

Is God as Good as We Think?

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Abstract

C. S. Lewis discussed the presence of pain, evil and suffering in his book *The Problem of Pain*. In the face of evil, he affirmed his view that God is 'good,' that is, people are able to recognize God using their natural understanding of what constitutes goodness. However, in July 1960 Joy Davidman, the wife of C. S. Lewis, died of bone cancer. Lewis kept a journal immediately following Joy's death and those reflections were the basis of his book *A Grief Observed*. In that small book, Lewis expressed anger towards God and questioned whether God is as good as he thinks. Today the question is still asked by many people: "Is God as good as we think?"

Introduction

Clive Staples Lewis (1898–1963) found it difficult to maintain confidence in the goodness of God immediately after his wife's death due to bone cancer. This paper examines the available evidence to assess the permanence of those doubts. During his period of grief, Lewis revisited his previous ideas about God's character. He expressed anger towards God and questioned whether God is 'a vet or a vivisector.'¹ But despite what happened, Lewis maintained his long term belief that God is good. His pain over his wife's suffering, and his own great loss of a companion, was expressed in writing. Lewis kept a journal during August 1961, supposedly filling four empty manuscripts with his thoughts and feelings arising from that experience. Those manuscripts formed the four chapters of his small book, *A Grief Observed*. The book was published using a pseudonym. Many reasons have been suggested by biographers and critics, but it appears Lewis did not reveal why he used a name other than his own. What is clear is that Lewis made the book available for the benefit of others but did not want it to be attributed directly to him. Not many copies were sold until the book was republished under Lewis' real name after his death.

This paper will examine the views of philosopher John Beversluis, an apostate from the Christian faith, who implies Lewis was enamored with Platonism. The influence of Plato on Lewis can be seen from the theme of this world being a shadow of another, more real world. Also, Lewis' ideas about the fixed category of goodness can be traced to Plato. Beversluis acknowledges that Lewis held a modified version

¹ C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), 35.

of Platonism and called it 'qualified Platonism'² but claims Lewis made a gradual retreat to 'Ockhamism.'³ Platonism expects God to conform to a true and ideal meaning of goodness whereas Beversluis defines Ockhamism as the 'view that things are good simply and solely because God says so.'⁴ The evidence offered for this shift is primarily Lewis' *A Grief Observed*. It is helpful to consider the type of literature the book is when reviewing that account of Lewis' grief. Beversluis treats it as a factual account of what Lewis truly believed at that moment. Others have suggested a degree of poetic license for effect. In other words, Lewis used his journal writings as a muse for writing the book. This theory introduces an element of intention and design that lessens its reliability as a historic record of Lewis' beliefs about God. Whatever Lewis' motivation and the changing nature of his theology, his writings nevertheless have much to offer in helping others through suffering.

The Problem of Evil, Pain and Suffering

Apologist Alister McGrath⁵ claims suffering became a common obstacle to Christian faith in the seventeenth century due to a new emphasis on reason and philosophy as tools for defending Christianity. He refers to the perfection of the god of Descartes and other philosophers, and the contrast between that perfection and the existence of evil and suffering. He reveals, 'It is only since the Enlightenment, with its emphasis upon universal concepts of divinity and justification of beliefs, that the problem of suffering has come to be seen as grounds for disbelief.'⁶ He states suffering is a barrier to belief if either of two key incorrect and unprovable premises about the relationship between God and evil are proposed: First, 'A good and omnipotent God could eliminate suffering entirely' and second, 'There could not be morally sufficient reasons for God permitting suffering.'

Professor Jerry Root describes Lewis as an objectivist and a rhetorician.⁷ Lewis understood subjectivity as a response to an object, but regarded 'subjectivism' where people believe anything they want about an object as a source of evil.⁸ Though both reason and imagination were vitally important to him⁹ Lewis acknowledged 'reason is utterly inadequate to the richness and spirituality of real things.'¹⁰

² John Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion: Revised and Updated* (Amherst: Prometheus, 2007), 313-314.

³ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁴ John Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, 284.

⁵ Alister McGrath, *Bridge-Building: Effective Christian Apologetics* (Leicester: IVP, 1992), 140.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁷ Jerry Root, *C. S. Lewis and a Problem of Evil: An Investigation of a Pervasive Theme* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2009), 7-8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁹ Peter J. Schakel, *Reason and Imagination in C. S. Lewis: A Study of Till We Have Faces* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 127.

¹⁰ Walter Hooper, ed., *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis Volume 2: Books, Broadcasts, and the War 1931-1949* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 670.

Lewis challenged subjectivism and sought to persuade people concerning what is real. Root makes four observations:

First, Lewis believed in the objectivity of truth—thought must conform to its object. ... Second, Lewis believed it is important to discover what an object is intended to do. ... Third, Lewis believed that an understanding of the truth of an object is more fully grasped when one possesses the skill to use the object for its intended purpose. ... Fourth, to say what a thing is does not imply that one has spoken the last word about that object.¹¹

The fourth observation indicates Lewis was always open to modifying his thinking in relation to reality. Root explains ‘Changes that do occur in Lewis ... occur because of his belief that truth is objective.’¹² He adds, ‘The objectivist ... is likely to make many changes in his thinking as he discovers more data.’¹³ Interestingly, Root goes further and proposes that Lewis ‘was himself the embodiment of his rhetoric concerning the problem of pain (and therefore it was a rhetoric in process).’¹⁴ So Lewis was committed to updating his thinking as he discovered more information about what is real. His beliefs about the nature of God reflected his deepening understanding of objective truth and reality. Nevertheless, despite what happened, Lewis believed God is good.

Lewis believed our common understanding of goodness enables us to recognize God: ‘Christ ... appeals to our existing moral judgement.’¹⁵ In other words, ‘God’s goodness must be defined in terms of ... *objective* moral standards discoverable by reason independently of faith and common to everyone.’¹⁶ This is important for otherwise humans would lack the necessary faculties to choose whether to follow Jesus Christ. However, this belief in God’s goodness was somewhat challenged when he suffered the loss of his wife Joy Davidman in July 1960. Lewis expressed his grief by writing in private journals during the following month¹⁷ and in 1961 published, under a pseudonym, his brief account titled *A Grief Observed*. Following his death in 1963, that small book was republished under his own name and sales increased significantly.

Philosopher John Beversluis argues that Lewis and his beliefs about God were significantly changed by the loss of his wife. Root supports this view to the extent that ‘the loss of his wife, touched him more deeply than anything he had yet experienced.’¹⁸ However it should be remembered that Lewis had previously experienced a great deal of loss and was affected by suffering throughout his life, yet he still came to believe God is good. Schakel lists those challenges as ‘the early death of his mother, his

¹¹ Ibid., 8-9.

¹² Ibid., 20.

¹³ Ibid., 84.

¹⁴ Jerry Root, *C. S. Lewis and a Problem of Evil*, 73.

¹⁵ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 28-30.

¹⁶ Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, 229.

¹⁷ Walter Hooper, ed., *C. S. Lewis Collected Letters Volume III: Narnia, Cambridge and Joy 1950-1963* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), 1182.

