

## UNDERSTANDING 2020 (AND EVERY TIME WE SUFFER) FROM C.S. LEWIS' *THE PROBLEM OF PAIN*

By Gary Brouwers

Suffering stinks. There's no way around this. No one likes to experience the pain of loss and grief and fear and confusion. So, this little explanation of suffering may help to make some sense of why we suffer, but it won't take the pain away. Often, we need more than just a rational understanding of our suffering. We need someone to try to understand our experience, even if they never can fully comprehend what we're going through. Lewis writes, "When pain is to be borne, a little courage helps more than much knowledge, a little human sympathy more than much courage, and the least tincture of the love of God more than all."<sup>1</sup> Better than courage or even the understanding of a friend, just a whisper of the love of God is better than anything else.

While we ache to be understood, our minds also search for some reason, some purpose for why so many bad things are happening. We ask, "What is happening? Why must I be so lonely? Why is God allowing all of this to happen? Why do we suffer?"

While I doubt whether any of us will be completely satisfied with the answers, I hope that the following provides a structure, a framework on which we can sort out our pain. This summary begins with a quick-glance explanation of the logic that Lewis presents in his book, "The Problem of Pain,". I've rearranged the flow of his explanation in an attempt to make this summary more concise. Following this is a more developed explanation of the structure, including Biblical texts and quotes from the book. If you still want more, I encourage you to read Lewis' book itself.

My hope is that we as believers in Jesus will be able to connect the pain of our suffering with the joy of surrender. As followers of Jesus, the One who died AND rose again, our suffering is paired with our resurrection.

### FIRST PASS, QUICK-GLANCE SUMMARY

1. **THE BEAUTY OF HEAVEN IS A LIFE COMPLETELY SURRENDERED** – The joy of heaven is not found in receiving nice things from God, but in continually, eternally offering our lives back to Him.

2. **THE BEAUTY OF HEAVEN CAN BEGIN TO BE EXPERIENCED WHEN WE SURRENDER OUR LIVES** – If the joy of heaven is the surrender of our lives to God, then we can begin to experience the joy of heaven already now, by surrendering more and more of our lives to the control of God

3. **WE WILL NOT WANT TO SURRENDER OUR LIVES UNLESS THERE ARE PARTS OF OUR LIVES THAT ARE NOT PLEASANT** – In our sinful nature, we resist the idea of surrendering control of our lives over to God. Usually, we are only willing to give up control

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, C.S., *The Problem of Pain*, (HarperOne: San Francisco, 2015), 1.

over a part of our life is when that part is too heavy or painful to hold on to anymore and we have no other option but to surrender.

4. GOD’S LOVE IS SO DEEP, HE WON’T STOP UNTIL WE ARE TRULY BLESSED – God’s idea of a blessed life is deeper and more complete than we can comprehend. He loves us so much that He won’t stop until we are truly blessed, with the glory of heaven, having completely surrendered every part of our life into His hand.

## DEEPER EXPLORATION

### 1. THE BEAUTY OF HEAVEN IS A LIFE COMPLETELY SURRENDERED

Revelation 4:9-11 gives us a glimpse into the glory of heaven where the twenty-four elders, the symbol of all of God’s people, are worshipping God:

**Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.”**

According to 1 Corinthians 15:25 this is the goal toward which God is working in the world right now, through the reign of Jesus:

**For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he “has put everything under his feet.”<sup>s</sup> Now when it says that “everything” has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.**

An existence where God is everything in everything, all in all, every part of our lives is completely surrendered over to God.

If that doesn’t sound like your idea of an enjoyable heaven, understand that this eternal surrender has been the glorious existence of God Himself:

**Lest we should think this a hardship, this kind of good begins on a level far above the creatures, for God Himself, as Son, from all eternity renders back to God as Father by filial obedience the being which the Father by paternal love eternally generates in the Son.<sup>2</sup>**

So rather than thinking that God is making us do something that He Himself is not willing to do, the act of surrender is actually something that has happened within the Trinity, where the Father gives life to the Son and the Son offers His life back to the glory of the Father. Their existence, from eternity, was infinitely blessed, and so when God creates humans, we are given the same opportunity to receive and surrender our lives to God:

**This is the pattern which man was made to imitate—which Paradisal man did imitate—and wherever the will conferred by the Creator is thus perfectly offered**

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 89.

