

FINDING CHRIST IN NARNIA


Experiencing Gospel
Truths in C. S. Lewis's
Fiction

Sponsored by the

BYU HUMANITIES CENTER

THE PURPOSE OF THIS SESSION

This session aims to demonstrate how the fiction of C. S. Lewis—especially in the Chronicles of Narnia—not only represents important gospel truths but helps us come to know and love the Savior more deeply.



C. S. Lewis

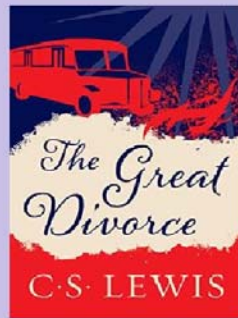


Born (Belfast, Ireland), November 29, 1898
Died (Oxford, England), November 22, 1963

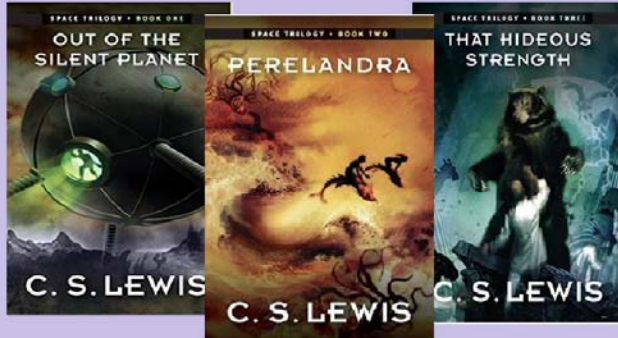
SOME OF LEWIS'S 40+ BOOKS

Fiction

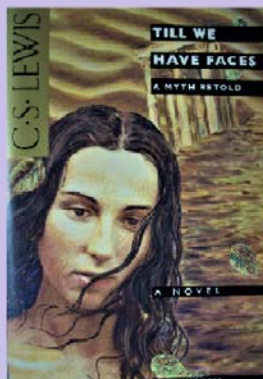
Religious "supposals"



Planetary trilogy
("sci-fi"/fantasy)

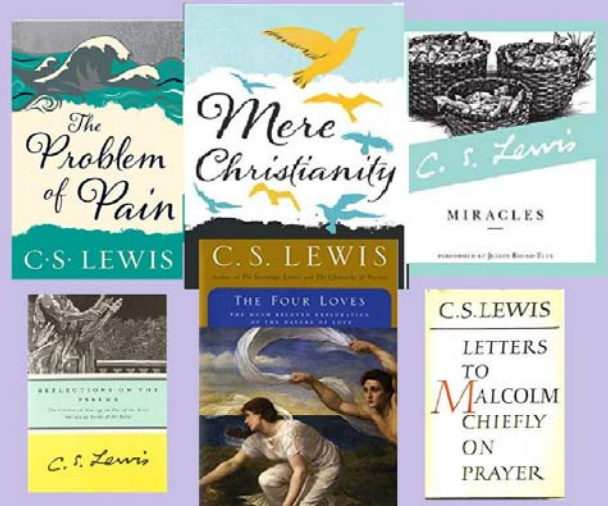


A novel (for adults)

