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Cover Page Footnote

Undergraduate Student Essay

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Byron J. Powell

*“The earth is soaked from crust to core with the tears of humanity.”
—Fyodor Dostoyevsky*

The task of the Christian apologist is to eliminate intellectual obstacles that individuals may stumble upon as they negotiate the intellectual path to Christendom. For example, issues such as the existence of evil, hypocrisy, and miracles often prove to be intellectual hindrances potentially preventing multitudes of people from coming to Christ. C.S. Lewis, perhaps the most brilliant Christian apologist of the twentieth century, was tremendously successful in helping to remove such obstacles through the medium of his literary works.

The world we live in is one in which suffering often seems to reign supreme. It would be most difficult to identify a single individual who has not suffered in some way, shape, or form. In fact, pain and suffering are so pervasive that it is safe to say that everyone who walks the earth has suffered, is suffering, or will suffer in the future. One cannot escape it, for it is an undeniable fact of life. Lewis testifies to the inevitability of suffering in his writing:

Try to exclude the possibility of suffering which the order of nature and the existence of free wills involve, and you find that you have excluded life itself (*Problem of Pain* 31).

Both God’s Word and shared human experience echo Lewis’s sentiments. That being said, the existence of pain has proven problematic, as Christians and non-Christians alike encounter a God who allows such suffering to occur.

Upon close examination of this issue, it becomes apparent that the problem of pain is two-fold. The problem of pain has a philosophical or theoretical component as well as a practical component, both of

which are addressed in Lewis’ works. Lewis describes the philosophical problem in *The Problem of Pain*:

If God were good, He would wish to make his creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty, He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness or power or both (*Problem of Pain* 23).

The practical problem of pain deals not with the intellectual task of reconciling a good and all-powerful God and a suffering people, but rather with the difficulty in relating to God in the midst of pain and suffering.

The Philosophical Problem of Pain

It is human nature to shrink from pain. What child does not cringe at the very thought of a spanking? Who eagerly anticipates getting a tooth drilled at the dentist office? Aversion to pain is simply instinctual. However, any parent or dentist would be quick to warn against the dangers of leaving children undisciplined, or to avoiding the dentist chair. So why does one avoid pain at all costs? Perhaps the rise of hedonism in modern society has made it increasingly difficult to recognize the benefits of experiences which seem a bit unpleasant. Regardless of the reason for man’s loathing of pain, it is a beneficial and necessary part of life. In fact, Scripture is bold enough to identify adversity and affliction as the bread and water of life (Isaiah 30:20). Certainly, there are several reasons why the Lord allows suffering. Some of these reasons will no doubt remain mysteries on this side of Heaven. However, Lewis provides

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several valid pieces of rationale for God allowing pain and suffering. He claims that God's concepts of goodness and love differ greatly from fallen man's, that a correct understanding of sin will bring suffering into proper perspective, and that God uses pain and suffering to purify His children and rouse them from their selfish and complacent lifestyle.

It is extremely difficult to understand why God would allow pain and suffering, because God's definitions of goodness and love differ greatly from mankind's. Scripture affirms that God's wisdom is far superior to human wisdom. 1 Corinthians 3:19 goes as far as to say that, ". . . the wisdom of this world is folly with God." God's Word also maintains that man will never fully understand his ways on this side of Heaven. Fallen man's understanding of the truth is imperfect, like the silhouette of a creature on a dark and foggy evening that is spotted in the distance. It is imperative that one does not forget their own limitations, so that they might look upon the Lord's wisdom with fear and reverence.

Lewis reaffirms the Scriptural truths mentioned above by begging his readers to consider the inherent differences between the human conceptualization of goodness and love and the perfect representation of goodness and love that is the Lord's. Lewis is quick to note that although the human idea of goodness and love is very different from the Lord's, it differs mostly in the degree of perfection. Lewis describes it as differing, ". . . not as white from black but as a perfect circle from a child's first attempt to draw a wheel" (*Problem of Pain* 35). Therefore, it becomes evident that the human perception of goodness may not be goodness at all when placed under the Lord's perfect judgment. That is, He may desire something much greater for us. George MacDonald, who Lewis identifies as his spiritual master, once wrote, "The Lord never does the next best. The thing He does is always better than the thing He does not" (*The Elect Lady* 324). Lewis also observes that love is something much more than kindness. In fact, when one demonstrates true love, they demand more of the beloved, desiring that they suffer rather than be "happy in contemptible and estranging modes" (*Problem of Pain* 36). It seems as if love and goodness are associated only with kindness, gentleness, grace, and mercy. However, love is just as likely to arrive with discipline or even wrath as its companion. Once again, man's perception of goodness is skewed, distorted, and altogether incomplete. The tragedy is that they only short change themselves when they limit goodness to these warm and safe feelings. God desires so much more for them than what they see fit to demand of Him. In his essay, *The Weight of Glory*, Lewis addresses this idea that man is far too easily pleased. He remarks:

Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased (*The Weight of Glory* 26).

