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Some Shattering Simplicity: Suffering, Love, and Faith in the Thought of C.S. Lewis

Jennifer Woodruff

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A Collection of Essays Presented at

The First

FRANCES WHITE EWBank COLLOQUIUM

ON

C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

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**“Some Shattering Simplicity”:
Suffering, Love, and Faith in the Thought of C.S. Lewis**

Jennifer Lynn Woodruff

**“Some Shattering Simplicity”:
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by Jennifer Lynn Woodruff

“Heaven will solve our problems, but not, I think, by showing us subtle reconciliations between all our apparently contradictory notions. The notions will all be knocked from under our feet. We shall see that there never was any problem. . . . And more than once, that impression which I can't describe except by saying that it's like the sound of a chuckle in the darkness. The sense that some shattering and disarming simplicity is the real answer.”

-C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

A repeated theme in the works of C.S. Lewis is the tension inherent in why and how we believe and accept Christianity. On the one hand, he claims, we recognize Christianity as true because it makes so much sense out of patterns and ideas we intuitively know or have observed already: “The whole Miracle [the Incarnation], far from denying what we already knew of reality, writes the comment which makes that crabbed text plain: proves itself to be the text on which Nature was only the commentary” (*Miracles* 130) On the other hand, Lewis also asserts, Christianity is something that, left to our own human resources, we never could have guessed: “It is no use asking for a simple religion. After all, real things are not simple. They look simple, but they are not.... That is one of the reasons I believe Christianity. It is a religion you could

not have guessed” (*Mere Christianity* 46). Perhaps, it seems to me, these two concepts are not as contradictory as they might seem; it may well be that our experience and acceptance of faith will both confirm and complicate our first impressions. Christianity makes sense of reality, but at the same time shatters all our expectations of reality. How—and why—does this happen? And what implications does it have?

Inextricably connected to a discussion of the nature of faith is a discussion of the nature of love: our faith, after all, is ultimately not only intellectual belief, but a relationship. In *The Four Loves* and *A Grief Observed*, Lewis describes and expands upon, from both apologetic and personal viewpoints, the nature of love. His discussion provides a way of understanding both these aspects of the

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journey of faith, and how they may be reconciled.

Understanding the nature of love in a Christian sense (agape, or Charity) begins as all Christian understanding does, by confirming much of our natural experience of love. Throughout *The Four Loves*, Lewis illuminates how, if Charity is present, each of the other three loves can serve as a proper reflection of and pathways to that Charity. Affection can teach us to love the unlovable and “[open] our eyes to goodness we could not have seen, or should not have appreciated without it” (*The Four Loves* 37).

Friendship, as a love “free from instinct, free from all duties but those which love has freely assumed, almost wholly free from jealousy, and free without qualification from the need to be needed” (*Loves* 77) gives us a foretaste, in nearness of resemblance to the “heavenly life” (*Loves* 88). As for Eros, Lewis says, “Christ says to us through Eros, ‘Thus—just like this—with—this prodigality—not counting the cost—you are to love me and the least of my brethren’” (*Loves* 110). All have the ability to awaken in us the appreciative love towards others and towards God which Lewis calls “that higher—that highest—subject” (*Loves* 129).

Lewis is very clear about the spiritual perversions which each of these loves is subject to if considered as an end instead of a means, and constantly reiterates the idea that love “begins to be a demon the moment he begins to be a god” (*Loves* 6). But he is equally clear that living in Christian charity does not automatically entail renouncing our natural loves. Rather, submission to Charity perfects these natural loves and helps develop them to their highest capacity: “When God rules in a human heart, though he may sometimes have to remove certain of its native

authorities altogether, He often continues others in their offices and, by subjecting their authority to His, gives it for the first time a firm basis. . . . When God arrives (and only then) the half-gods can remain” (*Loves* 119).