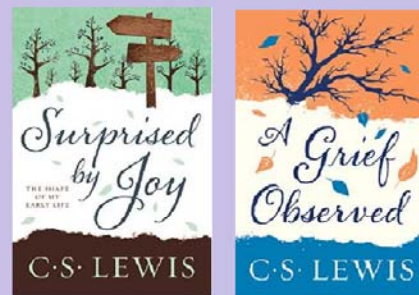


Non-fiction

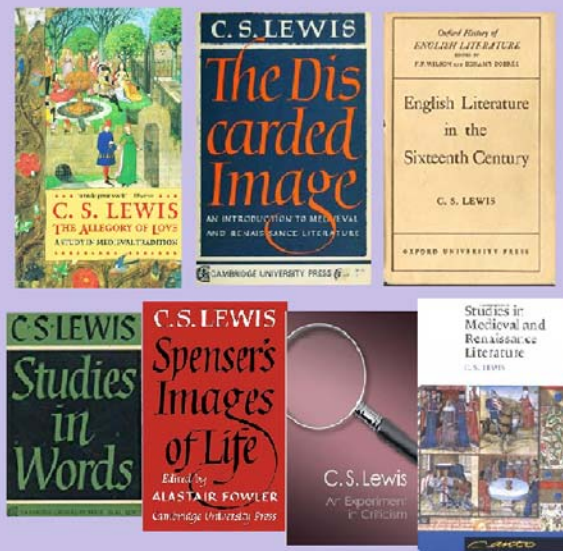
Religious



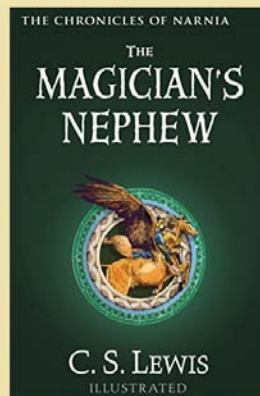
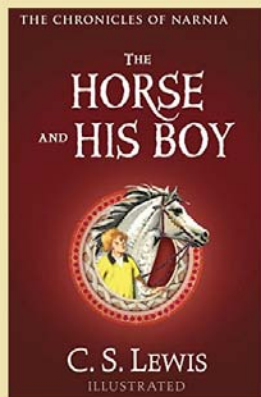
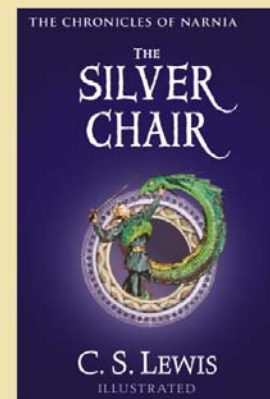
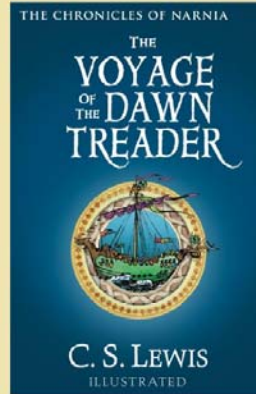
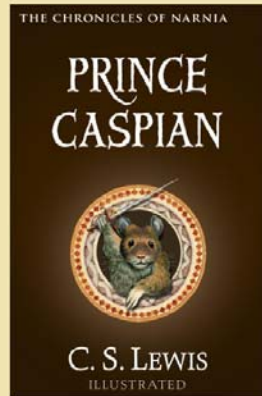
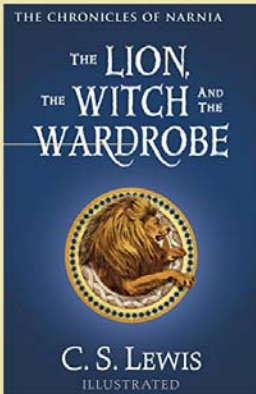
Autobiographical



Academic



THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA



WHAT ARE THE
CHRONICLES OF NARNIA
ABOUT?



WHAT THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA ARE ABOUT

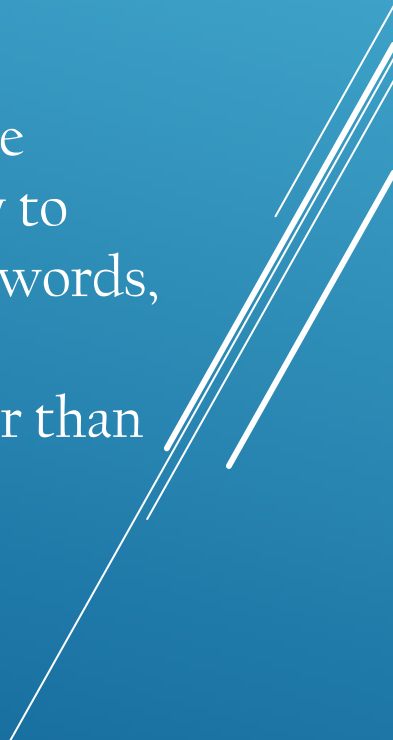
From a letter to Anne Jenkins (5 March 1961):

The whole Narnian story is about Christ. . . .

- ▶ *The Magician's Nephew* tells the Creation and how evil entered Narnia.
- ▶ *The Lion*, [*the Witch and the Wardrobe*] the Crucifixion and Resurrection.
- ▶ *The Horse and His Boy* the calling and conversion of the heathen.
- ▶ *Prince Caspian* restoration of the true religion after a corruption.
- ▶ *The Voyage of the 'Dawn Treader'* the spiritual life (especially in Reepicheep).
- ▶ *The Silver Chair* the continued war against the powers of darkness.
- ▶ *The Last Battle* the coming of Antichrist (the Ape). The end of the world and the Last Judgement.

