



*BETWEEN  
HEAVEN AND  
HELL*

*A Dialog Somewhere Beyond Death with  
JOHN F. KENNEDY, C. S. LEWIS  
and ALDOUS HUXLEY*

*PETER KREEFT*



InterVarsity Press  
ivpress.com

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# THE DIALOG

**Time:** November 22, 1963

**Place:** Somewhere beyond death

**Characters:** C. S. Lewis, Theist  
John F. Kennedy, Humanist  
Aldous Huxley, Pantheist

**Kennedy:** Where the hell are we?

**Lewis:** You must be a Catholic!

**Kennedy:** You could tell by the accent, eh?

**Lewis:** Yes. I say—aren't you President Kennedy? How did you get here—wherever *here* is?

**Kennedy:** Ex-President, I think: I seem to have been assassinated. Who are you? And—to return to my first question—where the hell are we?

**Lewis:** I'm C. S. Lewis. I just died too, and I'm pretty sure you're wrong about the location. This place just feels too good to be hell. On the other hand, I didn't see any God, did you?

**Kennedy:** No.

**Lewis:** Then it can't be heaven either. I wonder whether we're stuck in limbo.

**Kennedy:** Ugh! Do you really think so?

**Lewis:** Actually, I think it more likely that it's purgatory, especially if we end up getting out of it and into heaven. I did a bit of speculating about such places as a writer, especially in *The Great Divorce*. I don't suppose you've read it? No . . . well . . . But surely you should be familiar with such concepts if you were a Roman Catholic.

**One world  
at a time?**

**Kennedy:** Well . . . I was more of a modern Catholic; I never bothered about transcendental mysteries or mythology. I was too busy trying to take care of the world I lived in for escapist thinking. "One world at a time," as Thoreau put it.

**Lewis:** You can see now that you were wrong, can't you?

**Kennedy:** What do you mean?

**Lewis:** Why, first that it isn't mythology. It's real. Wherever we are, here we are, large as life. And second, that the rule *isn't*

“one world at a time.” Here we are in another world talking about our past life on earth. That’s two worlds at a time by my count. And while we were on earth we could think about this world too; that’s also two worlds at a time, isn’t it? Finally, it’s not escapism. In fact, *not* to have prepared for this journey while we were living on earth would have been escapism. Don’t you agree?

**Kennedy:** Hmm . . . I suppose you’re right. But look! Someone else is coming. Can you make out who it is?

**Lewis:** Why, it’s Huxley! Aldous Huxley. Aldous, welcome. How did you get here?

**Huxley:** Same way you did, I’m sure. I just died. Oh, I say! Kennedy and Lewis! What good company to die in—or live in, whatever we’re doing. Where is this place, anyway?

**Kennedy:** That’s what we’re trying to figure out. Lewis thinks it may be some sort of limbo or purgatory. I’m just hoping it’s not hell.

**Huxley:** Well, you’re both wrong. It’s heaven. It *must* be heaven.

**Kennedy:** Why?

**Huxley:** Because *everywhere* is heaven, if only you have enlightened eyes.

**Lewis:** Even hell?

**Huxley:** Oh, this is going to be fun! Lewis, you’ve lost none of your cantankerous penchant for Socratic questioning, have you? I remember you made Oxford a regular hornets’ nest when you debated back on earth, and now you’ve shipped your hornets to heaven. This is a nice challenge.

**Lewis:** Then reply to it. If everywhere is heaven, then either hell does not exist, or hell is part of heaven. Which way will you have it, Aldous?

**Is heaven  
every-  
where?**

**Kennedy:** Wait, please! Before you two take off, could you give me some assurances about this sort of debate? I was a debater too, but we politicians confined ourselves to the concrete and tangible. I'm not at all convinced you can do anything more than talk through your hat about things you've never seen.

**The  
question  
of method:  
how can  
we know?**

**Lewis:** So you want an assurance that there is some method of really finding the truth about things we can't see.

**Kennedy:** Yes. Before you take off, be sure you have a plane that can fly, and can get back to earth and land. Lewis, you said you wrote a book about heaven. How the hell—how in heaven's name—how on earth—do you know anything about heaven? Have you ever been there?

**Lewis:** Yes, indeed. I've been in and out of the back doors of both many times.

**Huxley:** You see, Mr. President . . .

**Kennedy:** Please call me Jack.

**Lewis:** That will be rather confusing. My friends called *me* Jack.

**Huxley:** Suppose we let rank have first choice. Would you mind if we called you Lewis?

**Lewis:** If you please. Clarity seems to be the thing here, not titles.

**Huxley:** Fine. Now Jack, Lewis meant that remark about heaven spiritually, not literally.

**Kennedy:** Oh, well, if that's all you mean . . .

**Lewis:** No, wait. Let's not get bogged down in the swamps of "spiritual senses." Let's use words as literally as we can. I have *not* been in either heaven or hell literally.

