



## A Grief Observed

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Writing the book *A Grief Observed* was the one therapy that helped C.S. Lewis cope following the death of his wife, Helen Joy Davidman (“H.” in the book). Here C.S. Lewis—Atlanta Teaching Fellow and apologist, Jana Harmon, shares some insights on this great classic work of Lewis.

Intense emotional pain. It changes the landscape of our minds. It moves the ground upon which we stand. It brings clouds, obscuring the once-clear view. The heart overrides, plowing through the once-fertile rows of contentment, happiness, clarity, and peace, and leaves a dry, parched, disrupted soul in its wake. It causes us to question the very core of our beliefs, the Person in whom we placed our trust. Is God really all that good, all that powerful? Couldn’t He have prevented this pain? Is God there? Does God care? Why do I feel only overwhelming silence?

C.S. Lewis was not immune to the overwhelming grief that accompanied the mourning of his young love in later life. His erudite argument in *The Problem of Pain* lay still, lifeless against his raging sorrow. In faithful manner, he questioned and agonized through his pen. It was meant to be a private, honest reflection of his passionate struggle, but its value was too great to remain for an audience of one. For such is the common arduous experience of man, even for the most faithful of believers. Value is found in authentic company of the bereaved. Published first under a pseudonym to preserve Lewis’s anonymity, it was later printed posthumously under his given name.

Lewis soberly moves us through his journey of grief.

The first stop: Great love and great loss. Great loss and great grief. Anger. Distance. Raw emotion. Despair. Pain. “Satan’s corruption of that great gift of loving and being loved.”<sup>1</sup> According to stepson Douglas Gresham,



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*It almost seem(ed) cruel that her death was delayed long enough for him to grow to love her so completely that she filled his world as the greatest gift that God had ever given him, and then she died and left him alone in a place that her presence in his life had created for him.*

*C. S. Lewis . . . too fell head-long into the vortex of whirling thoughts and feelings and dizzily groped for support and guidance deep in the dark chasm of grief.<sup>2</sup>*

Lewis was in a trough of despair and vacillating emotion. The mind tries to reassure the heart that all is well, then a sudden earthquake of pain erupts and all sense of well-being: “a sudden jab of red-hot memory and all this ‘commonsense’ vanishes like an ant in the mouth of a furnace.”<sup>3</sup> The mind can go only so far to convince the heart in the way of suffering. In this acute phase of loss, emotions rule the day. Desperate longings for the one who is gone or the One who should be ever present are met with empty return. In their absence, we idealize the absentee loved one and denigrate the evasive Lover of our souls, questioning the cruelty of God’s love. We find the lost one’s presence everywhere and cannot find God’s presence anywhere. We move through the day with despondency

weighty, slow, dismantled from our normal passions. Death comes. Death matters. It is the great separator.

The second stop: Less than a month after his loss of H., Lewis begins the slow process of imagining their lives, of its “otherness,” of its profound intimacy. He realizes the vanity of his fleeting impression of her, his self-created images. He wants to press beyond sentimentality to face soberly the reality of her person, of her death, and the fullness of his loss. Death is the ultimate test of belief. Is religion only for those who cannot face reality? The curative opiate? Lewis would have none of that. The past is the past. Death is final. He has no place for the supposed comforts and answers and rhetoric of religion. He wonders where the “good God” is in the midst of his incomprehensible pain. He questions whether it is “rational to believe in a bad God.”<sup>4</sup> He chooses to face unbearable reality. He, like his lost loved one, would rather “have truth at any price.”<sup>5</sup>

Questioning God, he realizes the futility and meaninglessness of it all, that he must suffer regardless of his intellectual ramblings. Pain will still be pain. Grief and fear pervade. Endless moments of successive emptiness remain.

The third stop: The world goes on for Lewis, but it is flat and lifeless. Knowing that “trouble” is to be expected in his life does not help his failing faith. He begins to question the authenticity of his belief, his trust in God, his care for others. True tests, or “torture” as Lewis calls it, reveal true faith. Reflecting, Lewis states, “I thought I trusted in the rope until it mattered to me whether it would bear me. Now it matters, and I find I didn’t.”<sup>6</sup> He desires a restoration of faith but realizes that this too may be merely another house of cards. He even begins to question his love for H. as a mere “card-castle,” as well as a relationship of egoism rather than altruism.