Yet, as much as we would like to, we cannot stop there. Once we allow a true understanding of the Christian conception of love to enter our lives, once we allow God to shape, remake, and deepen our loves, we are all too quickly faced with a painful reality which our Christian beliefs seem only to complicate. In a world where loss and death are factors, real love for any fellow-creature involves and cannot avoid real suffering; and a proper understanding of Christian charity, which has allowed that love to develop to its fullest potential, only deepens the pain at the point of loss. Our response to this face is similar to what Lewis claims was his natural response, as it was St. Augustine’s: “I am a safety-first creature. Of all arguments against love none makes so strong an appeal to my nature as ‘Careful! This might lead you to suffering;’” (*Loves* 120).

As Lewis mourns the death of his wife Joy in *A Grief Observed*, we see this response illustrated in graphic detail, and the questions he asks parallel our own questions and our own complaints when faced with a reality which seems so contrary to our desires. “Oh god, God,” he writes in his journal at one point, “why did you take such trouble to force this creature out of its shell if it is now doomed to crawl back to be sucked back into it?” (*Grief* 20). Later: “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 all our worst fears and beyond all we can imagine” (*Grief* 31). And: “Aren’t all these notes the senseless writhings of a man who won’t accept the fact

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that there is nothing we can do with suffering except to suffer it?" (*Grief* 38) Perhaps what is hardest is that this suffering inherent in love seems contrary not only to our unadulterated natural desires and expectations, but to the very encouragement of those natural desires which Christianity has given us.

Given this dilemma, this impasse, what are our options? There is, of course, the choice not to love any "earthly beloveds" (*Loves* 122) at all. This is the alternative St. Augustine was recommending, and the choice Lewis recognizes as so congenial to our nature. But it seems clear, if we take our faith with any seriousness, that this alternative is not what was commanded of us. "We follow One," says Lewis, "who wept over Jerusalem and at the grave of Lazarus...Even if it were granted that insurances against heartbreak were our highest wisdom, does God Himself offer them? Apparently not. Christ comes at last to say 'Why has thou forsaken me?'" (*Loves* 121). So the puzzle remains. Why are we led so deliberately (it almost seems) into heartbreak? Why, if we are commanded to love and not to count the cost, is the world set up so that suffering is part of loving?

Granted that we have loved, and granted that we have suffered, we are fully within our rights and our human nature to stop there, and to claim a number of fully human and cynical things. We may come to believe that we have misunderstood the very foundations of our faith, and deny God's existence. More likely, as Lewis puts it in *A Grief Observed*, "Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him" (*Grief* 5). He toys in this book, as we toy in our sufferings, with the idea that God is ultimately uncaring, or worse, evil. The faith that we thought fit the facts so well crumbles

in the face of facts that it seemingly cannot explain. "You never know," Lewis says,

how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you. It is easy to say you believe a rope to be strong and sound as long as you are merely using it to cord a box. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a precipice. Wouldn't you then first discover how much you really trusted it?...Apparently the faith—I thought it faith—which enables me to pray for the other dead has seemed strong only because I have never really cared, not desperately, whether they existed or not. Yet I thought I did. (*Grief* 25-26)

At first, in all likelihood, we will be angry at God. But if we choose the route of ceasing to believe, and follow that road where it ultimately leads, the anger will fade; the cruel joke will be accepted, and the love which our faith enabled to grow and blossom will die when that faith dies. We become then what Lewis, discussing Hope, calls the "Disillusioned 'Sensible Man'" who "settles down and learns not to expect too much" (*Mere Christianity* 120). In fact, this option is no option at all, for we end up directly in the middle of the alternative we have already rejected. As surely as if we had chosen not to love, by rejecting love's consequence of suffering we are locking our heart "up safe in the casket or coffin of [our] selfishness. But in that casket safe, dark, motionless, airless it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable" (*Loves* 121).

