Strengthened By Fire: How Events in C.S. Lewis’s Life Shaped His Views on Pain and Suffering

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Introduction

The issue of pain and suffering has long been a barrier to some when considering the existence of a loving God. C.S. Lewis was not immune to this dilemma. As a self-described atheist, Lewis concluded, “Either there is no spirit behind the universe, or else a spirit indifferent to good and evil, or else an evil spirit.”¹ The purpose of this paper is to explore how Lewis’s experiences of dealing with pain and suffering impacted his faith in God. The paper will show how his suffering and loss actually strengthened his faith.

Atheism and the Cold Universe

Clive Staples Lewis was born on November 29, 1898 in Belfast, Ireland. His parents were Albert and Florence Lewis. He was baptized as an infant in 1899 at St. Mark’s Church where his family attended. Although the family attended church regularly, there is little to indicate that the family held strong religious convictions. Devin Brown writes that Lewis could say, “Almost nothing from memory of his mother’s religion.”² Lewis’s father was described as very intelligent and enjoyed the tradition of religion however, “His approach to religion … was at the opposite pole from what later became my own.”³

Lewis, who would be known as “Jack” to his family and friends, developed a close relationship with his older brother Warnie Lewis. The two had a relatively happy childhood and exhibited creative imaginations. Lewis’s simple and happy lifestyle would soon change with the death of his mother.

³ Ibid.
Death of His Mother

Florence Lewis passed away on August 23, 1908. Young Jack was nine years of age at the time of his mother’s death. Lewis had prayed earnestly that his mother would recover from her illness, but his miracle never came. In *Surprised by Joy* Lewis states, “With my mother’s death all settled happiness, all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life.”

Young Jack’s relationship with his father grew very strained. Lewis’s father was dealing with loss from many fronts in his life. Walter Hooper writes, “For Albert Lewis, the tragedy seemed endless. His father had died a few months before his wife, and his brother Joseph (1856-1908) died a few weeks later.” Jack and Warnie were then sent to boarding school at Wynyard.

Wynyard was described as untidy and the boys suffered under the harsh treatment of the Rev. Robert Capron. The school eventually closed due to court action in 1910. In 1911, Lewis began attending a preparatory school known as Cherbourg House. Under the influence of the School Matron, Miss Cowie, Lewis began to lose what faith he had in God. “She loosened the whole framework, blunted all the sharp edges, of my belief … The whole thing became a matter of speculation: I was soon altering “I believe” to “one does feel.” Lewis’s atheism had begun to sprout roots.

The War

After less than eight weeks at University College, Jack joined the British Army on June 8, 1917. Lewis would later speak about postponing an education during a time of war stating, “What is the use of beginning a task which we have so little chance of finishing? … Is it not like

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6 Ibid., 7.
Second Lieutenant Lewis was wounded by a shell explosion while in France. Lewis wrote little about his war experiences. Brown stresses, “He was in France for only six months. For more than two of these months, he was in a hospital on the coast—in February recovering from trench fever, and in April and May being treated for his shrapnel wounds.”

Lewis had expected to dislike military life. However as Brown writes, “The hardship of the army created camaraderie and fondness between the fellow sufferers. Second, in noting the goodwill extended to him by his military elders, Lewis comments, “Thirty is naturally kinder to nineteen than nineteen is to thirteen.” It appears that during his time at war, Lewis began to develop a reverence for his fellow man. This could evidence a transition in his spiritual walk. Lewis stated, “Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.”

While hospitalized trench fever, Lewis began to read the works of author G.K. Chesterton. Jack had read the book Phantastes by George MacDonald two years earlier. It appears that these two Christian writers had a huge impact on Jack’s ever tendering heart. In Surprised by Joy, Lewis acknowledges, “I did not know what I was letting myself in for. A young man who wishes to remain a sound atheist cannot be too careful of his reading.

**A Changing World-View**

Shortly after returning to Oxford, a friend asked if he had been frightened during his time serving in the war. Lewis replied, “All the time, but I never sank so low as to pray.” Until his

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8 Brown, *A Life Observed*, 100.
9 Ibid., 101.
10 Ibid., 102.
conversion, Lewis believed there were basically two possible explanations for the existence of the universe. Lewis argued,

Ever since men were able to think they have been wondering what this universe really is and how it came to be there. And, very roughly, two views have been held. First, there is what is called the materialistic view. People who take that view think that matter and space just happen to exist, and always have existed, nobody knows why; and that the matter behaving in certain fixed ways, has just happened, by a sort of fluke, to produce creatures like ourselves who are able to think….The other view is the religious view. According to it, what is behind the universe is more like a mind than it is like anything else we know. That is to say, it has conscious, and has purposes, and prefers one thing to another. And on this view it made the universe partly for purposes we do not know, but partly, at any rate, in order to produce creatures like itself…to the extent of having minds.\textsuperscript{12}

As he began to read more Christian authors, Lewis gradually began to question his materialistic views. The question of morality began to concern him. Where did real morality originate? Lewis also began to notice the beauty of nature. Jack could no longer, “abandon the idea that that our experience of the beautiful is more than merely an encounter with something pleasing to the senses.”\textsuperscript{13}

Conversion

Lewis finally accepted the idea that there may be a “spirit” that was the originator of the universe. Lewis’s friend Owen Barfield was also instrumental in his spiritual journey. The book \textit{131 Christians Everyone Should Know} states, “Barfield pounced on the logic of Lewis’s atheism. Barfield had converted from atheism to theism, then finally Christianity, and frequently badgered Lewis about his materialism. So did Nevill Coghill, a brilliant fellow student and lifelong friend who to Lewis’s amazement, was a Christian and a thoroughgoing supernaturalist.”\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12} Brown, \textit{A Life Observed}, 108.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 123.
1929, Lewis accepted that there was a personal God; a God that he could know in an intimate way. Lewis describes his reluctant conversion this way,