**Kennedy:** Fine. Then how can you possibly know anything about them?

**Lewis:** I've been told.

**Kennedy:** What? What do you mean?

**Lewis:** Do you know anything at all about Tibet?

**Kennedy:** Of course.

**Lewis:** Have you ever been there?

**Kennedy:** No.

**Lewis:** Then how do you know anything about it?

**Kennedy:** Oh, I see. I've been told. But that's *knowing* only if you *believe* what you've been told.

**Lewis:** Exactly. It's called "faith."

**Kennedy:** You just passively, uncritically believe?

**Lewis:** No, I believe for good reason, and then I explore my belief with good reason.

**Kennedy:** I certainly don't want to impugn your faith, but I think my faith is quite different from yours.

**Lewis:** How?

**Kennedy:** You're one of those theological conservatives, aren't you?

**Lewis:** That depends on what you mean by the label. I've always thought *liberal* and *conservative* were terms used not to think but to avoid thinking. You can classify *anything* as liberal or conservative, then simply declare yourself one or the other, and all your thought for the rest of your life can be a knee jerk.

**Kennedy:** Well, *fundamentalist*, then.

**Lewis:** What does *that* mean? Many people associate it with "No drinking, smoking or swearing." By that standard, I was *not* a fundamentalist.

**Literal  
vs. poetic  
interpretation of  
the Bible**

**Kennedy:** I guess I mean, Do you take everything in the Bible literally?

**Lewis:** Of course not. When Jesus says, “I am the door,” I don’t look for a knob on him.

**Kennedy:** And when he talks about heaven and hell, do you look for real angels and demons?

**Lewis:** Yes.

**Kennedy:** Why? Why not interpret that poetically?

**Lewis:** Because the speaker didn’t mean it poetically.

**Kennedy:** How do you know that?

**Lewis:** It’s just simple common sense. Look here: do you think anybody, either Jesus or any of his hearers, reached for a literal knob when he said, “I am the door”?

**Kennedy:** No.

**Lewis:** And when he talked about heaven and hell, do you think his hearers interpreted it poetically?

**Kennedy:** No. They probably weren’t sophisticated enough.

**Lewis:** Was Jesus a good teacher?

**Kennedy:** Of course.

**Lewis:** Does a good teacher take into account his audience, and how they are likely to interpret his words?

**Kennedy:** Of course.

**Lewis:** And does a good teacher deliberately use poetic language when he knows his audience will misinterpret it and take it literally?

**Kennedy:** No.

**Lewis:** You see what follows then. He meant to be taken literally when he talked about the existence of heaven and hell.

They're real places. We will certainly go to one of them forever. It matters infinitely which. *That* is certainly what he meant everyone to get out of his teaching about heaven.

**Kennedy:** So you really believe in a place with devils with horns and hoofs and all? You, a twentieth-century man?

**Lewis:** As I wrote in one of my books, I'm not sure what the time has to do with it, and I'm not particular about the horns and hoofs.

**Kennedy:** But otherwise, yes?

**Lewis:** Yes.

**Kennedy:** Well, I find it a lot easier to believe in the goodness of man than in the badness of God.

**Lewis:** The *badness* of God?

**Kennedy:** Yes; can you imagine a worse God than one who claps human beings into hell for all eternity?

**Lewis:** Yes, I can imagine a much worse God than that.

**Kennedy:** What God?

**Lewis:** One who would put people in hell *who didn't deserve it*. An unjust God. But the God I believe in is not only above injustice, he's also above justice. He's pure love.

**Hell and  
the God  
of love**

**Kennedy:** Wonderful! Then there is no hell.

**Lewis:** That does not follow.

**Kennedy:** Why not? How could pure love create hell?

**Lewis:** I don't think God creates hell; I think we do, or perhaps evil spirits do.

**Kennedy:** But God puts you there.

**Lewis:** No again. We put ourselves there by free choice.

**Kennedy:** Why would anyone do that? Who would prefer hell

to heaven if it was up to our own free choice?

**Lewis:** Anyone who found God uncomfortable, unendurable. Anyone who couldn't stand the light, the truth.

**Kennedy:** You mean it's not a matter of good deeds versus bad deeds, a kind of moral bookkeeping?

**Lewis:** No indeed. Look at the thief on the cross. He made it to paradise even though his life's red ink certainly outweighed the black.

**Kennedy:** I never thought of our destiny in any other terms than moral bookkeeping.

**Lewis:** That's why you never believed in hell.

**Kennedy:** Perhaps so. But I still don't understand how anyone could prefer hell to heaven.

**Lewis:** What do you think hell is? And what do you think heaven is?

**Kennedy:** As I just told you, I never gave it much thought. I suppose I thought of them in the usual way, as rewards and punishments, pleasures and pains, bliss and misery.

**Could  
anyone  
choose  
hell?**

**Lewis:** And you couldn't understand why anyone would freely prefer misery to bliss.

**Kennedy:** Exactly.

**Lewis:** Suppose the bliss is not a reward tacked onto a good life, like a grade tacked onto a school course, but the good life itself in its consummation. And suppose the punishment is also not external and tacked on but internal: the consummation of the evil itself. Do you see what follows?

**Kennedy:** I think so. We choose heaven or hell *in* every choice of good or evil.

**Lewis:** Exactly.

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