So it seems we have no other choice but to

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suffer; even to abandon ourselves to the suffering, with no guarantee as to what our faith will look like on the other side. This does not prevent us from asking some of the same questions and feeling the same anger that we should ask and feel along the road to disillusionment, but it prevents our coming up with the same ultimate conclusion; and we do not have to come up with that conclusion, if we admit that faith can move through doubt and still be faith. One response when our experience shatters our expectations or reality is the response that we had false expectations about God's goodness and purpose; but another response is that it is in the nature of god's goodness to shatter our expectations not shattering in the sense that we thought He is good, and He is instead evil, but shattering in the sense that He is certainly bigger, and probably better, than we thought.

John Beversluis, writing in *Christian History* on themes more fully developed in his book *C.S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, characterized Lewis's position in his later writings thus: "The ambitious scope and extrovert manner of the old days is replaced by a noticeably smaller-scaled and more piecemeal approach together with a correspondingly quieter tone and tree-ripened meditiveness" (Beversluis 29). His description of the specifically post-*Grief Observed* Lewis pictures him as "no longer the Apostle to the Skeptics, acutely surveying the present state of the evidence, but the Reminder to the Forgetful, humbly searching for just enough light to face the day ahead" (Beversluis 31). There is much truth in both of these characterizations. What seems less true is Beversluis's interpretation of what this change means. He claims it meant that "rationality has been sidestepped" and that Lewis's "commitment to divine goodness had

outrun his comprehension of it" (Beversluis 30). "Lewis claimed," Beversluis says, "his faith somehow survived. I am sure that it did. But it no longer invited the assent of the rational man" (30). Perhaps, however, the "sidestepping" of rationality is not sidestepping, but transcending. Perhaps it is good that we do not comprehend all of God; perhaps it is necessary that the final thing we trust is not our own reason. Perhaps Lewis's faith no longer invited the assent, not of the rational man, but of the solely rational man.

I realize this point is vulnerable to the same charge that Beversluis leveled against Lewis; that of changing the definitions of Christian faith to avoid the consequences of that faith's contact with reality. To this charge I can only respond: who is to say that our first impression of those definitions was complete? That, at any rate, was Lewis's response. If Lewis claimed his faith "somehow survived," perhaps we ought to listen to why.

In fact, this point seems to be central to Lewis's final conclusion, and to the resolution of Christianity's confirmation and complication. What we discover when we go through suffering, Lewis seems to imply, is that our first impressions were true, but incomplete. We defended them in honest good faith and certitude, and this was not a mistake. It is certainly preferable to never having believed, never having defended them at all. But there is more. Applying this concept specifically to love, we see that we may have perfected our earthly loves in a truly Christian manner. But that never really was enough. In *A Grief Observed*, considering his description of his marriage to Joy as "too perfect to last," Lewis says: "It could . . . mean 'This had reached its proper perfection. Therefore of course it would not be prolonged.' As if God said 'Good; you have mastered that exercise.

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I am very pleased with it. And now you are ready to go on to the next” (*Grief* 56-57). In *The Four Loves*, he states the point memorably: “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” (*Loves* 139).

It is our own enslavement to our own original expectations which prevents our faith from reaching its fruition. Not that our original expectations were false. Lewis certainly believed that, done in good faith, human reason can develop explanations and defenses of many great truths of our existence and our faith; and indeed, if we believe our intellectual powers are God-given, we are under obligation not to hide the talent in the ground (Matt. 25:14-30). But in reasoning about Divine things, the picture is not complete without Divine assistance; and since faith is not a matter of reason alone, that Divine assistance is perhaps best accomplished not merely by sharpening our reason but by sending us experiences where the beliefs we have arrived at by reason can be tested, tried, refined, and completed.

For in order to complete our faith, in order for it to come to fruition, we must realize our ultimate helplessness. This is where Beversluis’s account of what Lewis’s newly-discovered humility meant falls wide of the mark. “Humbly searching for just enough light to face the day ahead” is not necessarily an unfaithful position. In fact, it is probably closer to the core of our faith than an overzealous certitude. Not that our faith does not promise certitude; but we ultimately base that certitude, not on our own powers, but on the fact that “I know Whom I have believed, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that

Day that has been entrusted to me” (2 Tim. 1:12,RSV). Not what we have believed: Whom. But why?

