

THE PROBLEM OF OBSERVED PAIN: A STUDY OF C. S. LEWIS ON SUFFERING

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John Locke once wrote that "pleasure and pain, like other simple ideas, cannot be described, nor their names defined; the way of knowing them . . . is only by experience." Yet few, including myself, are ever content to leave Locke's advice well enough alone. The history of theological and philosophical speculation is replete with examples of those who have refused to leave discussions of pain to the intuitions of experience. This results in discussions, organized in the appropriate dogmatic categories, which seem to never quite translate the feelings of pain—both tangible and intangible—from one person for the next. But the genre of "problem of pain" papers and books marches on—sometimes painfully so.

Whether philosophical or theological, discussions about the problem of pain seem always to be carried on within the dispassionate confines of dogmatic categories. Whether intentioned or unintentioned they seem to remove the mysterious, the unknowable, the ambiguity from the very center of human experience. Indeed human suffering cannot be organized and articulated to make it seem reasonable. For the one experiencing pain, everything seems to be in disarray. Suffering, although a part of human existence, is not very humane. Indeed it has been my experience that suffering transforms the way I think about humanness. Beauty may be transformed into ugliness, statements of dogmatic certitude may become translated into questions of doubt and skepticism, suffering may make one numb to the needs and even to the love of others. Such moves are not toward community with Creator and with creature but rather toward an insulated self-centeredness, and all of this at the same time when one should know better. Perhaps part of the problem is that theological advice just does not prepare one for what pain really does to human experience. Theological advice too often seeks to demystify that which is essentially mysterious. Why in the world do people need to suffer, and in fact do suffer, sometimes for an even worse end? Dogmatic answers simply do not prepare one for the blows of doubt and depression that result from ruined plans. Indeed, if taken too seriously such answers merely intensify the problem.

This need not completely rule out the various "problem of pain" advice that abounds in the world. Reason is critical for reasonableness, of course, and books built with profound theological insight, such as Lewis' own *Problem of Pain*, can help rebuild the chaos suffering leaves behind and even help anticipate the inevitable suffering of human suffering. But what is needed is balance. Sometimes suffering makes no sense at all. Sometimes suffering calls a people or a person to trust God for a brighter tomorrow in the midst of such a despairing present that

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there seems to be no possible future at all. One cannot understand such radical faith by all the Christian clichés lumped together; it is not an easy bidding. It is a war that is profoundly internal, a war not waged in textbooks but in the heart. Victory—if there will be victory—belongs ultimately to the spirit and not to reason alone.

Some Lewis scholars are quite willing to start and to stop with his more theological work, *Problem of Pain* (hereafter *Pain*).¹ Here one finds reasoned if not easy answers to all the problems inherent in the one. To stop here, however, is to miss the full measure of his teaching on the subject. In fact, while *Pain* is perhaps a masterpiece of Christian thoughtfulness, it simply does not do well alone. It desperately needs the emotive, subjective dimension to the problem Lewis provides in *A Grief Observed* (hereafter *Grief*).² In this second work on pain Lewis narrates his own "second thoughts" and allows the reader to enter into this new context of his own observed pain. The point is this: If one is to understand suffering, he/she must understand that suffering cannot simply be dispatched to a world of reasoned stoicism. Pain pressures us all to assume the tough questions of life in very threatening ways. Thus our thesis is that *Grief* modifies *Pain* in many ways, but chiefly in the questions one asks. The questions of *Pain* are "legal" questions, so that suffering is best subdued by a system of cogent (and perhaps accurate) propositions of theology and philosophy with their logical conclusions. Yet when Lewis actually lives within the context of suffering and experiences pain first-hand, as *Grief* describes, he calls into question the legitimacy of and then finally extends those very beliefs developed in *Pain*. Two different contexts, two different treatments of the problem are brought into a profound dialectic that provides the reader with a more comprehensive picture of what is really at stake in human suffering.

