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## Narrating Pain: C.S. Lewis and the Problem of Evil

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Over 20 years separate the publication dates of C.S. Lewis's *The Problem of Pain* and *A Grief Observed*. Written relatively early in both his career and in his pilgrimage as a Christian, *The Problem of Pain* takes its place in a genre that is at least as old as the book of Job: the theodicy, the attempt to address the question, 'Why does God allow bad things to happen?' Lewis's return to this topic roughly 20 years after the publication of *The Problem of Pain*—albeit in a radically different discursive form—suggests that this question never goes away, no matter how cogent the argument or compelling the answer. Lewis returned to the subject late in his Christian pilgrimage frankly because he had to. The death of his wife, Joy Davidman Gresham, hurled Lewis into a crisis of suffering that caused him to doubt everything that he believed. Writing what was later titled *A Grief Observed* was therapeutic for Lewis, who called the book a "defense against total collapse, a safety valve" (22).

When I teach a course on Lewis, I like to hold the two books on pain and suffering, one in each hand, raise them toward my students, and ask, 'Which of these two texts would give you more comfort in your own crisis of suffering? Which of the two would you recommend to the sufferer?' Almost unanimously, my students reply, '*A Grief Observed*'—this despite the fact that *A Grief Observed* depicts a Lewis grappling with God, angry with and frightened by God, a Lewis who, in his darker moments, suggests that God had successfully played a "vile practical joke" on His own Son (34). Clearly something more than twenty years separate the triumphant *Problem of Pain* and the tragic *A Grief Observed*: Though written by the same author on the same subject, the two texts diverge in discursive methods, tone, and in attestations that are just plain contradictory. In this essay, I will explore some of these points of divergence, seeking to understand why my students and other Lewis readers resonate more strongly with the narrative account of suffering and loss

registered in *A Grief Observed* than with the rational defense of God's goodness in the face of suffering, philosophized in *The Problem of Pain*.

One major theodicy presented in *The Problem of Pain* originates—at least to my knowledge—in the writings of the Apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul pleads with the Lord to remove his thorn in the flesh. The Lord, however, flatly rejects Paul's request, responding, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (1 Corinthians 12:8). Paradoxically strengthened by his own weaknesses, Paul begins to delight in hardships and in difficulties. Similarly, in *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis points to the paradox of suffering—how pain can occasion human responses that allow God to transform people. In one of the most famous sentences of the book, Lewis writes, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains; it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world" (83). "Pain," Lewis continues, "shatters the creature's false self-sufficiency; the will must be surrendered to God" (91).

The Lewis of *A Grief Observed*, on the other hand, wrestles with a pain that shatters more than self-sufficiency; it seems to explode the entire foundation upon which Lewis built his earlier theodicy. As Lewis admits in *A Grief Observed*, "What grounds has [Joy's death] given me for doubting all that I believe? ... We were even promised sufferings. They were part of the program. We were told, 'Blessed are they that mourn,' and I accepted it. 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 the imagination" (42). These sentences inscribe the hard-earned truth that when theodicy meets reality, reality generally wins. Later in *A Grief Observed*, in fact, Lewis implies that philosophical, theodicy-building approaches to suffering only compound the problem of pain by proposing answers to ill-formed

questions, false starting points of inquiry. He writes, “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” (81). In stark contrast to the self-assured Lewis of *The Problem of Pain*, the doubting Lewis of *A Grief Observed* admits that “there is nothing we can do with suffering except to suffer it” (38).

Other disquieting contradictions augment the conceptual and tonal distance separating the two texts. In a chapter titled “Divine Goodness” in *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis states that love may cause pain to its object. As Lewis writes, “It is for people whom we care nothing about that we demand happiness on any terms: with our friends, lovers, and children, we are exacting and would rather see them suffer much than be happy in contemptible and estranging modes... If God is love, He is something more than kindness.” Re-invoking what I earlier called the paradox of suffering, Lewis argues that this something-more-than-kindness—divine goodness and love—“demands the perfecting of the beloved,” paradoxically accomplished through the refining fires of suffering. In *A Grief Observed*, however, when Lewis seeks out that paradoxical experience created by divine goodness and love, he finds only divine rejection. He explains, “But go to [God] when your need is desperate, 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” (4).