¹⁸ Root, *C. S. Lewis and a Problem of Evil*, 90.

front line service in World War I, the death of his father, the sudden death of his close friend Charles Williams, and the difficulties of caring for Mrs Moore [the mother of his friend Paddy who died in World War I] as she grew increasingly infirm and of dealing with his brother's binge alcoholism.'¹⁹

Platonism and Ockhamism

Beverluis focuses on a change he sees in Lewis' view of the goodness of God and declares 'the key is chronology.'²⁰ He must declare that, for unless readers accept the development of Lewis as chronological, he cannot make his case. That is, he cannot allow Lewis to experience confusion, to temporarily doubt his beliefs, to explore alternative views or to intentionally identify and empathize with those who grieve. Any sign that Lewis no longer has a rational basis for calling God 'good' is taken as indicating he is no longer a Platonist. His argument depends on *A Grief Observed* as its primary source and on Lewis as a linear being, continually evolving in a positive direction, which is unrealistic for any human. He allows Lewis to revert to previous beliefs, stating: 'he never extricated himself from qualified Platonism'²¹ but implies that his previous writings are superseded. Interestingly it was Joy who said 'we needn't be too afraid of questionings and expostulations ... Certainly He cannot like mere flattery—resentment masquerading as submission thru' fear.'²²

Root agrees that Lewis 'is at times sympathetic to Plato, but he sees the areas that distinguish Christianity from Platonism, and he rejects Plato soundly at such places.'²³ He illustrates by quoting a letter from January 1940 in which Lewis rejects the Gnostic tendencies of Plato.²⁴ Aware of the dangers of incorporeality, Lewis also writes in October that year that 'real embodiment is the view of the Christian Platonists of the Renaissance'²⁵ which unfortunately also has a 'dark side' as a conduit for occultism.²⁶ In a letter written in 1950, Lewis mentions 'Cambridge Platonists (and Florentine Platonists)' and in *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm* he distinguishes Christianity from 'Neo-Platonism.'²⁷ It seems that Lewis was fully aware of Platonism, distinguished its different forms and critiqued them. Since many versions of Platonism exist, and many qualifications have been added to Platonism, perhaps the description 'Platonist' is unhelpful. The category may have lost its meaning.

¹⁹ Peter J. Schakel, *Is Your Lord Large Enough: How C. S. Lewis Expands Our View of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), 94.

²⁰ Beverluis, "Beyond the Bolted Door," *Christianity Today* <http://www.ctlibrary.com/ch/1985/issue7/728.html>

²¹ Beverluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, 296.

²² Hooper, *C. S. Lewis Collected Letters Volume III*, 1161.

²³ Root, *C. S. Lewis and a Problem of Evil*, 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 5; Hooper, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis Volume 2*, 326.

²⁵ Hooper, *C. S. Lewis Collected Letters Volume III*, 450.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 475.

²⁷ C. S. Lewis, *Selected Books: The Pilgrim's Regress, Prayer: Letters to Malcolm, Reflections on the Psalms, Till We Have Faces, The Abolition of Man* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), 265.

In his revised and updated edition of *C.S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, Beversluis claims Lewis partially shifted from a qualified Platonist to an Ockhamist²⁸ in *The Problem of Pain*, his 1940 response to the Problem of Evil.²⁹ He explains the difference: 'Unlike the Platonist Christian, the Ockhamist thinks that morality *is* based on divine commands and prohibitions. According to this metaethical theory, known as theological voluntarism or the Divine Command Theory of Ethics, God's will is free and he can command or forbid anything he pleases.'³⁰ As Beversluis observes, 'Lewis' fully developed view is more elusive ... in later writings he significantly qualifies the foregoing position twice and ends up with a very different one.'³¹ Root supports the idea that Lewis's thinking was 'still in formation' at the time he wrote *The Problem of Pain*.³²

Beversluis claims to identify an even more developed Ockhamist view of God in Lewis' *A Grief Observed*, published in 1961, twenty-one years after *The Problem of Pain*. He suggests that in his grief, Lewis was unable to retain his long term belief in the goodness of God and thus moved, at least temporarily, to a state of resignation where God will do what God will do. Thus he states, 'The Author of *A Grief Observed* is not a thoroughgoing Ockhamist, but a disenchanted Platonist worried about contrary evidence and its bearing on his belief in God's goodness.'³³ However, despite his worrying, Lewis maintained his belief that God is good.

Martha Sammons in *A Guide Through Narnia* claims 'Lewis's view of reality, involving man's separation from his heavenly potential, can be described as Platonic.'³⁴ Schakel agrees, seeing the mention of Father Time in *The Silver Chair* as referring 'to Plato's belief that the present (our world and the things in it) is like a dream of a shadow; we live in a dream world or in the Shadowlands, not in the realm of timeless, changeless reality.'³⁵

Although Lewis drew on the ideas of Plato concerning reality, it does not follow that he can accurately be described as a Platonist in his view of God. He could perhaps be described as disenchanted in some way with Platonism but the claim that he was previously enchanted by Plato or Platonism is unproved. A letter from Lewis to Beversluis dated 3 July 1963, states 'the Divine will is the obedient servant of the Divine Reason.'³⁶ By this he means that God chooses to do that which is good, not to conform to some external standard, but to conform to the standard God established. This appears

²⁸ Beversluis, C. S. *Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, 263.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 227.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 230.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 233.

³² Root, C. S. *Lewis and a Problem of Evil*, 63.

³³ Beversluis, C. S. *Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, 313.

³⁴ Martha C. Sammons, *A Guide Through Narnia: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Vancouver: Regent College, 2004), 174.

³⁵ Peter J. Schakel, *Is Your Lord Large Enough*, 28.

³⁶ Beversluis, C. S. *Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, 296.

to be a Platonist view. In the same letter he admitted there may be 'an invisible goodness hidden'³⁷ in something that appears to be bad. This resembles an Ockhamist view. It seems that Lewis does not fit into either camp, Platonist or Ockhamist. Therefore the terms may be no more useful than describing Lewis as a qualified protestant who shifted towards Roman Catholicism each month when he attended confession, or when he prayed for his deceased wife. The categories do not offer useful information about Lewis.

The Effect of Grief

Beverluis uses *A Grief Observed* as his primary source for evidence of changes in Lewis and therefore must show the book is fact, more than fiction. It is likely the content and structure of the book were shaped by Lewis' hidden intentions. Referring to Lewis the rhetorician, Root states, 'When he wrote about the problem of evil, autobiographically or apologetically, he had intentions for his audience.'³⁸ He also states that Lewis was 'not always exactly right in telling his own story.'³⁹ Lewis sometimes used himself and his experiences as a tool in his writing to achieve his intentions as a rhetorician. In other words, Lewis was in the habit of shaping the material he presented in books and other media so as to achieve his rhetorical objectives.

Michael Ward, in his 2003 discovery of a hidden, underlying pattern in the Narnia Chronicles, asserts that Lewis was not naturally one for randomness.⁴⁰ It would therefore be extraordinary to suggest that Lewis published his journal entries without recognizing the theological, pastoral and spiritual issues they could raise. However, the book was initially published anonymously using the pseudonym 'N. W. Clerk', as his initial suggestion of 'Dimidius' was, in the opinion of T. S. Eliot, a little too easy to guess.⁴¹ Biographer George Sayer suggests Lewis used a pseudonym because 'The book is so intimate and personal ... He would have found unbearable the correspondence that would have followed publication under his own name. It was published only because he thought it might perhaps help others who had suffered bereavement'.⁴² Schakel in *Reason and Imagination in C S Lewis* claims the book is 'a fictional diary,' hence the use of a pseudonym as a deliberate 'separation of the diarist from himself.'⁴³ To support this he identifies in *A Grief Observed* definite sections or stages; similarities to Lewis' Dymmer, and of course the work of Dante;⁴⁴ plus suggests the use of 'verisimilitude.'⁴⁵ It is also worth noting that Lewis

³⁷ Ibid., 296.

³⁸ Root, *C. S. Lewis and a Problem of Evil*, 47.

³⁹ Ibid., 62.

⁴⁰ Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 11.

⁴¹ Hooper, *C. S. Lewis Collected Letters Volume III*, 1201.

⁴² George Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994), 394.

⁴³ Schakel, *Reason and Imagination in C. S. Lewis*, 168.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 170-172.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 175.

had used *non de plumes* on three other occasions and commented in a letter that in *A Grief Observed*, 'There are small stylistic disguisements all the way along.'⁴⁶ His permission for the book to be published under his real name immediately after his death undermines any suggestion that he was seeking to hide troublesome views of God.