The things that become so captivating, such as food and drink, sex, work, or even family are very good things that are blessings from the Lord. However, these things are not the best, especially when they are placed in contrast with God's offer of infinite joy! Fallen man's reluctance to trust and obey the Lord's commands is indication enough that it is extremely difficult for them to decipher between what is good and what is the best. George MacDonald reiterates this concept as he remarks:

Man finds it hard to get what he wants, because he does not want the best; God finds it hard to give, because He would give the best, and man will not take it (*Unspoken Sermons II*, 142).

It is obvious that one's understanding of goodness and love needs to be measured against that of the Lord's, lest it be reduced to mere kindness, or worse. That said, the existence of pain and suffering becomes even harder to grasp due to an improper understanding of sin.

A proper understanding of sin, both individual and corporate, is crucial to the understanding of pain and suffering. There are several distinctions that need to be made when discussing this sensitive area. There are those that have misconstrued God's Word, thus equating every pain and suffering with some type of personal sin. Individual sin may in fact result in God's punishment, which leads to the pain and suffering of the guilty party. This is supported Biblically in parts of the Old Testament as well as in Revelation. However, it would be absurd to attribute all suffering to Divine wrath. God's Word reveals several instances in which suffering is not punitive. Certainly Job, who suffered more than most men ever will, was not being punished when he endured such terrible trials. Likewise, Jesus makes it clear in John 9:1-3, that suffering and sin are not always causally linked. It is safe to say that the direct punishment accounts for only a small fraction of the pain and suffering that permeates all creation. However, sin still rears its ugly head in this world, stinging all humanity with its iniquitous venom. Genesis

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6:5 conveys this unfortunate news, and testifies to the darkness of man's soul. It states that, "the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was evil continually." Thus, it is imperative that one thoroughly examines their soul, in order to recognize the utter depravity within. This introspection inevitably gives birth to humility, which facilitates a certain appreciation for the existence of pain and suffering. As Lewis remarks:

When we merely say that we are bad, the "wrath" of God seems a barbarous doctrine; as soon as we perceive our badness, it appears inevitable, a mere corollary from God's goodness (*Problem of Pain* 52).

This basic awareness of sin is fundamental to all Christianity. The truth of the matter is that man has the tendency to underestimate the wickedness of his own heart. Lewis mentions that man often errs in calling his habitual acts of transgression rare offenses, and of making the opposite mistake with his exceptional virtuous acts, calling them the norm (*Problem of Pain* 53). He also accuses man of being impenitent in his treatment of sin by failing to view them as pertinent to his present situation, and even of laughing in retrospect (*Problem of Pain* 54). He begs that sinners repent and recall that their salvation was not inexpensively gained, but rather paid for in full on a cross. Lewis also warns against man's tendency to excuse sin, due to the fact that he is surrounded by "friends in low places" (*Problem of Pain* 55). Sin is not excused simply because it is so popular. Lewis states that all men need to come face to face with the moral law. He mentions that:

The moral law may exist to be transcended: but there is no transcending it for those who have not first admitted its claims upon them, and then tried with all their strength to meet that claim, and fairly and squarely faced the fact of their failure (*Problem of Pain* 58).

When one arrives at these conclusions regarding the status of their heart, repentance and humility are sure to follow. However, man is most often stubborn to the core, filled with a pride that demands that life be lived on their terms. This selfish and individualistic attitude is contrary to what Lewis calls "the proper good of a creature," thus it becomes necessary for God to intervene and trouble this life that man fancies as their own (*Problem of Pain* 80).

This leads to what are perhaps the most important purposes of pain and suffering. God blesses us with affliction, because it is often the only way He is able to get our attention. Also, He uses pain and suffering as a

purifying fire. Lewis wrote that, ". . . Tribulations cannot cease until God either sees us remade or sees that our remaking is now hopeless" (*Problem of Pain* 95).

