

A Severe Mercy Study Guide

A Severe Mercy by Sheldon Vanauken

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Contents

A Severe Mercy Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Prologue: Glenmerle Revisited.....	5
The Shining Barrier (The Pagan Love).....	6
The Shadow of a Tree.....	8
Encounter with Light.....	10
Thou Art the King of Glory.....	12
The Barrier Breached.....	14
The Deathly Snows.....	16
The Way of Grief.....	18
The Severe Mercy.....	20
Epilogue: The Second Death.....	21
Characters.....	22
Objects/Places.....	25
Themes.....	28
Style.....	31
Quotes.....	33
Topics for Discussion.....	35



Plot Summary

Sheldon Vanauken's *A Severe Mercy* is the story he tells upon reflection of the love he had with Jean Davis, or Davy as she would come to be called, and the evolution they experienced both as a couple in love and as individuals. It is, as much as it is the story of their love, the story of their coming to know and love Christianity and its Jesus.

The two meet in their late teens and are immediately close. They sit engrossed in conversation for hours at a time, and eventually their conversation moves to what their lives would be like if they were to marry. They imagine a life of total sharing, centered on all the beautiful things they love, like poetry, literature, the sea, good company, and art. Eventually, they secretly marry, and spend a happy summer living at the estate where Van grew up, establishing the memories that would be the folklore of their love.

World War II comes and calls Van away from Glenmerle to Hawaii, and fortune allows Davy and he to remain there throughout the war. There is a moment in that era when Van reconsiders the question of Christianity as a valid faith, since so many intelligent and educated people swore so adamantly by it, and another in which the two realize the ease with which they could be separated from each other forever.

Following Hawaii, there is the time they spent living on a sailboat and realizing a long-held and hard-attained dream of theirs. They explore the Florida Keys and all the ocean surrounding while Van writes for a yachting magazine. Innocent days fill themselves with moments of complete joy and "inloveness", as they coined it, even transcending time itself. Yale follows, and their time at Horsebite Hall when their dogs Gypsy and her Flurry become characters, and Davy paints the first omen painting of the spiritual searching that has begun in her. Next follows another summer of sailing, and then they are finally off to realize their dream of studying at Oxford in England, a place they both loved.

Oxford is full of Christian friends and is the setting for their Christian exploration, quite thrust on them by the reality of Jesus Christ in the lives of the joyful and peaceful Christians they continued to meet. Christian thinker C.S. Lewis becomes a character as he is a don of Literature at Cambridge, and not only the author of some of their favorite Christian books, but the one to lead Van and Davy into the kingdom of God through a series of letters and close friendship. The two experience a flowering of spiritual passion and understanding, and revel in the liveliness of the group of Christian friends. There is, at Oxford, a continuous and passionate conversation about all things spiritual, as well as worship in the form of art, music, poetry and fellowship. Two lovers are very happy.

Following Oxford is Virginia and Lynchburg College, where Van would take a teaching position for the English department. A group of students forms and becomes another thriving Christian discussion group, and Davy dives into that ministry. Van, however, wishing for time for the two of them to go back to just being in love like it had been before, resents Davy's so passionately seeking after God, and recognizes that his position as the focus of her life has been usurped.



Soon, Davy falls ill, and while she is granted another full year, and the gift of dying alert and in a time when the two of them have been enjoying each other deeply, and preparing with plenty of time to say goodbye, she succumbs and dies. Van, as he mourns her, comes to see that her passing was the answer to her prayer for his soul, since she was the thing keeping him from throwing himself into seeking after God. He also comes to see that his own prayer is answered in his death, since what he wanted while she was alive was only her happiness, and in seeing him move into a deeper walk with God, she is completely and eternally happy.



Prologue: Glenmerle Revisited

Prologue: Glenmerle Revisited Summary and Analysis

Sheldon Vanauken (Van) first revisits Glenmerle, his childhood home, after ten years away. He arrives alone on a summer evening and recounts the smells, the grand, welcoming look of the place, and his cornucopia of memories. New owners live in it, but he imagines the house filled with the people and memories of his boyhood, and as the setting for his earliest love with Davy. With his father several years gone and Davy dead now six months, it is hard to imagine so much different yet still the same.

The poetry of Shakespeare and Shelly, and a year in Kensington, made England real to him and birthed his discovery of beauty here. He stood on a starry night under the bare branches of trees in winter and looked up. The sensation was like pain and longing, choking him with its intensity—his first aesthetic experience. One afternoon he lay in the grass, contemplating the value of emotions. He had thought them a symptom of a weak or feminine disposition, but in that moment began to rethink his position. All great moments in life must be felt, or they lose their majesty. If emotions are to be sought and enjoyed, he wanted the highest of them—joy! Where could it be found? He did not believe in God; it would have to be for him a great love. He wanted both the pain and the glory. Remembering his years of love with Davy, he believes the intensity of the pain of her loss is worth the immensity of the joy of their union.

Van and Davy, in love from the very beginning, secretly married before the end of the first year and at Glenmerle frolicked and dreamed like children. They will have a schooner called the Grey Goose, as when one of a pair dies, the other flies on alone, never taking another mate.



The Shining Barrier (The Pagan Love)

The Shining Barrier (The Pagan Love) Summary and Analysis

Van remembers meeting Davy and falling in love; he requests his money back for a badly tinted print and it is her job not to give it to him. Struck by her eyes, though angry at the time, when he later needs a date he thinks of her, and eventually they find themselves chatting alone by a fireplace. They discover quite a lot in common: a love of the sea, boats, dogs, poetry, owls, and the pain of beauty. They enjoy each other continuously from that night on. She is gay, straight, eager and valiant, and they learn about each other as eagerly as they can, the spark bouncing between them strengthening with every exchange. They shared "a pagan love."

Throughout the first spring, they recognize the completeness of their abandon as something worth cherishing. They immortalize it in poems Van writes and music Davy plays. Beauty unites them in worship. They finally broach the subject of marriage. They establish the code that will preserve their "inloveness." Identifying the things that weaken and defeat other loves, they establish ground rules: complete trust and honesty, since trust lost cannot be completely reestablished; sharing everything; joint decision-making; possessions valued minimally; and children as a distraction in an over-populated world, so there will be none. These will be a "Shining Barrier" to protect their love.

Van and Davy share everything to protect against "creeping separateness." Whenever a decision is to be made, they put on a symphony record and consider the Appeal to Love. Never to the exclusion of family or friendships, which remain important, these discussions order their values with the purpose of protecting their love. Household duties are completely shared; they consider themselves comrades in love, even after their secret wedding, rather than husband and wife. So determined are they to remain bound forever that they resolve to die together.