Beverluis reports a claim by Walter Hooper that 'Lewis never said that *A Grief Observed* is autobiographical, and he told me that it was not.'⁴⁷ He reluctantly acknowledges the possibility that 'Hooper is right'⁴⁸ and therefore Lewis may have carefully chosen which particular journal entries to include in *A Grief Observed*. That is, he did not simply publish his journal but selected excerpts from his reflections and this introduces an intention that changes the book from raw fact to a piece of creative writing. Thus the use of the book as proof of substantial and lasting changes in Lewis' core beliefs about the nature of God is undermined. This is somewhat supported by Lewis' letter to Sister Madeleva on 3 October 1963 in which he wrote: 'I will direct Fabers to send you a copy of the little book, but it may shock your pupils. It is '*A Grief Observed*' from day to day in all its rawness and sinful reactions and follies. It ends with faith but raises all the blackest doubts *en route*.'⁴⁹ This journey imagery indicates that despite what he experienced, Lewis retained his belief that God is good.

There is no pattern of Lewis being undone or particularly unsettled by significant grief events. For example, back in 1945 after the death of his good friend Charles Williams, Lewis wrote 'his death has made my faith ten times stronger than it was a week ago.'⁵⁰ Then, after the death in 1951 of Mrs Moore, whom he described as 'the old lady I called my mother,' he indicated he was unaware of much grief.⁵¹

In letters he wrote around the time of Joy's death on 13 July 1960, Lewis does not appear to be lost or disillusioned. In December 1959 he wrote to a new widower, 'what you are facing must be worse than what I must shortly face myself,'⁵² which indicates Lewis was very aware that Joy's life was coming to an end. He was clearly not oblivious to the reality of loss and grief, and in that letter discussed (for the benefit of Sir Henry Willink): consolation, comfort, crumbling beliefs and physical exhaustion. This was written seven months before Joy's death and demonstrates his awareness that 'crumbling beliefs' was a possible effect of grief.

Lewis' March 1960 letter to his friend Arthur Greeves shows he was under no illusions about Joy recovering: 'The doctors hold out no hope of a cure; it is only a question of how soon the end comes and how painful it will be.'⁵³ In the May following, Lewis explains that the return of Joy's cancer was 'irrelevant

⁴⁶ Hooper, C. S. *Lewis Collected Letters Volume III*, 1320.

⁴⁷ Beverluis, C. S. *Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, 305.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁴⁹ Hooper, C. S. *Lewis Collected Letters Volume III*, 1460.

⁵⁰ Hooper, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis Volume 2*, 652.

⁵¹ Hooper, C. S. *Lewis Collected Letters Volume III*, 105.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 1102.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1139.

to the question whether the previous recovery was miraculous.⁵⁴ This shows that he was already reflecting on the circumstances and was not overly disillusioned by the period of remission ending.

The day after Joy's death, Lewis was still writing letters and indicated to Reverend Peter Bide that natural death was 'less dreadful' than he expected, though he was experiencing 'a kind of bewilderment, almost a psychological paralysis.'⁵⁵ The emotional noise resulting from the grief event that just happened was probably overwhelming. In the days immediately following he described grief as 'like being slightly drunk ... like fear'⁵⁶ and 'like fidgety boredom.'⁵⁷ Again writing to Bide, he says more about his experience of grief: "Yes—at first one is sort of concussed and 'life has no taste and no direction'. One soon discovers, however, that grief is not a state but a process—like a walk in a winding valley with a new prospect at every bend."⁵⁸ Lewis was clearly experiencing grief, yet there is no clear evidence that he was overwhelmed by depression or unable to comprehend his thoughts and feelings. He was merely in a process.

Lewis does not seem to have been struggling at that time to the extent Beversluis suggests. Nevertheless, Lewis wrote in September that in sorrow 'The moments at which you call most desperately and clamorously to God for help are precisely those when you seem to get none.'⁵⁹ This is not an uncommon experience. However, this sense of isolation is later balanced by his suggestion in *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm* that "The 'hiddenness' of God perhaps presses most painfully on those who are in another way nearest to Him."⁶⁰ That is, silence from God can bring some comfort, and we need not despair upon encountering 'A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside'.⁶¹

Theology, Pastoral Care and Spirituality

The following discussion will address three issues. First, suffering challenged Lewis' idea of the nature of God. His theological question concerning God's goodness is critical to this discussion. Second, Lewis demonstrated pastoral care towards people experiencing suffering. He was motivated to help others in their suffering and offered consolation in a variety of ways. The third issue is the effect of suffering on Lewis' spirituality. Many writers have speculated on how pain changed Lewis. Each section (theology, pastoral care and spirituality) will examine some comments from critics of Lewis, and then add my own insights on that topic.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 1146.

⁵⁵ Hooper, C. S. *Lewis Collected Letters Volume III*, 1169.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 1174.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 1175.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 1185.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 1188.

⁶⁰ Lewis, *Selected Books, Prayer: Letters to Malcolm*, 252.

⁶¹ C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 7.

Lewis's ideas about suffering and theology

McGrath outlines four key points Lewis makes in response to the suggestion that pain and suffering are evidence that God is not good. First, omnipotent 'does not mean that God can do anything he likes.'⁶² For example, God cannot perform any self-contradictory tasks. Second, God cannot block the outcome of 'endowing his creatures with freedom.'⁶³ By giving freedom to people, God risked them behaving badly. Third, we should not confuse 'love' with 'trivial and sentimental human parodies of the divine reality.'⁶⁴ God is purposeful but is not primarily concerned with preventing people from being hurt. Fourth, suffering 'reminds us of our frailty and hints of our coming death,' thus 'our thoughts are gently directed towards God.'⁶⁵ Sometimes pain awakens us to our mortality and causes us to reconsider our place in the universe.

Lewis painted a picture of a reliable God and a reliable world. God did not set up a world that is unpredictable but one that is ordered and stable, with 'Natural Law.'⁶⁶ This order makes it possible for people to settle in a location, plan for food production and grow communities. An alternative world that changed with a whim, or in response to every prayer from every person, would be uninhabitable.⁶⁷ It is the stability and predictability of the world that enables creation to flourish.

Louis Markos asserts the importance of predictability and stability in a world containing free will. He explains that if people could choose to continually change or reshape that world, then they would risk robbing other people of their free will. He therefore proposes that a neutral playing field of a fixed nature is essential: '...if God were to intervene every time someone was in danger, then nature would quickly lose its "fixedness," and the whole free will proposition would come crashing down.'⁶⁸ However, Beversluis counters that although the world must be somewhat fixed, it need not be fixed in the way that it is. God could have created the world any way he liked as long as 'he did not set himself any self-contradictory tasks.'⁶⁹

Lewis taught that God intervenes in natural processes in response to prayer. Schakel explains, 'God takes what will be asked...and the fact that it will be requested, into account from the foundation of the world.'⁷⁰ Thus 'Prayers don't act directly on nature, Lewis says; they are not magic spells.'⁷¹ Rather,

⁶² McGrath, *Bridge-Building*, 142.

⁶³ McGrath, *Bridge-Building*, 142.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 141-148.

⁶⁶ C. S. Lewis, ed. by Walter Hooper, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 318.

⁶⁷ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 23-26.

⁶⁸ Louis Markos, *Lewis Agonistes: How C. S. Lewis Can Train us to Wrestle with the Modern and Postmodern World* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2003), 98.

⁶⁹ Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, 243.