The contradictions between the two books on suffering and loss are thus inescapable. While the Lewis of *The Problem of Pain* could expatiate in chapter’s length on the non-contradiction between human suffering and divine goodness, the Lewis of *A Grief Observed* seems to undermine that notion of divine goodness with one agonized sweep of the pen. “Sooner or later,” this tortured Lewis admits, “I must face the question in plain language. 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?” (33-34). The re-conceptualization of divine goodness in *The Problem of Pain* becomes re-re-conceptualized in *A Grief Observed*—to the point that divine goodness falls outside the pale of anything we can call good.

In addition to enduring the all-consuming pangs of an encompassing suffering, the Lewis of *A Grief Observed* also experiences more particularized throes of despair for which I believe the Lewis of *The Problem of Pain* never accounted. Once Joy died, Lewis began to construct in his mind an imaginary Joy, what he in

his self-pity calls a “mere doll to be blubbered over.” The reality of Joy—her physical presence—is no longer there to check him, and he possessed no clear photograph of her. To his horror, Lewis realizes that he cannot remember her clearly. In his overpowering grief, Lewis begins to commemorate a woman who exists only as an imaginary construct.

Though the struggles like these recorded in *A Grief Observed* make some of Lewis’s more conservative Christian readers nervous and uncomfortable, it would be misleading to overemphasize the hopelessness of the text; it is not an account of Lewis’s apostasy. And my students (at a conservative Christian university) certainly would not give it the nod over *The Problem of Pain* if it were. Though his life would never be the same, Lewis works through his grief, gradually finding some resolution.

Perhaps most significantly, Lewis realizes that the unrestrained, plaintive cries of the sufferer can drown out God’s voice even when that voice is projected through the megaphone described in *The Problem of Pain*. In a passage that marks an important shift in *A Grief Observed*, Lewis achieves yet another hard-earned insight, this time one that brings him comfort:

I have gradually been coming to feel that the door is 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. (53-54)

In addition, when that “frantic need” and those “reiterated cries” subside, Lewis can once again fix his mind’s eye on the real Joy, not the one constructed by self-pity and an imagination skewed by grief and desperation. “Passionate grief,” writes Lewis, “does not link us with the dead but cuts us off from them. This becomes clearer and clearer. It is just at those moments when I feel least sorrow—getting into my morning bath is usually one of them—that [Joy] rushes upon my mind in her full reality, her otherness” (64-65).

My sense is that the shockingly honest, emotionally and spiritually charged narrative of suffering and loss in *A Grief Observed* comes across as more real, more authentic and genuine to my students than does the theoretically oriented, painstakingly argued theodicy offered in *The Problem of Pain*. Students seem more compelled by the organically developed conclusion in *A Grief Observed* that suffering, when it is overwhelmingly great, can de-sensitize our receptivity to God’s voice. Some students know this experientially;

they read their own narrative in Lewis's narrative and perhaps find that Lewis gives voice to some of their own moments of doubt and despair.

I am more interested, however, in the underlying factors behind this preference, this partiality toward narrative. By extrapolation, it would seem that the evidential arguments that buttress the theodicies of such popular Christian thinkers as Josh McDowell, Lee Strobel, Ravi Zacharias, R.C. Sproul, and William Lane Craig would be less convincing to my students than narrative accounts of suffering and loss. These students are not anomalous: Their sentiments echo a growing consensus in the academic community—one that is sympathetic to narrative approaches to the problem of evil.

Before launching his own philosophical theodicy, for example, Daniel Howard-Snyder makes a distinction between the “practical problem of evil and the theoretical problem of evil” (79). He then admits that many of his readers will be disappointed by his exclusive focus on the theoretical problem: “I am in sympathy with them. After all, evil and suffering are too real to be dealt with on a merely theoretical level.... The premise here is true: for many people, there are times when ‘philosophical twaddle’ about God and evil cannot meet their needs” (80). Philosopher Susan J. Brison also notes how philosophical discourse often empties suffering of its lived, individualized meanings. A victim of sexual assault, Brison struggles to localize terms that are easily dislodged from their particularized context: “And I felt that I had very little control over the meaning of the word ‘rape.’ Using the term denied the particularity of what I had experienced and invoked in other people whatever rape scenario they had already constructed.”

