



C.S. Lewis on the Problem of Pain

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The problem of pain is inescapable, its effects profound. No one can deny it. Many use it as a way to remove God from reality. It fuels the flame of doubt and sometimes undermines the believer's faith. It empowers the atheist's argument. To be a follower of Christ and to live in the world, one must determinedly, intentionally face the issues and difficulties that lie inherent and obvious in the problem of pain.

C.S. Lewis, a frontline witness to evil in the world, was not immune from personal pain. As a boy, he experienced the death of his mother followed by the emotional abandonment of his father. As a young man, he directly encountered the ugliness of war. As a brilliant Oxford don, he suffered rejection from academic colleagues. As an older man who finally discovered young love, he endured the painful loss of his wife. In 1940, at age forty-two, Lewis penned *The Problem of Pain* accompanied by a humble, written admission. Fully realizing that he might be underestimating the reality of serious pain, he was compelled to intellectually address the issue, for he understood its profound implications toward belief, or disbelief, in God. After all, Lewis reminds us early on in this writing, it was the problem of evil that foundationally motivated his prior atheism.

The Problem of Pain seeks to understand how a loving, good, and powerful God can possibly coexist with the pain and suffering pervasive in the world and in our lives. Indeed, the problem of pain could not exist without the reality of a good and loving and powerful God. Without a transcendent creator God who ultimately defines good and evil, there are no grounds upon which to substantiate the difference between the two, much less the effect of either. Lewis states

that "pain would be no problem unless, side by side with our daily experience of this painful world, we had received what we think a good assurance that ultimate reality is righteous and loving."¹ The innate relationship between the existence of God and pain must be rightly understood if we are honestly to confront the difficult issues that lie therein. Without such an understanding, faith is at risk of crumbling.

Theodicy, derived from the Greek words for "deity" and "justice," "refers to the attempt to justify the goodness of God in the face of the manifold evil present in the world."² It begs the question, if God is good and powerful, why does God allow bad things to happen? It speaks to the heart of the issue—the very nature of God, who He is, and who we are in relationship to Him. Lewis asserts "the problem of pain, in its simplest form": "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."³

According to Peter Kreeft⁴ and basic rhetorical analysis, the veracity of an argument is based upon the soundness of its individual terms, the integrity of each premise or statement, and its overall logic. On its face, this argument against God appears to have power and logic on its side. The terms, premises, and reasoning appear robust and convincing. God is good and powerful. He desires good things for His creatures. But pain and suffering remain, and we are not happy, but miserable.



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Confronting this dilemma, Lewis takes issue with our popular understanding of the terms *good*, *loving*, and *powerful*, and what it means to be happy. For it is there, along with our vigorous desire for and understanding of free will, that Lewis makes his case for defeating the apparent contradiction in the problem of pain. Since God is indeed loving, good, and powerful in light of the reality of pain and suffering, it is “abundantly clear” that our conception of those attributes “needs correction.”⁵ Lewis assures us that proper understanding of the terms bring the co-existence of God with pain and suffering into alignment “without contradiction.”⁶ He also challenges our discernment of what exactly makes us happy, what satisfies us. When these notions are rightly understood, the argument is emptied of its persuasive power.

As Christians, we believe that God is omnipotent (all-powerful) and that “nothing is impossible” for Him (Luke 1:37). Yet Lewis reminds us that God is constrained by two realities. First, God cannot do what is intrinsically impossible or what Lewis terms “nonsense.”⁷ The law of noncontradiction—a basic law of logic—applies even to God. God cannot grant free will to humanity and not grant free will at the same time and in the same way. Holding God to a standard of applying two mutually exclusive alternatives is essentially meaningless.

Second, God allows us as human beings to be free agents with free choices. We cannot desire freedom to choose and yet hold God responsible for not preventing our choosing of evil. Either we have freedom or we do not. Either we choose or we do not. We cannot have it both ways. We cannot blame God for our evil actions when we freely chose them. We cannot excuse ourselves and accuse God when freedom was truly granted to us. Our understanding of what it means for God to be all-powerful must be viewed within this informed reality. We must not “think things possible which are really impossible.”⁸ In other words, we cannot have our cake and eat it too.

This perspective does not, in any way, compromise God’s sovereignty or power. Granting free will to humanity, to love self more than God or to love God more than self, is the ultimate power by which a Creator can grant freedom to His creation. The natural, fixed order of the universe provides a stable framework in which freedom, and the possibility of pain and suffering as well as love, is viable. Lewis soberly reminds us that if the possibility of suffering is excluded, life itself is excluded.⁹ God, in His omnipotent power, allows us the greatest amount of freedom to choose for or against

Him and our fellow man. Pain is a consequence inherent in this sovereign design. Without this freedom, the full extent of goodness, joy, or love cannot be authentically known.

As believers, we also believe in a God who is completely and utterly good; He is all-loving. It is argued that if God was loving and good, there would not be pain in the world, that He would not allow evil to perpetuate and invade our lives. Yet suffering is an inescapable reality. Jesus affirmed this in John 16:33, saying that we would have trouble in this world. In light of this fact, we recognize humanity’s free contribution to suffering. What’s more, as Lewis instructs, we must take another look at our understanding of what it means for God to be good. He insists that God’s idea of goodness is different from ours, vastly better, higher, greater—although not wholly different altogether.