⁷⁰ Schakel, *Is Your Lord Large Enough*, 47.

he regarded prayers as contributing to what God makes happen, but it is God who intervenes in nature, rather than a prayer acting directly on nature. Again, 'All theology would reject the idea of a transaction in which a creature was the agent and God the patient.'⁷² Lewis in *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm* pointed out that in the Garden of Gethsemene, Jesus 'did not get what He asked for.'⁷³ We pray to God and God listens and takes our prayers into account and intervenes in nature, instead of our prayers directing God how to intervene. 'Prayer is request.'⁷⁴ Though this thinking may seem more rational than mystical, Lewis also very confidently proclaimed 'that Christianity essentially involves the supernatural.'⁷⁵

Third, Lewis taught that God's long term purposes are continually worked out in the lives of believers. That is, through good times and bad times God will continue his work of forming within his people the life of Christ, as illustrated by the term "little Christs."⁷⁶ We will gradually become like Jesus. That process can be difficult at times, yet God will persist in growing Christ's character within his people: '...pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine...The process will be long and in parts very painful, but that is what we are in for.'⁷⁷ Though we may not know the ways in which God is answering our prayers, we can trust that God is not idle and that what God does is good.

Fourth, Lewis had a curious idea of vicarious suffering, in which we can share in the sufferings of others. In its mild form he writes 'when we willingly accept what we suffer for others and offer it to God on their behalf, then it may be united with His sufferings and, in Him, may help to their redemption.'⁷⁸ However he was careful not to accept suffering as redemptive in itself.⁷⁹ In his theory, suffering adds to redemption in Christ rather than contributing outside of Christ. In other words, we 'offer it in Christ to God as our little, little share in Christ's sufferings.'⁸⁰ In its stronger form, 'sufferings which (heaven knows) fell on us without and against our will can be so taken that they are as saving and purifying as the voluntary sufferings of martyrs & ascetics.'⁸¹

Fifth, Lewis believed it is important to distinguish 'absolute will from relative will' since 'God never absolutely wills the least suffering for any creature, but may will it *rather than* some alternative.'⁸² He writes, 'I believe that all pain is contrary to God's will, absolutely but not relatively.'⁸³ In other words,

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Lewis, *Selected Books, Prayer: Letters to Malcolm*, 255.

⁷³ Ibid., 247.

⁷⁴ Hooper, C. S. *Lewis Collected Letters Volume III*, 81.

⁷⁵ Lewis, *Selected Books*, 300.

⁷⁶ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 199.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 206.

⁷⁸ Hooper, *Collected Letters Vol 3*, 134.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 629.

⁸⁰ Hooper, *Collected Letters Vol 3*, 743.

⁸¹ Ibid., 405.

⁸² Ibid., 379.

⁸³ Ibid., 163.

people should not blame God for their pain, even though God may have willed it, because it was the best alternative.

Critique of Lewis' ideas about suffering and theology

Root states, 'there are at least two obvious ways to approach the problem of evil, one philosophical and the other theological, yet Lewis abandoned both in the development of his argument.'⁸⁴ The problem of evil is also sorted by philosophers of religion into two forms: deductive (logical) and inductive (evidential). Beversluis claims that in redefining the meaning of good, love, happy and omnipotent, Lewis tends to focus on the logical form.⁸⁵ However, he seems not to realize Lewis' purpose in defining terms stem from him being an objectivist who is vigilant to prevent misunderstanding. This purpose is illustrated by the general advice on writing he gave Thomasine in a letter on 14 October 1959. His eighth and final tip was: 'Be sure you know the meaning (or meanings) of every word you use.'⁸⁶

Lewis suggests four key reasons why people may not see objectively, and thus not readily accept a 'supernatural cause and moral order in the universe': ignorance, inattention, misunderstanding and psychological state.⁸⁷ Misunderstanding has two subcategories: 'failures of definition' and 'kinds of language' and it is the first of these that Lewis is primarily addressing when he defines important terms. Lewis the objectivist and rhetorician is reducing misunderstanding by clarifying what is meant, for example by "love" and "good". He does this not to avoid the problem of pain and suffering, but to be objective and to assist his audience to understand what he means. He appeals to the readers' experience in the real world and challenges them to 'rethink what Divine Goodness must truly mean.'⁸⁸

Lewis also points out that some kinds of language are unable to adequately describe God's activities but this should not then cause us to 'challenge whether or not God exists or His character is good'.⁸⁹ He illustrates this by referring to a good friend: 'Any given circumstances that might arise, calling into question the character of that friend, must be considered in the light of the full experience of that relationship.'⁹⁰ Thus, language can sometimes prevent full understanding of God's character or actions.

Beversluis claims 'Lewis has redefined "love" and "good" so thoroughly that they no longer mean anything at all.'⁹¹ Thus 'all Lewis can mean is that he will continue to *call* God good no matter what he proves to be like.'⁹² He is clearly exaggerating, but this is what he means when he describes Lewis as an Ockhamist. He suggests Lewis fails in his bid to offer a rational basis for Christian faith because the terms

⁸⁴ Root, p77; Gibb, Jocelyn, editor. *Light on C. S. Lewis*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1965, 35.

⁸⁵ Beversluis, *C S Lewis*, 237.

⁸⁶ Hooper, *Collected Letters Vol 3*, 1109.

⁸⁷ Root, 16-23.

⁸⁸ Root, 71.

⁸⁹ Root, 19.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

⁹¹ Beversluis, *C S Lewis*, 256.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 270.

he uses to describe God are rendered vacuous. Thus when Lewis addresses the problem of pain and suffering in a world created by a good God, Beversluis pronounces his argument flawed due to its reliance on ideas of love and goodness that no longer hold meaning.

Christian apologist John Sims sees Lewis's treatment of Natural Evil as incomplete.⁹³ Lewis tended to focus on evil caused by free will and this resulted in an apologetic that is weak in its explanation of suffering caused by natural disasters. By 'natural evil' Sims means evil caused by nature rather than by free will, such as 'the tidal wave, the earthquake, the hurricane.'⁹⁴ Root writes that according to Lewis, 'natural evil may be accounted for by the existence of devils.'⁹⁵ That is, 'When natural evils are discussed at all, they are seen as the product of a malevolent supernatural being.'⁹⁶

Suffering and theology: Practical implications for ministry

The first thing to realize about suffering and theology is that people tend to create meaning out of their pain and generate all sorts of theories about God's involvement. Those theories are meaningful when we create them ourselves but lack effect when they are borrowed from others. Suffering generates theology and theology tries to explain suffering. Neither tends to greatly reduce pain though some comfort can be found in a well thought through rationale.

Second, suffering is a normal part of natural life. Creatures are born, they live, and they die. Since death is common to all, suffering is common to all. One cannot escape suffering any more than one can escape death. Of course a life with minimal suffering followed by a quick death may be possible and could be an attractive option. Maximum pleasure and enjoyment right up to the moment of death would be preferable to most alternatives.

Third, generally speaking, babies come into the world in pain; children feel pain when they fall over; teenagers experience pain when injured; and adults encounter pain during illness, operations and break down of the body. To escape pain one would need to live without a human body. Then nothing could break, decay, be infected, wear out or stop working.

Fourth, pain has some positive uses. For example, a baby will normally feel pain when its body needs nutrition and a child may feel pain when it is learning to judge the danger of heat. These are both important signals for their wellbeing. Interestingly, a friend who served in a leper colony in Papua New Guinea declares: "Oh for the gift of pain for those poor dear lepers that I worked with." Pain for lepers might protect them from injury for then they could quickly know when they have damaged their body.

Fifth, emotional pain and suffering, such as grief or loneliness, can be debilitating though those feelings reflect the attachments we make. One way to avoid grief is not to form attachments and not to

⁹³ Root, 63; Sims, *Missionaries to the Skeptics*, 60.

⁹⁴ N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (London: SPCK, 2006), 6.

