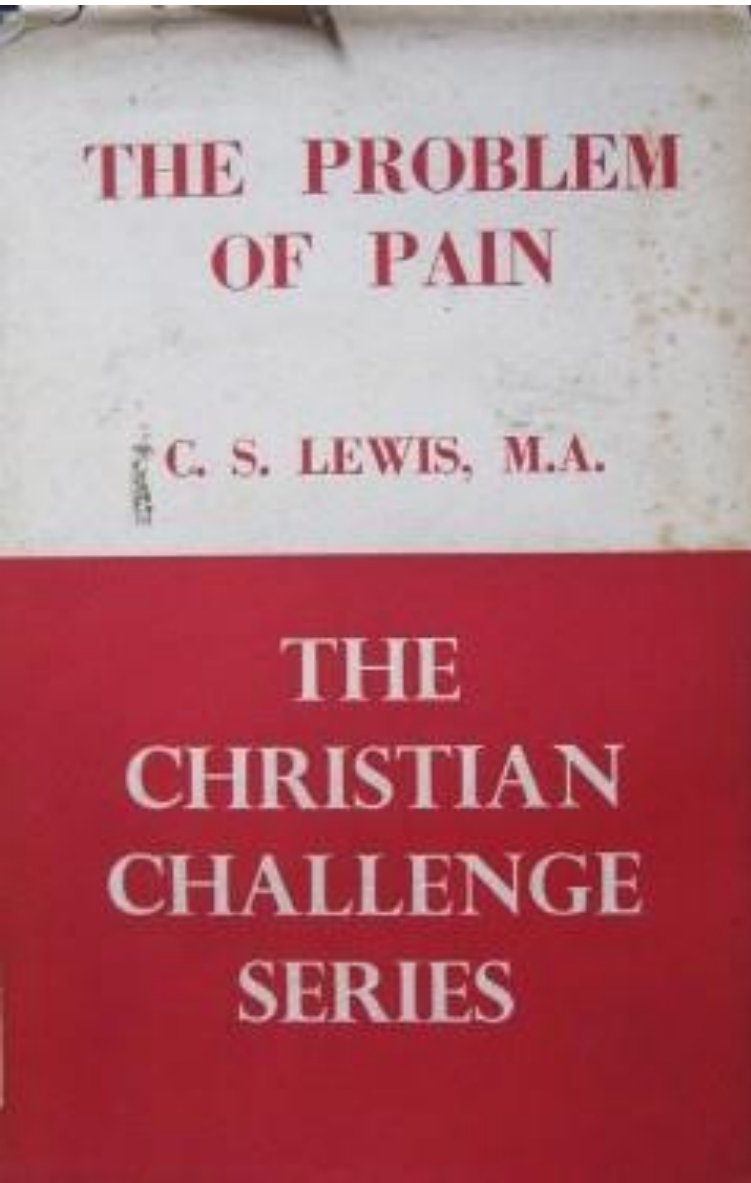


**Session 12:**

**“In the Valley of the Shadow of Death”:**

***C. S. Lewis on Pain and Suffering, Hope and Heaven***



“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

--C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (1940),  
Ch. 6: “Human Pain”.

## Recall Week 2: The Grand Panorama: *C. S. Lewis on the Meaning of Life*

“I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”

C. S. Lewis, “Is Theology Poetry?”



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Although Christianity illuminates much, some parts of human experience remain in the shadows.

Elevenes with C. S. Lewis

“In the Valley of the Shadow of Death”:  
***C. S. Lewis on Pain & Suffering, Hope & Heaven***

Session 12

December 17, 2017

# Plan for the day

- Lewis' life preparation for writing about suffering
- *The Problem of Pain*
- *A Grief Observed*
- Hope and heaven
- The final years of Lewis' life
- Lewis' views on death
- His legacy, and ours

# Lewis' preparation for writing about pain and suffering

- Experienced death of his mother just before his 10<sup>th</sup> birthday.
- Spent 6 miserable years in different boarding schools.
- After 2 years of study under the atheist Kirkpatrick, Lewis is admitted to Oxford University but in less than a year is on the front lines of WWI.
- His best friend Paddy Moore is killed, Lewis is wounded.