The Biblical view of suffering is not so different from this. (Of course Biblical faith does not take up the problem of pain in a formal way, but the problem of suffering. Pain is the more philosophic category, which ought to tell us something about the nature and purpose of Lewis' *Pain*.) From many differing vantage points the Biblical writers and their communities sought to interpret their suffering in light of who they were and what they were to do as God's people. Look, for instance, at the exodus story. It unfolds from within the crucible of suffering in its many forms. Under the mastery of the Pharaoh the people endured physical affliction and psychological abuse. They were nobodies who yearned to be liberated. But they had no control over their suffering because there was no escape from their position of slavery. They could not fend for themselves as suffering slaves. They could do but one thing: cry out to another God—not Pharaoh, not to a human God who was here, but to a nonhuman God who was there (Yahweh). Their cry toward heaven was not a reasoned one. It was simply an acknowledgment that they had no earthly control over their situation of suffering. It also acknowledged that any God who might deliver them from their affliction could not be part of the earthly-human system that caused it.

¹C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

²C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam, 1976).

In the midst of this despair, God delivered his people from their suffering. It seems then that the starting point of this theology of suffering is God and his control. We can do nothing about our predicament ourselves. We can only cry and grumble about it. It is rather God's commitment to us as his people that best explains our liberation from our suffering. There really is very little logic to the wilderness, exodus or conquest stories. The plan of deliverance is God's, the problem of pain is God's to deal with and not man's to manage. This is not an easy way to deal with our suffering. It is easier to come to God as Moses did in the burning bush when God told him that he had heard the cry of the people's affliction and he was about to deliver them: Moses' response was terror and even a certain unwillingness to pursue God's plan for dealing with the problem of Israel's pain. Perhaps a part of Moses' fear (and our own) was due to his total lack of control. There was real risk in following someone else's plan and power. It was all so mysterious, and we as humans want so badly to control and manage our lives. I feel the same way when I board an airplane. I sit in my seat without being able to see the controls and without being able to control those controls I cannot see, and I am scared to death.

Such is one trajectory found in Scripture:³ God finds us in our suffering; human reason and wisdom are replaced by a risky trust in his plan, his power, his control of the situation.

There is at least one other trajectory in Scripture that finds its center in the wisdom literature of both the OT and NT.⁴ It admits to a certain danger in leaving things totally to God. Not that God is found insufficient in times of human neediness. The problem is that humans are too easily immobilized by grief. It is too easy for us to use one's pain and suffering as the justification for irresponsible action. Suffering becomes an excuse for inactivity.

Grief, on the other hand, is authorized more by a Mosaic theology: Lewis is terrified and troubled, much as Moses was before the burning bush theophany. Lewis' life is in total disarray. For him, his grieving pain is not only inhumane, but God's presence is not so obvious. Yet it is in the midst of his anger, his dark depression, in a location of such grief that he could not use even the wisdom of his book, *Pain*, that God finds him and liberates him to a faith regained. The promise of *Grief* corresponds to the Mosaic thesis: Even if you cannot fend for yourselves, God will find you and will fend for you himself. More than anything else, *Grief* is improperly billed: It is not the account of Lewis' rediscovering his lost faith but of God's continuing faith in Lewis.

At this point it would do us well to discuss the two books in question. It is important to keep in mind the previous introduction as the hermeneutic for all that follows, which will be more descriptive than critical. First, then, to *Pain*. Lewis seeks to make the problem of pain more manageable by articulating it

³Cf. W. Brueggemann, "Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel," *JBL* 98 (1979) 161-185, esp. 161-168.