One May morning, Van takes Davy up in an open-cockpit biplane to loop through the clouds, delighting her with the adventure of her first flight. During the most daring loop, she lets her lilacs, his gift, trail behind them. When he drops her off, a shaft of light illumines him in gold, inspiring her to remember him as her golden one and their flight in "lilactime."

The two marry simply so a ceremony can acknowledge the permanence of their bond. Their secret marriage is endorsed by his parents. The two steal off to a small village to find a minister, are married in the rain and greeted by the world with a rainbow, the blessing of heaven on their union. The following summer they spend days walking through the countryside, skinny dipping and laughing at their dog, Laddie. They conceive of the idea of living at sea. With a sailboat, there will be no expense for fuel, they can catch what they eat, and truly give themselves to being in love. The Grey



Goose is where they will live out the rest of their days in a timeful life, enjoying what too quickly passes people by. They take navigation and boating classes, beginning a life-shaping dream. The following winter, with war approaching, they announce their marriage. Within days Van ships out with the Navy, leaving Glenmerle and his father for the last time. The lovers' parting, however, is sweet and optimistic.



The Shadow of a Tree

The Shadow of a Tree Summary and Analysis

Van serves in the South Pacific near Hawaii. The lovers remain stationed in the peaceful Hawaiian Islands throughout the war, meeting as they can. During a reunion, Van sees the shadow of his ship's mast and signal yardarm on the hull of the vessel. The shadows form a sharply contrasting cross that Van identifies at first as a black, foreboding X. On second thought, however, it looks like a Christian cross. He muses on his youthful dismissal of Christianity as a fairy tale for the weak-minded. He wonders whether he was rash and determines to re-examine the question someday. While he and Davy call themselves agnostics, they are in fact theists, recognizing there must be a creator of the order and beauty throughout the world, but their thinking stops there. To them, the holiest existence is beauty, what they worship for now.

He and Davy spend a blissful day on the beaches of Waikiki, an evening with friends closed by the *Pathetique*, "the dirge of a dying world." The following morning, Japan bombs Pearl Harbor. Van and Davy know how precarious their togetherness is now they are at war, but happily, they are never separated. They dream of the *Grey Goose* and live together in Hawaii throughout the war, during which time Van learns of his father's death.

Shortly after the war ends, they acquire a boat called the *Gull* in Miami. Sailing throughout the Keys and the Gulf, Van writes freelance for *Yachting Magazine*. They live a simple, aquatic life for months, reading, sunning and hearing the stories of old, weathered sailors. Fall finds Oxford too full of men returning from war, so they enroll at Yale. They read, learn and observe during breaks in New Jersey. However, even with the company of a new dog, *Gypsy*, they pine for the *Gray Goose* and life at sea.

One day Davy takes her book alone to a city park, and is momentarily pursued by a man exposing himself. She is affected deeply by it, and they discuss the reality of evil as a part of man's soul. One night, she is so confronted by her own guilt, small as it was, that she weeps broken in the apartment. She recalls mocking people for needing faith to supplement personal strength, and now cannot shake the feeling of needing something like it.

The next spring, the two christen a new yacht the *Grey Goose*. While it is being built, they live in the Virginia farmhouse Davy calls *Horsebite Hall*, and *Gypsy* has puppies. Davy paints frequently, with occasional attendance at the Anglican Church for its peace and the poetic liturgy. One painting is of cliffs and shadows, a female figure in the foreground, and the shadow of a tree forming in silhouette the shape of the crucified Christ hanging on the cross. They lightly refer to it as her "*Sin Picture*," but Van remains uneasy about it.

Concerned for Davy's health, they defer their long Grey Goose tour in favor of new openings at Oxford, but spend the summer sailing with the new puppy Flurry as their crew, living their timeful life, upholding the Shining Barrier around their love. In the late summer, they sail for Oxford.



Encounter with Light

Encounter with Light Summary and Analysis

Once in Oxford, they fall into a lifestyle of yachting on the Isis, meeting friends, and enjoying the bells chiming all over the city. England feels like a homecoming. The friends they make right away are Christians, and a merry bunch. They are surprised at the intellectual prowess, wit, and enjoyable natures of the Christians they encounter, and are forced to adjust their definitions. Where "Christian" once meant a simple-minded, uneducated person, or a stiff Puritan unable to enjoy life, it now means anyone who believes Jesus to be the Son of God, and to live with an otherwise inexplicable joy and completeness.

They share good times, enjoying pubs and songs outside of school, and taking part in clubs, like Van's dinner group that hosts speakers. They observe that Christians are both the best argument for and against Christianity, depending on how they live. Eventually, catching so completely the vision of Oxford as a place stemming from Christian lives faithfully lived and dedicated to learning, they decide to investigate. Van goes to Blackwell's Booksellers and comes back to their flat with stacks of books. C.S. Lewis first catches their attention. Davy begins *Screwtape Letters*, and Van the *Perelandra* trilogy. Then they read apologetic books and are confronted with the complete devotion necessary to conclude Jesus is Who He says He is. Van determines to write to Lewis, hoping he might offer some helpful wisdom.

Van lists observations from which he cannot draw a satisfactory conclusion: Christianity is historically and aesthetically appealing, but that cannot make something true; all of the founders of world religions must have been observing the same creative force behind nature, so what makes one observation more true than another; he wants to believe enough that he may trick himself into believing even without satisfactory intellectual evidence; and Christians live winsomely all around him, but does that make them right?

Lewis responds with gracious, non-condescending logic. He points out that in the beginning of his inquest into Christianity, he hoped Christianity was not, in fact, true. He suspects Van hopes that it is true, as much as Lewis hoped that it was not. The hope, then, is not a significant piece of evidence. Next Lewis moves to Van's supposition that all world religions are essentially different observations of the same Thing. Lewis has found Buddhism to be merely a simplification of Hinduism, and Islam a simplification of Christianity. The philosophies focusing on a code of conduct like the Tao, featuring an ethical but marginal god, are a later development from educated people in great cities, appealing to the delicate and well-cultured with their reliance on Confucius and Aristotle. Then, there are ritualistic, barbarian religions born in jungles and made up of barbaric superstition. Christianity is the only world religion that satisfies the intellect, the soul, and the barbarian equally.



