A Grief Observed Study Guide

A Grief Observed by C. S. Lewis

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

A Grief Observed is a non-fiction reflection from author and theologian C.S. Lewis on the process of grieving for his wife, who died of cancer after three years of marriage. He keeps a journal throughout the months immediately following and very candidly describes his resulting anger and bewilderment at God, his observations of his impressions of life and his world without her, and his process of moving in and out of stages of grieving and remembering her. He ultimately comes to a revolutionary redefinition of his own characterization of God, and gains the ability to live gratefully for the gift of a true love as long as he was enrolled in that particular education.

The book is divided into four sections, simply headed with Roman numerals, each a collection of excerpts from his journals documenting scattered impressions and his continuously evolving state of mind.

In the beginning his writing is, as one would expect, raw, vulnerable, and at times startlingly angry. Lewis questions the benevolence, even the attentiveness of God, expresses distaste for all of the business of life and having to see all of the places where they were so happy and reveals that both of his parents were taken by cancer, as well. He speaks of a feeling of only veiled mental acuity, like he is watching life through a veil; or when he does feel her absence acutely he is tempted not to feel it, but to remember how happy he was in his long bachelorhood before his wife. He scolds himself for "maudlin tears", saying she would have disapproved of the self-indulgence of them. And, at the moments of his most desperate need of reassurance, Lewis describes the doors of heaven as being locked tightly against him.

In wondering at his struggling to understand God, Lewis confesses a fear not of losing his faith in God, but of coming to believe awful untruths about him: that He is willing to hurt us arbitrarily, without cause or compassion, that He is a capable ruler over the good and prosperous times, and conspicuously absent when our need is most dire.

Lewis discusses his body's being hers and being itself a constant reminder of her absence. He talks about the embarrassment of his sons whenever he broached the subject of their mother. He describes his and her intense intellectual intimacy, transcending emotion for perfectly honest and real intimacy.

As a part of their intimacy, there was in his wife a continuous call to a realistic view of things, and he has a conversation with his memory of her at one point about his "house of cards". He contends at a number of points that his belief in God has not so much been in God for Who He is, but in a set of hopeful ideas of his own construction, that set being as fragile as a house of cards ("merely verbal thinking and his merely notional beliefs"). His reflection on the mental discipline of his wife leads him to conclude that the sooner his house of cards is knocked over to make room for a real and substantial faith, the better.

In the latter half of the book, Lewis is both emerging from the anger he expressed in the first half and coming to enjoy the clear memory of his wife as it becomes less clouded by his grief. His view of God moves securely away from Him as the Cosmic Sadist to a place in which he understands God's intention for the loss of a spouse as an expected and necessary next step, as much as marriage is the logical step following courtship. His tone resumes the wise and clear-thinking voice his readers know and love. Ultimately, his reflections from the beginning become launching points for tangible and applicable wisdom.

Lewis concludes that God does in fact use the necessary pain in our lives to teach us to know and trust Him as He is, and that for God to give us comfort we have to be through the consuming grief enough to be able to receive it.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

A Grief Remembered is a non-fiction reflection from author and theologian C.S. Lewis on the process of grieving for his wife, who died of cancer after three years of marriage. He keeps a journal throughout the months immediately following and very candidly describes his resulting anger and bewilderment at God, his observations of his impressions of life and his world without her, and his process of moving in and out of stages of grieving and remembering her. He ultimately comes to a revolutionary redefinition of his own characterization of God, and gains the ability to live gratefully for the gift of a true love as long as he was enrolled in that particular education.

Lewis opens his reflection by describing his physical and mental state compared with his expectations or lack thereof. Feeling something like nerves and the symptoms of a concussion—the fluttery stomach and cloudy head—he wonders why no one told him grief would feel this way. He describes a feeling of disengagement from his surroundings, thinking everything and everyone left in the world too uninteresting and trivial to engage him, yet wishing for company anyway.

He observes moments when one part of his mind tries to remind him of the good around him, and the happiness he had with his life before he was married, and the speed with which memories of his wife chase those thoughts from his mind. At other moments, he records sinking deeply into grief and "the loathsome sticky-sweet pleasure of indulging in it" and is disgusted. He speaks of preferring the moments of heart-rending agony, as those are at least clean and honest. Wallowing in despair inspires in him the fear that he "shall have substituted for the real woman a mere doll to be blubbered over", when the woman herself was Lewis' respected intellectual equal and even guided him away from his tendency to silly or overly emotional thinking. He says he "was never less silly than as H's lover".