Lewis makes the point near the end of *The Four Loves* that one of God’s strangest and most paradoxical actions is to create in us a supernatural Need-love of Him. “Need is so near greed and we are so greedy already that it seems a strange grace,” he says.

But I cannot get it out of my head that this is what happens. . . . Of course the Grace does not create the need. That is there already; ‘given’ . . . in the mere fact of our being creatures, and incalculably increased by our being fallen creatures. What the Grace gives is the full recognition, the sensible awareness, the complete acceptance even, with certain reservations, the glad acceptance of this Need. (*Loves* 129-30)

Even in our repentance, even in our humility, Lewis claims, we still attempt to find a source of pride: “Depth beneath depth and subtlety within subtlety, there remains some lingering idea of our own, our very own, attractiveness” (*Loves* 131). Yet God cannot give the full measure of his love to us until we acknowledge that we need it, until we develop “a joy in total dependence” (*Loves* 131). And perhaps the only way to truly learn this is through suffering. Returning for a moment to Lewis’s rope example from *A Grief Observed*: without abandoning ourselves to the process of suffering, without being willing to take the complicated way out of admitting our ideas were incomplete—rather than the easy way out of proclaiming that they were merely wrong we are only tying cords around boxes, and may pride ourselves on how artfully we make the knots. When we choose to love, we

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choose the precipice instead. When we choose to grow through the suffering of love, we choose to take the rope in our hands, knowing that our own artful knot-tying will not in the end be the deciding factor in the rope's own strength, and take the jump. Or, as Lewis says: "We shall draw nearer to God, not by trying to avoid the sufferings inherent in all loves, but by accepting them and offering them to Him; throwing away all defensive armor. If our hearts need to be broken, and if He chooses this as the way in which they should break, so be it" (*Loves* 122).

And what, then, do we discover when we make the jump? We discover that the rope holds. What Lewis described early in *A Grief Observed* as the "locked door, the iron curtain, the vacuum, absolute zero" (7) is later transformed for him: "When I lay these questions before God I get no answer. But a rather special sort 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'" (*Grief* 80-81). We discover that God is there; we even begin to reassert that God is good. But now, in what can eventually become that "joy of total dependence," we assert this in humility and gratitude, more tentatively perhaps not because we believe God is too small to deal with the world's problems, but because we have discovered he is so much larger than we could have conceived on our own. "My idea of God," Lewis says, "is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast. Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of His presence? The Incarnation is the supreme example; it leaves all previous ideas of the Messiah in ruins" (*Grief* 76).

It may very well be asked at this point, especially by those who have not yet undergone this kind of experience, why the rope holds. Why, if real love involves real suffering, the shattering action of the great Iconoclast, the ultimate taking of a leap we cannot solely justify rationally, does God's goodness and purpose make sense? The answer, and the resolution—at least the resolution Lewis and along with him other theologians and philosophers, seems to imply—is that we are not merely God's disinterested experiment. If we stop our growth in faith at this point of realizing that suffering serves a divine purpose, we have not fully regained our faith in God's goodness; for we have left out of our picture of God an element of compassion. We have left out of our picture God's suffering. For some, the idea of God's suffering is controversial. But if we believe that perfect God and perfect Man died on the Cross if we believe that He called out, in that darkest hour just before death, the haunting phrase which is echoed faintly in our own human cries, including Lewis's—if we believe that God Himself asked the ultimate question of doubt—"My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46, Mark 15:34) if we believe that, we have no other choice.