Van next presents the conundrum of how to believe without Christ already having given you faith. He asks why evidence of God cannot just be overt and unmistakable. He also admits that the most repugnant part of confessing faith and submitting himself to God is the bent knee. Next, Van poses the logical conclusions that if Jesus really is the Son of God, only growing toward wisdom would bear real and lasting fruit, and the good and beautiful would survive. He says he wants to believe, but even more to be right.

Lewis responds by addressing the question of faith being necessary to believe. Just as people cannot float without swimming and people cannot swim without floating, it is an oversimplification that ruins itself upon being concluded. He compares faith in Jesus' claims to his own claims of trustworthiness among his own friends. Why would God be interested in the kind of faith that has to be proven by rigorous testing? Then it is not confidence but suspicion staved off by elaborate demonstration. However, suppose you believe and are wrong? You have paid the universe a compliment it does not deserve. However, can an idiotic universe produce creatures whose mere dreams are more magnificent than any possible reality? Why do men complain about the passing of time unless we are not meant always to be subject to it? Lewis closes by saying Van is being pursued by the Holy Spirit and is not likely to escape.

Van and Davy reflect on the letters from different emotional perspectives. Van sees an intellectually exciting and stimulating topic. Davy looks from a place of pain at her sin, the loss of her mother, and the evil of ego. She also is quietly conscious of feeling unwell. She finds consolation, assurance, and absolution in Christianity. One night while Van is out, she gives her will over to Christ. Van responds to the news with joy openly, but is disappointed that she made the leap without him. One night, Van sits up with Lewis's Miracles. He feels Davy kneeling beside him. She felt urged to be with him, and in a moment of emotion he later identifies as love for her, he confesses that he believes.

It was a false reason to make the commitment, however, and in coming days he recants, warning himself about the danger of making decisions based on emotion. Finally his intellect intervenes and confronts him with the choice that truly lies before him. He can no longer claim blissful ignorance and immunity from the responsibility to decide. He writes Lewis and in his journal that he subjects himself to the will of God, leaving it to God to help his unbelief.



Thou Art the King of Glory

Thou Art the King of Glory Summary and Analysis

Van realizes in retrospect that he was, in fact, chosen, and ushered lovingly into the faith by the prayers of Davy and Mr. Lewis. They consider themselves Anglicans start attending St. Ebbe's for its spirit, splendid rector and music, like Handel's "Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ." The rector preaches on the relationship between mind and heart in conversion, and it rings true for Van.

Van also speaks of the certainty they are graced with concerning their new belonging in the family of Christ. Lewis warns the enemy of their souls would attacks their faith however he can while it is still young and tender, and to be cautious. Van records in his journal that doubts did indeed creep in, but reminding themselves they made their choice based on reason, they lay their doubts before God. Doubts diminish as time goes on.

Van is inspired by the internal tumult of his conversion to write a sonnet he titles "The Sands." It speaks of Christ's calling as sharp sand blowing hard against his soul in the wind, where once he had thought it impervious. With Christ's love and truth everywhere, he succumbs, and the irritant of sand, now embedded in him, becomes a pearl. Lewis complements the sonnet highly, and Van thinks of changing his major to theology.

He realizes a man entering the ministry for any reason other than being genuinely called is as poisonous as one who does not believe what he is preaching at all. Lewis advises against it, noting that service cheerfully given, inspired by love and fealty, is more valuable and sustainable to a soul than service given as the requirement of a vocation. If one's job is spiritual, one can confuse vocational progress for spiritual. So they continue their original courses, reading theology in their personal lives.

Van's friendship with Lewis begins with an invitation to Magdalen, the college at which Lewis teaches. He is surprised to find Lewis a robust and energetic man, sharply witted and able to cut through fuzzy thinking. Lewis and Van discuss the spiritual life, literature, local fare, science fiction, enjoying each other's company. One discussion is of "the island in the West" to which Lewis refers in "the Pilgrim's Regress." It is symbolic of the time, place, or circumstance on which one hangs happiness, unable to enjoy the present moment as a result. One expects to find joy in that thing, and never fully does because what he truly seeks is God.

Van describes life in the studio apartment they inherit their first summer at Oxford, or St. Udio's, as they call it fondly. Due to their central location, willing company and stimulating conversation, they become a hub for the lively Christian community at Oxford. Old and new friends combine by the fire, engrossing themselves in conversation about theology, worship, poetry, and music. The group so loves the writing and person of Lewis that they read his books like a canon as edifying as scripture, and create a



culture of mutual spiritual encouragement that they all recognize as making this time in their lives singular and life-shaping.

He and Davy are also careful to share time together outdoors. They take books of poetry and the "Wind in the Willows" into the park and cultivate in whatever way they can the togetherness that the Shining Barrier exists to protect. They also spend much time talking with Mr. Lewis while they are still in Oxford. They entertain him at the studio for a whole evening filled with discussions of prayer, grammar, sailing, and friendship.

In the last days in Oxford, they make a point to enjoy the city fully. Though sad, they look forward to the time they can spend set apart from distractions and reform their united vision for the future in light of their new faith. A life of sailing far from people now seems less befitting their philosophy. So, it would be Virginia, maybe England, and a place they would call Ladywood, that would be their next destination. There is a final lunch with Lewis, after which he will not say goodbye, only cheerily say that they will meet again, if not in this life then in the next.



The Barrier Breached

The Barrier Breached Summary and Analysis

The couple makes their home in Virginia, instead of Ladywood as they dreamed in England, in Li'l Dreary on the Lynchburg campus where Van is to teach English. Culture shock sets in as they realize Oxford's thriving intellectual community with its theological discussions, love of poetry and music, and vibrant ecclesiastical life was more unusual than they had hoped. Christianity in America is concerned with including, allowing, and rationalizing everything, in the end believing nothing. There is no living, powerful presence of Christ, but a passionless dedication to church for church's sake only. So, the two dedicate themselves to their work, Van to teaching and Davy to keeping books for a local bank, and make friends where they can.

Van has a conversation with his students about the adjectives historians use to impose their own tone and ideology on a text. The class debates furiously, and one girl in particular stays after class to continue the debate. Van invites her to the house. There ensues a lively discussion of the life they led vigorously encouraging their group of passionately Christian and Christ-seeking friends in Oxford. The girl, who has lived only a nominal Christian life, is fascinated by the prospect of a Christianity that is stimulating, artistic and supremely true. The girl brings friends who bring friends, and a group forms of faithful students dedicated to discussing a vibrant, transforming Christianity. Van and Jean have a ministry, and their Li'l Dreary is reborn as a sort of new St. Udio.