Emerging from a bout of complaint about the temptation to become lazy and untidy without a wife for whom to keep his cheeks smooth, Lewis begins to wonder why he doesn't feel more acutely the comfort of God at these moments. He reflects that when people are happy and remember to turn to heaven and give their thanks to God, He seems immediately present and rejoicing with those who are rejoicing. When they are at their most desperate, however, and turn to God when all of their other resources are exhausted, there is the feeling of heaven's remaining stone-wall silent, leaving Lewis in the seemingly unfamiliar territory of being perplexed by his experience of God.

The comfort of a Biblically-thinking friend reminds Lewis of a similar experience had by Jesus Himself, motivating the famous question from the cross, "why have You forsaken me?" Lewis confesses, however, that this comfort makes the feeling no easier to understand. It is at this point that Lewis confesses his fear not of ceasing to believe in the reality of God, but of coming to believe that his present experience of God is a more

accurate representation of Him than the definitions he held before. He wishes to submit to the will of God as was modeled by great men of faith who came before him, even if just to behave as if his faith remained strong even while he remains baffled.

Here Lewis explores and dismisses the theory that God is a figment of primitive human imagination seeking to put together a suitable substitute for sex. The flaw in the theory, according to Lewis, is that healthy romantic love at its most passionate and its most unemphatic alike left him completely satisfied in every aspect of his being. If God were only manufactured as a substitute for that, people would have lost interest in Him completely as an ill-fitting solution to that particular human desire. But with that desire fulfilled in both him and his wife, Lewis observes that they both recognized their need of something grander outside of one another: quite a different something to satisfy quite a different kind of want, for with each other they were both utterly satisfied.

Lewis remembers next that at the death of a friend years before, he had the continually strong feeling of assurance that his life continued and was enhanced after death, and observes that he has nothing like that feeling regarding his wife. He records having asked for even a fraction of that assurance and wonders even if he were to receive it whether it would be merely self-hypnosis from having wished for it so intently.

He then discusses his resolve not to shape his practices based on what she would have wanted in life under the guise of keeping promises to the dead. He concludes that to do so would be to allow her to become a disguise for his own preferences and therefore he will not dishonor her thus.

The next group of reflections center on the topic of shame as a reaction in his children and in himself as a boy to the discussion of the recently deceased. He theorizes that it is the emotion of shame that prevents many people, even beyond childhood, from behaving as though they are truly happy, but at the same time wonders whether the boys are right in wanting those conversations about her to stop. He observes that whatever pain, be it from a toothache or a loss, pulls our focus toward it, leading us to contemplate the fact that we are focused on it. The result is the self-perpetuating cycle of going round and round the same group of thoughts with little possible progress away from it. He observes that the sense of people's embarrassment reaches beyond his children to his friends. The moments of their passing him in the street reveal their inner quandaries whether to offer comfort to him, or speak as if nothing is wrong, or to just grit their teeth through the most polite greeting possible and have it over and done with. He theorizes whether it would be best for the bereaved just to excuse themselves from society for the duration of their most intense mourning to prevent both the awkward obligation and becoming oneself a reminder to young lovers of their inevitable eventual separation.

Regarding places where he and his wife had been most happy, Lewis reflects that he determined to go back to them right away, so as not to be tempted to avoid them perpetually. To his surprise, the pain of her absence is neither more nor less intense in the places of their particular happiness than anywhere else. Rather, the place in which he feels her absence most acutely is in his own body. As the instrument of his enjoying

her and one of her means of most intimately enjoying him, it is a reminder he necessarily carries with him at every moment.

Here Lewis' reflections reveal that cancer took both of his parents: his mother first, then his father, and most recently his wife. He observes that the idea of cancer carries with it a certain kind of horror of the unknown, and in the living with it, that terror is somewhat disarmed. For in the living with it, as with war or anything else, one lives in conversation with moments only, not necessarily conversing directly with the thing itself.

An atypical moment of jubilant memory appears next in his memoir, as he remembers how happily he and his wife still existed in moments long after all hope had vanished. But this reflection leads directly into a qualifier: that even in the most intimate of relationships there is still a limit to how far the partner who is not dying can enter into the experience of the partner who is. Intellectual understanding can only take a person so far, and beyond that point, there is a kind of fear of destruction that can only be felt by the body being destroyed. He makes the observation here that lovers in particular are necessarily complementary in their feelings toward one another rather than identical, making the entering into the feeling of dying even less possible.

