually became the third highest person in the land (Dan 5:29), and his friends were named as provincial administrators before being promoted to some higher position following the episode of the fiery furnace (Dan 2:49, 3:30).

How does any of this relate to the theme of our discussion, that of the sacred role of reading in the Christian life? The answer is hidden in the unspoken facts of Daniel's story. If Daniel and his three friends had failed to apply themselves to their studies, it is fair to say they would never have attained the high positions they reached in the Babylonian government. One of the key components of their education was their study of the language and literature of their captors. Nebuchadnezzar's guidelines for the type of young men he was looking for included a marked aptitude for all kinds of learning, which obviously included book learning. That he was looking for young men who *already demonstrated* an interest in book knowledge implies that the four young men he ended up with must have been bookworms long before they were taken in the siege of Judah.

The application for us is this. Their longtime interest in books and the knowledge that comes from books put Daniel and his three friends in a position to wield great influence. Even in the midst of enemy-occupied territory, they thrived, based on God's blessing, yes, but also on the willingness they demonstrated to drink deeply of literature, some of which was probably more of a strain on the brain than *The Discarded Image* would be for us.

So what these young men may have thought of merely as a vocation—perhaps even a hobby—during their time in Judah took on a far deeper significance when they were taken into captivity. The

danger of living in enemy-occupied territory was that they might have succumbed to their captors' worldview. Instead, they refused to back down from their own beliefs, as we see early on in their determination to avoid the king's unclean food (Dan 1), in Daniel's courage to pray to God against the king's orders (Dan 6), and in his friends' stand at the fiery furnace after they had been commanded to bow to Nebuchadnezzar's statue (Dan 3), to name but a handful of examples.

Perhaps this gives us some idea of what C.S. Lewis was talking about when he said we were being asked to take part in a great campaign of sabotage. Though we are living in enemy-occupied territory, God expects us to hold fast to our beliefs, to absorb all the knowledge of the world without allowing it to drag us into sin, and to use that knowledge to fight for the good of His kingdom, just as Daniel and his three friends did.

Of course, in light of the present discussion, there is another question that rises from a close examination of what Lewis is saying. How can one sabotage what one does not understand in the first place? The act of sabotage is far more efficient when the saboteur has an understanding of the object he or she is attempting to sabotage.

Like Daniel, the Apostle Paul understood the role that study and book learning can play in making an impact on the world we live in. In Acts 17, we read about Paul's intellectual battle with the Thessalonians, in which he spent several weeks attempting to persuade them to the faith through his knowledge of the Scriptures. By the end of the chapter, we see him doing something very similar with a roomful of Greeks and assorted foreigners in Athens, only this time he quotes the Cretan poet Epimenides instead of the Scriptures he used with his Jewish audience. In other words, because he took time to study both the Scriptures and the literature of the pagans he lived

among, he was prepared for almost any opportunity to share his faith, no matter the audience.

In a Scripture often quoted by Christian apologists, Peter exhorted his audience: "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" (1 Pet 3:15, NRSV). This verse does not explicitly refer to reading, but it is clear from the illustrations already given that a little book learning goes a long way towards helping us carry out our sacred campaign of sabotage on the enemy's spiritual and intellectual fortresses.

Certainly, Lewis himself was no slouch when it came to arming his mind for battle, even before his final conversion to Christianity. Douglas Gresham writes of Lewis' youth, "Literature saved him from becoming a complete waster. His taste in literature at this time was widespread, and like a starving man reaches for food, he would read almost anything put before him" (19). Clyde Kilby writes that "before [Lewis] was ten his mother had started him in French, Latin, and the reading of fiction" (7).

Before we turn to discussing what types of books should be part of our diet, it may be well to take another look at the consequences of ignoring the crucial role that literature plays in our lives.

Lewis shows us a grim illustration of a culture divorced from its own historical and literary roots in *Prince Caspian*. Miraz, the wicked ruler of Narnia, has banished any and all stories about the Old Narnia—that is, the Narnia that existed before Miraz's ancestors came to power. When Caspian reveals that his nurse has been telling him stories of Old Narnia in secret, Miraz's response is: "You're getting too old for that sort of stuff. At your age you ought to be thinking of battles and adventures, not fairy tales" (42).

Of course, the truth is that it is Miraz and his predecessors who are responsible for the widespread ignorance

of the old stories. If Caspian is any example, the rest of the people would be perfectly willing to soak up their country's history and literature if it wasn't for the threat of punishment from their king. Either way, the consequences are the same, whether the people of Narnia have given up their stories under an external influence or through their own general lack of interest. Miraz, like any good dictator, knows that people tend to be easier to rule when they are ignorant.