⁴Very little has been done to analyze NT wisdom (e.g. James). This is an unfortunate gap in NT studies. Recently a substantial amount of important work has been done to interpret OT wisdom (the "Solomonic trajectory"). W. Brueggemann's semi-popular treatment, *In Man We Trust: The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith* (Richmond: John Knox, 1972), is an important work in delineating this trajectory. Also the article by J. Crenshaw, "Wisdom in the Old Testament," *IDBSup* 952-956, is necessary reading.

within the context of a nineteenth-century idealism.⁵ It is a sort of skepticism that says that if God were really good he would certainly wish to make the world a good place in which to live—that is, a place that knew no pain. If God were almighty he would be able to do as he wished. Yet the world abounds with pain. Thus either God is evil and omnipotent or he is good and impotent. Either option leaves us without justification to confess him as God. Thus, since the reality of pain contradicts the notion of God, it is the notion of God that must go.

Of course there are obvious problems with such skepticism. It is important, however, for us to remember Lewis' background at this point, for it was precisely this claim against God that controlled him during his years in atheism. In a symbolic sense, then, to defeat the idealist is to win the fray—but the fray is fierce. As Capon has said, "Theodicy is for people with strong stomachs."⁶

Following the dogmatic categories that seem to organize all discussions of pain, Lewis begins with the problem of God's goodness and power caused by the reality of pain in his creation.⁷ Typically, God's power is cast in terms of his freedom. His power lies in his freedom from constraint. But is there any kind of freedom that is absolutely autonomous? Even God's freedom? Lewis responds: "No." God is limited by what is possible and right for God to do. God is not free, for instance, to do non-sense. Neither is God free to allow or enact that which fails to produce at least potential good. God, then, is not free from himself. Nor, Lewis suggests, is he free from his relationship to his creatures. Therefore God is not free to renege on his plan for creation. Indeed he has granted freedom to his creatures as part of that plan. It is a creaturely freedom that allows for choices that result in either pain or pleasure, good or evil. For God to prevent a person from bringing pain to himself militates against his own free choice of giving to his creatures the freedom of determining their own destiny. A God who feels he must change his mind is not a God of power but of weakness.

More critically for Lewis' argument, however, is the goodness of God. This part of his confession of God demands that God's power be qualified by his goodness. God uses his freedom only to produce a potentially good end. His is "good freedom." Thus, regarding pain, it is not the potentially negative consequences of pain that qualifies God's power, but it is the goodness of God's power that qualifies how we look at human pain. To wish for a life without pain is to wish for something less than God's goodness. The root problem, then, lies with a faulty human perception both of pain's redeeming value and of God's love. For Lewis, pain is transformed only when it is perceived as a radical form of God's love. Indeed it is but God's way of disciplining us to better love him—to have more of what Lewis calls "loveability." More than this, however, pain brings humankind (through humility, through feelings of dependency on something greater than the human condition) to the place where they are more easily loved by God. Thus Lewis' "theology of creation" begins with that goal: God created people so that

⁵Lewis, *Pain* 26; cf. C. S. Kilby, *The Christian World of C. S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 15-20, perhaps resembling an incipient "logical positivism."

⁶R. F. Capon, *The Third Peacock* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972) 18.

⁷What follows is a summary of Lewis, *Pain*.

he might love them and not vice versa. God's task is not only to accept us but to make us acceptable to him. To experience pain forces humanity into a more lovable shape—less egoistic, less rebellious, more willing to be loved by someone outside of themselves.

But that is not the natural instinct of man, Lewis suggests. A person acting naturally will insist that God conform to his/her image rather than he/she to God's. Lewis' interpretation of this formula is patently traditional. A person is inclined toward wickedness because he/she is fallen. Thus the problem of pain—if pain indeed results from evil—is a problem of humankind. A person suffers because he/she sins. Suffering began at the fall. Pain corrects what one naturally is bent to do and to be. Any resolution to the problem of pain, then, demands "a recovery of the old sense of sin" (*Pain* 57).

But sin is still too slippery. Sin too often feels good. After all, as a recent popular song asks, "Can anything be so wrong when it feels so right?" That is why the corrective must feel so bad. Pain awakens a person to his/her wickedness. Pain tells a person that he/she has abused his/her freedom to make the wrong choice.