An insight into the wisdom Lewis admired so much in his wife sets the tone for the close of the first chapter: he moves from the observation that their sufferings were theirs as individuals and very different from each other to the recollection of a phrase she frequently quoted: "Alone into the Alone". The next phase of the journey was hers to take and was not intended for them both together. Even if they were both to die at the same moment, never feeling each other's absence on earth, their conversation would still stop. He observes in his typical clean logical style that it is foolish to expect or seek conversation with the dead for, if that were the intention, where would be the purpose of the separation in the first place?

An impatient and emphatic commentary on the idea passed around that death either isn't real or isn't relevant follows next. Lewis passionately observes that death most certainly does exist, and that it makes a very marked difference, making it matter very much. For all the hard searching he might do in the vast searches of the universe, he would not find her.

To close the first bundle of reflections, Lewis turns to the memory of his wife's face and wonders at its lack of clarity. Having seen it in a thousand states and expressions, it is at this moment of recollection a blur, and he has no photograph he regards as any good at all.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

The second and by far the most hopeless section opens with Lewis scolding himself for, having reread his journals to date, having focused so much more time on the effect his wife's death on him than on her suffering and so early having lost her late-coming happiness. He remembers her capacity for joy and pleasure as prodigious and worth reward, and observed with no little bitterness the pleasure fate takes in creating an appetite and then snatching away its satisfaction. As quickly as he determines to think more about her and less about himself, however, he identifies the fatal flaw of such a determination. For when he chooses the ingredients and measures for the recipe of her, the woman he will remember becomes necessarily molded to his liking. Instead, Lewis pines for the resistant reality of the woman he loved. As close as the two of them became, they were still two. Lewis asks almost in the same breath for her to come back and correct his warping memory and why God would allow her, once freed, back into her old shell.

A discussion follows of the shells that are our memories of people and how changeable they are with time. Having met a man he hadn't seen for ten years, Lewis was struck by how much the reality of the man had to correct about the memory he had held. Without having changed at all, the real man shattered the remembered image in only the first few moments. He compares the effect of losing the reality of a person in the taint of memory to snow falling on objects until the real shape and details of the thing end up quite hidden. But, confesses Lewis, as quickly as her reality might clear away the snow, the moment she was gone again the snow would recommence.

And so Lewis returns to a place similar to the one in which he closed the opening chapter, pointing out the necessity for a realistic and matter-of-fact acceptance of the reality of death as a permanent separation. Like the Egyptians thinking they could make death less with embalming, regardless of their ritual, whatever is left is still just a corpse. The person loved is every bit as gone, making everything we try to cling to a mockery. To fall in love with his memory of her, that memory never actually being her, would be to Lewis a kind of incest. He likens it to a man he recalls having observed saying he was going with his hoe and watering pot to visit his mum, when where he was going in point of fact was to tidy the spot under which his mother's body had been buried. He recalls having been horrified that that spot had come to be regarded as the man's mother. He tries to accept it as a kind of surrogate and metaphor, a way of honoring and remembering the dead, but observes the flaw in the attempt being that the mother at the plot of land will do, think, and say whatever the visitor wants. The plot is the only resistantly real feature of that interaction.

His thoughts return next to his observations of himself and the process underway in him, and he records how easy it was for him to pray for other dead in their time of transition, and how hard he finds it to pray for his wife. He says it is like praying into

nothingness about a woman who was once and now is not at all, not even in the spiritual realm. Comparing faith in such practices to faith in anything else, a rope being his example, he concludes its only real test is real risk. Wanting desperately for her soul to continue to exist beyond her death and being unable to rest comfortably enough in the reality that she did, to be able pray as if it were so, Lewis realizes that he must never have cared as much for the people for whom praying came easily.

In the kind of thinking that makes C.S. Lewis such a stimulating mental exercise to read, he muses next over where, more specifically, when his wife is in what he considers "now". If the dead exist outside of time, it would be foolish to ask after her location at any point along our physically necessary time line. It is a convention no longer necessary once we are no longer physical. Even the comfort offered by some that she is with God now is no comfort to a body and existence that, at one time touching hers intimately, is no longer able to touch her at all. The parts that feel her absence feel it regardless of how happy and peacefully she might exist somewhere else.