Lewis responds to news of the new Christian group and their disappointment at concession-making clergymen. He expresses humble pleasure at having been used by God to welcome them into the kingdom, and encourages them both to continue believing through the moments of incredulity at their devotion and to steer clear of clergy who do not believe.

The doubts disturbing Van are not, however, predominately about the credulity of his belief, but the redefinition of his life. Davy studies the Bible with eager devotion, but Van wishes for the days on the sea. He wants God to be a reality, but distant, not demanding his every thought and action. While he admires Davy's devotion, he is jealous of faith usurping his place in her life. She recognizes the distance growing between them, and prays for his relationship with God, but does not discuss it. The term ends and, oppressed with sickness, Davy prays she is allowed to live one more year for the sake of the Christian group; Van looks forward to the visit of Jane from England.

Davy gives her notice at Van's request following the advice of her doctor, but wraps up her responsibilities while Jane visits. Van entertains Jane, spending their days deep in the beauty he has so been longing for. Poetry and walks in the park fill their days, and discussions, music, and more poetry keep them up late into the night after Davy has gone to bed. Van regards Jane as a sister, knowing her affection for him is quite innocent, but he does not doubt that, as they continued exchanging letters following her



visit, they were in love. He is disturbed at the possibility, even knowing its innocence and sharing every detail with Davy. Between Davy's dedication to God and his finding satisfaction outside their relationship, it is clear the Shining Barrier has been breached.

They remain dedicated to each other and fall brings happy drives through the country, evenings praying together at a stone cross in a country cemetery, and dreams of a house they found they could buy and make their Ladywood. They are finally beginning to have the time with just the two of them to redefine and reaffirm their devotion to each other. Even so, while Van has found someone with whom he can share his love for beauty in Jane, Davy remembers a soul who shares and inspires her devotion to the person of Christ in their old friend Julian, and writes him a poem. Soon after that poem, Davy tells Van she is going to sleep in the guest bedroom and spends the entire night wrestling with God in prayer. She offers her life for Van's soul. She recognizes that she is ill, and prays that if it will help Van become closer to God, she be taken.

Davy finally tells Van of her bargain with God on Christmas Eve following a moment of glorious reflection and unity in love, and shortly thereafter, they move to Davy's last home. They call it Mole End in tribute to the Wind in the Willows, and return to being deeply together, happy and in love. The Christian group grows. They go regularly to Grace Church to worship, pray, and play on the organ, and Davy engrosses herself again in painting.

In March, Julian is able to visit. April and May fill themselves with drives through the country, evenings praying in the old cemetery and watching sunsets, and occasional visits to Horsebite Hill to reflect, and Ladywood to dream. In June they make the difficult but exciting decision to accept a job for Van at Wabash College, to the dismay of the discussion group and friends. June is also when Davy falls very ill and is hospitalized. Her liver is implicated, and she is given one chance in ten and six months to live. Devastated, Van kisses her goodbye without telling her the news and returns home. Remembering the bargain she made, while he wants to pray for her recovery, he respects her wishes and God enough to pray for His will all the way there.



The Deathly Snows

The Deathly Snows Summary and Analysis

The following morning Van calls and sends letters and telegrams to their Christian friends, telling them the news and asking for prayers. He resolves that he will be Davy's strength until the end, completely devoted to her happiness and comfort. Then he sets off to the hospital to tell her.

He remembers the previous July when Davy had been sick and asked God for one more year to invest in the college group. He granted her request, a happy and energetic year exactly before her sickness returned. He thinks of the dreams that call him away from engaging in the faith with her, his islands in the West, and offers them up to God wholly, for Davy's good in living or dying. He reckons it is the most self-sacrificing moment of his life. A rainbow accompanies him to the hospital. He brings her yellow roses, determining to do so the rest of her days. He tells her the doctors say it will be their parting for a while, but a hundred people are praying for her. She smiles and is not surprised. Her reply: "Let it be according to His perfect will."

In August, Van and Shirley bring Davy home to Mole End where she entertains like a queen in her big bed in the living room. Friends stream in, as do letters and cards of encouragement, prayer, thanks, and generous offers of help. Friends give blood as she is continuously in need, and even as they pour out love on Davy, Van observes that they leave her presence more encouraged and uplifted than when they arrived. Her spirit never wanes nor stops pouring out the love, hope, and joy of Christ to everyone.

Van and Davy spend good time alone together, as well, praying and reading from the Book of Common Prayer, and spending days under the trees in the expansive yard with Davy on a chaise lounge and the two of them reading from their journal. They revel in the memories of their falling in love, and their summer at Glenmerle. They also read Thomas Merton's *Seeds of Contemplation* and the Rector visits to give them Communion.

She is not in pain for that happy August. In September, Van takes her back to the hospital so they can regularly tap the fluid from her abdomen. Van goes to her every day faithfully, and most days, twice. With her is Julian's carved crucifix, and one of his poems, pinned up on her wall, "thanks be to God that He is all I have/and if I have Him not, then I have nothing at all . . . farewell to the grey sky . . . if all is lost, thanks be to God."

Her eagerness to serve is not lessened by sickness, or her doctor's orders to stay in bed. When she hears a cry in the night, or perceives a need, she is there instantly, speaking comfort, truth, and prayer to the other patients. The hospital staff come to love and admire her so ardently that they refuse to accept payment for her stay, saying she



did far more for them than they did for her. The words continuously on her lips are "all shall be most well."

While she is strength to the people around her, Van shares the burden of her fear of dying. Their daily rituals remain truly them and England, Van bringing proper tea and taking her to the veranda which they imagine to be the bridge at Glenmerle. Van writes two poems: reflections on the Halloween evening they imagine they are watching fish and fireflies from the Glenmerle bridge; and about the grace and beauty she displays in dying. She hangs both by her bed.

Following a worried letter from Lewis and Van's update in reply comes her brief coma. Van's is the only voice she responds to. He tells her favorite stories and she smiles, giggles, and even eats. For a time she seems to be hanging in a balance, only saying, "oh, love . . ." at thirty-second intervals. Gradually, she emerges, and they are granted a happy and alert December.

They have completely restored and reinforced their deep inloveness. When the pain intensifies and she begins her slow march toward death, they are peaceful and happy. She restates her wish that he not follow her, and he promises he will not. It will be only a brief time before they are together again.

Her last night is a drowsy one, remembering him, her golden one and their flight in lilactime. They make plans for tea tomorrow, and then late that night, Van receives a call. Her pulse is slowing; there are only a few hours left. She is perfectly aware when he arrives, and he thanks God for answering their prayer that she not die in a coma. They pray a favorite prayer, and then Davy prays for the staff by name. They whisper love to each other and Van bids her "go under the love, dearling, go under the mercy."