At first glance, it is surprising that the Lord's only recourse is the implementation of pain and suffering to garner the attention of His delinquent creation. Yet if one takes a second to reflect on the tendency of all mankind, it becomes obvious that pain and suffering are in fact the most expedient way to wake mankind from their slumber. As mentioned above, man is too easily pleased. He is easily given over to the simple comforts and pleasures of life. As Lewis notes:

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 sources of false happiness? (*Problem of Pain* 85)

It is practically a law of nature, that man credits himself when life seems agreeable to him. Man's pride is extensive, and he will not often fall to his knees on his own accord. Therefore, it becomes necessary for the Lord to knock His creature's legs out from under them. Pain and suffering demand attention, for "every man knows that something is wrong when he is being hurt" (*Problem of Pain* 82). Lewis describes the role of suffering most eloquently when he writes that, "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" (*Problem of Pain* 83). The Lord uses this "megaphone" that is pain as an instrument to penetrate the thick skulls of mankind. For man is stubborn and senseless and must, as Lewis said, ". . . be knocked silly before he comes to his senses" (*A Grief Observed* 36). The Lord also allows his children to suffer, so that their faith may be strengthened and that they may be purified in the fires of affliction. James 1: 3-4 supports this claim in stating, "For you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." Lewis noted that the more one understands that God's intention is to "hurt only to heal," the more they yield to affliction, with the realization that the present suffering is completing a good work in them (*A Grief Observed* 35). It is because of the Lord's great love that He subjects us to such horrible pain. George MacDonald illustrates this point:

The Son of God loves so utterly that He will have His children clean, and if hurt and sorrow, pain and torture, will do to deliver any one of them from the horrible thing . . . the

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loving Christ, though it hurts Him all the time, and though He feels every sting Himself, will do it (*God's Word to His Children* 125).

God's love is severe. He is holy, and must work in man, so that he might also be holy. Pain, although "a horrible instrument," is one that God often implements to carry out the process of sanctification (*Problem of Pain* 85). Lewis likens mankind to a "Divine work of art" that God continually rubs and scrapes at in order to make it glorious (*Problem of Pain* 38). Therefore, it becomes clear that although His children often squirm at the thought of pain, it is useful in making them what the Lord desires them to be. It is equally clear that pain and suffering are useful in testing and perfecting one's faith. Lewis notes that, "Only a real risk tests the reality of a belief" (*A Grief Observed* 21). There must be something at stake for man to truly rely on the Lord and take comfort in Him alone. Once again, man's tendency is to rely on himself. He is mercenary, and it is difficult for him to rely on anyone, let alone the Lord of the Universe, who remains unseen. This is precisely why it is so important for the Lord to take one of his legs out, so that he has no choice but to rely on the Lord as his crutch. Lewis compares his faith to a house of cards as he reflects upon how the Lord exposed the weakness of his faith:

He always knew that my temple was a house of cards. His only way of making me realize the fact was to knock it down (*A Grief Observed* 42).

The Lord knocks His children down only to pick them up again, and in so doing, raises them to new heights that were previously unreachable. He perfects them through affliction, pushing them beyond themselves.

The Problem of Pain alone is a great contribution to the literary world that provides many different explanations for the existence of pain and suffering in this world. However, one experiencing a great deal of pain and suffering first hand could certainly accuse Lewis of "whistling in the graveyard." But Lewis also penned a blatantly honest, first-hand account of suffering entitled *A Grief Observed*, which deals directly with the practical problem of pain as he copes with the death of his beloved wife Joy.

The Practical Problem of Pain

The aforementioned theodicies go a long way to dismiss the intellectual objections of those who cannot stomach a God who would ordain so many horrible manifestations of pain and suffering. However, to one who is staring suffering in the face, these intellectual explanations are far from consoling. In fact, Lewis

notices that intellectualizing the pain of his wife's death proved to be ineffective (*A Grief Observed* 31). Thus, the practical problem of pain is mostly unrelated to the intellectual problem that pain presents, and deals specifically with the difficulty in relating to God in the midst of pain and suffering.

A Grief Observed serves as an inside look into the realm of suffering. Lewis struggles with all the symptoms that accompany an immense loss, and is eventually granted healing when the Lord redeems his heartache for ultimate good. Lewis describes in great detail the course of misery that seemed both unrelenting and all encompassing.

