

C.S. Lewis on Grief

by Art Lindsley, Ph.D.

A psychiatrist friend maintains that, “All change involves loss, and loss involves grief, and grief involves pain.” Since the events of September 11, 2001, there has been much change, loss, grief, and pain. There is a changed perception of our lives, a loss of a sense of safety and security, grief over those lost or grieving with families who lost loved ones, and all of this leads to pain from these and other sources. Although the events of Lewis’s life differ from ours, perhaps his struggle with grief can be helpful for us.



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Lewis Loses Joy

C.S. Lewis had a number of particularly painful events in his life. His mother died of cancer when he was a young boy, he was sent away to a boarding school with an abusive headmaster later declared insane, he was wounded in World War I, and his father failed to visit him in the hospital despite his pleadings. However, clearly the most painful event was the loss of his wife Joy. They had only been married for a few years. The rather strange circumstances surrounding their marriage are powerfully portrayed in the BBC or Hollywood movie versions of *Shadowlands*. They were married in a civil ceremony in 1956 and later, after Joy was diagnosed with cancer, married by an Anglican priest in 1957. Shortly after this second ceremony, a remission in Joy’s cancer occurred. Joy was then able to progress from bed to wheelchair to almost normal walking. The next couple years were filled with remarkable happiness. Joy wrote in mid-1957: “Jack and I are managing to be surprisingly happy, considering the circumstances; you’d think we were a honeymoon couple in our early twenties, rather than our middle-aged selves.”

C.S. Lewis commented that he experienced later in life the married bliss that most people experience in their early years. However, it didn’t last. By late 1959, the cancer returned, and Joy died July 13, 1960. Two of the last things she said were, “You have made me happy,” and “I am at peace with God.”

A Grief Observed

The loss of Joy plunged Lewis into the depths of grief and pain. Following Joy’s death, Lewis kept a journal and wrote down his thoughts because he was personally helped by doing so—with no intent of publication. Later, he published his journaled thoughts under a pseudonym, N.W. Clerk (a pun on the Old English for “I know not what scholar”). *A Grief Observed* was published two years before his own death in 1963. Interestingly, when the book first came out, many people thought it would be helpful to C.S. Lewis, and he received many gift copies.

The Problem of Pain

Back in 1940, Lewis had published a book titled *The Problem of Pain*, which was a theoretical discussion of the problem of evil and pain. It is a book that still repays reading. He was aware then of the difference between theory and practice. In his introduction to *The Problem of Pain*, he says:

I have never for one moment been in a state of mind to which even the imagination of serious pain was less than intolerable. If any man is safe from the danger of underestimating this adversary, I am that man. I must add too, that the only purpose of the book is to solve the intellectual problem raised by suffering; for the far higher task of teaching fortitude and patience I was never fool enough to suppose myself qualified.

Charles Williams, Lewis’s close friend and fellow “In-king” once told Lewis that the weight of God’s displeasure was reserved for Job’s comforters who tried to show that all was well: “The sort of people,” he said, measurably dropping his lower jaw and fixing Lewis with his eyes, “who wrote books on the problem of pain.”

In one of his letters, Lewis wrote about the difficulty of applying our beliefs to actual suffering:

The real difficulty is—isn’t it—to adapt one’s steady belief about tribulation to this particular tribulation; for the particular, when it arrives, always seems so peculiarly intolerable.

During World War II, the bombings of London and the prospect of Nazi invasion was more shattering to him than expected. It was difficult to be detached from this world with the threat of loss being so real. The ups and downs of our changing emotions present a problem. Once Lewis was asked about how he dealt with sorrow. He responded:

In nearly all possible ways because, as you probably know, it isn't a state but a process. It keeps changing—like a winding road with quite a new landscape at each bend.

A Grief Observed shows the process through which Lewis dealt with and began to emerge from his grief. But, the process was not pretty or easy. The path was much clouded by fear, doubt, and anger before the gradual lifting of the darkness and breaking through of the sun.

Grief and Fear

Lewis once wrote:

No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing.

Lewis was afraid of going to places that he and Joy had enjoyed, “our favorite pub, our favorite wood.” He was afraid of his thoughts about God, afraid of what the future would bring:

This is one of the things I'm afraid of. The agonies, the mad moments, must, in the course of nature die away. But what will follow? Just this apathy, this dead flatness?

Darkness and Doubt

Above all, there was a sense of distance from God, what the sixteenth century Spanish monk John of the Cross called the “dark night of the soul” or the sense that the “heavens were like brass” bouncing back any prayer sent heavenward. Lewis says,

But go to Him when your need is despicable, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double-bolting on the inside. After that, silence.

Worse than that, there were doubts about the goodness of God. It wasn't that Lewis was in any danger of becoming an atheist: “The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not, ‘So there's no God after all,’ but,

‘So this is what God's really like. Deceive yourself no longer.’”