(from Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography*, Revised edition, 323-24)

THREE KEYS TO INTERPRETING THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA

- ▶ KEY #1: These are NOT allegories but are what Lewis called “Supposals.”
 - ▶ KEY #2: He did not originally plan these out as stories about Christianity. They started as “pictures in his head.”
 - ▶ KEY #3: We would do best to immerse ourselves in the stories rather than try to “figure out” what they mean. In other words, they are stories to be experienced (imaginatively and emotionally) rather than puzzles to be figured out.
- 
- A decorative graphic consisting of several parallel white lines of varying lengths, slanted diagonally from the bottom right towards the top right, set against the blue background.

NOT ALLEGORIES BUT “SUPPOSALS”

► More from a letter to Anne Jenkins (5 March 1961):

The whole Narnian story is about Christ. That is to say, I asked myself 'Supposing there really were a world like Narnia and supposing it had (like our world) gone wrong and supposing Christ wanted to go into that world and save it (as He did ours) what might have happened?' The stories are my answer. Since Narnia is a world of Talking Beasts I thought he would become a Talking Beast there, as he became a Man here. I pictured Him becoming a lion there because (a) the lion is supposed to be the King of beasts: (b) Christ is called 'The Lion of Judah' in the Bible: (c) I'd been having strange dreams about lions when I began writing the books.

► In a letter to “Fifth Graders” (29 May 1954) he wrote:

"I did not say to myself 'Let us represent Jesus as He really is in our world by a Lion in Narnia'; I said, 'Let us suppose that there were a land like Narnia and that the Son of God, as he became a Man in our world, became a Lion there, and then imagine what would happen.'" (*Letters to Children* 44-45)

▶ In a letter to a girl named Patricia (8 June 1960) he wrote:

“All your points are in a sense right. But I’m not exactly ‘representing’ the real (Christian) story in symbols. I’m more saying, ‘Suppose there were a world like Narnia and it needed rescuing and the Son of God . . . went to redeem it, as He came to redeem ours, what might it, in that world, all have been like?’ Perhaps it comes to much the same thing as you thought, but not quite.

- ▶ 1. The creation of Narnia is the Son of God creating a world (not specially our world).
- ▶ 2. Jadis plucking the apple is, like Adam’s sin, an act of disobedience, but it doesn’t fill the same place in her life as his plucking did in his. She was already fallen (very much so) before she ate it.
- ▶ 3. The stone table is meant to remind one of Moses’ table.
- ▶ 4. The Passion and Resurrection of Aslan are the Passion and Resurrection Christ might be supposed to have had in that world – like those in our world but not exactly like.
- ▶ 5. Edmund is like Judas a sneak and traitor. But unlike Judas he repents and is forgiven (as Judas no doubt w[oul]d. have been if he’d repented).
- ▶ 6. Yes. At the v[er]y edge of the Narnian world Aslan begins to appear more like Christ as He is known in this world. Hence, the Lamb. Hence, the breakfast – like at the end of St. John’s Gospel. . . .
- ▶ 7. And of course the Ape and Puzzle, just before the last Judgement (in the Last Battle) are like the coming of Anitchrist before the end of our world.

All clear?" (*Letters to Children* 92-93)

KEY #2: HOW LEWIS WROTE THE CHRONICLES (It started with “pictures in his head”)

- ▶ Not originally planned out as a series of books about Christianity
- ▶ Age 16: “All . . . began with seeing pictures in my head”
- ▶ In 1939 started a story about evacuees from London coming to a professor’s house
- ▶ Picked up again in 1949: Just one book in mind at that time
- ▶ Later Aslan “pulled the 6 other Narnian stories in after Him” (also started with “pictures” in his head)

LEWIS ON HOW HE WROTE THE CHRONICLES

One thing I am sure of. All my seven Narnian books, and my three science-fiction books, began with seeing pictures in my head. At first they were not a story, just pictures. The *Lion* all began with a picture of a Faun carrying an umbrella and parcels in a snowy wood. This picture had been in my mind since I was about sixteen. Then one day, when I was about forty, I said to myself: 'Let's try to make a story about it'.

At first I had very little idea how the story would go. But then suddenly Aslan came bounding into it. I think I had been having a good many dreams of lions about that time. Apart from that, I don't know where the Lion came from or why He came. But once He was there He pulled the whole story together, and soon He pulled the six other Narnian stories in after Him.