One further example from Old Testament history should cement our understanding of what happens when we ignore our culture's literary treasures. In the time of King Josiah of Judah, the priest Hilkiah was gathering the money that had been deposited at the temple of God when he discovered a book that had apparently lain untouched for some years. This book was nothing less than the "book of the law," which contained the commandments of God Himself that had been handed down through Moses. Hilkiah, realizing the significance of this discovery, brought the book to King Josiah and read it in his presence. Josiah's reaction was one of grief at his own ignorance. He immediately commanded that the book be read in the presence of all the people, and he promptly instituted a series of political and spiritual reforms based on the book's contents (2 Chron 34:14-33).

It is difficult to deny from all this that reading has serious consequences and that when we leave books and their contents out of our lives altogether, we may be courting grave danger. But is every book potentially as important as the book of the law? If we take the time to comb the bestseller lists and the syllabi of our universities, it is clear there are more "must-read" books out there than we will ever have time to read in one lifetime, and that's even without turning to lesser-known works and authors. It is as if we readers are in the shoes of Belle

from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* when the Beast shows her the castle library, with its shelves that seem to stretch for miles in every direction.

So the next question we must ask ourselves is just this: "What do we read?" Should we stick to the acknowledged classics? If we permit ourselves to read popular literature, how much is too much? We have a food pyramid, so why not a literary pyramid? Unfortunately, it is even more difficult to agree on the recommended servings of literature than it is to agree on how many servings of fruits and vegetables we ought to be taking in a day.

Perhaps the simplest answer is the one offered by C.S. Lewis scholar Alan Jacobs in a slim-but-useful volume titled *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction*: "Read what gives you delight—at least most of the time—and do so without shame. And even if you are that rare sort of person who is delighted chiefly by what some people call Great Books, don't make them your steady intellectual diet, any more than you would eat at the most elegant of restaurants every day. It would be too much" (23).

While Nañez clearly wants us to be disturbed on some level by his anecdote about the neglect of *The Discarded Image*, Jacobs may seem at first glance to be contradicting this tone of lament by suggesting that everyone should read mainly what gives them delight. It may very well be that the patrons of Nañez's local library were doing just that: reading what gave them delight. Discarding *The Discarded Image* does not automatically imply that they were avoiding reading altogether, as the truth may simply be that they were avoiding a book that held little of value for them personally.

That being said, what Jacobs appears to be calling for is a more balanced approach to reading that allows the reader room to read what they like without worrying about the literary

snobbery of certain academics who think that books like *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Twilight* are for morons. At the same time, Jacobs, who is himself a professor of English at Wheaton College, does not cast off the reading of the classics. He is just less concerned about people reading the "right" books than he is about seeing them read what they enjoy and enjoy what they read.

Tolkien, likewise, had little sympathy with those who called his work mere escapism. Far from considering this an insult and attempting to shy away from the label, Tolkien faced it head-on:

Fantasy is escapist, and that is its glory. If a soldier is imprisoned by the enemy, don't we consider it his duty to escape? The moneylenders, the know-nothings, the authoritarians have us all in prison; if we value the freedom of the mind and soul, if we're partisans of liberty, then it's our plain duty to escape, and to take as many people with us as we can. (qtd. in Lawhead, 167)

In Tolkien's words, there is an obvious echo of Lewis in *Mere Christianity*. Both men saw that we are prisoners living in enemy-occupied territory. Both believed we have a duty to work against the system that captivates us. Lewis envisioned this duty as a great campaign of sabotage, and Tolkien asserted that reading imaginative literature and sharing it with others was one of the ways in which we might fulfill that duty.

As Christians living on this "silent planet" under constant attack from Uncle Screwtape and other servants of the enemy, it is our duty to follow the example of some of the great Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve who came before us, men like C.S. Lewis, Tolkien, and Daniel who read widely and frequently and used the knowledge they soaked up from books to work towards a better Middle-earth in the name of the Emperor Beyond the Sea. The image of

reality that we gain by way of a life spent in books is one that we dare not discard.

Whether we read a book a week or, like the protagonist of MacDonald's novel *Thomas Wingfold*, "read very slowly and pick up all the crumbs" (488), we must read. Failing to do so will hardly send us to the devil, but it may consign us to mediocrity. If we truly want to "shine like stars in the world" (Phil 2:15, NRSV), if we wish to be all that we can be in Christ, we will seek to know the world around us through books—and not just the Scriptures, as critical as they are. A glimpse of truth is a glimpse of truth, whether we find that glimpse in John's Gospel or John Grisham, in Noah or in Nora Roberts.

The library is open. The shelves are packed with treasures waiting to be discovered. Pick one and dig in.

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