

The Great Divorce by C. S. Lewis

Book Review by Staci Stech

The Great Divorce, by C.S. Lewis, is about a man who finds himself on a bus that is going from Hell to Heaven. In the end, it turns out to be a dream (which he does also acknowledge at the beginning of the book), so that the speaker is not really dead. The speaker is told by a spirit at the end that he can tell others about the dream and the choice that people have to go to Heaven or to stay in Hell. Throughout the speaker's experiences in Heaven (or a sort of pre-Heaven because the ghosts need to make the actual decision to go over the mountains with the spirits) he sees souls who make the decision to return to Hell, and once in a while a person who wants to stay in Heaven. Some of the people he sees are really heartbreaking in their inability to let go of the familiar, even though that familiarity is painful, thus condemning themselves to an eternity in Hell. In the end, the speaker is frightened to die prematurely, which he does not, when he sees the sunrise; he is instead left to write and tell the story of the choice all people have to have a life of goodness and love with God, or a life without that.

This book offered a lot of really interesting things to think about. From the beginning Lewis presents Hell as a vast place of loneliness, dissatisfaction, boredom, and hopelessness. He presents Heaven as an infinite space of love, light, and joy, in which there is no wanting, no time, nothing but everything in a life with God. One of the scenes that stands out most is when the speaker has witnessed the saintly "Lady" who tries to prevent the dwarf, Frank, from succumbing to his fear and anger. The speaker does not understand why she can't go to Hell and save him, and the speaker's guide explains that Hell is so small that it is through the space left by a blade of grass plucked from the ground; the Lady is too expansive because of her love to be contained in the entirety of Hell. So how does all of this affect my spiritual and Orthodox life? Well, Lewis creates an understandable and tangible idea of Hell, not of flames and devils and violent torture, but of total emptiness. Who would want that? In a way, in our world today we can find ourselves in such a place, if we only try to fulfill our spirits with material objects and foolish aspirations. So, one would hopefully choose Heaven. I really thought a lot about Lewis' presentation of Heaven as something we all have the opportunity to choose, and even that we can choose to live in Hell; thus, do we want to live with or without God?

As I read, I pondered, "Do I have the courage to follow the Spirit who wants to take me over the mountains into the sunrise for an eternity filled with love?" I saw, as I read, a glimpse of what faith really is, that one needs to be able to say, "Yes, I will go with you into the unknown, because I do not doubt that you will bring me to God." I can understand those in the book who were too afraid to go with the Spirit. So, the biggest impact is that I see some of my limitations (as the Gospel says, "I believe. Help me in my unbelief."), and I understand more what faith really involves. I hope I will always have the courage to let go and say "Yes."

This book was easier to understand than *The Screwtape Letters*. The most difficult application is probably realizing the depth of faith and my limitations. I really thought so often throughout the book, "What would I do?" Everyone wants to say, "Oh sure, I would go with the spirits into Heaven. Who wouldn't?" But when I think about it, I am reminded of a saying one of my friends has, that familiarity is intoxicating. So, for many of us, we would choose a familiar Hell rather than an unknown Heaven. So, recognizing my limitations was difficult to understand, but hopefully not to improve upon.

The scene with the blade of grass will stay with me, demonstrating the smallness of Hell and isolation compared with the infinity of love and Heaven. Also, the scene with the Lady and the Dwarf will stay, because she is such a wonderful example of total love. Also, that scene made an impact because the speaker's guide tells him that only One is able to go into Hell, and that even though the Lady's love is so vast that she won't fit into Hell to save another, only Jesus can make that journey to save others. I liked this book and read it in just a couple of

days. I am sure I will read it again because there are a lot of interesting things to think about and learn about in it.