⁹⁵ Root, 80.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

love any other creature. This would require denial of our own needs and isolate us from the communities in which we live. Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote in a poem: "Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." Interestingly, Lewis wrote on 14 July 1960, 'One doesn't realise early in life that the price of freedom is loneliness. To be happy one must be tied.'⁹⁷

Sixth, pain and suffering from illness and injury should not be a great surprise to many people. It is an accepted part of living in this world and no sane person is likely to claim they will escape this life unscathed. However, there are too many testimonies of people who claim to have been miraculously healed to simply ignore them. Beware though the person who offers a magical formula for escaping illness, particularly if it is mixed up with a God dressed like Santa Claus. Nevertheless, people do recover and sometime miraculously.

While pain and suffering are normal, and in some circumstances also positive or helpful experiences, God does sometimes, in response to prayer, intervene to rescue people. There are several principles which should inform a theology of intervention such as healing. One, the Gospel is the power of salvation for everyone who believes (Romans 1:16). This means any theology of how God releases supernatural power with a person must centre on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Two, 'If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved' (Romans 10:9). That is, we can encounter God if we state out loud that Jesus is Lord of everything, in full confidence that God raised him from death. Three, God's 'incomparably great power ... is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead' (Ephesians 1:19-20). In other words, the same force that raised Jesus back to life now lives in Christians and has that same power to release new life within a human body. Four, Christ has both authority and power over pain and sickness since 'God placed all things under his feet' (Ephesians 1:22). Therefore, we can be confident that whatever storm we encounter, Christ has authority in that arena. Five, 'confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed' (James 5:16). This instruction is given in the context of proximity, rather than prayers at a distance, so we should aim, whenever possible, to pray with people while we are physically with them. These principles inform prayer for miraculous healing though the outcome and the timing of that outcome are beyond our control.

Two other aspects of theology need to be mentioned. One concerns the past and one concerns the future. In the story told in the book of Genesis, nature changed as a result of choices made by the first people. For example, God told the woman named Eve, "I will make your pains in childbearing very severe" (Genesis 3:16). This tells us that the changes in nature included pain for women birthing children. From this we can deduce that nature has not always had the current level of pain and suffering. Thus we can say that giving people freedom to choose their behavior resulted in them making choices that increased pain and suffering in the world.

⁹⁷ Hooper, *Collected Letters Vol 3*, 1169.

Concerning the future, we are promised that one day 'There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain' (Revelation 21:4). This utopian promise is for a restoration or regeneration of the Garden of Eden. So regardless of the pain and suffering currently experienced, people can look forward in hope to a time and place of harmony. In the meantime, we have the comfort of God through his Spirit, the comfort of human care, including through God's people, the comfort of progress we are making towards a better world, and the comfort of hope as we look forward to the end of time.

Lewis' pastoral care towards people experiencing suffering

Caring for people who are suffering is rarely about words and is instead more about presence. One thing that does not stand out in Lewis' writing is the importance of friends and community during periods of suffering. In *Mere Christianity* he did affirm Christian community as a body in which people are, 'loving one another, helping one another'⁹⁸ but he could have written more about the role of Christian community during times of suffering. Lewis attended church regularly and private confession each week yet he does not appear to draw strength from fellowship with other Christians. His social needs were possibly met through various other groups such as The Inklings and the Oxford Socratic Club. Humphrey Carpenter claims, 'His attention was directed to the salvation of the individual soul rather than to the solution of communal problems.'⁹⁹ He clearly had friends and lived with people yet the emphasis in his books seems to be more on individual faith and personal struggles. However, Peter Schakel sees in *The Magician's Nephew*, particularly in the story of Charn, a motif showing 'The importance of choice goes beyond individuals to nations'.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, an individualistic emphasis in his thinking may have undermined a well-rounded appreciation of Christian fellowship and community. Christians are called to love one another but Lewis seemed to have missed out on this corporate fellowship. Perhaps church services were generally sufficient yet in a time of suffering, need and grief, a human may need much more personal relating.

Lewis offered pastoral care in several ways, such as through myth, reason, money, time and personal letters. He created myths that enable people to better understand the Christian Gospel and to live as followers of Jesus Christ. Schakel explains, 'He regarded myth (imagination at its highest level) as a kind of incarnational thinking, an implanting of divine realities in human narratives to convey not fact but truth.'¹⁰¹ Within those myths are stories that convey care to those who were suffering and to those caring for others who were suffering. For example, in *The Magician's Nephew*, a key character is Digory who was facing the possible death of his mother. She lay in bed very ill and life was draining from her, yet the young boy found himself with the power to restore her health. He carried in his pocket a magical apple

⁹⁸ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 165.

⁹⁹ Carpenter, *The Inklings*, 207.

¹⁰⁰ Schakel, *The Way into Narnia: A Reader's Guide* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 100.

¹⁰¹ Schakel, *Is Your Lord Large Enough*, 154.

from Narnia and was tempted by a witch to eat it or take it and give it to his dying mother. Kathryn Lindskoog reveals: 'Lewis watched his lovely mother weaken, suffer and die of cancer. ...When Lewis wrote of Digory's dilemma, he wrote from his own heart.'¹⁰² Schakel adds that when his mother died, Lewis was about the age of Digory.¹⁰³ Digory resisted the witch and safely delivered the apple to Aslan as instructed. The apple, not long after being thrown on the river bank, produced a tree and prior to returning to his own world, Digory was instructed by Aslan to pluck an apple and take it to his mother: 'It will not, in your world, give endless life, but it will heal.'¹⁰⁴ This story conveys empathy to people caring for those who are suffering and dying. It offers an eternal perspective on life and death, it gives hope of miraculous or unexpected recovery from sickness, and it identifies with a deep desire to save the ill family member.

Other Chronicles also illustrate Lewis' pastoral concern and ministry to those facing death. In *The Silver Chair*, Lewis provides 'a beautiful picture of death; it makes death less fearful and unnatural'.¹⁰⁵ He does this through the idea of rebirth and reversal of the ageing process. In *The Last Battle*, Lewis used a stable door to represent death. Schakel explains: Death and the door are, in effect and meaning, the same, the important thing being that neither represents an end but a beginning, not an exit but an entrance.¹⁰⁶

The general population was the flock pastorally cared for by Lewis. He wrote for its benefit and his work, like a set of proverbs, spoke into people's lives about everyday matters. Suffering was a common theme but it was explored alongside other themes such as morality, prayer and miracles.

Lewis wrote to give people confidence in living a Christian life. He was their defender as well as their shepherd. He addressed big issues and common causes of concern and in this way he was topical and contemporary. However, he did not ebb and flow according to the daily news but rather chose as his targets significant barriers to belief. For example, to those trying to sort out the basics of Christian faith, without sectarian influence clouding the pathway, he provided *Mere Christianity*. For those trying to sort out prayer and faith in God in a climate of naturalism and disbelief, he wrote *Miracles*.

Lewis engaged in public argument so that, by his use of reason, people would be helped in their pursuit of truth and in their finding of truth in Jesus Christ. He used lectures and debate, radio broadcasts, books, articles and essays. He cared pastorally for people through various mediums, at times drawing on the Northern Irish Protestantism¹⁰⁷ of his childhood. He steered them towards the best life he knew. He lived, talked about, explained and defended Christian living. Louis Markos in *Lewis Agonistes* declares, 'After Churchill, Lewis's voice became one of the most recognized on the British airways, and everyone from the research scientist to the poor soldier in the pub tuned in to hear this once timid Oxford professor

¹⁰² Lindskoog, *Journey into Narnia* (Pasadena: Hope, 1998), 86.

¹⁰³ Schakel, *The Way into Narnia*, 4.

¹⁰⁴ Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), 163.