**back in delighted and delighting obedience by the creature, there, most undoubtedly, is Heaven, and there the Holy Ghost proceeds.** <sup>3</sup>

The Father gives life to the Son, eternally, the Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son, while the Son and the Spirit eternally bring glory to the Father. “From before the foundation of the world He surrenders begotten Deity back to begetting Deity in obedience. And as the Son glorifies the Father, so also the Father glorifies the Son.”<sup>4</sup>

As image bearers of God, we were created to join this blessed exchange: “The soul is but a hollow which God fills. Its union with God is, almost by definition, a continual self-abandonment—an opening, an unveiling, a surrender, of itself. A blessed spirit is a mould ever more and more patient of the bright metal poured into it, a body ever more completely uncovered to the meridian blaze of the spiritual sun.”<sup>5</sup> We were created to constantly receive our life from God and to constantly give it back. To hoard our lives, to try to hold something back from God, is to cut off the life that we were given. To attempt to control our own lives is death. “What is outside the system of self-giving is not earth, nor nature, nor ‘ordinary life’, but simply and solely hell.”<sup>6</sup>

We were created to surrender. “From the highest to the lowest, self exists to be abdicated and, by that abdication, becomes the more truly self, to be thereupon yet the more abdicated, and so forever.”<sup>7</sup> Surrendering our lives, and whatever happens in them, as quickly as we receive them is heavenly! Lewis describes this continual self-abandonment as a dance where God tosses us our lives and we toss them back, where “it flies to and fro among the players too swift for eye to follow, and the great master Himself leads the revelry, giving Himself eternally to His creatures in the generation, and back to Himself in the sacrifice, of the Word, then indeed the eternal dance ‘makes heaven drowsy with the harmony’.”<sup>8</sup>

The joy of heaven is the quick, constant, complete surrender of our lives back to the Giver of life. “The proper good of a creature is to surrender itself to its Creator.”<sup>9</sup> This is what it means to live in the love of God. “To experience the love of God in a true, and not an illusory form, is therefore to experience it as our surrender to His demand, our conformity to His desire.”<sup>10</sup>

## **2. THE BEAUTY OF HEAVEN CAN BEGIN TO BE EXPERIENCED WHEN WE SURRENDER OUR LIVES**

Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the glory of heaven begins to be available already now. 1 Timothy 6:12 says, “Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.” Already now, we can experience the heavenly wonder and peace of surrendering our lives to God.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 45.

This was Adam's experience in the garden before the rebellion against God. Self-surrender was what made paradise so wonderful. "The self-surrender which he practiced before the Fall meant no struggle but only the delicious overcoming of an infinitesimal self-adherence which delighted to be overcome."<sup>11</sup> Adam enjoyed surrendering!

**In perfect cyclic movement, being, power and joy descended from God to man in the form of gift and returned from man to God in the form of obedient love and ecstatic adoration: and in this sense, though not in all, man was then truly the son of God, the prototype of Christ, perfectly enacting in joy and ease of all the faculties and all the senses that filial self-surrender which Our Lord enacted in the agonies of the crucifixion.**<sup>12</sup>

The first Adam was created to live constantly surrendered. While we lost that desire through Adam's sin, we can recover it through our connection with the second Adam, Christ, who also surrendered His life to God. "The sacrifice of Christ is repeated, or re-echoed, among His followers in very varying degrees, from the cruelest martyrdom down to a self-submission of intention whose outward signs have nothing to distinguish them from the ordinary fruits of temperance and 'sweet reasonableness'."<sup>13</sup> As believers we follow Christ's example. As believers, we share His nature. "Since I am I, I must make an act of self-surrender, however small or however easy, in living to God rather than to myself."<sup>14</sup>

### **3. WE WILL NOT WANT TO SURRENDER OUR LIVES UNLESS THERE ARE PARTS OF OUR LIVES THAT ARE NOT PLEASANT**

Originally, we were created to find joy in surrender. It was natural, for Adam and Eve, to continually relinquish control over to God, even in the glory and pleasure of paradise. However, their natures, and ours, were changed. "A new species, never made by God, had sinned itself into existence."<sup>15</sup> This new species was fundamentally different from the beings God had originally created. "The change which man had undergone was not parallel to the development of a new habit; it was a radical alteration of his constitution, a disturbance of the relation between his component parts, and an internal perversion of one of them."<sup>16</sup> As Romans 3:23 bluntly states, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

Now, as these fallen species, we no longer equate the glory of God with the act of surrender. Surrender, in our minds is the opposite of joy and pleasure. We resist surrendering. We will do anything to avoid surrendering. Only as a last desperate measure will we consider doing what we created to do in the first place. "The human spirit will not even begin to try to surrender self-will as long as all seems to be well with it."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 91.