In his sharp and tidy logic and drawing from his unpolluted acquaintance with scripture, Lewis writes next about the attempt of some religious people to comfort him with the promise of "reunions on the further shore", and points out the purely human source of that theory. Taken from what Lewis classifies as bad hymns and lithographs, he points out its absence from the pages of scripture. The very thing making heaven different and worth getting to is its very difference from this life. He points out as he did at the suggestion that we could talk to the dead that nature never repeats itself, or takes something away only to give the same thing back. But even recognizing the falseness of the expectation, Lewis confesses how ardently he cries out for that very kind of restoration.

Here, Lewis records another raw and human confession: that the comfort offered when a mourner is quoted the line of scripture "do not mourn like those who have no hope" seems to him a command addressed to his betters. Lewis recognizes that a mother who has lost her child and is rightly mindful of the child's being in the place for which its eternal soul was created could be comforted by that knowledge. But a mother mourning her own loss of the child will find no comfort in whatever might be said about where the child is now. By the same token, she might be comforted that she herself retains her ability to "glorify God and enjoy Him forever" even while her chief source of earthly happiness is absent. But Lewis recognizes that the woman's mothering instinct and habit can take no comfort in such a thought, but must be allowed to pass out of her just as the child passed away from her.

He wonders next about the commonly offered comfort that his wife is happy now, and wonders how those offering that advice can do so with such confidence. He does not wonder about her ultimate reconciliation with God, but instead over whether her agony should be instantly gone at the moment of death. Does it make sense that the separation that causes such agony to the lover left on earth should cause none to the lover leaving it? The answer that she is in God's hands makes no sense, either, because she was always in God's hands when she was alive, so in what way would they change their character at the moment she became dead?

Next follows a contemplation of the observed cruelty of God and harshness of reality. God hurts us, completely in keeping with His promises to love us and his love for us, unbearably during our lives, so he may very well continue to allow pain for us after this life. He crucified His Son with no attempt to reign in the pain that was involved in that process. Life is a harsh and hideous thing, still compelling us to investigate it further even while we recoil in disgust on seeing it more clearly. He muses that if people cease to exist altogether upon death, that they then never existed in life, and that death is just the means of revealing the emptiness that was always there. That cannot be his conclusion. To whom would we be revealed as nothingness? And what keeps us all from suicide on realizing the sadness of this life if nothing follows it?

Lewis pens the idea that we are trapped in it, and God has neither need nor reason to conform to our idea of goodness. His answer to the question of what we have to combat the idea of God's mindless cruelty is the person and character of Christ. But the haunting question Jesus asked from the cross, "Why have You forsaken me?" then becomes merely a lead-in to the punch line for the cruel joke that is human history: God is a hateful being. He uses several false recoveries and optimistic diagnoses along his wife's journey with cancer as evidence. They were led to believe one thing while its cruel and terrible opposite was true.

The writing that follows was penned the day following that dark and hopeless rant. He offers as its alternative the question of whether it is rational to believe in a bad God - "the Cosmic Sadist". His conclusion is refreshingly logical and another confession. Any rigid characterization we give God is anthropomorphism and in effect a caricature of someone we have observed in life. He confesses that the character of the previous night's accusations was a boy Lewis had known in school who would brag about torturing his cats. But, asks Lewis, could a God who delights to set traps for His creation have conceived first of so beautiful a creation? Could He have authored love and then used that real selfless state to lure people to senseless pain? Could that "spiteful imbecile" create and govern a universe? Or could our tainted-to-ruin sense of things be so depraved that we regard Him falsely? Lewis concludes that such thinking makes any word we use to describe anything worthless. If His definitions of good are bad to us, or vice-versa, what point is there in contemplating God at all? What point would there be in our having even the ability to do so?

At the end of this string of frustrated questions, Lewis asks another: why does he make room in his mind for these intellectual mazes? He concludes that they are "the senseless writhings of a man who can't accept that there's nothing we can do with suffering except to suffer it". Regardless of our reactions to the pain, the pain remains as long as it must. Revisiting the feeling in grief that reminds him of fear, Lewis describes it more accurately as unease with the state of things and waiting for it to change. He ends the chapter quite without optimism, likening himself to a ship missing one engine and destined to chug on alone until his inevitable landfall, like his wife's, and his parents' before that.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

The opening of the third chapter, and the second half of the book, begins with Lewis wondering to the page whether the feeling of something being wrong, missing, nauseating about life will be the new state of things in his perception. He notes that old familiar things either hold new senses of wrongness or are missing their old sense of goodness and expresses fear that his grief will merely settle into bored acceptance of this new "dead flatness".