¹⁰⁵ Schakel, *The Way into Narnia*, 80.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁰⁷ Carpenter, *The Inklings*, 50.

of English expound the basic tenets of the Christian faith in a robust, straightforward prose style of great power and lucidity.¹⁰⁸

Lewis cared for people by secretly donating money to meet their needs. Michael Ward reports that 'His benefactions were hidden from nearly all his intimates and the gifts themselves were almost always made anonymously.'¹⁰⁹ Art Lindsley in *C S Lewis's Case for Christ* states that Lewis 'gave away most if not all of the proceeds from his books.'¹¹⁰ For example, he cared pastorally for an American lady named Mary Willis Shelburne by corresponding regularly and 'his lawyer, Owen Barfield, had found a way to have his New York publishers send her money every month. This monthly stipend continued until Lewis died.'¹¹¹ George Sayer in *Jack: A Life of C S Lewis* reports that the value of Lewis' estate upon his death 'was so little because during his lifetime Jack had given away most of his literary earnings.'¹¹²

Lewis did not only give money but gave of himself. This is illustrated by his care of Mrs Moore, the mother of his friend Paddy, who died in World War I. He in effect became a substitute son and lived with Mrs Moore for many years. He learned the importance of being present with people, even at personal cost. During a discussion with Walter Hooper concerning a man characterized as boring, Lewis advised: "let us not forget that our Lord might well have said, 'As ye have done it unto one of the least of my bores, you have done it unto me.'"¹¹³ Lewis learned to be present with people, particularly those who are suffering, realizing perhaps through his own experience of grief, 'the presumptuousness, or ineffectiveness of giving people answers or advice about dealing with grief and pain.'¹¹⁴

Lewis responded personally and thoughtfully to thousands of private letters. This was a consistent ministry throughout his life and demonstrated his care for individuals. Initially he was annoyed at the great number of letters he received in response to his books but he came to see correspondence as part of the responsibility of an author. Hooper notes, 'As more and more people turned to him for help he saw it as a clear duty to help them, and letter-writing thus became a valuable aspect of his apostolate. Thereafter, Lewis answered nearly all letters by return of post.'¹¹⁵ This became quite a burden for Lewis, and Hooper reports that in 1963 'After breakfast we spent about two hours replying to every letter he received.'¹¹⁶ He offered encouragement and advised people to forgive others and to avoid temptation. For example, to a Mr Green he wrote, 'I have no doubt that the fear you mention is simply a temptation of the devil, an effort to keep us away from God by despair.'¹¹⁷ However the overall style of his letter writing was more one of

¹⁰⁸ Markos, *Lewis Agonistes*, 21.

¹⁰⁹ Ward, *Planet Narnia*, 7.

¹¹⁰ Lindsley, *C S Lewis's Case for Christ*, 180.

¹¹¹ Hooper, *Collected Letters Vol 3*, 1718.

¹¹² Sayer, *Jack*, 411.

¹¹³ Lindsley, *C S Lewis's Case for Christ*, 180.

¹¹⁴ Schakel, *Is Your Lord Large Enough*, 101.

¹¹⁵ Hooper, *The Collected Letters of C S Lewis Vol 2*, xii.

¹¹⁶ Hooper, *Collected Letters Vol 3*, xv.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1341.

expressing empathy through shared experience. For example, 'to a Mrs Peterson he wrote, 'Accept my sympathy for your great sorrow. My deeply loved, and only lately married, wife is apparently dying of the same disease.'¹¹⁸

Critique of Lewis' pastoral care towards people experiencing suffering

It is difficult to find criticism of Lewis' pastoral ministry to people who are suffering. The focus of his critics seems to have instead been primarily on his logic and his private life, both of which may simply be attempts to undermine the influence of his ideas. There have been plenty of ultra conservative Christians who have critiqued Lewis' work and life, judging both to be unchristian.¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, it seems little attention has been given to the effect, positive or negative, of his ideas on people who are suffering or experiencing grief.

The validity of Lewis' use of reason to strengthen fellow Christians is undermined by challenges to his rational arguments. Despite Lewis' attempts to provide a rational basis for Christian faith, Beversluis claims he ends up sidestepping rationality because he is unable to reconcile his wife's suffering and death with his beliefs about God's goodness.¹²⁰ He believes Lewis fails to make the case for Christianity since his 'apologetic writings do not embody a religion that satisfies his own definition of rationality.'¹²¹ He would say that Lewis' rational arguments about Christian living are ineffective in helping people who are suffering or dying as the view of God he communicated was undone by his experience of grief and suffering. In other words, if Lewis claims that God is good in the normal sense of the word but then changes his view in the midst of grief, then he has very little to offer other people who are suffering grief. However, it is his experience of grief and his enduring belief in God's goodness that enables him to be of even greater use to others who are grieving.

George Sayer in *Jack: A Life of C S Lewis* discusses the relationship between Lewis and Mrs Moore, as do many writers. Most speculate about what did and didn't happen between them sexually. This of course suggests that Lewis living with Mrs Moore was not an example of pastoral care of her but, in a sense, of him. Sayer writes,

Because Jack, an unusually sensitive person, had lost his mother at a vulnerable age, and this had been followed at once by banishment to an exceptionally brutal boarding school, he felt the lack of mother love as psychological insecurity. Mrs Moore, a homely woman, and like his mother from southern Ireland, seemed fit to act as another mother and to provide the love and security that he wanted.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 1152.

¹¹⁹ James Richard, "When Worldviews Collide: Lewis Critics in Cyberspace." Cumberland River Lamp Post. <http://www.crlamppost.org/critics.htm>

¹²⁰ Beversluis, *C S Lewis*, 299.

¹²¹ Ibid., 316.

¹²² Sayer, *Jack*, 152.

Practical Insights: pastoral care towards people experiencing suffering

Suffering for some people is an ongoing experience, sometimes resulting from trauma. Many times professional counseling and therapy can release some of that recurring pain. My thoughts are more about amateur pastoral care of one human towards another. I cannot cover all types of pain but will limit myself in this discussion to emotional pain, whether it results from physical or emotional trauma.

Pastoral care, when invited, can be helpful for people in pain. From my experience, the stance of the carer is vital. I see that stance as one of acceptance and valuing of the person. It is not judgmental but communicates grace, understanding and empathy. The stance of the carer should not be one of hurry but rather be attuned to the suspension of time possibly being experienced by the person suffering. That is, an event has occurred, they are in some way arrested, and the carer joins in that momentary pause in his or her life.

Second, the input of the carer is primarily their presence as a fellow human rather than a speaker, teacher or counselor. Exhortation and words of encouragement are rarely helpful, at least initially. The carer must be alongside his or her peer and able to remain silent. The person may say a lot, some of it may express strong emotion and be irrational, and the carer should listen attentively. The person needs to feel heard and may also find relief from some of the emotional turmoil by saying things out loud and by knowing they have been heard.

Third, the person should ideally set the pace and length of each encounter with the carer. This is not a formal process, but the carer should try to take the cues from the person as to how much time is helpful at that point in their process. Similarly, the carer should aim only to speak when the person indicates they want some words to be spoken. Also the person should initiate any physical contact or affection while the carer must be very careful to prevent any sexual contact or inappropriate physical clinging. I would recommend the carer does not initiate any physical contact with the person though I expect there are occasions when it would be beneficial for the person to have a hand on their shoulder, for example.

Fourth, a person who is suffering may look for something to read and this may be where Lewis' books are helpful. People seek answers, clues, insights and relief from their pain at various times and the availability of general material can help. That is, rather than words directed at them personally, words in the public arena could be less threatening and may feel more objective and believable. It could give the person a sense that they are not alone in what they are currently experiencing. As for logic and reason, they have their place in the process and could help people make sense of their suffering. However, I would wait for the person to seek that medium rather than offer them arguments, whether written or oral.

Fifth, letter writing can communicate care despite geographical separation. In fact, due to the speed and ease of email and social media, a personal note, card or letter delivered via the postal service can say a lot. Even though electronic communication is possible and affordable, something more tangible

that cost the sender a stamp may provide a stronger benefit to the person receiving it. Of course the content of the note is also important, and care should be taken, but assuming the carer takes the stance recommended above, the message should normally be well received.