# *The Problem of Pain* (1940)—one book in a series on challenges to the Christian faith

- Purpose of book: only to solve the *intellectual problem* raised by suffering, not to try to teach fortitude & patience.
- Ch. 1—Introductory: If asked when he was an atheist “Why do you not believe in God?” Lewis says his reply would have been “Look at the universe we live in.”
  - Most of it is empty space and unimaginably cold.
  - On our planet where there is life, most living things prey on one another.
  - Human history is largely one of crime, war, disease and terror.
  - Lewis’ conclusion: “Either there is no spirit behind the universe, or one indifferent to good and evil, or else an evil spirit.” (p. 15)
- If the universe is meaningless, no explanation of pain is needed—it’s meaningless like everything else.
  - In a sense, Christianity creates rather than solves the problem of pain. (p. 24)
  - But if the universe is so bad, or even half so bad as the pessimist claims, “how on earth did human beings ever come to attribute it to the activity of a wise and good Creator?” (p. 15)
  - “Christianity is not the conclusion of a philosophical debate on the origins of the universe: it is a catastrophic historical event following on the long spiritual preparation of humanity” (p. 24)

# *The Problem of Pain* (cont.)

## Ch. 2: Divine Omnipotence

- Lewis' succinct statement of 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." (p. 26)
  - *Is this a valid argument?*
- "If the popular meanings attached to these words [of 'good' and 'almighty' and perhaps also 'happy'] are the only ones possible, the argument is unanswerable."
- God may do miracles, but not what is self-contradictory.
  - God cannot give men free will and deny them free will.
  - Giving men freedom means both creating selves who can initiate action, and providing a common framework or Nature in which they can operate.
  - Not all states of Nature will be equally agreeable to all.
  - Free souls have the opportunity for act of love and unselfishness, but also the opportunity for competition and hostility.

# *The Problem of Pain* (cont.)

## Ch. 3: Divine Goodness

- Divine goodness differs from ours
  - But not as black differs from white
  - Rather, like a perfect circle differs from a child's first attempt to draw a wheel.
- The popular misconception: 'goodness' or 'lovingness' just means 'kindness'.
- But love is something more stern and splendid than kindness.
  - "Kindness, merely as such, cares not whether its object becomes good or bad, provided only that it escapes suffering." (pp. 40-41)
  - God pays us the "intolerable compliment of loving us, in the deepest, most inexorable sense." (p. 41)



# *The Problem of Pain* (cont.)

## Ch. 3: Divine Goodness (cont.)

- To illustrate divine goodness and love, Lewis cites four different analogies
- The love of an artist for his creation.
  - Jeremiah 18.6: “Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.”
- The love of man for beast.
  - Psalm 100.3: “We are his people and the sheep of his pasture.”
- A father’s love for his son.
  - Hebrews 12.7-8: “Endure hardship as discipline, God is treating you as sons.”
- The love of a man for his wife.
  - Jeremiah 2.2: “I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert.”
  - Ephesians 5.26-27: The church as the bride of Christ, whom He loves so much that no “stain or blemish” is endurable.

## *The Problem of Pain* (cont.)

The focus of a Christian answer to the problem of pain: the incarnation of God in Christ

- Epigraph: “The Son of God suffered unto death, not that men might not suffer, but that their sufferings might be like His.” George MacDonald
- God’s plan of redemption was something foreseen from before the Fall.
  - Revelation 13.8: “The Lamb slain before the foundation of the world.”
  - “In fact, of course, God saw the crucifixion in the act of creating the first nebula.” (Ch. 5 The Fall)
- “Suffering is not good in itself. What is good in any painful experience is, for the sufferer, his submission to the will of God, and, for the spectators, the compassion aroused and the acts of mercy to which it leads.” (Ch. 7: Human Pain (cont.))
- In the fallen and partially redeemed universe, we may distinguish:
  - (1) the simple good descending from God,
  - (2) the simple evil produced by rebellious creatures
  - (3) the exploitation of that evil by God for His redemptive purpose, which produces...
  - (4) the complex good to which accepted suffering and repented sin contribute (Ch. 7: Human Pain (cont.))

# *A Grief Observed* (1961)—written in the 6 weeks immediately following the death of Lewis' wife

- Written in a diary format as a way of coping—to get a little outside his grief—during the greatest trial of Lewis' life as a believer.
- Reveals:
  - Lewis' great love for “H.” Helen Joy Davidman
  - Lewis' anger toward God and the initial lack of consolation he experienced
- Losing Joy for Lewis was like having a leg cut off—something one never “gets over”. Now “he will always be a one-legged man.” (Ch. 3, p. 52)
- “Where is God?... 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. After that, silence.” (Ch. 1, p. 6)
- Pained by Joy's suffering, Lewis calls God “a cosmic sadist” and a “vivisector”; then the next day confesses “That was a yell rather than a thought” (Ch. 2, pp. 29-30)