More on how he wrote

Some people seem to think that I began by asking myself how I could say something about Christianity to children; then fixed on the fairy tale as an instrument; then collected information about child-psychology and decided what age-group I'd write for; then drew up a list of basic Christian truths and hammered out 'allegories' to embody them. This is all pure moonshine. I couldn't write in that way at all. Everything began with images; a faun carrying an umbrella, a queen on a sledge, a magnificent lion. At first there wasn't even anything Christian about them; that element pushed itself in of its own accord. It was part of the bubbling.

I have no idea whether this is the usual way of writing stories, still less whether it is the best. It is the only one I know: images always come first.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?
(how he wrote them)

(Any thoughts?)



Maybe relevant: LEWIS ON SYMBOLISM

- ▶ Lewis argued that “symbols are the natural speech of the soul” (“Edmund Spenser, 1552-99,” *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*).

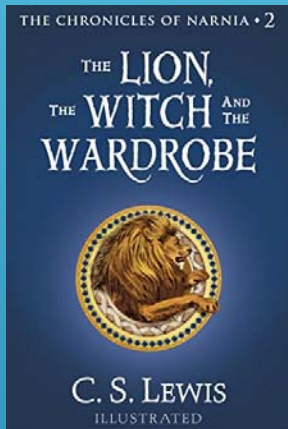
KEY #3: HOW TO READ THE CHRONICLES

My recommendation (and I think Lewis would agree):

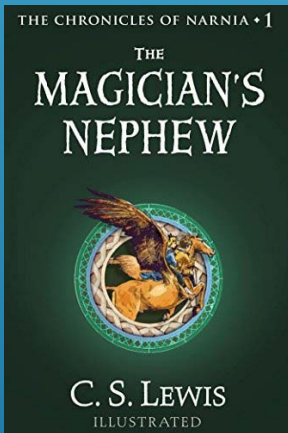
- ▶ Immerse yourself in the stories rather than try to “figure out” what they mean. In other words, experience them imaginatively and emotionally -- get to know the characters, and join in their adventures and struggles.
- ▶ As for the symbols, just let them do their work as part of the experience. See, feel, “taste” them -- and then of course think about them too. But don’t think of them as pieces in a puzzle but more as meaningful features of a meaningful world.

SO LET'S DIVE IN . . .

Who is Christ (according to the Chronicles of Narnia)?



Has come into the world (Narnia)
Offers Himself a ransom (for Edmund)
Is killed -- but returns to life
Defeats the White Witch
Brings the creatures who have been turned to stone back to life



Creates a new world (Narnia)



Returns as Narnia begins to fall apart
As Narnia ends, all its creatures go either to His right (into the "new Narnia") or to His left (into darkness)

So Aslan (Narnia's Christ-figure) is

The Redeemer (atones and is resurrected)*

The Creator

The Judge

*Note this poem from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*:

*Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.*

(Compare John 1:4: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men.")


But we know more than just what He does; we know who He is:

He is powerful but loving and good

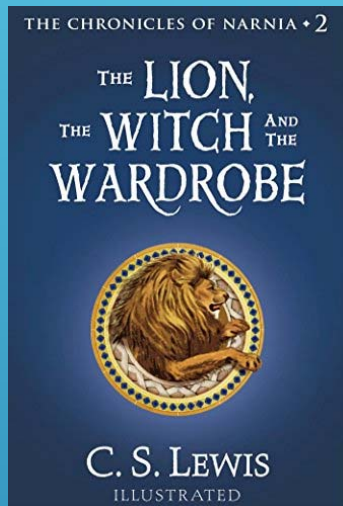
“He's wild, you know. Not like a tame lion. . . . He isn't safe. But he's good.”

How the children react when they first hear His name:

At the name of Aslan each one of the children felt something jump in its inside. Edmund felt a sensation of mysterious horror. Peter felt suddenly brave and adventurous. Susan felt as if some delicious smell or some delightful strain of music had just floated by her. And Lucy got the feeling you have when you wake up in the morning and realize that it is the beginning of the holidays or the beginning of summer.