This is why, sometimes, bad things happen to the nicest people, because “this illusion of self-sufficiency may be at its strongest in some very honest, kindly, and temperate people, and on such people, therefore, misfortune must fall.”<sup>18</sup> It is natural, in our broken nature, to see ourselves as the master of our own lives who should be allowed to determine the quality of our own lives:

**From the moment a creature becomes aware of God as God and of itself as self, the terrible alternative of choosing God or self for the centre is opened to it. This sin is committed daily by young children and ignorant peasants as well as by sophisticated persons, by solitaries no less than by those who live in society: it is the fall in every individual life, and in each day of each individual life, the basic sin behind all particular sins: at this very moment you and I are either committing it, or about to commit it, or repenting it.**<sup>19</sup>

Even if we’ve been taught the need to surrender, and even if we’ve experienced a taste of the joy of letting go, still, we resist. “We try, when we wake, to lay the new day at God’s feet; before we have finished shaving, it becomes our day and God’s share in it is felt as a tribute which we must pay out of ‘our own’ pocket, a deduction from the time which ought, we feel, to be ‘our own’.”<sup>20</sup>

It takes time, and usually some level of discomfort, to retrain us to naturally, spontaneously and constantly surrender. “Hence the necessity to die daily: however often we think we have broken the rebellious self we shall still find it alive.”<sup>21</sup>

Even daily surrender is not enough to change our nature. We may arrive at a point where we relinquish control over to God for a moment, only to find ourselves trying to take that control back. “God has had me for but forty-eight hours and then only by dint of taking everything else away from me. Let Him but sheathe that sword for a moment and I behave like a puppy when the hated bath is over—I shake myself as dry as I can and race off to reacquire my comfortable dirtiness, if not in the nearest manure heap, at least in the nearest flower bed.”<sup>22</sup>

But God is persistent, and through the pain continues to release us from the delusion that we are in control. “If the first and lowest operation of pain shatters the illusion that all is well, the second shatters the illusion that what we have, whether good or bad in itself, is our own and enough for us.”<sup>23</sup> This shattering is painful. It must be. “There is one right act—that of self-surrender—which cannot be willed to the height by fallen creatures unless it is unpleasant.”<sup>24</sup>

This is the struggle between the new life we have received from Jesus and our old, sinful natures. Lewis quotes from the *Theologia Germanica* (a summery of theology written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century) as he writes, “Since the life of Christ is every way most bitter to nature and the Self and the Me (for in the true life of Christ, the Self and the Me and nature must be forsaken and lost and die

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 71

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 101

altogether), therefore in each of us, nature hath a horror of it.”<sup>25</sup> This is why Jesus describes surrendering as taking up our cross and following Him. Surrendering used to be joyful. It was the ultimate experience of pleasure. Now, because of our broken nature, “to surrender a self-will inflamed and swollen with years of usurpation is a kind of death.”<sup>26</sup>

What is God to do? Should He leave us as we are, defiantly trying to defend our own idea of a blessed life? Or, from the deepest love, should God break our illusion and bring us back to true paradise, to the pleasure of surrender, even though we might not like it at first? “The creature’s illusion of self-sufficiency must, for the creature’s sake, be shattered; and by trouble or fear of trouble on earth, by crude fear of the eternal flames, God shatters it ‘unmindful of His glory’s diminution’.”<sup>27</sup> What is God to do?

What do you think?

#### 4. GOD’S LOVE IS SO DEEP, HE WON’T STOP UNTIL WE ARE TRULY BLESSED

God decides to love. Are you surprised? He decides to love us so much to allow us to feel some pain, restoring the pleasure and joy of surrender.

**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 source of false happiness? It is just here, where God’s providence seems at first to be most cruel, that the Divine humility, the stooping down of the Highest, most deserves praise.**<sup>28</sup>

He decides to love us, even though we don’t always recognize that love.

What we call “God’s love” is often a faint, faded echo of what God truly intends to give to His children. “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.”<sup>29</sup> What we call a blessed life has as much to do with true blessing as a mudhole does with an ocean. But we, from our broken, limited perspective, would prefer the mudhole to the ocean.

We would prefer God to show His love by making sure that nothing bad ever happens. That, to us, a blessed life. “We want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven—a senile benevolence who, as they say, ‘liked to see young people enjoying themselves’, and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, ‘a good time was had by all’.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>29</sup> The Weight of Glory, page 26.

<sup>30</sup> Lewis, *Pain*, 32.