## One hears echoes of Lewis' arguments in his apologetic and autobiographical writings

- Repeats his “aboutness” argument against materialism:
  - “If H. is not, then she never was. I mistook a cloud of atoms for a person. I will never believe—more strictly I can't believe—that one set of physical events could be, or make, a mistake **about** other sets.” (Ch. 2, p. 28)
- Suffering can be used by God.
  - “Suppose that what you are up against is a surgeon whose intentions are wholly good. The kinder and more conscientious he is, the more inexorably he will go on cutting.” (Ch. 3, p. 43)
- Importantly, suffering can reveal things *to us* about the quality of our faith.
  - “From the rational point of view, what new factor has H's death introduced into the problem of the universe? I had been warned—I had warned myself—not to reckon on happiness. Of course it is different when the thing happens to oneself, not to others, and in reality, not in imagination. If my house has collapsed at one blow, that is because it was a house of cards. In which sense may it be a house of cards? Because the things I am believing are only a dream, or because I only dream that I believe them?” (Ch. 3, p. 36-39)
  - “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.” (Ch. 3, p. 52)

## *A Grief Observed* (cont.)

### Beginning to come out of the days of despair

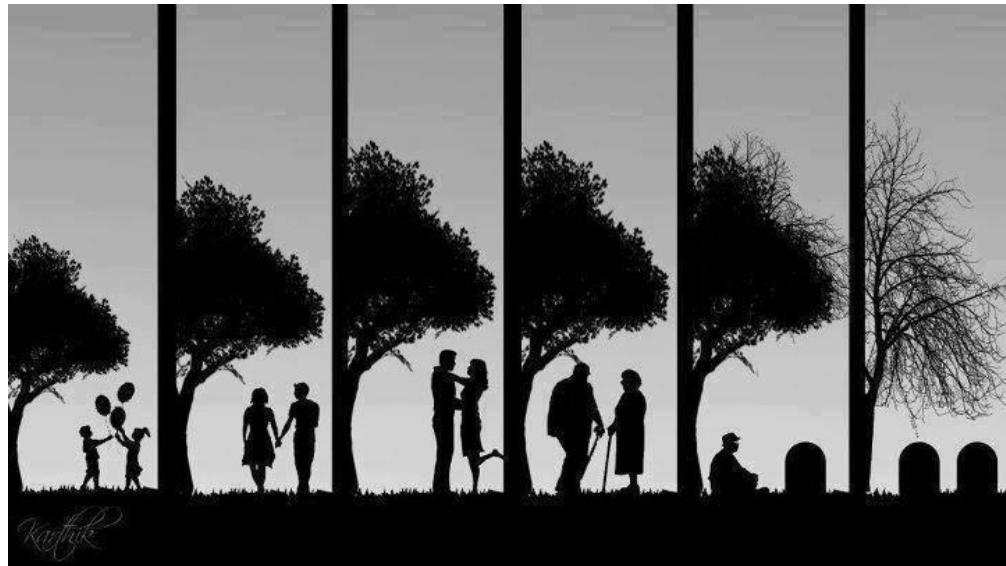
- One change occurs when Lewis reflects on wishing he could have experienced some of the physical pain instead of his wife.
  - “If only I could bear it, or the worst of it, or any of it instead of her.” (Ch. 3, p. 44).
- And, then Lewis realizes that in a sense this is what Christ did.
  - “I find I can now believe again, that He has done vicariously whatever can be so done. He replies to our babble, ‘ You cannot and you dare not. I could and dared.’” (Ch. 3, p. 44)
- After some recovery, Lewis realizes his own state was perhaps responsible for the sense of God’s absence.
  - “For various reasons, not in themselves at all mysterious, my heart was lighter this morning than it has been for many weeks. For one thing I suppose I am recovering physically from a good deal of mere exhaustion.”
  - “You can’t see anything properly while your eyes are blurred with tears. You can’t, in most things, get what you want if you want it too desperately... Was it my own frantic need that slammed [the door] in my face? Perhaps your own reiterated cries deafen you to the voice you hoped to hear. Perhaps your own passion temporarily destroys the capacity [to receive]” (Ch. 3, p. 45-46)

# Bereavement as a phase of love

- Lewis writes “A good wife contains so many persons in herself.
  - “What was H. not to me? She was my pupil and my teacher, my subject and my sovereign; my trusty comrade, friend, fellow-soldier. My mistress; but at the same time all that any man friend (and I have good ones) has ever been to me.” (Ch. 3, p. 47)

- Then he claims,  
“Bereavement is a universal and integral part of our experience of love. It follows marriage as normally as marriage follows courtship or as autumn follows summer.”

