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### **THE PROBLEM OF PAIN – Part 1**

(C. S. Lewis wrote a little book with this title in 1962, and following are some paraphrased excerpts along with my observations. Mr. Lewis was a genius, intellectual and spiritual, and his writings make us think deep thoughts that our more limited intellects never before thought. His writings are not infallible but are reflections on the inspired and infallible Word. One of the things that makes his writing difficult is that he quotes not only from the Bible but from the great thinkers of the past and assumes, erroneously, that we are as erudite as he: Aristotle, St. Augustine, Dante, Hobbes, Dr. Johnson, Kant, Marcus Aurelius, Montaigne, Niebuhr, Ovid, Plato, Shakespeare, Socrates, Wordsworth, Zarathustra, and others. If you find some of the following hard going, just gird up your loins and eat your spinach.)

“Some of the reasons why atheists do not believe in the loving Creator described in the Bible: Life on earth is so arranged that all the forms of it can live only by preying upon one another. In the lower forms this process entails only death, but in the higher there appears a new quality called consciousness which enables it to be attended with pain. The creatures cause pain by being born, live by inflicting pain, and in pain they mostly die. Man, through his reason, is enabled to foresee his own pain which causes acute mental suffering, and to foresee his own death. Men also inflict upon one another and on other creatures an incredible amount of pain. Their history is largely a record of crime, war, disease, and terror, with just enough happiness to give them an agonized apprehension of losing it, and when it is lost the poignant misery of remembering. The human race is doomed because the universe is running down, so that ultimately all stories will come to nothing: all life will turn out in the end to have been a transitory and senseless contortion upon the idiotic face of infinite matter. If you ask me to believe that this is the work of a benevolent and omnipotent spirit, I reply that all the evidence points in the opposite direction. Either there is no spirit behind the universe, or else a spirit indifferent to good and evil, or else an evil spirit.

An inference from the course of events in this world to the goodness and wisdom of the Creator has always been preposterous; and it was never made. Religion has a different origin. In all developed religion we find three strands or elements, and in Christianity one more. The **first – the experience of the Numinous**. The Numinous is the sense of awe and dread of a spiritual reality beyond our material being. This experience, common to mankind, finds its fullest development in poet, philosopher, or saint, and it is either a mere twist in the human mind or else it is a direct experience of the really supernatural, to which the name Revelation might properly be given. (Note: Mr. Lewis takes many pages to develop each of these points, and I am condensing them to a sentence of two.) **Second – morality**. Morality, like numinous awe, is a jump; in it, man goes beyond anything that can be “given” in the facts of experience. And it has one characteristic too remarkable to be ignored. All moralities agree in prescribing a behavior which their adherents fail to practice. All men alike stand condemned by their own code of ethics, and all men therefore are conscious of guilt. Again, this consciousness is either inexplicable illusion, or else revelation. **Third – when the Numinous power of which men feel awe is made the guardian of the morality to which they feel obligation.** (When the mysterious spirit or power that is not man is connected with the sense of right and wrong that so deeply troubles and torments all

men.) **Fourth – there was a man born among the Jews who claimed to be or to be “one with” the Something which is at once the awful haunter of nature and the giver of the moral law.**

At every stage man may rebel against any of these points. He can close his spiritual eyes against the Numinous, if he is prepared to part company with half the great poets and prophets of his race, with his own childhood, with the richness and depth of uninhibited experience. He can regard the moral law as an illusion, and so cut himself off from the common ground of humanity. He can refuse to identify the Numinous with the righteous, and remain a barbarian, worshipping sexuality, or the dead, or the life-force, or the future. But the cost is heavy. We can certainly refuse to consider the historical Incarnation as being real or possible. The story is strangely like many myths which have haunted religion from the first, and yet it is not like them. It is not transparent to the reason: we could not have invented it ourselves. It has the rough, male taste of reality, not made by us, or indeed, for us, but hitting us in the face.

The problem of pain in its simplest form: “If God were good, He would want 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.” (In Response: Thoughts on the Divine Goodness.) By the goodness of God we mean nowadays almost exclusively His lovingness or kindness. By kindness we mean the desire to see others than the self happy. What would satisfy us would be a God who said of anything we happened to like doing, “What does it matter so long as they are contented?” We want not a Father in Heaven but a grandfather in heaven – a senile benevolence who, “liked to see young people enjoying themselves.” I should very much like to live in a universe which was governed on such lines. But since it is abundantly clear that I don’t, and since I have reason to believe that God is Love, I conclude that my conception of love needs correction. Kindness, merely as such, cares not whether its object becomes good or bad, provided only that it escapes suffering.