He continues to tend to her lips with water, to hold her hand as she drifts, and puts her wedding ring back on her finger and renews his promise to love her for eternity. "Oh dearling, look . . ." are her last words. He assures her as she continues to breathe that he is with her, until she breathes her last. He stands, knowing beyond believing or hoping that she continues. He takes one of the yellow roses and when he receives the box of her ashes, leaves the rose with some ashes at the stone cross at St. Stephen's.



The Way of Grief

The Way of Grief Summary and Analysis

Van renews his vow to do all and be all for Davy, including entering into and gleaning everything from the experience of remembering and mourning her that he can. He writes letters to everyone who has been praying, closing each with the words, "all shall be most well," and meets with the group of Christian students, who share his joyful assurance that Davy still is. He even writes letters to Davy, hoping she reads them over his shoulder.

He dreams about her, too. In going through her things, to distribute them to friends according to her request, he finds a letter she wrote but never sent to Lewis. He sends the letter along with one of his own, that Lewis might read it after all. Lewis' reply offers that a death during happy and in love times is the least perilous to the survivor and the memory of any of the ways love might end, because end it must. He understands the very real assurance that the dead person continues to exist, and praises Van's willingness to be sad, instead of angry, resentful, or self-pitying. His would be a healthy and productive grieving. He urges Van to look after his physical health and get enough rest. Lewis would most helpful to Van during this process, being wise in his understanding, and brutally honest when discipline is needed.

Van observes that within the first few days following her death, all of the Davies he has known rush back into his consciousness, each from a different part of their lives, each needing to die. He uses the analogy of reading a novel, and knowing a character at several ages as one is reading, and as a whole once the novel is finished. Lewis complements him on the analogy.

Soon Van begins a process of borrowing from friends all the letters Davy ever wrote. With them, he arranges all of the journals, poems, paintings, even pieces of music that filled their time together, so he might undertake the task of the Illumination of the Past. Every day after he teaches his classes, he returns to a fire-lit Mole End and sets the scene for the part of their lives he is to read about that day. Laughter resolves in tears as he comes to grips with the loss of each of the Davies he must mourn.

His next letter to Lewis asks if there is any use assigning validity to the rainbow the day he offered himself up for Davy's best good. Lewis replies that if one accepts an omniscient and providential God, one must suppose that every little thing is as deliberate as the last. The assurance comforts Van. He jumps ahead to a year when asking for a sign concerning whether he should go on teaching or finally set out on the Grey Goose. A gust of wind makes him think God is urging him to set sail, but no accompanying sign or help follows, and his faith in God's goodness, intimate involvement, or even existence is shaken. He rushes into the country with the purpose of rejecting Christ once and for all, only to find he is completely unable.



He presents the problem to Lewis, who compares men to dogs following a master whose motives they never completely understand. He cautions to allow God to give gifts even when we expect them in different form.

As a part of the Illumination of the Past, and seeing Davy as a whole being, Van considers, whether a person's life ends with heaven or with hell, that the whole of one's life will be understood to have been one or the other. He recognizes in Davy's life the Christ in her even in the years preceding faith, and wonders whether she saw anything of Christ in him.



The Severe Mercy

The Severe Mercy Summary and Analysis

Van reflects on moments that feel like eternity, that they are never perfect, always tainted by the pressure of time, and that man has never adapted to that constraint, but always resents it, tries to save it, and still can neither escape nor find it. Were we to recognize it as the state created for us to enable the process of coming closer to God, he surmises, the nostalgia we feel for the past might be replaced with a dedication to eternity. Time can be the corridor we pass through to get to our destiny.

Lewis addresses the necessity of time for allowing humans to learn and experience this life and about spouses and whether they continue to belong to one another in eternity. Instead, however, of seeking eternity for the sake of reunion with the lost love, Lewis reminds Van to seek first the kingdom of God, that he might get eternity with God and Davy thrown in.

Another of Lewis's letters calls her death a severe mercy, since their love had to end because all loves on earth do, and apparently had to end the way it did in order to bring about his and Davy's best good. Lewis points out the error of their choosing not to have children. He contends that love was not created to be its own end, but to be given from uniquely different people, compounded, and passed on yet again, primarily to children, then to neighbors, and thus demonstrating the image of the love of God. He stresses the importance of moving to the place in his mind and practice in which God is the highest priority, and Davy second.

As Van contemplates, he remembers their prayers, Davy offering up her life to God for the good of Van's soul while she lived a life of willing and humble obedience, and Van's offering up his life for Davy's good simply because he loved her more than anything else. Davy's being taken precisely when and how she was motivates him to honor her memory by living passionately for What she loved. If she had not died: he would have come as close to God as Davy; he would have tried to divert her passion away from God and back to something they shared; or come to hate God and Davy for having a passionate love without him. He understands on reflection exactly how her death answers both of their most passionate prayers. He also understands how very gentle God was in the process of taking her. He granted her the extra year, that she not die in a coma or bleeding, and restored their love to its strongest state before her time was done.

Epilogue: The Second Death

Epilogue: The Second Death Summary and Analysis

Van has a vision in which he turns to find Davy, grinning. He revels in a hug and their conversation. She says she cannot tell him everything, but is with him when he feels her, and has read all of his letters. They hold each other.

Two weeks later, he sails to England. He sends Davy's rings to the depths of the sea, and feels an urgent need to get to Oxford, so cancels his plans for London. He immediately feels Davy there in the familiar sights and smells. He writes to Lewis who has married Joy Davidman, dying of bone cancer. Van visits them frequently, joining them in prayer for her recovery. Soon after Van returns to Virginia, he learns that their prayers are answered regarding Joy, and her bones are rebuilding themselves, while Lewis' bones weaken with osteoporosis. Soon her bones are completely restored, as are Lewis's, and the two travel and live happily. Eventually, like Lazarus, her illness returns and she succumbs.

Before Van sails for Virginia, he goes to visit a friend in Lincoln and feels the presence of Davy walking gaily and lightly with him. He remembers it as the last thing they do together. He proposes the idea of a second death to Lewis, and they discuss the idea that the dead must be allowed to mourn as well, and to depart when the time for mourning has passed. The emptiness that follows is, while without tears, in ways harder than the first death for the survivor. He finds he cannot write her anymore, but finds "she" on the page where there would once have been "you." Later he learns Lewis has died, and is comforted that Christians never say goodbye.