*Do you agree?*



# Final thoughts on *A Grief Observed*

- “*A Grief Observed* is a narrative of the testing and maturing of faith, not simply its recovery—and certainly not its loss” (McGrath, *Lunch with C. S. Lewis*, p. 180).
- In 1940, in *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis focused on the intellectual difficulties caused by the problem of pain and suffering; in 1961, in *A Grief Observed*, he dealt with the emotional distress caused by loss. These are complementary, not contradictory, perspectives.
- *A Grief Observed* lets you see someone honestly grappling with incredible emotional pain, who comes out on the other side.

# Hope and heaven

- The final chapter of *The Problem of Pain* is titled “Heaven”.
  - “I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us.” (Romans 8:18)
- God transforms the valley of the shadow of death into a gateway of hope.
  - Milton in *Paradise Lost* writes that hope allows us to bid farewell to fear (Bk. IV).
- In the chapter on Hope in *Mere Christianity* Lewis argues that it is because Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this.
  - *Why might that be so?*
- Also in this reading, Lewis presents a version of his argument from desire,
  - “A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food.”
  - “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is I was made for another world.”



# The final years of Lewis' life

- In 1961, after Joy's death, Lewis needed surgery for an enlarged prostate gland, but his kidneys and heart were in such bad shape, the operation was impossible.
- This condition could not be cured.
- In fall of 1961, Lewis was too ill to teach at Cambridge.
- But he recovered and was able to work from Jan., 1962-June, 1963.
- 14 July, 1963, Walter Hooper comes to take Lewis to church. He is too weak to go, is taken to a hospital, where he lapses into a coma.
  - Although he recovered enough to go home, Lewis then resigned his position at Cambridge, and wrote Arthur Greeves "having glided so painlessly up to the Gate it seems hard to have it shut in one's face and know that the whole process must some day be gone through again... Poor Lazarus!"

# Lewis' view of death

- On the one hand, death is the punishment for the Fall and our enemy (recall Jesus shedding tears at the grave of Lazarus); on the other hand, death is the mean of entry into a better world.
- Death is “Satan’s great weapon, and also God’s great weapon: it is our supreme disgrace and our only hope; the thing that Christ came to conquer and the means by which he conquered.” (*Miracles*, Ch. 14: The Grand Miracle)
- A month before his death Lewis wrote “Yes, autumn is the best of the seasons; and I’m not sure that old age isn’t the best part of life.”

# Lewis' view of death (cont.)

- *Letters to an American Lady*

- “Can you not see death as a friend and a deliverer? It means stripping off that body that is tormenting you: like taking off a hairshirt or getting out of a dungeon. What is there to be afraid of?”
- “There are better things ahead than any we leave behind... Don't you think Our Lord says to you ‘Peace, child, peace. Relax. Let go. Underneath are the everlasting arms.’”
- “Of course this may not be the end. Then make it a good rehearsal.”
  - “Yours (and like you a tired traveler, near the journey's end),  
Jack”

# Lewis' last days

- Lewis' friend George Sayer said Lewis spend his last days re-reading his favorite books: *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* and a little Plato in Greek, *The Aeneid* in Latin, and Dante's *Divine Comedy*.
  - 3 weeks before his death Lewis wrote: "Don't think I'm not happy. I am re-reading *The Iliad* and enjoying it more than I have ever done."
- "If we really believe what we say we believe—if we really think that home is elsewhere, and that this life is 'a wandering to find home,' why should we not look forward to the arrival." (*Letters to an American Lady*)
- Lewis' brother Warren reported "About a week before his death he said to me, 'I have done all that I was sent into the world to do, and I am ready to go.' I have never seen death looked in the face so tranquilly."
- Warren: "On 22<sup>nd</sup> of last month I took him his tea in bed at 4 o.c., and went back to my study to do some work. At 5:30 I heard a crash in his room and ran in, to find him lying on the floor on his back, unconscious; he lived for about five minutes after that and never recovered consciousness. Would not we all wish to go the same way when our time comes?"

# Lewis' legacy and ours

- Lewis thought he would be forgotten within 5 years of his death, but his writings continue to help and inspire millions.
- Lewis' life challenges us to think about the difference that we make to others, the lives that we might change through our influence.
- What will our legacy be?
- Lewis would remind us that whether we are remembered by others or not, each of us is remembered by God. Our names can be written in the Book of Life.

# Conclusion

- “The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in’: aim at earth and you will get neither.”

C. S. Lewis on “Hope” in *Mere Christianity*