Pain and Suffering are certainly experiences that are subject to degree. That is, not all suffering is equally as severe. However, if one has experienced suffering, they will not disagree that it is marked with an attitude of general lack of motivation. When one suffers, even the ordinary tasks of life become burdensome. Lewis remembers that even shaving became difficult for him, and concedes that, "It's easy to see why the lonely become untidy; finally, dirty and disgusting" (*A Grief Observed* 9). This is not the least bit surprising. When an individual experiences tremendous pain, it becomes difficult for them to find a reason to live, let alone brush their hair. Therefore, grieving individuals find work tremendously difficult, due to an overwhelming sense of apathy. Lewis was restless and felt that he was blessed with a most unwelcome gift, an abundance of time. Though he felt that nothing was worth starting, because he could not settle down, much less muster enough motivation to finish anything worthwhile (*A Grief Observed* 29).

Loneliness is often a likely companion to pain and suffering. Lewis mentioned that, "There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me" (*A Grief Observed* 7). He felt as if there was a sort of communicational chasm between him and the rest of the world. This is an emotion often shared amongst those who suffer. Lewis felt isolated from others, even to the point of writing, "Perhaps the bereaved ought to be isolated in special settlements like lepers" (*A Grief Observed* 13). Lewis even refers to the fact that his sons felt a sort of pity and embarrassment towards him. He felt alone, and the words of those who would attempt to offer comforting words to him seemed to be of little consequence. No doubt, suffering coincides with fear and isolation.

Another treacherous and predictable aspect of suffering is the self-centeredness of the whole affair. Lewis struggled greatly with this despicable truth, and it continually plagued him with guilt. He admitted that:

Part of every misery is, so to speak, the misery's shadow or reflection: the fact that you don't merely suffer but have to keep on

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thinking about the fact that you suffer (*A Grief Observed* 13).

The inward focus that grief often demands left Lewis feeling guilty for not mourning the passing of his wife as he ought. But the fact of the matter was that he thought of her constantly. He could not escape her memory if he wanted to (*A Grief Observed* 17). Actually, as he attempted to avoid those places that were of particular meaning to him and Joy, he discovered that the grief he experienced was not local at all (*A Grief Observed* 13). Once again, this should not come as a shock, for even an adolescent who has been dumped by his sweetheart knows that the pain is equally as real regardless of whether he is standing on the site of their first date or someplace that the couple never visited. Lewis was even tortured by the attempt to remember Joy accurately. He had seen her in so many different lights, that he could not picture her as he thought proper. Lewis was further confused when healing began to take its course, leading him to feel better. This too elicited feelings of shame and guilt within him, as if it would be better for him to wallow in his unhappiness forever.

Despite all of these internal “demons” that one faces in the midst of suffering, the real difficulty becomes trying to maintain a positive relationship with God throughout prolonged trials. Lewis, though a man of great faith, experienced a sort of abandonment, as he felt shut out from God. He relays this message:

When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, so happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be – or so it feels – welcomed with open arms. But go to Him 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 (*A Grief Observed* 9).

His feelings of loneliness and isolation seemed to extend to his relationship with the Divine. He felt that the Lord turned away and would not hear him in his time of trouble. Certainly he was in no danger of disbelief. However, Lewis began to see that, “The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him” (*A Grief Observed* 9). The idea he seems to present is that ceasing to believe in the Lord altogether would almost be better than believing inaccurate and horrible things about Him. But Lewis eventually began to see the Lord’s method in all this madness. He began to see that it was not the Lord that was lending him a deaf ear, but rather his own frantic attempt to be heard

that deafened him from the voice he hoped to hear (*A Grief Observed* 38). He slowly realized that the Lord was exposing him for a fraud. Again, Lewis likened his faith to a house of cards. The Lord had no choice but to knock the house down in order to perfect it. Lewis learned a difficult lesson, namely that pain and suffering require much time to heal. He attempted to make a map of sorrow, but found that it was a process instead (*A Grief Observed* 47).

Conclusion

Lewis can never be charged of writing about something that he knew nothing about, for Lewis suffered a great pain. By the grace of God, he emerged on the other side of that pain, and through his brilliant prose, left his readers with a first-hand account of what suffering entails. Suffering will be ever-present on this side of Glory, and it will continue to be something that mankind struggles with. Despite numerous rational explanations for the existence of pain and suffering, there will be many who deny any Divine Being that would allow such horrendous affliction to occur. The philosophical problem of pain remains. Alas, pain is guaranteed to every man; therefore, the practical problem of pain is one which all individuals will eventually confront as well. Perhaps it behooves God’s children to consider Lewis’s conclusion:

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 (*A Grief Observed* 56).

Perhaps many of the theological questions that haunt mankind will prove to be “unanswerable” in the end. As far as the realm of suffering is concerned, solace can be discovered in the words of 1 Peter 2:21. “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.”

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