Brison's language—“localized terms,” “particularized contexts”—suggests that the experience of suffering and loss opens up a space that tends to bifurcate discursive approaches to the problem of evil. On the one hand, philosophical approaches, like those found in Lewis's *The Problem of Pain*, often operate from outside the space of suffering, from a de-individualized vantage point that, if successful, will render universally binding conclusions. Analyzing the space of suffering from outside that very space, such approaches necessarily maintain a phenomenological distance from suffering, combating the problem of evil from an abstract, de-particularized perspective; concrete instances of evil are held at bay while the theodicy-maker squares off against the universal problem of evil. On the other hand, narrative approaches—like that found in Lewis's *A Grief Observed*—operate from inside the space of suffering, occupying the personalized space of individuals grappling with evil. Such narratives eliminate that phenomenological distance and give representation to

concrete, particularized experiences of suffering; evil rushes in upon the reader as the narrative unfolds.

Lewis often favored the philosophical, de-particularized perspective, for in many ways, Lewis was a product of his age. He gave reasons for the hope that lay within him using Enlightenment standards of rationality. The philosophical framework of *The Problem of Pain*—its clear stance of analyzing suffering from outside the space of suffering—is a testament to that fact. However, when Joy died in 1960, he was forced to return to the problem of pain in a way that made him so uncomfortable that, when *A Grief Observed* was published, he resorted to the use of a pseudonym (N.W. Clerk). Namely, Lewis was forced to enter the space of suffering where the particularities of his own experience became evident. Lewis thus necessarily shed his typical discursive identity as a dispassionate inquirer whose reasonable conclusions were irrefutable to anyone exercising good common sense and impartiality. The Lewis of *A Grief Observed* is convincing to my students precisely *because* he is partial. By necessity, he abandons the de-contextualized, neutral posture adopted in *The Problem of Pain* and begins a narrative of suffering and loss that is already embedded in a context: that of a middle-aged academic who recently lost his wife, who wants to turn to his Christian faith but finds God's presence to be overshadowed by the tyrannizing presence of grief. Once Lewis steps inside the space of suffering, he necessarily perspectivizes his narrative and sheds the de-localized voice that predominates in many of his other books on faith. Unlike *The Problem of Pain*, *A Grief Observed* draws readers into a deeply contextualized scenario, and it is within this context that the truth claims and conclusions that Lewis narratively works out achieve a richer and more convincing coherence and meaning.

What Lewis shows my students not only in *A Grief Observed* but also in his fantasy and science fiction literature is that Christians are in an advantageous position to flesh out truth claims that proceed from contextualized narratives. Lewis, after all, identified Christianity as a myth—the archetypal narrative—that became fact. Lewis's myths project worlds, open up spaces that beckon the reader to enter. Once inside this space, Christian truth claims achieve a fuller resonance because they are placed within a specific context.

What is true for Christian truth claims is true for Christian suffering. In Book 1 of *The Chronicles of Narnia, The Magician's Nephew*, for example, young Digory Kirke pleads with Aslan to give him something that will cure his dying mother. As Lewis narrates,

‘But please, please—won't you—can't you give me something that will cure Mother?’ Up till then he had been looking at the Lion's

great feet and the huge claws on them; now, in his despair, he looked up at its face. What he saw surprised him as much as anything in his whole life. For the tawny face was bent down near his own and (wonder of wonders) great shining tears stood in the Lion's eyes. They were such big, bright tears compared with Digory's own that for a moment he felt as if the Lion must really be sorrier about his Mother than he was himself.

'My son, my son,' said Aslan. 'I know. Grief is great. Only you and I in this land know that yet. Let us be good to one another.' (168)

This passage shows that Christians are in that advantageous position mentioned earlier not only because they have a narrative that contextualizes truth claims. Perhaps more importantly, this passage reveals that the One who permits suffering suffers Himself. He involves Himself, as Aslan does with Digory, in the personal narratives of grief and despair lived out by his own children. To use my previous metaphor, like narrative approaches to the problem of evil, God enters the space of human suffering. Once inside, He participates in the unbearable grief that is observed there. *The Magician's Nephew* at this particular point brings readers inside the space of suffering, where Aslan not only meets Digory, but, for the engaged reader, where God can also meet us as we endure pain and despair. Narrative accounts of suffering and loss like *A Grief Observed* encourage my students that God can likewise meet them there in their own respective contexts—their own particularized spaces of suffering.

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