



January 2009—*The Gift of Pain?*

Pain is the gift no one wants. But, as C.S. Lewis explains, sometimes it is the gift that God must give.

If the first and lowest operation of pain shatters the illusion that all is well, the second shatters the illusion that what we have, whether good or bad in itself, is our own and enough for us. Everyone has noticed how hard it is to turn our thoughts to God when everything is going well with us. We “have all we want” is a terrible saying when “all” does not include God. We find God an interruption. As St. Augustine says somewhere, “God wants to give us something, but cannot, because our hands are full—there’s nowhere for Him to put it.” Or as a friend of mine said, “We regard God as an airman regards his parachute; it’s there for emergencies but he hopes he’ll never have to use it.” Now God, who has made us, knows what we are and that our happiness lies in Him. Yet we will not seek it in Him as long as He leaves us any other resort where it can even plausibly be looked for. While what we call “our own life” remains agreeable we will not surrender it to Him. What then can God do in our interests but make “our own life” less agreeable to us, and take away the plausible source of false happiness? It is just here, where God’s providence seems at first to be most cruel, that the Divine humility, the stooping down of the Highest, most deserves praise. We are perplexed to see misfortune falling upon decent, inoffensive, worthy people—on capable, hard-working mothers of families or diligent, thrifty little tradespeople, on those who have worked so hard, and so honestly, for their modest stock of happiness and now seem to be entering on the enjoyment of it with the fullest right. How can I say with sufficient tenderness what here needs to be said? . . . Let me implore the reader to try to believe, if only for the moment, that God, who made these deserving people, may really be right when He thinks that their modest prosperity and the happiness of their children are not enough to make them blessed: that all this must fall from them in the end, and that if they have not learned to know Him they will be wretched. And therefore He troubles them, warning them in advance of an insufficiency that one day they will have to discover. The life to themselves and their families stands between them and the recognition of their need; He makes that life less sweet to them.¹

When we are content without God (or with God kept in second place), he may, out of love, give us the gift of pain—not to punish us, but to draw us to himself and keep us from even greater suffering in the future. While this certainly doesn’t explain all pain in human life, it does explain some.

C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), pp. 94-95.