Frustrated at the fruitlessness of thinking in that way, he shifts his focus back to rationality. He wonders what promise has been broken that was once made him, or what new question has it introduced to his contemplation of the universe. We were, after all, promised suffering, mourning, pain by God himself is Lewis' reminder. While he grants that it is very different to grapple with something tragic happening to oneself that seeing it as a philosophical point of understanding, it shouldn't make such a difference as to rattle one's previously held faith or, Lewis contends, that faith would not have been real at any point. Faith that crumbles at its first serious blow is "a house of cards"; not faith, but imagination, playing with the ideas of pain and tragedy, but unable to contend with their realities—a rope that, when really required to hold him, he didn't trust enough to test.

He compares faith to a game of bridge on which there must be staked money, or the players wouldn't take it seriously. One's bet to trust God or not to must be something dearly cherished, or it won't make a difference to us which way the cards fall. Not until the hypothesis' credibility determines something to which we react with our very deepest emotions, related to our deepest attachments, is our faith forced out of being merely verbal proclamation or intellectual understanding. He observes that his wife would have pointed out the valuable necessity of knocking down a faith no stronger than a house of cards, and that only suffering had the force to do it. God the mindless torturer was then an unnecessary hypothesis.

Lewis wonders as he begins rebuilding his faith whether the next construction will be just another of the same, following his initial tantrum, and no stronger than the first. Then when his next test comes, that one of a slightly different flavor, will it be knocked as completely to the ground? He wonders whether the things he believes are the dreams, or whether he only dreams he believes them.

Next comes a series of questions wondering what makes his current meditation more legitimate than his last. He observes that his initial ragings about the injustice of God were more intended to hurt God back than to be legitimate theses on his definitions of Him. He observes that what he needed then was the release of hitting God back, as well as everyone who defended Him while he was so enraged, but that the mood that

motivated it was no kind of evidence of what is actually true about God. It was just the writhings of a man in His grip who didn't understand His intention.

Comparing his suffering in his wife's last days to hers, Lewis observes that physical pain is a much more constant assault, while mental anguish has the advantage of the mind's capacity for distraction. So then, he comes to observe the real selfishness of wishing her back, her having passed through the very painful experience of dying once, and compares this selfishness for his faith in God. When it was tested, what he really wanted was his own comfort, and he sees the necessity of that as being revealed to him.

Contemplating her suffering in life leads him to the same about her suffering beyond it. Even as faithful and admirable a soul as he knew her to be, he observes that it is wishful thinking to imagine that she was perfected enough by her testing in this life to pass straight into pure communion with God. He compares her to a tempered sword, and supposes as the last remaining footprints of her life with a sinful race are refined away, she will be perfected as a beautiful and useful tool in His hands, but asks God to temper her tenderly, remembering the intensity of her suffering on earth.

As quickly as he asks for tenderness, however, he stumbles into one of the more thought-provoking meditations in the book. For if God uses our pain and suffering for our ultimate good, there is neither point nor profit in asking Him for tenderness. It is His compassionate love for us, after all, that motivates Him to the surgery in the first place. If He were to stop, that would be the real cruelty, because He would have stopped caring for our healing, and all of the pain that came before our ill-informed entreaty would have been for nothing. To fear God, then, remains as legitimate as fearing the dentist because, for all of their ability and intention to heal, both must still inflict pain to get the job done.

Lewis moves from this thought to contemplating people's requesting that they receive the pain of the people they hate seeing in it. He observes it is another hollow request, since we have no way of knowing how serious that pain might be. God is the only being with both the ability to actualize that request and still to allow the benefit to pass to those for whom he bore the pain.

Next Lewis records a clearing of the clouds, both in his physical world, and in his remembering his wife. Observing that he had gone to bed tired and woke up refreshed for the first time in a long time, Lewis recounts a moment of very clearly remembering his wife, almost as if he had encountered her. And, without tears clouding his vision or grief clouding his memory he is able to remember her much more clearly than in previous weeks. He writes that in the same way one tries hard for a good night's sleep and lies awake, trying to force the clear memory never brought it as clearly into focus as just physically recovering and allowing it to come when he wasn't expecting it.