It is important to note that Lewis' discussion of pain is sandwiched between chapters on wickedness and the fall on the one hand and heaven and hell on the other. To confront the lessons of pain is to come to a fork in the road carved by human frailty. To choose to walk down the path well worn by unrepented rebellion consigns a person to final ruin. To choose the less-worn path of repentance and responsible goodness takes a person into the glory of realized perfection. We cannot even begin to deal with the fundamental images of heaven and hell in Lewis' work, but I do want to make some connections between pain, heaven and hell. It seems clear from *Pain*, as it does from traditional wisdom, that a person chooses his own destiny. It also seems clear that pain facilitates that choice for Lewis. To reject pain's remedial influence is to ultimately choose hell. There one experiences the absence of God and therefore of goodness and power. It is not man who is finally cast into hell, but only his remains.⁸ Humanness, which pain has signaled and clarified, is totally lost in hell. Ironically even pain, which is after all human, does not exist there. On the other hand, heaven is the location where humans can experience the absence of pain and all that pain is responsible for in the world. Thus it is within the sweep of these ultimate ends that Lewis finally resolves the problem. Yes, pain is ugly—but it is necessary if one is to understand beauty and joy. Yes, pain is the result of human wickedness—but it can ultimately lead one to godliness. Yes, pain is a problem—but it finally resolves its very cause. Yes, we are bound to suffer in this world—but suffering calls us to be responsible in using our freedom wisely.

Robert Farrar Capon writes the following immediately after discussing the reality of evil in the world:

If we were God we would be more serious and respectable: no freedom, no risks; just a smooth, obedient show presided over by an omnipotent bank president with a big gold watch . . . (but) try writing a fairy tale on the safe-and-sane view of the universe.⁹

⁸Kilby, *Christian* 69.

⁹Capon, *Third* 25-26.

For C. S. Lewis, the essential premise of *Pain* is that the story of God could not be written without the existence of pain and suffering in the world. It just would not make sense at all.

Grief is Lewis' second and less pretentious book on suffering. It is also the more important. In it the orderly world made of theology and reason that he constructed in *Pain* is threatened by the loss of his wife Joy. It is a grinding grief of the kind that immobilizes one in an apparent hopeless and isolated reality. There really is no future in such grieving. There is no thought given to benefits or to God's purpose for it all. Everything is in disarray, and all is consumed by a self-centered pathos. Life is really not life at all, because life itself was so wrapped up in what is lost. One cannot act too wisely, if at all, during crises of grief. He is in bondage to his grief with little hope for escape. The bridge to recovery has to be built by someone or something else. Having noted already that *Grief* relies on a more Mosaic theology, it is important for us to recognize that in the Biblical drama the Mosaic tradition is appealed to—especially by the prophets of God—during national crises, in the midst of the prophets' own grieving for Israel.¹⁰ It is in fear, it is in alienation and aloneness, it is in the midst of such despair as Lewis experienced with Joy's death that it must ultimately be a transcendent Lord who comes to the rescue of the bereaved. This God offered Lewis life.

Like most devotional books (if this is truly that) the essential structure of *Grief* is that of a pilgrimage toward faith recovered. In this case the journey takes Lewis out of his grief and the doubt it caused to a renewed awareness of who God is. During the course of his journey Lewis asks himself and his God questions that *Pain* never touches. He found that one could not think about God's goodness or his power in the midst of loss. It did not make sense at all. One could barely think about God, and more often than not the thoughts were of doubt and skepticism rather than of love and grace. Lewis could not make the equation between evil and the pain of suffering because his relationship with Joy brought him happiness and contentment. New thoughts about heaven arose—not about what it was or where it was, as in *Pain*, but rather whether it was at all. The questions asked in the midst of suffering were not disinterested but urgent. They were life-and-death questions, where Lewis felt the whole force of the real risks involved in taking up an agenda of faith that is Biblical. Answers are not easy; neither God nor reason seem to work at such times.