Characters

Sheldon Vanauken

Sheldon Vanauken, or Van, is the protagonist and narrator of this story. He is a passionate student of literature and poetry, as well as sailing and music, and a lover of beauty in all its forms. He is a romantic and an intellectual who, at the beginning of the story, is a confirmed and happy pagan, thinking pleasurable and fair living with the acknowledgment that all that is must have been created by an intelligent being, or moral theism, the wisest course. Over the course of the story, though, he is confronted with the undeniable superiority of the Christian scriptures and the appeal of a life shaped after the person of Christ. He, with the guidance of several Christian authors as well as the wise friendship of Christian thinker C.S. Lewis, becomes a partner in faith with his wife, Davy, and with countless other excellent Christian minds at Oxford. He is even given the role of Christian advisor to a group of students back in Virginia before he begins his retreat. He is jealous of God's relationship with Davy, and so quietly resents them both. It is not until Davy is taken following a long and sweet goodbye that he comes to understand how her parting was the result of her and God's love and desire for his eternal happiness.

Jean Davis

Jean Davis, or Davy, is the woman Van loves, and is herself an eager and artistic fellow explorer with Van. She is remembered by everyone she encounters in her short life as flowing with selfless and generous love and good humor, as well as loving all things musical, artistic, and meaningfully poetic. She admires above all else, however, Christian devotion in the friends she meets, having followed Van whole-heartedly into the Christian faith following a long time of conviction, pain, and searching. She ends her life praying selflessly, wrestling with God for an entire night that if she is going to be sick, that she be given one more year for her ministry with the students, and that her life be taken in exchange for Van's soul. She is such a beautiful representation of the character of Christ that the hospital in which she spends the majority of her illness will not accept payment after her death, since she did more for them than they could ever do for her.

C.S. Lewis

C.S. Lewis, or Jack, begins his presence in the story as the author of some of the most thought-provoking of the books Van and Davy read in their initial investigation into the Christian faith. He evolves into a close friend, advisor, and confidante as he and Van exchange letter after letter, and meet for long conversations about the Christian life and all of its challenges. Jack and Van become even more closely bonded when Davy dies and Jack anticipates and then experiences the passing of his own wife. His letters are



the source for the title of this book, and much of the wisdom and perspective Van gains through the years it chronicles.

Julian

A fellow Oxford student and passionate believer, Julian is the source of some of Davy's most treasured poems about the faith. He is also one of the most faithful friends, even from a distance, and a source of prayer and encouragement during the months of Davy's decline.

Jane

A fellow Oxford student and passionate lover of poetry and literature, Jane is the friend that fills the void of the worship of beauty while Davy is sick the first time and devoted to her Christian study in her waking hours. Jane is a believer, but becomes the personification of the breach of the Shining Barrier for Van as he realizes they were in love with each other during her visit.

Gypsy

The dog who becomes analogous to the wandering human who will not obey God until, at last, he no longer hears his invitation and loses the freedom and provision that what once his.

Flurry

The dog who obeys with such enthusiasm that she becomes analogous to Davy as Van remembers them in a poem on the dog's death.

Shirley Rosser

A friend at Lynchburg College, he is a passionate and articulate believer and a physics professor.

Belle Hill

A widow who has given herself to living richly and teaching, she is also a friend at Lynchburg College.



Rector M.A.P. Wood

The Anglican in Oxford who sat and invested wisdom and care in Van and Davy in their earliest days as believers.

Charles Williams

The Christian writer who wrote about the idea of a holy exchange arranged between believers before God. The idea is carried forward in Davy's exchanging her life for Van's soul, his exchanging his dreams and ambitions for Davy's best good, and Lewis's losing calcium in his bones while Joy's bones were being strengthened.

The Providential God

Lewis and Van have many conversations about the likelihood that things happen on earth by blind chance, and agree that it is not possible with an omniscient and eternal God that He would not use every means of guiding His children to love Him that is available to Him.



Objects/Places

Glenmerle

Glenmerle is Van's childhood home and the setting for the first spring the lovers spend together as man and wife. A number of their poems and the reasons they love the spring so dearly have their beginnings in memories they make at Glenmerle.

The Grey Goose

The two lovers dream of a life at sea with time to stop and stare and step outside of the line of time to be timelessly in love. As an analogy to their everlasting devotion, they name the Grey Goose their symbolic bird, since when one of a pair dies, the other flies on alone, never taking another mate. The Grey Goose, then, is the name they give the sailboat or yacht on which they dream of living out their days. It remains an elusive dream for them, and happily, the part of their dream they never get to realize is coming to the end of their lives and sinking with their ship, in order that they might leave this life together.

Horsebite Hall

Van and Davy follow their time at Yale living at Horsebite Hall, so named by Davy, with their dog Gypsy and its pup, Flurry. It is a place in the country with lots of room for them all to roam and enjoy the spring and summer. It is also the place where Davy does her first large amount of painting, particularly the "Sin Picture" described in the chapter called "The Shadow of a Tree".

The Studio

Also called St. Udio's, the studio is a tiny apartment in Oxford on a cobblestone street with a street lamp and a smoky fireplace. It is the place that becomes a social hub for the group of Christian friends, and is where Van and Davy make the most precious of their Oxford memories.

Li'l Dreary

Li'l Dreary is the tiny and sad house that first houses Van and Davy when Van starts teaching at Lynchburg College. It is also where the group of Christian students is born in that community.



Mole End

The basement apartment where Davy spends her last days before going to the hospital, and the two are able to be happily in love again, following Van's wavering enthusiasm for the faith.

The Gull

The first sailboat the two live on. It is their vessel for exploring the ocean surrounding Florida.

Lewis's Books and Letters

The written word, including the books countless other Christian minds supplied for Van and Davy during their examination of the faith, was an incredibly valuable teacher for them. Lewis in particular provided a voice with which Van could identify as loving and seeking the same things as he.

Van's Poems

Van is continuously writing poems to capture moments and moods, and to communicate ideas he thought could be expressed in verse. They became fixtures in the thinking and conversation of the two lovers.

Music

The Humoresque, when whistled or hummed, is Van's message to Davy that he loves her. "Thou art the King of Glory" becomes as important a piece of music for calling up memories of their time as new Christians at Oxford. Throughout their lives, music is the tool they use to set moods, send messages, and call up memories.

Julian's Crucifix

Carved from wood and representing Julian's steadfastness of devotion to prayer during Jean's illness, it arrived by mail and hung by her hospital bed until the end of her life.