You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.”\textsuperscript{15}

Lewis began attending the Anglican Church, Holy Trinity. He also began to attend chapel services at Magdalen on weekdays. Over a period of time reading and talking with Christian friends, Jack finally came to the belief that Christ was the Son of God. Brown states that Lewis became a believer in Christ while, “whizzing past farms and fields in the sidecar of Warnie’s motorcycle.”\textsuperscript{16}

**Pain and Suffering**

At the beginning of chapter two in *The Problem of Pain* Lewis writes, “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. This is the problem of pain, in its simplest form.”\textsuperscript{17}

Lewis expresses the belief that much suffering in the world is a result of the fall of man and our free will to choose. Lewis stresses that, God might have corrected the fall by a supernatural act but, “this—to speak in somewhat irreverent metaphor—would have been to decline the problem which God had set Himself when He created the world, the problem of

\textsuperscript{15} Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 228-229.
\textsuperscript{16} Brown, *A Life Observed*, 155-156.
expressing His goodness through the total drama of a world containing free agents, in spite of, and by means of, their rebellion against Him.”

With free will, Lewis argued that the wicked will use that free will to create pain and suffering in the lives of others. Lewis concluded that this type of injustice, “accounts for four-fifths of the sufferings of men. It is men, not God, who have produced racks, whips, prisons, slavery, guns, bayonets, and bombs; it is by human avarice or human stupidity, not by the churlishness of nature, that we have poverty and overwork.”

Lewis argued that the only hope of happiness in this world lies with the creature realizing its relationship with its Creator. Lewis suggests that, “The proper good of a creature is to surrender itself to its Creator—to enact intellectually, volitionally, and emotionally, that relationship which is given in the mere fact of its being a creature. When it does so, it is good and happy.”

During his exploration of pain and suffering, Lewis did acknowledge that there was human tribulation that does not arise from one another. He referred to this as arbitrary pain and suffering. He explored scripture that stressed the virtues of suffering. Lewis explains,

But if suffering is good, ought it not to be pursued rather than avoided? I answer that 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. 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, and (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.

Marriage
During Lewis’s last decade, he fell in love and married at the age of fifty-nine. Lewis’s

18 Ibid., 597.
19 Ibid., 601.
20 Ibid., 602.
21 Ibid., 615-616.
marriage was not accepted very well by his friends. Not only was Joy Gresham sixteen years younger than Lewis but, “he married an American who was at once Jewish, divorced, a former Communist, and personally abrasive. In brief, the marriage did not set well with most of Lewis’s friends and acquaintances.”

Jack and Joy seem to have been perfectly suited for each other. Their few years together provided a happiness and contentment that Lewis had only read about. Brown writes, “In his late fifties, Jack gladly became love’s fool and experienced love personally—and found it to be infinitely better than just reading about the experience of others.”

Writing about romantic love, Lewis writes, “When two people achieve lasting happiness, this is not solely because they are great lovers but because they are also—I must put it crudely—good people; controlled, loyal, fairminded, mutually adaptable people.” In A Grief Observed, Lewis expresses the idea that marriage completes the sexes stating,

There is, hidden or flaunted, a sword between the sexes till an entire marriage reconciles them. It is arrogance in us to call frankness, fairness, and chivalry “masculine” when we see them in a woman; it is arrogance in them, to describe a man’s sensitiveness or tact or tenderness as “feminine.” But also what poor, warped fragments of humanity most mere men and mere women must be to make the implications of that arrogance plausible. Marriage heals this. Jointly the two become fully human. “In the image of God created He them.” Thus, by a paradox, this carnival of sexuality leads us out beyond our sexes.

The Final Test

As happy as Jack and Joy were together, their journey together would be a brief one. At the age of forty-one, Joy was diagnosed with advanced cancer that had spread throughout her body. Joy died on July 13, 1960. Brown elaborates on the arrangements, “Following her wishes,

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the funeral was held at Oxford Crematorium, and her ashes were scattered in its garden. The service was conducted by the Reverend Austin Farrer.  

Lewis was shattered by the loss of Joy. Although confused and at times angry, Jack did not lose his faith. He did have questions. At times he felt like, “God has retreated behind a shut and locked door.” In the end, Jack did find peace.

Lewis finally deals with his grief through praise. He finally came to the place where, “praise—not yelling or trying to hit back—has become the best source of relief. And this praise must take a certain form: first praise of God as the giver, and then praise of Joy as the gift, Lewis concludes, “I must do more of this.”

C.S. Lewis had dealt with his most difficult trial yet. He had faced the arbitrary suffering that he had written about. He had accepted the will of God and the mercy and kindness that surrounded him. Through his honest writings about his grief, he has ministered to many who still experience that arbitrary pain and suffering. Through pain and suffering, his faith in God had lead him to praise of his Creator. Lewis’s open and honest writing allows anyone to get a clear picture of how his experiences shaped his views on pain and suffering. It was all through his faith in an Almighty God.

Lewis concludes A Grief Observed indicating that he would not bring Joy back if he could. He knew she was far better off in the care of her Heavenly Father. Lewis exclaims, “How wicked it would be, if we could, to call the dead back! She said not to me but to the chaplain, ‘I am at peace with God.’ She smiled, but not at me.”

26 Brown, A Life Observed, 207.
27 Brown, A Life Observed, 211.
28 Ibid., 212.
29 Lewis, A Grief Observed, 688.
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