Lewis asks questions in the opening paragraphs of *Grief* that get his pilgrimage on its way.¹¹ The most striking thing is that these are the very questions good

¹⁰There have been several works recently that have tested this thesis. Not only the writing of the prophetic material but the final shaping of the canonical material as well took place during the crises of the exilic and post-exilic periods. See for instance W. E. Lemke, "The Way of Obedience: I Kings 13 and the Structure of the Deuteronomistic History," in *Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God. Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Memory of G. Ernest Wright* (ed. F. M. Cross, W. E. Lemke and P. D. Miller; Garden City: Doubleday, 1976) 301-326. But see also J. A. Sanders, "Adaptable for Life," in *ibid.*, pp. 11-16, who argues that the exile-crisis forced the prophets of God (versus the "false" prophets who were appealing to the same story) to interpret the destruction of old Israel as the necessary event for a whole new "exodus," a new Israel. Naturally they would authorize such an interpretation by the Mosaic tradition and its story of the "old exodus" and would shape the entire canon accordingly.

¹¹Lewis, *Grief* 1-11.

Christians are never supposed to ask. When asked they are interpreted to mean that something is fundamentally wrong with that person's faith: "Why am I so afraid? Why do I feel guilty? Why am I so lazy? Where is God in all of this? Why is he so silent? Why do I feel resentful and angry at God? Why can't I understand? Why do I want to be left alone?" These are questions that grief evokes but, more importantly, these are questions that found Biblical faith. This is the stuff on which everything else, including *Pain*, is built. Therefore while I am developing the books in chronological order they probably should be read in reverse order. Start with *Grief*, and then read *Pain*, for *Grief* is the adjective of the more substantive *Pain*. It is not merely the *problem of pain* but the *problem of observed pain* (the worst of pains being grief)¹² that is on trial.

Assuming the pilgrimage motif, four broad stages to the journey are noted in *Grief*, the first stage being the questions of doubt already mentioned. The journey is not a smooth one, however. It is very much like driving in city traffic: stop-go, stop-go, detour. Short-cuts are few and far between. The God of *Grief* is not the organized God of *Pain*. Rather, God stands above the chaos of Lewis' life. He is there, but he is strangely silent. Indeed in the first two stages of the pilgrimage God is mentioned only in a skeptical way. He is either doubted or his goodness is debated by Lewis. Lewis admits that it is hard not to say, "God forgive God."¹³ In the second stage, when answers are finally solicited, all opinion and advice are turned back. The first part of the journey is isolated from the common props of faith:¹⁴

1. Lewis' faith seems to be irrelevant: "You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you. Apparently the faith that enables me to pray for the other dead has seemed strong only because I have never really cared, not desperately, whether they existed or not. Yet I thought I did."

2. The faith of Lewis' comforting friends: "Don't come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don't understand."

3. The comfort of Scripture's words: Regarding Paul's admonition not to mourn like those who have no hope, Lewis said, "It astonishes me the way we are invited to apply to ourselves words so obviously addressed to our betters."

There is a rejection of traditional forms of comfort, then. Only questions of doubt that mirror the unreasonableness of Lewis' grief and loss make any sense at all. For Lewis, two feelings are impressed on him as he comes to the end of the first two stages of his suffering: First, there is the feeling of suspense, waiting for something to happen, wanting desperately for time to move him to a more hopeful place, but finding only motionless emptiness; second, Lewis admits to the failure of theology to deal with his reality. Theology writes for others from disinterest, he says. It makes a difference when "the thing happens to oneself, not to others, and in reality, not in imagination."¹⁵

¹²Ibid., pp. 46-47.

¹³Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 25-29.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 42.