Van's Norman Christ

A gift to Joy and Jack, and dear to them both as a symbol of Van's devoted and prayerful friendship, it hung by both of their beds when they died.



The Sin Painting

The painting from Horsebite Hill symbolizing the conviction Davy was under about her need for a spiritually cleansing and reconciling Christ.

The Calling Painting

The Blakean painting in orange and blue Davy did featuring representations of both Davy and Van, Davy obeying the call to her lower station and Van waving off the call to a high station.

Themes

God as Providential

Throughout the book, with the benefit of Van's hindsight and a mind trained to know the character of God well enough to recognize His hand, circumstances conspire to bring both Van and Davy into intimate friendship with God. The best and earliest example is their shared love of beauty both in human expression and in created nature. When later they are making their investigation into Christianity, the thing that strikes them both so intensely is the beauty with which the Christians interact and worship. As they come to understand that the creator they knew must exist is the exquisite Lover and Inspiration behind that interaction, they are inspired to learn as much about Him as they can. Nature then continues to feed and salve their souls in a way it never had before they came to know that it was a love letter from that God. Another example is their desire to live unaffected by time, and the teaching tool that became for Lewis as he explained that just as fish don't complain because the sea is wet, people would only complain about time if they were not intended always to be subject to it. Even their own love becomes a teaching tool Lewis points to in order to help Van understand that the devotion he was giving to Davy is the very devotion he will find fulfillment and eternal satisfaction in giving to God.

Signs are another of the items discussed as a part of understanding God's providence. Lewis points out to Van that if God is omniscient and eternal, then He knows that at a certain moment a person will be standing in a certain place and see a certain rainbow, for example, and so to live as though every circumstance has been arranged by God to teach a lesson, or to inspire His children to love Him more completely, is the wisest course. One must also understand, Lewis explains, however, that we are to God the way a dog is to a benevolent master, never able in this life to completely understand His motives, but always safest to obey those commands we are given.

Romantic Love as a Way of Understanding God

In the case of Van and Davy, they are given a rare glimpse of a whole-hearted and selfless love, and one that is so complete as to be enough to satisfy them for eternity. Its strength becomes useful to God's purposes in several ways. First, the two know and trust each other so completely and their investigation into Christianity is so like the voracious reading and studying it has been their habit to engage in to that point that they trust it and each other enough to look fairly at it and discuss it thoroughly. Then, there is the fact of their love itself, putting them both in practice of complete vulnerability and jubilant abandon to a love. There is nothing jaded or reserved about either of them, so when they become intellectually satisfied and give God their trust, they give it freely and in happy expectation.



Having come through the experience of Davy's death, Van is able to reflect with Lewis on the motivations for his actions during that time and recognize that it was not, in fact, holy love that motivated him to offer up his dreams to God for Davy's best, but only love for Davy. That was still his most ardent passion, and as sweet as it was, would never be able to satisfy him perfectly. Knowing how wonderful and fulfilling it had been, to hear Lewis say that it is only a taste meant to motivate him to draw near to God, meant that what he would find in communion with God would be even more quenching to his soul than his love with Davy had ever been. As Dante said, "Ask for the Morning Star and get (thrown in)/your earthly love". And, as the gospels have it, "seek ye first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you".

The Value of Like-Minded Friends

Van and Davy understand early on in their time at Oxford the incredible amount that could be learned from the group of friends who shared each other's passionate devotion to and love for Christ. The time they all spend at the studio in discussion of spiritual questions, mutual prayer and worship, and out in the many churches joining huge groups of people in enthusiastic and thankful worship, would set the tone for their entire Christian lives. They see examples of friends praying for other friends, entering into their questions and wrestling alongside them, and keeping mantras of Christian wisdom with which to create a culture of encouragement and gratitude among themselves.

Once they are away from Oxford and that incubator of Christianity, they immediately feel its absence and set out to find its like as quickly as they can. It is their Christian friends, both the new and the old, who enter in to their pain and pray, offer encouragement about the beauty of the promised eternity, and help Van to grasp all of the lessons their lives together had to teach.

The Credibility of the Christian Faith

The fourth chapter, entitled Encounter with Light, chronicles the process Van and Jean went through to end up coming to faith in Jesus as the Son of God, and in the God of the Bible. The books they read, as well as the letters from C.S. Lewis, provide a bibliography, of sorts, of commentary and academic examination of the historicity, relevance, and veracity of the Christian faith as presented in the canon of scripture. To the questions Van asks in particular, there are thoughtful and insightful responses for the reader to examine in the form of letters from C.S. Lewis. In them, he discusses the idea that humanity does not want Christianity to be true, because it would mean needing to hand over its will, which it values too highly as a source of pleasure and power. He also discusses the evolutions and sources of each of the major world religions: Buddhism being a simplification of Hinduism and Islam being a simplification of Christianity, for example, lead one to ask which one most satisfactorily answers the needs of the human condition. He points out that belief in something that could be pointed to as clearly as the sun would be no big deal to God at all, Who wants His people to trust Him simply because He fills their world with evidences of His love, and



He asks them to. Trust that came after elaborate proofs of trustworthiness would not be trust at all, but doubt staved off by rigorous testing, and would be no more desirable to God than friendship only offered a man after he has demonstrated in numerous ways that he is trustworthy.

The second evidence of God's intimate love and desire to exist closely involved in the intimate details is the confluence of events that make up Van and Davy's lives. He proves Himself to be the Hound of Heaven, seeking them out and courting them like a lover, and to be a benevolent Father, granting them their requests when they are made humble and with sincere hearts.



Style

Perspective

The story is told in the first person by Sheldon Vanauken about his own life. He tells the story as a man both humbled and reborn by the story's most painful aspects, and striving to remain true to a love story that was the most powerful experience of his life. His perspective on Christianity, the next, although not less, most powerful thing to happen in his life, is the most dramatically changing part of his point of view. In the beginning of the story, he is above the need for faith, satisfied and happy in his beauty-worshiping paganism. Over the course of the story, the reader is allowed to see the reasons why he begins to wonder whether a reexamination might be worth making and why he puts his faith in God. Vanauken is so thorough in his re-entering the thoughts he had while he was moving through each experience that the reader is allowed to completely enter in and feel what he was feeling as he reads. He describes the stimulation his faith received in Oxford, and the wavering it did when he began to entertain jealousy of the relationship Davy had with God, and the way his faith is made real once and for all through the process of Davy's dying.