How does the Cross achieve this reconciliation of our faith with our frustrated expectations? What is the strength of this rope? As long as God had never become Man, we could claim somehow that he "never really understood." Our grievance against Him, our description of Him as something close to the cosmic vivisectionist Lewis comes up with early in *A Grief Observed* (33), might have some basis in fact. Granting that suffering is for our benefit, we could still claim that His inflicting of suffering is somehow cruel. What

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the Cross means—or, more specifically, the agony of the Cross—is that we cannot make that complaint. We can doubt no more, agonize no more, and suffer no more than God Himself has done. Modern theologian Thomas C. Oden comments: “The most profound Christian theodicy does not reason deductively but tells the story of God’s suffering for us. No argument can convince the sufferer. Only the actual history of God’s own coming to suffering humanity could make the difference. That is what has occurred” (Oden 422). And an apologist of an earlier era, G.K. Chesterton, put it even more memorably:

In that terrific tale of the Passion there is a distinct emotional suggestion that the author of all things (in some unthinkable way) went not only through agony, but through doubt. ... When the world shook and the sun was wiped out of heaven, it was not at the crucifixion, but at the cry from the cross; the cry which confessed that God was forsaken of God. And now let the revolutionists choose a creed from all the creeds and a god from all gods of the world, of unalterable power. They will not find another god who has himself been in revolt. Nay (the matter grows too difficult for human speech), but let the atheists themselves choose a god. They will find only one divinity who ever uttered their isolation; only one religion in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist. (Chesterton 194-95)

It may seem that we have moved in the last few paragraphs rather far away from our discussion of love. I think that rather we have moved closer to its core; for without

understanding the Cross we will understand love no better than we understand faith. The key to both is that they involve suffering. The key to both is also that God shares that suffering. The key to both is that when we suffer, when our original confidence is shaken, we may walk a dark road and we may think we walk it alone; but if we do not give up we find out that we do not walk it alone, and there is a new kind of light at the end, on the other side of our experience. Lewis says: “God has not been trying an experiment on my faith or love in order to find out their quality. He knew it already. It was I who didn’t” (*Grief* 61).

So, if the rope holds, and if this is why it holds, then we must reassess our original question somewhat. We began by asking how and why it is that Christianity both confirms and complicates our first impressions. The answer seems clear, if profound, now: God confirms, then complicates, in order to confirm again, but differently now. We begin in innocence, in the fresh excitement of a new-found faith, of a developing, growing love that is learning within the framework of that faith how to give and to receive. Christianity is what we expected; it makes sense of all the fragmented parts of our faith and our love. Then we move into experience. The love we have surrendered to involves suffering. The faith we have surrendered to is attacked and tormented with doubts. Christianity is not at all what we expected, and everything we desire is dying. Our former explanations seem, as Beversluis perhaps somewhat overzealously termed Lewis’s earlier books, “facile and cavalier” (Beversluis 31). We knock at Heaven’s door for earthly comfort, and hear no sound.

Yet experience is not the end. There is what might be called a higher innocence; a

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level of understanding where our intellect, clothed in experience and bowed in humility, transcends itself—or rather, finds itself transcended by a God who is not inconsistent with our earlier conceptions, simply larger than them. If His Word became flesh, can ours fail to do as much? Lewis implied as much at the end of *Mere Christianity*: “Nothing that you have not given away will every be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead” (190). After complexity and complication come, not “subtle reconciliations,” but “some shattering and disarming simplicity.” “We shall see that there never was any problem” (*Grief* 83). “Didn’t people dispute once,” Lewis says in his journal’s last paragraphs, “whether the final vision of God was more an act of intelligence or of love? That is probably another of the nonsense questions” (*Grief* 89).

One final testimony. Perhaps it is farfetched; but I think not so. Thousands of years before Lewis, centuries even before Christ, in some of the most famous lines ever written, in poetry which has entered and informed the imagination even of those who do not yet profess Christianity—another writer who understood suffering, love, and faith had this to say as he chronicled how God confirmed, complicated, and confirmed again what he had first believed. Having moved from mere reason to relationship, having passed from innocence through experience to a higher innocence he wrote:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not
want;
He makes me lie down in green
pastures.
He leads me beside still waters;
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness

for His name’s sake.
Even though I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil;
for Thou art with me;
Thy rod and Thy staff
they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
Thou anointest my head with oil,
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall
follow me
all the days of my life;
and I shall dwell in the house of the
Lord forever.
(Psalm 23,RSV)

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