Our popular conception of love and goodness has more to do with kindness, tolerance, and “a desire to see others . . . happy.”¹⁰ We tend to see God’s love as more like a kind, doting grandfather who likes to see his grandchildren contented than as a father who genuinely loves and desires to see the best character developed in the child through discipline. Lewis insists that love in its truest, deepest sense is “more stern and splendid than mere kindness.”¹¹ A loving father will take endless trouble to foster growth in his child, will discipline to make him more lovable rather than leave him to follow his own natural impulses, will be “pleased with little, but demands all”¹² God is an intensely interested, loving, all-consuming fire who deeply loves the objects of His love—us. His goodness demands that He make us more lovable. Lewis, again, reminds us:

*We were made not primarily that we may love God (though we were made for that too) but that God may love us, that we may become objects in which the Divine love may rest ‘well pleased’. To ask that God’s love should be content with us as we are is to ask that God should cease to be God: because He is what He is, His love must, in the nature of things, be impeded and repelled by certain stains in our present character, and because He already loves us He must labour to make us lovable.*¹³

For God knows that we are most contented when we find that our desire and our love are for Him, not for ourselves. God gives love because He knows we need it. If God chooses to need us, it is because we need to be needed. He loves and needs us for our sake, not His own. “When we want to be something other

than the thing God wants us to be, we must be wanting what, in fact, will not make us happy."¹⁴ "Whether we like it or not, God intends to give us what we need, not what we now think we want."¹⁵ His goodness and love are ever altruistic, desiring the good of His creation, of us.

But this begs the question, aren't I already good, already lovable? Lewis exposes our self-deception. We no longer see ourselves as sinners, but sin's reality surfaces through our own sense of personal guilt, which we tend to transfer toward corporate responsibility or try to reduce over time. Both strategies are vain attempts to prevent personal culpability. Or we attempt to lower our moral and ethical standards, to reduce them to mere kindness, yet we recognize a higher moral standard exists across time and cultures. This recognition of an ultimate standard in God compels us to either admit our sinfulness and surrender to Him or reject Him. Regardless, we cannot blame our sinfulness and its consequent evils upon God. We are either the perpetrators of sin or the victim of others' sin against us. Sin, then, becomes the ultimate horror to both God and man.

God created good. Man chose against God, against good, and introduced evil into the world through his rebellion. God did not create evil but knew that the offering of free will in His created beings allowed for the possibility of pain and suffering. Man, as Lewis summarizes, "spoiled himself," and "good, to us in our present [fallen] state, must therefore mean primarily remedial or corrective good."¹⁶ Subsequently men, not God, have precipitated the vast majority of pain and suffering in the world. Wicked and hurt people hurt one another.

The remedy to this pain is self-surrender of the will to God, which in itself can be painful. Dying to one's own will, day after day, is the constant, ongoing corrective that is required to break our rebellious sinfulness. When we are self-satisfied with our own soul, we will not surrender our will. Sin, according to Lewis, is masked evil. Pain unmasks the evil and exposes the sin for what it is. "Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."¹⁷

We all have some sense of justice. We all want evil to be punished, to be recognized for what it is, especially in others. Yet we deceive ourselves into thinking that all is well with us. Pain reveals the reality of our own evil and gives us a choice to either resist and rebel

against the ultimate standard bearer or recognize our sin, repent, and surrender to Him. "Pain shatters the illusion that all is well . . . that what we have, whether good or bad in itself, is our own and enough for us."¹⁸ Pain takes away our false sense of happiness, draws our attention to God and our need for Him. Even in "good, decent people," the illusion of self-sufficiency must be shattered. And, like a good and loving Father, God is willing to accept whatever surrender and sacrifice we have to offer. Our desires must be changed from pleasing self to pleasing God, which in the end produces our greatest happiness. We must lose ourselves to find ourselves, truly satisfied, in God.

Lewis does not dismiss the fact that pain is pain and it hurts. But he reminds us that the supreme act of self-surrender was found in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Christ knows pain and suffering, intimately, personally, profoundly. His loving sacrifice was for the redemption of us, the sinners whom He loves. His followers are similarly called to lives of submission, to "walk as Jesus did" (1 John 2:6 NIV). Pain reminds us of our humility and utter dependence upon God, upon our true source of goodness, strength, and happiness in Christ. When pain is withdrawn, we tend to forget God and return toward self-sufficiency and sin. Pain does its work on those whose hearts are willing to receive, to grow, to love in greater and more godly ways—to surrender self to God.

Pain, then, in and of itself is not completely bad or evil. It can come from the hand of a good, loving, and powerful God who desires the best for His creation, who genuinely allows for us to be free agents who make free choices. The possibility and reality of pain and suffering is palpable and at times devastating to both victim and perpetrator. Regardless, pain can and does serve redemptive purposes in the lives of those who turn toward God. In light of this, our constant prayer to our loving, good, and powerful Father in heaven should be that of the psalmist: "Deal with your servant according to your love" (Ps. 119:124 NIV).

Yes, God is completely good.

Yes, God is completely powerful.

Yes, pain and suffering exists.

The existence of pain does not negate the presence of an omnipotent, loving God. When understood in the fullness of its context, we realize that it is the very presence of God that provides meaning and hope amid the pain. Christ was the ultimate, innocent bearer of unjust suffering. In the face of abject pain, self-sacrificial love, goodness, and power are met on the cross.

Notes

1. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (1940; repr., San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 14.
2. Van A. Harvey, *A Handbook of Theological Terms* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 236.
3. Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 16.
4. Peter Kreeft, lecture on *The Problem of Pain*, <http://www.peterkreeft.com/audio.htm>.
5. Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 32.
6. *Ibid.*, 27.
7. *Ibid.*, 18.
8. *Ibid.*, 19.
9. *Ibid.*, 25.
10. *Ibid.*, 31.
11. *Ibid.*, 32.
12. *Ibid.*, 39.
13. *Ibid.*, 40–41.
14. *Ibid.*, 46.
15. *Ibid.*, 46–47.
16. *Ibid.*, 85.
17. *Ibid.*, 91.
18. *Ibid.*, 94.

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