Because he tells the story with very evident help from thoroughly kept journals, his perspective on the story he tells is as fresh as if he were recounting the events of his day at the end of it. He speaks humbly and honestly with the goal of thoroughly communicating precisely what he had experienced and what it meant for his long-term life. Another valuable part of his perspective is his admiration for C.S. Lewis, leading to openness of questioning and teachability that allows the reader to enter in to that process of questioning and learning, as well.

Tone

The tone of the book is also quite dynamic. Vanauken tells the whole story with obvious affection for the people who share the story with him, allowing the reader to become fond of them for the same reasons he so eloquently communicates. He opens the book nostalgic for a time and a lover that have since gone when he is visiting Glenmerle. The reader is allowed both to revel in his memories and mourn the passing of a joyful time. Then he rejoices in the memory of his and Davy's falling in love and in their lives together. He speaks with such deep admiration for Davy and about the depth of their connection that the reader understands their love as one of those ultimate loves that some people search their whole lives to attain. He writes honestly about his straying devotion, and recounts with candid detail just what he was thinking at the time. He sweetly reminisces about his and Jean's becoming close again when they learn that she is dying. Since the reader is allowed the insight of the promises he and Jean made to God as a result of the promises He kept to them, the reader can read the recounting of the end of their time together with the understanding that it is completely a gift from God, just as they both saw it, living through it as such. His humility continues as he



describes the lessons Lewis pointed out, and his need to learn from the process of letting Jean go. His transparency and the sweetness of the lovers' devotion makes it easy for the reader to fall in love with them as a couple and cheer for their happiness. When he is describing the wisdom he gains from the trial of learning to live without her, the reader remains engrossed to see the now evident hand and heart of God in Van's experience.

Since teachability so dominates Van's tone, the reader is allowed to put himself in the position of learner and questioner to the point that even in the book's saddest moments the reader is looking eagerly for the lessons that will come to Van, and relishing the wisdom observable in Jean.

Structure

The book is laid out like a novel, with only occasional breaks to explain an insight he might have gained in years since that help the reader understand the significance of the event he's telling about. Since Van wrote with the advantage of journals kept throughout the years about which he is writing, it has the tempo of a journal, too, with detail as sharp and emotions as intensely communicated as if emotions being felt in the moment itself. Its rhythm and pace allow the reader to be deeply engrossed enough in each season to be nostalgic about them at their end. Its rhythm is slow enough, with time devoted to each era enough to completely establish their personalities and perspectives at the time, that it reads at a very comfortable pace, nothing feeling rushed or incompletely explained.

If there is any disadvantage to the structure of this story, it would come from the expectation a reader might bring to the story. If, for example, a reader were wanting to hear only about Van's religious conversion and subsequent journey, he would have to endure quite a lot of exposition on his love affair with Davy. If, on the other hand, he were wishing to hear about a love affair beautifully lived, there would be a great deal of spiritual talk to wade through. The story must be viewed as two aspects of a life informing and shaping each other, and therefore allowed to function, and be told, as a whole.



Quotes

"He chuckled at the memory, and then, in the instant, tears were burning in his eyes and rolling down his cheeks. That was always the way of grief: laughter and tears, joy and sorrow." Chap. 1, p. 12

"The aged winter fled away/
Before the bugles of the May,-/ And love, dear love, arose./
But when spring's glory goes/
The lilacs of our love shall stay,/ Forever Maytime sweet
and gay,/ Until the lilacs close/
Beneath the deathly snows." Chap. 2, p. 23

"What we did see was that jealousy is fear: it can corrode even if quite baseless. There was only one answer: total trust. And, we said, if that trust were ever violated, even the least bit, then a quick end; for trust can never be restored." Chap. 2, p. 24

"If one of us likes anything, there must be something to like in it— and the other one must find it. . . That way we shall create a thousand strands, great and small, that will link us together." Chap. 2, p. 27

"I now choose my side: I choose beauty; I choose what I love. But choosing to believe is believing. It's all I can do: choose. . . I do but say: Lord, I believe — help thou my unbelief." Chap. 4, p. 96

"This, you know, is a time of taking in — taking in friendship, conversation, gaiety, wisdom, knowledge, beauty, holiness — and later, well, there'll be a time of giving out." Chap. 5, p. 116

"Do you think that people like Hitler, Stalin, Haldane, Stapledon (a corking good writer, by the way) would be pleased on waking up one morning to find that they were not their own masters, that they had a Master and a Judge, that there was nothing even in the deepest recesses of their thoughts about which they could say to Him, 'Keep out!'. . . their first reaction would be (as mine was) rage and terror." Chap. 5, p. 86

"We looked at each other with that look of perfect understanding that, more than any other single thing, was the essence of our love. I raised my teacup and said, 'If it's half as good as the half we've known. . . ' and she, lifting hers, said, 'here's "Hail!" to the rest of the road!'" Chap. 6, p. 149

"Davy, in her divine humility, saw me called to a high destiny — the high door — and herself called to a low one. . . That low door probably leads to a throne." Chap. 6, p. 152

"But love is the final reality; and anyone who does not understand this, be he writer or sage, is a man flawed in wisdom." Chap. 7, p. 165

"It is, surely, the eternal that Keats aches for. And I see the same longing in Shelley and many another poet." Chap. 9, p. 202



"This — the disappearance of the sense of the beloved's presence and, therefore, the end of tears — this is the Second Death." Chap. 10, p. 233

"May we not conjecture . . . that when Our Lord said "It is expedient that I go away" he stated something true par excellence of Himself, but also in their degree, of all His followers?" Chap. 10, p. 234



Topics for Discussion

In what ways did the Shining Barrier and the codes of conduct that shaped Van and Davy's lives prepare them for putting their faith in the Christian God?

Discuss Lewis's description of the coming about of the major world religions in chapter four. How does he finally land upon Christianity as the answer that best suits the questions humanity is asking?

In what ways does Van see the providential hand of God at work in their lives as he looks back on it? Where do you see it in the arrangement of their circumstances and experience?

What do you think accounts for the vast difference Van and Davy observe between the congregations in Oxford and those in the States? Do you think the same characteristics apply to modern congregations?

What differences do you see between the way he talks about Christianity and the way modern culture depicts Christianity?

Discuss the idea that humans are bothered by time because we were created ultimately to exist outside its constraints.

Do you think there is a difference in the amount of willingness to give oneself over in fealty to deity between men and women? What might account for such a difference?

Discuss the idea that the things that bring tastes of joy on earth are intended by their Creator to direct us to Him, Who is ultimately satisfying, and the things that delight us here will ultimately disappoint.