Finally, special care should be taken to avoid at all costs using the moment of grief or suffering to force a change in behavior. There are probably dangerous circumstances where persuasion is the right thing, but ordinarily a person should not be moved on from their current emotional pain. That will happen in due course, hopefully at the right time. Rather than skip the process of recovery by jumping to a solution promising relief, the person should feel free to experience the depth of their loss and suffering and find their own way out. This may better equip them or strengthen them for future suffering and empower them to recover from those future experiences a little more easily. To move them forward, out of the valley of despair, could simply encourage denial and prevent or hinder recovery. In other words, leave the person in the hole and climb down next to them and sit quietly until they stand up and begin to move. In this way the experience of the person is treated with integrity and the lessons they learn in that process can stay with them and increase their access to happiness in future situations.

It is beneficial during times of suffering to have existing connections within a healthy Christian community. God cares for us by calling us into relationship with God, and strengthening us by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. God also cares for us by placing us in the midst of God's people and we can encourage people to participate in a community of Christian faith, contributing to and drawing on that fellowship as is needed. It should be remembered that people exist within relationships and no recovery is complete without healthy connections with others, ideally within a church or fellowship of Christian believers.

The effect of Suffering on Lewis' Spirituality

Many people have speculated on changes in Lewis as a result of suffering. The death of his mother at a young age may have left him with less emotional support. Living with a minor deformity in his hand probably had positive as well as negative effects on him. Witnessing violent death on the battlefield can be expected to have affected him as much as it did other soldiers in that great conflict. The loss of close friends and people he lived with, of course including his wife Joy, did shape who he became. Each of these significant experiences also shaped his thoughts about Christian faith and his life as a disciple of Christ.

A Grief Observed is an obvious source for observing changes in Lewis as a Christian. However, caution is needed since he clearly had intentions in compiling and publishing that book. Those sixty pages are too brief to contain the jottings of four journals. Each chapter is about fifteen very small pages and none is likely to fill an 'empty M S book.'¹²³ It could be foolish to take the contents at face value and

¹²³ Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 50.

deduce permanent changes in Lewis' spirituality. He himself asks, 'Why should the desperate imagining of a man dazed—I said it was like being concussed—be especially reliable?'¹²⁴ He also acknowledged his hatred and his desire to hurt and abuse God: 'And of course, as in all abusive language, 'what I thought' didn't mean what I thought true.'¹²⁵ He later testified that his heart was mysteriously lighter one morning than it had been for weeks and supposed he was 'recovering physically from a good deal of mere exhaustion.'¹²⁶ The book is not a textbook containing Lewis' beliefs. It is an observation of his grief based on four manuscripts written in the month following Joy's death. Note that in chapter four Lewis writes, 'I said, several notebooks ago ...'¹²⁷ confirming that he wrote a great deal during this period, certainly more than is contained in the small book. However, it should be noted that Schakel doubts Lewis did write in four empty manuscript books.¹²⁸ Sayer disagrees and states, 'It is not fiction at all. In it he is trying to understand himself and the nature of his feelings. It is analytical, cool and clinical.'¹²⁹

Lewis wrote of a slammed door, an emphatic silence, windows without lights, an empty house and 'so very absent help in times of trouble'¹³⁰ This experience happened immediately after Joy died but should not be assumed to be a permanent phenomenon. Even part way through *A Grief Observed* (in chapter three) Lewis reported, 'I have been coming to feel that the door is no longer shut and bolted.'¹³¹ Again in chapter four he writes, 'Turned to God, my mind no longer meets that locked door'.¹³²

He was also in danger of 'coming to believe such dreadful things about'¹³³ God. The possibility that God was very different in character than what he previously believed, caused him concern. In one illustration he designated God as a clown¹³⁴ and in another 'a spiteful imbecile.'¹³⁵ He describes Christ's death on a cross as 'The trap ... The vile practical joke.'¹³⁶ To these descriptions he adds 'Eternal Vivisector,'¹³⁷ building on an earlier comment wondering if we are really 'rats in a laboratory'¹³⁸ but towards the end of the book swaps this term for the 'Eternal Vet'¹³⁹ acknowledging that some pain is for our benefit and that God is not capricious.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 34.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 35.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 39.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 61.

¹²⁸ Schakel, *Reason and Imagination*, 168.

¹²⁹ Sayer, *Jack*, 393.

¹³⁰ Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 7-8.

¹³¹ Ibid., 40.

¹³² Ibid., 52.

¹³³ Ibid., 8.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 14.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 16.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 26-27.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 34.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 26.

¹³⁹ Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 55.

Another immediate effect of his loss was less certainty and assurance concerning eternal life.¹⁴⁰ He also questioned whether the dead are at peace: 'But why are they so sure that all anguish ends with death? More than half the Christian world, and millions in the East, believe otherwise.'¹⁴¹ He takes this further:

... she was in God's hands all the time, and I have seen what they did to her here. Do they suddenly become gentler to us the moment we are out of the body? And if so, why? If God's goodness is inconsistent with hurting us, then either God is not good or there is no God: for in the only life we know He hurts us beyond our worst fears and beyond all we can imagine. If it is inconsistent with hurting us, then He may hurt us after death as unendurably as before it.¹⁴²

Lewis adds, 'What reason have we, except our own desperate wishes, to believe that God is, by any standard we can conceive, 'good'? Doesn't all the *prima facie* evidence suggest exactly the opposite? What have we to set against it?'¹⁴³ After listing several false hopes during Joy's illness, he wrote, 'Time after time, when He seemed most gracious He was really preparing the next torture.'¹⁴⁴ He then asked 'Is it rational to believe in a bad God? Anyway, in a God so bad as all that? The Cosmic Sadist, the spiteful imbecile?'¹⁴⁵

This discussion about God's goodness is taken further by Lewis as he reflects on an extreme view of depravity:

You could say we are fallen and depraved. We are so depraved that our ideas of goodness count for nothing ... our worst fears are true—all the characteristics we regard as bad: unreasonableness, vanity, vindictiveness, injustice, cruelty....The word *good*, applied to Him, becomes meaningless: like abracadabra. We have no motive for obeying him. Not even fear. It is true we have His threats and promises. But why should we believe them? If cruelty is from His point of view 'good', telling lies may be 'good' too. Even if they are true, what then? If His ideas of good are so very different from ours, what He calls 'Heaven' might well be what we should call Hell, and vice-versa.¹⁴⁶

He writes more about God's goodness in chapter three: 'The tortures occur. If they are unnecessary, then there is no God or a bad one. If there is a good God, then these tortures are

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 9.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 24.

¹⁴² Ibid., 24-25.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 26.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 27.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 27.