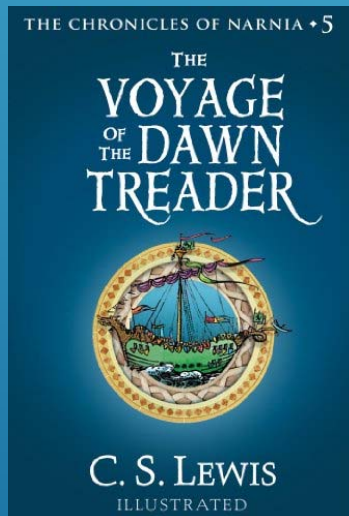


We come to know Aslan mainly through his personal interaction with the characters



Lucy and Susan following Him to the Stone Table (and then after)

Aslan's interview with Edmund (what Aslan does for him; how he changes)



(With them in different ways, including as an albatross)

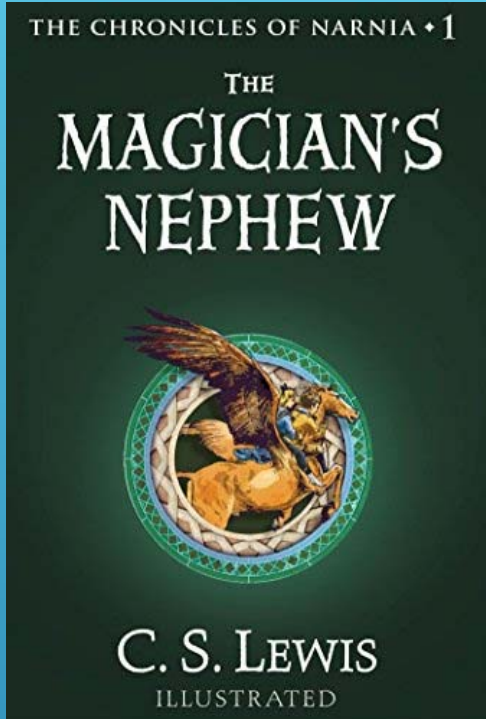
With Lucy in the Magician's house:

The Magician's Book: Aslan keeps His own laws

Tender interaction with Lucy (including counsel and rebuke)

The dragoning and undragoning of Eustace

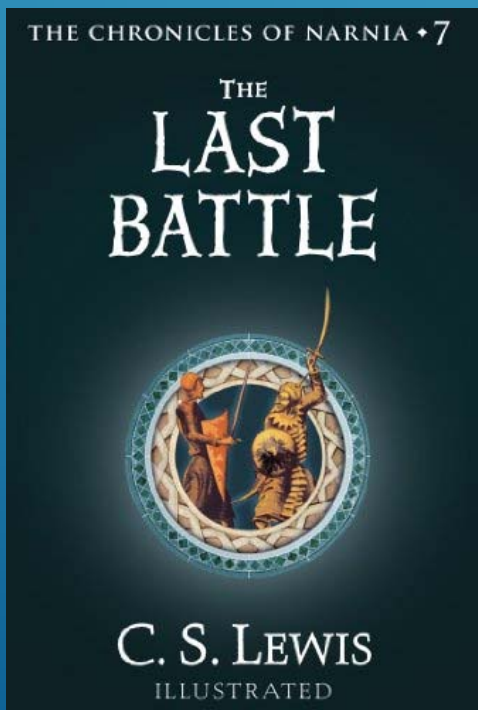
At the end, Aslan appears to them as a lamb



Interview with Digory (including a sort of rebuke)

Sends Digory on a mission (to get the apple -- but not for himself; tempted by the White Witch)

How Digory comes to know Aslan's heart (when Digory is hoping and pleading; cf. the Christ who weeps -- for Lazarus and others; note especially Moses 7)



Not a tame lion -- but he is good!

The children at the end -- the glorious final page of the series!

The end of *The Last Battle* (and of the whole series):

"You do not yet look so happy as I mean you to be."

Lucy said, "We're so afraid of being sent away, Aslan. And you have sent us back into our own world so often."

"No fear of that," said Aslan. "Have you not guessed?"

Their hearts leaped and a wild hope rose within them.

"There was a real railway accident," said Aslan softly.

"Your father and mother and all of you are - as you used to call it in the Shadowlands - dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning."

And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.

SOME QUESTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS



QUESTION: Is it possible to love Aslan too much?

A letter (1955) from Lewis to the mother of an American boy named Laurence, who was worried that he loved Aslan more than Jesus:

Tell Laurence from me, with my love: . . .

[that he] can't *really* love Aslan more than Jesus even if he feels that's what he is doing. For the things he loves Aslan for doing or saying are simply the things Jesus really did and said. So that when Laurence thinks he is loving Aslan, he is really loving Jesus: and perhaps loving Him more than he ever did before. . . .