In his turning, he sees God as the great iconoclast who offers remedial pain—to hurt in order to heal. The tortures are necessary. Christ suffered for us. God is indeed good. This realization brings about a lighter heart, a lifting of sorrow, a clearing of tears, a moment of clarity and release. His passions no longer blind or block God from view. The bolted door to heaven is no longer locked. Lewis not only sees his need, but realizes his newfound capacity to receive from God. He sees marriage and its end as a universal experience in learning to love the other. His prior intellectual insight (from *The Problem of Pain*) is finally met with experiential understanding. He sees the value of God’s testing, of experiential knowing. H. is not removed from his

thoughts (and is in fact constantly present), but meets him in a profoundly good, real, authentic way.

The fourth and final stop: Lewis now has the perspective to see grief as a valley with varied and surprising venues along the way, not as a circular, engulfing trench. It is a process. He begins to see signs of healing along the way, signs of hope, signs of God’s presence, a healthier remembering of H. He even moves toward moments of praise of the Creator, of his creation of H., of their time together. He rises from his self-imposed darkness to appreciate the comforting reality that he was never really alone. He realizes that his imaginations and passions overrode his reason, and he considers how anyone can “be utterly mistaken as to the situation he is really in.”<sup>7</sup>

In the end, he is convicted by two things. One: Remedial pain is worse than our “severest imaginings.” And, two: “all shall be well.”<sup>8</sup> We are in desperate need of what is real, of God, of others, not what is steeped in our imaginings of them, or even ourselves. Loving the reality of others is loving the reality of God, not our ideas of them. Loving the reality of God is loving the reality of others. He states, “I must stretch out the arms and hands of love . . . to the reality, through—across—all the changeful phantasmagoria of my thoughts, passions, and imaginings.”<sup>9</sup>

All things are not perfectly clear, but Lewis appreciates that God’s ways are higher, that God’s presence and peace remains with us through our struggles. He sees that he might have been guilty of putting H. before God. He encounters intimacy without emotion and finds it to be enough, even better somehow, clearer, more honest. “Above all, solid. Utterly reliable. Firm.”<sup>10</sup>

In reflection, it is striking to me to see the importance of balancing reason, passions, and the imagination. A sudden flood of emotions can drive like a runaway train, fueled by imaginings, leaving rationality on the tracks far behind. The reality of life becomes twisted by our self-absorbed desires, our emotional neediness, our longing for something or someone different from what they are. It can distort what we knew beforehand to be true. Emotions run unchecked. Imaginations move into fantasy. We move from painting realism in our minds to impressionism, in some cases, moving toward the abstract. Reality becomes no longer recognizable, with no grounding except for the self. Subjectivism moves toward its fullest manifestation. We become entombed in our own whirling sense of what we desire, what we wish to be true. “Reality

doesn't match our desires, so we bend our desires to meet our own sense of truth."<sup>11</sup>

Certainly we meet the circumstances of life with both heart and mind. We are depraved and finite. We encounter our own personal reality within the larger context of what is real, what is true of God, of the world, of others, of ourselves. But sometimes reality is hard to face. We wish it were other than it is. We end up creating God or others in our own image instead of knowing and loving and experiencing them as they are. We create an alternate world that is more attuned to our passions and imaginings than to reality. Reality, though, is a sobering stalwart revealer of truth. It reminds us that we are more than our desirings, that external reality is not as we can contrive it to be, that there is something or someone Other who brings sense, who brings healing to our circumstance. When our emotions and our eyes clear, we see that things are as they need to be.

Lewis, who was long steeped in rationality and imagination, found sentimentality afresh in Joy. When she was taken, this reasonable man found himself succumbing to an exaggerated emotionality, tipped beyond reason. Even though he searched for sobriety of thought, it evaded him during his early process of grief. We are all susceptible to this tipping, to this overcoming of emotion. We see our own vulnerability in moments of pain, of loss, of desire. But, like Lewis, we need to look to the reality of an unchanging God who loves us in the midst of our pain even though we may not see Him or feel Him. We need not to neglect the reality of God's past faithfulness and ongoing presence and overriding purposes in our lives. "Truth at any price" ends in contentment, in resting. It ultimately reveals that God sees us through the valley, stronger, clearer, knowing more fully the depth of His love for us. "All shall be well."

## Notes

1. Douglas Gresham, Introduction to C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (1961; repr., San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), xx.
2. Gresham, Introduction to Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, xxx–xxxi.
3. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 4.
4. *Ibid.*, 30.
5. *Ibid.*, 28.
6. *Ibid.*, 37.
7. *Ibid.*, 64.
8. *Ibid.*, 65, "All shall be well," quoting Julian of Norwich.
9. *Ibid.*, 66–67.
10. *Ibid.*, 75.

11. Os Guinness, "The Thinking Man's Journey," *Veritas Forum*, Asheville, NC (1995) "Either we conform our desires to the truth, or we conform the truth to our desires."

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