¹⁴⁶ Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 28-29.

necessary. For no even moderately good Being could possibly inflict or permit them if they weren't. Either way, we're for it.¹⁴⁷

Lewis' experience of prayer was changed by his suffering. In chapter two (from his second journal) he wrote: 'But when I try to pray for H., I halt. Bewilderment and amazement come over me. I have a ghastly sense of unreality, of speaking into a vacuum about a nonentity.'¹⁴⁸

His view of 'the consolations of religion'¹⁴⁹ may also have changed. In *The Four Loves* published in 1960, he wrote, 'We find thus by experience that there is no good applying to Heaven for earthly comfort. Heaven can give heavenly comfort; no other kind. And earth cannot give earthly comfort either. There is no earthly comfort in the long run.'¹⁵⁰

Lewis acknowledged that there was nothing in his experience that he was not forewarned about. He wrote, 'I've got nothing that I hadn't bargained for. Of course it is different when the thing happens to oneself, not to others, and in reality, not in imagination.'¹⁵¹

Critique of the effect of suffering on Lewis' spirituality

Lewis's expression of anger towards God is judged to be valid. Art Lindsley does not see Lewis' expression of anger towards God in *A Grief Observed* as unusual and suggests, 'Even a cursory look at the Psalms confirms this.'¹⁵² Michael Ward discusses 'criticism or defiance that ... a person hurls at an apparently ruthless and idiotic cosmos' and added 'Lewis thought that the Book of Job showed the legitimacy of such complaint.'¹⁵³ Schakel also validates Lewis' expression of anger and writes, 'we don't need to understand; we need only, eventually, after we have vented all our frustrations and uncertainties, to trust and obey.'¹⁵⁴ He believes Lewis' faith was 'renewed and strengthened' rather than 'permanently weakened, or destroyed by his wife's death'.¹⁵⁵

Louis Markos praises Lewis' *A Grief Observed*, describing it as 'an authentic journal of a deep, almost existential despair which slowly resolves itself into a rebound faith...where resolution comes through intense struggle and where neat, tidy answers give way to an almost mystical surrender to truths that are too wonderful for mortal men to know.'¹⁵⁶ That is, he too sees Lewis' faith being strengthened through reconciliation of his 'inner pain, loss and doubt'.¹⁵⁷

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 38.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 20.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁵⁰ C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), 168.

¹⁵¹ Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 32.

¹⁵² Lindsley, *C. S. Lewis' Case for Christ*, 61.

¹⁵³ Ward, *Planet Narnia*, 210-211.

¹⁵⁴ Schakel, *Is Your Lord Large Enough*, 101.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 94.

¹⁵⁶ Markos, *Lewis Agonistes*, 27.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 96.

Beverluis in his 1985 article about Lewis, claimed ‘we can no longer read Lewis’s earlier books as we once read them. We now know that he came to have grave doubts about many of the views that he so confidently and joyously defended in them – doubts out of which he could not find his way.’¹⁵⁸ However in 2007 he modified this claim. He now states, ‘I think it is clear from Lewis’s later writings that he did, to some extent, lose his confidence in *his* ability to set forth a rational defense of Christianity.’¹⁵⁹ Further, ‘To sum up, C S Lewis did not lose his faith. But his faith did temporarily waver. No one should hesitate to say that.’¹⁶⁰

Practical Insights: The effect of suffering on my spirituality

Like most people, I can list several personal experiences of suffering. In this section I will briefly describe three significant and painful events that have shaped my spirituality. I will then outline my reflections on those events and what I learned from them. Then I will summarize the effect on my life as a Christian.

My mother died from illness twenty-two years ago and that tragedy had a lasting effect on me. I prayed for her healing and I prayed for her to die. I wanted her to recover yet I could see how horrible her life was. I had no help to cope with her death and probably carried unresolved grief for about ten years. I lived with a sense of being guided by God, yet without any great confidence that my needs were important. I believed my needs would be met by God as I sacrificed myself for others. What I discovered ten years later was my needs had merely been swept under the rug. They were not met and had become a burden to my growth as a person and as a Christian. This was resolved through another painful event.

While walking along a street in Hungary, a huge hole opened up within me. I was taken by surprise and responded by inviting God to come in and walk around inside the chasm. Almost overnight I gained an inner world that enabled me to take in information, digest it or process it and then bring it back to the surface to act upon. This was very different from my extroverted ways of living prior to this experience. I noticed the pain of this experience was much the same sensation as the feeling of hunger. As I learned to live with this new pain, and because I got used to how it felt, it became easy to refuse food and so I lost weight. My personal needs became very real to me at that time and as I surveyed my relationships and possessions I decided a clean break would be helpful. Almost out of resentment, I decided that since I was in pain and my needs were clearly not met, then I did not need any of the things I currently had in my life. Over the next several months I came through that tunnel and found a new “me” emerged. I noticed that as well as an inner world, I grew new capacities overnight. New gifts or talents or abilities appeared in my quiver and I had both strategic and intuitive strengths that were not evident prior to the experience. I described the painful event as a little like a motherboard upgrade on a personal

¹⁵⁸ John Beverluis, “Beyond the Double Bolted Door.”

¹⁵⁹ Beverluis, *C S Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, 306.

¹⁶⁰ Beverluis, *C S Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, 311.

computer. James Fowler might describe it as a structural change from Stage Four to Stage Five faith. That is, from Individuative-Reflective Faith to a Conjunctive Faith.¹⁶¹

My third painful experience was the following year. My daughter Susannah was stillborn. This tragedy tipped me into another seven years of grief. This time I had caring friends and my wife and I had two or three counseling sessions, and these were helpful. The first two years were the worst and the first nine months almost unbearable. The emotional noise, as I call it, made decision making extremely difficult. My wife and I had very few personal resources with which to care for one another. We limped through the first year, unable to come to terms with our great loss. On one occasion after hearing a scientist at church say "Sometimes Aslan is ruthless," I reached a turning point. I prayed "God, I don't know what your involvement was in the death of my daughter, but I know that what you do is good."

My reflections on these three great experiences of pain are several. First, people get sick and babies die. I have sought to make death a part of my life rather than try to deny its reality. Second, wishful thinking is ineffective but prayer does have an effect. I do not know whether what I ask for will come to pass but I remain convinced that God hears me and takes my needs and my requests into account. Third, being connected through meaningful, committed relationships is beneficial in times of suffering. To be isolated compounds the pain and hinders recovery. Being alongside people in their pain is a gift we can give to one another. Fourth, there are times when we cannot think clearly, nor hear or feel God. During such times it is best to postpone big decisions. The confusion and noise can be overwhelming and it is best to make space and take time to allow recovery. To ignore the experience is to prolong the agony. Fifth, structural change in the ways we hold our faith can be revolutionary. We should not be overly confident in our understanding of ourselves and of what we are capable. Change can happen overnight, given the right circumstances.

Overall, suffering has given me a cautious outlook. I live with an awareness of the reality of death and the preciousness of life. I trust that God is good even when I do not understand what God is doing. I find appropriate ways to meet my needs and grow my capacity to do good by replenishing my own tanks. I am supportive of people who are seeking to take their next step but am unwilling to unseat people or demand change. I pray constantly with great confidence that God has all matters firmly in hand and is ruling with wisdom. Finally, I make space for parts of who I am to dissolve and for new capacities to emerge.

Conclusion

Suffering has long been a barrier to religious belief in a good God. C S Lewis was an objectivist and rhetorician who sought to provide a rational basis for Christian faith. He often wrote about the goodness of God. Though he had experienced suffering throughout his life, a most significant event was the death of

¹⁶¹ James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 184-198.

his wife Joy Davidman. In his grief, Lewis questioned the goodness of God and because of this he has been described as a qualified Platonist and, at least temporarily, also an Ockhamist. I argue that these categories have little meaning when applied to Lewis. His book *A Grief Observed* is offered by some as evidence of real change in Lewis while others view the book as fiction more than autobiography. I think the book contains genuine expressions of disbelief and anger towards God as written by Lewis in the month after Joy died. However, I also think Lewis constructed the book to benefit readers and thus it has an element of intention in its design. I certainly would not use it as primary evidence of permanent weakening or changing of beliefs held by the author. Clearly suffering did affect Lewis' theology and he wrestled with the pain he saw his wife suffer and his difficulty in reconciling that pain with his understanding of God's goodness and God's relationship with him. Despite what happened, Lewis believed God is good. However, it was not only Lewis' theology that was shaped by his various experiences of suffering. Pain also shaped and informed how he cared for others through his writing and speaking. In the final years of his life, Lewis continued to use various forms of writing to encourage Christian faith, and was particularly committed to respond personally to every letter he received in response to his work. His life as a Christian was challenged by suffering but there is no clear evidence that he regressed in his discipleship or reduced his confidence in God. On the contrary, he continued consistently his devotional habits, his work and his ministry to others. He remained confident that God is good in the ordinary sense of the word.

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