This God refuses to do, not because He doesn't love us but because He does! "As St Augustine says somewhere, 'God wants to give us something, but cannot, because our hands are full—there's nowhere for Him to put it.'"<sup>31</sup> If God gave us what we want, as we heard earlier, we would continue in our delusion that we need to set the terms for what life will be like. "The security we crave would teach us to rest our hearts in this world and oppose an obstacle to our return to God: a few moments of happy love, a landscape, a symphony, a merry meeting with our friends, a bathe or a football match, have no such tendency. Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home."<sup>32</sup>

So, says Hebrew 4:13 "everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account," even those who are enjoying a prosperous life. God, who made these deserving people, may really be right when He thinks that their modest prosperity and the happiness of their children are not enough to make them blessed: that all this must fall from them in the end, and that if they have not learned to know Him they will be wretched."<sup>33</sup>

It's hard to hear the love in this. This kind of love doesn't always feel good. But maybe we don't understand what love really is. "The problem of reconciling human suffering with the existence of a God who loves, is only insoluble so long as we attach a trivial meaning to the word 'love', and look on things as if man were the centre of them. Man is not the centre. God does not exist for the sake of man. Man does not exist for his own sake."<sup>34</sup> God does love us, deeply, infinitely. It just might not be the kind of love we were looking for. "

**In awful and surprising truth, we are the objects of His love. You asked for a loving God: you have one....not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way, not the cold philanthropy of a conscientious magistrate, nor the care of a host who feels responsible for the comfort of his guests, but the consuming fire Himself, the Love that made the worlds...<sup>35</sup>**

Could God, in His love, left His world half-made, with only half a sun shining, only half of the water divided from the land? Can you imagine a world inhabited by animals that were only half-made? So then, can God, in His love, leave us only half restored to true pleasure? Even if this restoration requires pain, can we understand it as anything other than love? "Love may cause pain to its object, but only on the supposition that that object needs alteration to become fully lovable."<sup>36</sup>

We perceive suffering in the light of God's love because we don't recognize just how much we need to be "altered." We don't realize just how broken we are. "When men attempt to be Christians without this preliminary consciousness of sin, the result is almost bound to be a certain resentment against God as to one always inexplicably angry."<sup>37</sup> We would prefer God to leave us alone, to be happy with who we are. But "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."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 47.

God, in His love, has something better in mind than we can imagine, or even desire, at the time. “Love, in its own nature, demands the perfecting of the beloved; that the mere ‘kindness’ which tolerates anything except suffering in its object is, in that respect, at the opposite pole from Love.”<sup>39</sup> God loves us deeply. Ephesians 5:25-27 describes how “Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to Himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” That He allows us to suffer doesn’t contradict His love, it proves it! Yes, He shows us grace, yes, He forgives, but yes, He loves! “Of all powers He forgives most, but He condones least: He is pleased with little, but demands all.”<sup>40</sup>

Would God rather we surrender our lives to Him as we were created to do without experiencing pain? Would He rather we constantly, willingly, release control of our lives over to Him? Of course! He loves us! And sometimes, that love needs to be loud. “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.”<sup>41</sup>

### CONCLUSION

After all this, in spite of all the logic, we still must agree, that suffering stinks! With all the purpose and meaning to suffering that’s we’ve been exploring, and even with the comfort of empathy we might receive from a friend, the pain remains. We hurt, so we must recognize 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.”<sup>42</sup>

And though it might seem less than honorable to be forced to surrender, to relinquish control of our lives only when we have no other options, still God accepts the gift of our lives and rewards us with a taste of joy and pleasure:

**It is a poor thing to strike our colours to God when the ship is going down under us; a poor thing to come to Him as a last resort, to offer up ‘our own’ when it is no longer worth keeping. If God were proud He would hardly have us on such terms: but He is not proud, He stoops to conquer, He will have us even though we have shown that we prefer everything else to Him, and come to Him because there is ‘nothing better’ now to be had.**<sup>43</sup>

He would rather have us in the end, even it means that we choose Him out of desperation rather than affection. “It is hardly complimentary to God that we should choose Him as an alternative to Hell: yet even this He accepts.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 97.

Because He wants you, because He loves you, because He wants to bring you back to kind of life you were created to live, a life of quick, constant, complete surrender to Him. We would prefer that He bring us back to this through pleasure, which He does. But we won't surrender every part of our life over to Him unless some of those parts are painful. "Tribulations cannot cease until God either sees us remade or sees that our remaking is now hopeless."<sup>45</sup> If we expect anything less than we are holding to a false gospel, a gospel without pain, without a cross, a gospel that falsely promises wealth and health and a life without pain. This is not the true gospel. Author and pastor Steve Brown writes, "I believe that when a non-Christian has cancer or is in great pain, a Christian has cancer or is in great pain...so that the world can see the difference."<sup>46</sup> There's a difference between the suffering of someone who knows Jesus and the suffering of someone going through it on their own. With Jesus, our suffering has a purpose. There is pain in the gospel, but the pain is redeemed pain, the suffering is transformed. In Jesus, through the cross, our suffering that leads to the heavenly joy of complete surrender. Philippians 3:10-11:

**I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.**

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.keylife.org/articles/i-give-you-permission/>