The most awful thoughts of God came into his mind. I remember many years ago when I first read *A Grief Observed*, that I stopped reading the book for awhile when I encountered these passages. It helps to keep them in context when we remember that this was initially his own private journal, not intended for publication. Also, many people have realized that they were not crazy or alone when they have had similar thoughts. In any case, Lewis feared at one point “that we are really rats in a trap. Or worse still, rats in a laboratory... Supposing the truth were ‘God always vivisects?’ Was God a ‘Cosmic Sadist’ or an ‘Eternal Vivisector?’”

Anger at God

Later, Lewis came to realize that the perverse delight in such thoughts revealed an anger at God and a desire to get back at Him:

In a way I liked them. I am even aware of a slight reluctance to accept opposite thoughts. All that stuff about the Cosmic Sadist was not so much the expression of thought as of hatred. I was getting from it the only pleasure a man in anguish can get; the pleasure of hitting back. It was really just... ‘telling God what I thought of Him.’ And, of course, as in all abusive language, ‘what I thought’ didn't mean what I thought true. Only what I thought would offend Him (and His worshippers) most. That sort of thing is never said without some pleasure. Gets it ‘off your chest.’ You feel better for a moment.

Even though it is by no means necessary to experience anger at God in the same way Lewis did, it is certainly not unusual. Even a cursory look at the Psalms will confirm this.

Clouds Begin to Lift

Gradually, ever so gradually, some of the clouds of grief started to lift. One of the stages in the process was a consideration of whether Joy's “coming back” to him would be good for her:

I never even raised the question of whether a return, if it were possible, would be good for her. I want her back as an ingredient of my past. Could I have wished her anything worse? Having got once through death, to come back and then at some later date, have all her dying to do over again? They call Stephen the first martyr. Hadn't Lazarus the rawer deal?

Unexpectedly, his heart started to feel lighter. “It came this morning, early ... my heart was lighter than it had been for many weeks.” Some of the lifting he attributed

to a recovery from physical exhaustion due to a few good nights' sleep. Gradually, he began to feel in his relationship with God that the door was no longer shut and bolted.

Was it my own frantic need that slammed it in my face? The time when there is nothing at all in your soul except a cry for help may be just the time when God can't give it: you are like the drowning man who can't be helped because he clutches and grabs. Perhaps your own reiterated cries deafen you to the voice you hoped to hear.

Lewis had the striking thought that God had not been experimenting with Lewis's faith; He knew it already. It was Lewis who didn't. In some ways, his faith was a "house of cards" that needed to be knocked down in order to be rebuilt with stronger material.

There was no sudden transition from fear, anger, grief and pain to warmth and light. It was "like the warming of a room or the coming of daylight. When you first notice them, they have been already going on for some time." You can be utterly mistaken about the situation you are really in. You can think that you are stuck in a cellar or dungeon alone when that is not really the case:

Imagine a man in total darkness. He thinks he is in a cellar or dungeon. Then there comes a sound. He thinks it might be a sound from far off—waves or wind-blown trees or cattle half a mile away. And if so, it proves he's not in a cellar, but free, in the open air. Or, it may be a much smaller sound close at hand—a chuckle of laughter. And if so, there is a friend just beside him in the dark.

Often, there can come this shift in perspective so that you perceive that you are not so confined or alone as you thought.

God the Iconoclast

Sometimes we need to have our categories smashed, to think outside our self-imposed boxes. J.B. Phillips once wrote a book titled *Your God is Too Small*. Periodically, we need to have our inadequate ideas about God enlarged. God Himself is the great idol smasher, destroying inadequate ideas of Himself so that we might grasp a more true vision. Lewis wrote: "My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast."

This smashing even applies to some of our questions. Some of our questions are unanswerable, at least in the way we ask them. Lewis says:

When I lay these questions before God, I get no answer. But rather, a special kind of 'no answer.' It is

not the locked door. It is more like a silent, certainly not uncompassionate, gaze. As though He shook His head not in refusal but waiving the question. Like, 'Peace, child; you don't understand.' . . . Can a mortal ask questions which God finds unanswerable? Quite easily, I should think. All nonsense questions are unanswerable. How many hours are there in a mile? Is yellow square or round? Probably half the questions we ask—half our great theological and metaphysical problems—are like that.

Later, Lewis writes:

Heaven will solve our problems, but not by showing us subtle reconciliations between all our apparently contradictory notions. The notions will be knocked from under our feet. We shall see that there never was any problem.

Lewis's faith was gradually restored to its robust quality, as we can see in his final book, *Letters to Malcolm*. He had suffered his worst pain and come out on the other side.

It is hoped that these insights might be helpful, although I am aware of the dilemma Lewis described in *The Problem of Pain*:

All arguments in justification of suffering provoke bitter resentment against the author. You would like to know how I behave when I am experiencing pain, not writing books about it.

When we all experience pain, a little courage helps more (Lewis observes) than much knowledge, a little human sympathy more than much courage, and the least tincture of the love of God more than all.

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