Will this help? I am terribly sorry to have caused such trouble, and would take it as a great favor if you would write again and tell me how Laurence goes on. I shall of course have him daily in my prayers. . . .

(*Letters to Children* page 52)

Something similar in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*:

But between them and the foot of the sky there was something so white on the green grass that even with their eagles' eyes they could hardly look at it. They came on and saw that it was a Lamb.

"Come and have breakfast," said the Lamb in its sweet milky voice.

Then they noticed for the first time that there was a fire lit on the grass and fish roasting on it. They sat down and ate the fish, hungry now for the first time for many days. And it was the most delicious food they had ever tasted.

"Please, Lamb," said Lucy, "is this the way to Aslan's country?"

"Not for you," said the Lamb. "For you the door into Aslan's country is from your own world."

"What!" said Edmund. "Is there a way into Aslan's country from our world too?"

"There is a way into my country from all the worlds," said the Lamb; but as he spoke his snowy white flushed into tawny gold and his size changed and he was Aslan himself, towering above them and scattering light from his mane.

"Oh, Aslan," said Lucy. "Will you tell us how to get into your country from our world?"

"I shall be telling you all the time," said Aslan. . . .

"Please, Aslan," said Lucy. "Before we go, will you tell us when we can come back to Narnia again? Please. And oh, do, do, do make it soon."

"Dearest," said Aslan very gently, "you and your brother will never come back to Narnia."

"Oh, Aslan!!" said Edmund and Lucy both together in despairing voices.

"You are too old, children," said Aslan, "and you must begin to come close to your own world now."

"It isn't Narnia, you know," sobbed Lucy. "It's you. We shan't meet you there. And how can we live, never meeting you?"

"But you shall meet me, dear one," said Aslan.

"Are are you there too, Sir?" said Edmund.

"I am," said Aslan. "But there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there."

WHY COME TO KNOW
CHRIST THROUGH STORIES?
("fantasy" stories, no less)

▶ Any thoughts?



WHY COME TO KNOW CHRIST THROUGH STORIES?

One reason: slip past the resistance to religion -- readers can experience spiritual things without preconceptions (and without realizing it)

I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm. The whole subject was associated with lowered voices; almost as if it were something medical. But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could.

Another reason: Lewis draws on what is truest and deepest in himself

Remember:

- (1) "symbols are the natural speech of the soul" and
- (2) The stories started with "pictures in his head"

Rather than ask what moral children need (Lewis says):

It would be better to ask "What moral do I need?" for I think we can be sure that what does not concern us deeply will not deeply interest our readers, whatever their age. But it is better not to ask the questions at all. Let the pictures tell you their own moral. For the moral inherent in them will rise from whatever spiritual roots you have succeeded in striking during the whole course of your life. But if they don't show you any moral, don't put one in. For the moral you put in is likely to be a platitude, or even a falsehood, skimmed from the surface of your consciousness. . . .

. . . . (The only moral that is of any value is that which arises inevitably from the whole cast of the author's mind.

Any questions or comments before
we end?



Of course there's lots more in the
Chronicles of Narnia . . .

(so let's keep reading them)

. . . But of course Lewis did not have
the fullness of the gospel.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell said that he did not “look to Lewis” for doctrine, but (he said) “I find his *depiction* of discipleship especially articulate and helpful” (*C. S. Lewis: The Man and His Message* 9).

Though Lewis is often (but not always) right about doctrine, I agree with Elder Maxwell that Lewis's primary value to us is not doctrinal (in the sense of specific, fully accurate, authoritative doctrines).

The greatest value of Lewis's work (I believe) is in helping us know and love the Savior -- which is the essence of discipleship.

**More from the letter to the American boy
Laurence (who was worried about loving
Aslan more than Jesus):**

If I were Laurence I'd just say in my prayers something like this: "Dear God, if the things I've been thinking and feeling about those books [the Chronicles of Narnia] are things You don't like and are bad for me, please take away those feelings and thoughts. But if they are not bad, then please stop me from worrying about them. And help me every day to love you more in the way that really matters far more than any feelings or imaginations, by doing what you want and growing more like you." That is the sort of thing I think Laurence should say for himself; but it would be kind and Christian-like if he then added, "And if Mr. Lewis has worried any other children by his books or done them any harm, then please forgive him and help him never to do it again."