As Scripture points out, it is bastards who are spoiled; the legitimate sons, who are to carry on the family tradition, are punished. If God is Love, He is, by definition, something more than mere kindness. Though He has often rebuked us and condemned us, He has never regarded us with contempt. He has paid us the intolerable compliment of loving us, in the deepest, most tragic, most inexorable sense. We are, not metaphorically but in very truth, a Divine work of art, something that God is making, and therefore something with which He will not be satisfied until it has a certain character. Over a sketch made idly to amuse a child, an artist may not take much trouble. But over the great picture of his life, the work which he loves, he will take endless trouble, and would thereby give endless trouble to the picture if it were sentient.

Another type is the love of a man for a beast – a relation constantly used in Scripture; “We are his people and the sheep of his pasture.” The merit of this analogy lies in the fact that the association of (say) man and dog is primarily for the man’s sake; he tames the dog primarily that he may love it, not that it may love him, and that it may serve him, not that he may serve it. Yet the dog’s interests are not sacrificed to the man’s. To the puppy the whole training regimen would seem, if it were a theologian, to cast grave doubts on the “goodness” of man; but the full-grown and full-trained dog, larger, healthier, and longer-lived than the wild dog, and admitted as it were by grace to a whole world of affections, loyalties, interests, and comforts entirely beyond its animal destiny, would have no such doubts.

Finally we come to the analogy between God’s love for man and man’s love for a woman. It is freely used in Scripture. Israel is a false wife, a pauper bride, whom her lover rescued from the wayside and yet she betrayed Him. When we fall in love with a woman, do we cease to care whether she is clean or dirty, fair or foul? Do we not rather then first begin to care? When Christianity says that God loves man, it means that God loves man; not that He has some disinterested concern for our welfare, but that in awful and surprising truth we are the object of His love. You asked for a loving God; you have one. The great spirit you so lightly invoked is present; not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way, not the cold philanthropy of a conscientious magistrate, but the consuming fire Himself, the Love that made the worlds, persistent as the artist’s love for his work and despotic as a man’s love for a dog, venerable as a father’s love for a child, jealous, inexorable, exacting as love between the sexes. How this should be, I do not know; it passes reason to explain why any creatures, not to say creatures such as we, should have a value so prodigious in their Creator’s eyes. It is certainly a burden of glory not only beyond our deserts but also, except in rare moments of grace, beyond our desiring. But the fact seems unquestionable. The Impassible speaks as if it suffered passion, and that which contains in Itself the cause of its own and all other bliss talks as though it could be in want and yearning. “Oh, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, and you would not.”

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 center of them. Man is not the center. God does not exist for the sake of man. “Thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.” 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 be impeded and repelled by certain stains in our present character, and because He already loves us He must labor to make us lovable. What we would here and now call our “happiness” is not the end God chiefly has in view; but when we are such as He can love without impediment, we shall in fact be happy.

If the immutable heart can be grieved by the puppets of its own making, it is Divine Omnipotence, no other, that has subjected it, freely, and in a humility that passes understanding. If the world exists not chiefly that we may love God but that God may love us, yet that very fact on a deeper level is so for our sakes. If He who in Himself can lack nothing, yet chooses to need us, it is because we need to be needed. Before and behind all the relations of God to man, as we now learn them from Christianity, yawns the abyss of a Divine act of pure giving, the election of man from nonentity to the beloved of God, and therefore the needed and desired of God, who but for that act needs and desires nothing, since He eternally has and is all goodness. To know it as a love in which we sought and He was found, in which His conformity to our needs, not ours

to His, came first, would be to know it in a form false to the very nature of things. For we are only creatures. Our highest activity must be response, not initiative. To experience the love of God in a true and not illusory form is therefore to experience it as our surrender to His demand, our conformity to His desire, since the very possibility of our loving is His gift to us.

Those Divine demands which sound to our natural ears most like those of a despot and least like those of a lover, in fact marshal us where we should want to go if we knew what we wanted. He demands our worship, our obedience, our prostration. Do we suppose that they can do Him any good or think that human irreverence can bring about “His glory’s diminution”? A man can no more diminish God’s glory by refusing to worship Him than a lunatic can put out the sun by scribbling the word “darkness” on the walls of his cell. But God wills our good, and our good is to love Him, and to love Him we must know Him; and if we know Him, we shall in fact fall on our faces. If we do not, that only shows that what we are trying to love is not yet God – though it may be the nearest approximation to God which our thought and fantasy can attain. The call is not only to prostration and awe; it is to a reflection of the Divine life, a creaturely participation in the Divine attributes which is far beyond our present desires. We are bidden to “put on Christ,” to become like God. That is, whether we like it or not, God intends to give us what we need, not what we now think we want. Once more, we are embarrassed by the intolerable compliment, by too much love, not too little.

George Macdonald represents God as saying to men “You must be strong with my strength and blessed with my blessedness, for I have no other to give you.” That is the conclusion of the whole matter. God gives what He has, not what He has not; He gives the happiness that there is, not the happiness that is not. The only alternatives are: (1) To be like God and to share His goodness in creaturely response, or (2) To be miserable. If we will not learn to eat the only food that the universe grows, the only food that any possible universe ever can grow, then we must starve eternally.