The third stage begins, then, without any answers and only with the strange ambiguity of silence from all fronts. As doubt continues to gnaw at Lewis' now-fragile faith, he falls back on all that is left: his memory of the past. Admitting to the danger of escaping to a nostalgic picture of the way it was, Lewis begins to piece together parts of his past to make sense of his present. He finds things gained by what has been lost. He locates lessons; he finds needs—especially of relationships with friends. He finds a better grip on reality that enables him to resume the "dance of life."¹⁶ It is not being left behind in our sorrow, but in our sorrow finding new ways to make life better. But the gains become illusory. "An admirable program," says Lewis. "Unfortunately, it can't be carried out. . . . In grief, nothing 'stays put.' One keeps on emerging from a phase, but it always recurs. Round and round. Everything repeats."¹⁷ Not quite true. This third stage of suffering's pilgrimage did produce some answers, even though the reality of pain finally did interrupt and throw everything into disarray again. Lewis remarked:

Grief is like a long valley, a winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape. (But) not every bend does. Sometimes the surprise is the opposite one; you are presented with exactly the same sort of country you thought you had left behind miles ago. That is when you wonder whether the valley isn't a circular trench.¹⁸

The fourth and final stage unfolds at the Lord's table. It is there that God finds Lewis in the midst of all the dead ends that have brought him to this point. It is the thin, cold, tasteless wafer that does it. Lewis is provoked to think of the tension and ambiguity between earthly reality and transcendent trust. To this point Lewis has not been able to decipher the reality of suffering, of loss, of painful memory, and find the heavenly. The two seem to be at odds. Likewise the wafer does not in any way resemble that which it represents. The real reality is not the symbol but that which the symbol represents to us—the body of Christ. Unfortunately, "images of the Holy easily become holy images—sacrosanct."¹⁹ Our ideas of God are not divine ideas. They must be shattered, and it most often takes God to shatter them. "He is," Lewis says, "the great iconoclast."²⁰ This sense of God's strange presence was liberating for Lewis.

The real problem of observed pain is that in our bereavement we want God domesticated. We want to make sense of our difficult reality by making our kind of simplified sense of him. What is needed is not a partner in grief but one who stands outside of it all, so that in his freedom from all that immobilizes he is able to free us. Often it is in appealing to a notion of God, as Lewis tried unsuccessfully to do, that we fail to hear the "real" him speak words of comfort to us. Thus it is not the perceived silence of God that is ultimately the problem, but it is the

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 59-67.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 66-67.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 69.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 76.

²⁰Ibid.

noise of our own wailing and railing at him that needs to be silenced, because in pain the silence of man would better do.

In any case, this is the climax of the book. When Lewis liberates God to be free, Lewis himself is liberated to embrace God on his terms for human life. It is God's presence with us that makes the difference for Lewis, and it is the risky trust that accepts this even at the most unacceptable times that finally ushers God back into Lewis' life. It is not so much knowing how the goodness of God interfaces with the reality of suffering that counts. Rather, it is simply knowing that the goodness of God is somehow present in all of this mess, and that he is with us in power.

In his preface to *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, Lewis wrote about how strange the world seemed to him following Williams' death. He was accustomed to Williams' company on his walks through London or to his conversation at dinner. Somehow everything that he did with Williams when he was alive was now transformed in his death. The world without Williams just did not seem right. But Lewis goes on to say that this estrangement was not at all like a haunting. Rather it was far more bracing, more vital, for it energized him to think not about death but of life beyond death. Thus he concludes, "When the idea of death and the idea of Williams met in my mind, it was the idea of death that was changed."²¹

The great power of the prophets was not in their ability to predict Israel's future or the future of God's salvation. Rather, it was in their desire to grieve for her.²² This was their most visceral pronouncement that things were not right with Israel and that change (repentance) was necessary. The prophets grieved because Israel suffered in the world, but the prophets grieved all the more because while God's redemptive activity was worked through his people and while this was the very remedy to suffering in all its shapes, Israel was unwilling to do anything about it. Human pain, indeed, confronts our comfort with a prophetic word from God. It proclaims that things are not right with our worlds. Our pain also reminds us all that as God's people we must be about the task of participating with him in righting all that causes pain in the world.

²¹*Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (ed. C. S. Lewis; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966) xiii-xiv.

²²See in particular W. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 44-61; J. Sanders, *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress) 66-73.