(CONTINUED NEXT MONTH)

## **WHO IS GOD, AND WHAT IS HE LIKE?**

As C. S. Lewis observes, trying to figure out God from the evidence in the natural world and in history and in our lives leads to a dead end. We simply can’t find God in that way. When I find myself getting confused about life and about God, which happens regularly, I have a practice which helps a lot, and I recommend it to you. I simply read and reflect on a few specific verses from John, Hebrews, Colossians, and Luke. Following are the verses from the NLT:

- **John 1:1-4, 18; 14:9.** *In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father’s heart. He has revealed God to us. When you have seen me, you have seen the Father.*
- **Hebrews 1:1-3.** *Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son. God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, and through the Son he created the universe. The Son radiates God’s own glory and expresses the very character of God, and he sustains everything by the mighty power of his command.*
- **Colossians 1:15-19.** *Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can’t see – such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world. Everything was created through him and for him. He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together. Christ is also the head of the church, which is his body. He is the beginning, supreme over all who rise from the dead. So he is first in everything. For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through him reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ’s blood on the cross.*
- **Luke 24:25-27, 44-45.** *Then Jesus said to them, “You foolish people! You find it so hard to believe all that the prophets wrote in the Scriptures. Wasn’t it clearly predicted that the Messiah would have to suffer all these things before entering his glory?” Then Jesus took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. Then he said, “When I was with you before, I told you that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and in the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.*

Wow! Isn’t that fantastic! I can’t read these Scriptures without getting goose bumps. Who is God, and what is he like? He is exactly like Jesus. When our minds start feeling overwhelmed with darkness, all we need to do is read and meditate on these verses and light will come. Yes! That is the way it has worked for me again and again.

These insights were received by John and Paul and Luke and the unknown author of Hebrews by revelation. They are received and believed by you and me by revelation. That is the only way any one knows God, it has to be revealed by the Holy Spirit. And what do these scriptures reveal about the invisible God?

1. God has made himself known through Jesus Christ.
2. Christ, the Son of God, preexisted in heaven with the Father for all eternity.
3. God the Father is the Creator, and he created the universe through the Word, his Son, Jesus Christ.
4. Jesus was not only the agent of creation, he presently sustains the universe by his power. Jesus is sustaining your heart beat, your breath, your ability to think and move and choose this very moment. He is sustaining the subatomic particles and the galaxies in the heavens by his power.
5. All of the Old Testament, Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms, is about Jesus. That means that for more than 2,000 years God was using the writings that became the Bible of the Jews, the Old Testament, to prepare the way for the coming of the Savior, the Messiah. The moral law, the ceremonial law, the history, the poems and songs, the prophecies, everything, is about Jesus Christ, the center of history.

If all of this is not real to you, ask God to give you the gift of faith and to reveal it to your heart.

## **HOW PEPE QUIROZ BECAME AN EVANGELIST**

I have known and worked with Pepe Quiroz in Mexico City for almost 30 years. When I first got to know him, I had some goofy ideas about the Christian life, and I wasn't living up to what I knew. That is still true, but I probably learned as much about Christianity from getting to know Pepe as from anyone. Some years ago on one of my trips with Pepe, I asked him to tell us how he became a Christian, and following is his story:

Pepe was born into a Christian home. His father, Maximo, was a pastor and church planter. When Pepe was 7 years old he was attending a public school. One afternoon after school several men grabbed Pepe and about 10 of his friends, took them in cars to a house and injected them with heroin. They told the boys that if they ratted on them they would kill their mothers and fathers. The men repeated this action every few days for a number of weeks until all of the boys were thoroughly addicted. They then recruited the boys to sell drugs for them, or to steal in order to earn money for their fix.

Pepe was immersed in drugs, gangs and crime until he was 17 years old. One night he went with his gang of 20 young men to a big fiesta of some 600 people. The party was going strong some time after midnight – music, alcohol, drugs, girls, loud talking, much noise – when Pepe heard a clear voice: “Pepe, leave this place!” He looked around to see who had spoken but there was no one. He turned back to his friends and the voice spoke again loudly and urgently, “Leave this place now!” He had never heard God speak before, but he knew it was God and it frightened him. Without a word to anyone he immediately left the party. He did not learn until the next day that shortly after he left a much bigger rival gang surrounded all the members of his gang and shot or stabbed to death all 19 of his friends.

Pepe was deeply moved when he left the party. He drove around for awhile and finally went to his father's church. It was 3 AM, but he saw his father's car outside and the door was unlocked. He went inside, there was a dim light, and he heard and saw his father and mother on their knees at the altar praying for him. His heart was broken. In tears he went down and threw his arms around them. He repented and gave his life to Christ. Within a year he was enrolled in a Bible school.

God Bless

Glenn

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