He likens the phenomenon to his interactions with God. When he was frantic, he couldn't observe any response from God; kicking and screaming at the door of heaven

found it locked tight. But when he had gotten through the angry, frantic state, he was better able to hear God, not being deafened by his own cries.

Here Lewis remembers an instance when his wife was feeling nudged into prayer, and in listening to God in her own mind she and resisted, thinking He would request something of her and not wanting to be disturbed. When she finally succumbed and quieted herself to hear, she discovered that He wanted instead to give her something, and was instantly joyful.

Lewis's clarity of thinking here allows him to revisit another of his earliest observations: that of fear feeling like suspense. He notes the dichotomy of a thousand habits once a part of interacting with his wife that now have no outlet, yet they sit there at the tip of his consciousness wanting to follow their old familiar course. Still those impulses let him revel in and praise her character in life and all the ways she stimulated him. She was as complete a companion as Lewis had ever had, and he is grateful to have recognized and appreciated her as such while she lived.

Remembering his wife easily leads Lewis to reflect on the temptation to wonder whether their love was too perfect a thing to last. He poses the question whether it is God's snatching joy away as soon as it is found, or whether He just sees the successful completion of the exercise of romantic love and allows the students to pass to the next lesson. It is a thought very typical of Lewis' viewing life as the first proving ground of the soul, where we are tempered and brought into the first stages of our communion with God, and as does the rest of his contemplative writing, which offers a clearly logical and biblical explanation of life's struggles and God's intention in them.

He discusses the point that men and women are created in a complimentary fashion in the image of God and, in being complementary halves, complete in their union the image of God written into humanity. He talks about a sword between the sexes and marriage being the removal of it. And, when that task is completed and their reconciliation and harmonious existence is complete, one or the other of the lovers is taken away as surely as marriage follows courtship. Instead of death being an interruption of the dance, it is intended to be merely the next movement. The challenge of that movement then becomes to love the departed as their essential selves instead of any of the emotions either familiar from the past or comforting about the present.

In wondering whether a person can move past the death of a spouse too quickly, Lewis makes the comparison of a man who has lost his leg. He will either die of the injury or eventually be able to move about on crutches, and then a new wooden leg, albeit not the same way and always aware of what is missing, but moving and functioning nonetheless. Lewis wonders whether he should feel shame at moving and functioning as well as he might without her, or whether he should amplify the unhappiness of living without her. He notes as quickly that his wife would tell him not to be a fool and admits it would be vanity to focus on and wear loudly his bereavement.

Lewis writes here of the balance he sees as necessary to strike between grief when the pain is new, and living faithfully and joyfully in a marriage in which one of the partners

has died. He talks about neither wanting to make another unnecessary separation like desertion or divorce, compounding the initial separation, nor wanting to live only in the pain of the separation allowing no joy to follow. Instead, Lewis suggests, the key is to live happily with the memories of the departed, still mindful of having been one flesh with them, allowing in as much joy from the past and the present as possible. He postulates that to remember the deceased in passionate grief is to put distance between the rememberer and the departed as they actually were. What is remembered instead is a sad, sainted, patheticized version of the person who was loved in life.

He observes that the cultures that add remembering the dead to their regular lives are, in a way, keeping the dead as dead as possible. Laying their clothes out for dinner as Queen Victoria did, keeping anniversaries, leaving rooms just as they were while the now dead once lived in them, are all modern sorts of mummification. He wonders whether it might be a remnant of the savage mind trying to keep the dead dead, so as not to allow them to come creeping back in and haunting their old lives.

As quickly as Lewis decides neither to judge these rememberers nor to join them, he records being swirled right back into the original pain of her departure. He wonders whether it is a cycle or a spiral, and whether if it is a spiral he is in, is he moving up or down it. But there he is as he closes this third and promising chapter, right back in the muck of his mourning.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

The final chapter opens with Lewis firm in the resolve that once he fills his last empty MS book, he will write no more on the subject of his mourning. He observes about the process that while he had set out to describe a state of sorrow and detail a map that could be used to recognize grief by everyone who read it while they themselves were in that state, he discovered instead that it is a process with no discernible end. Rather than having some moment at which he could emerge and therein stop his writing, he discovers new things to write every day. Instead of being on a linear journey, he finds himself tucking back in on his old route at arbitrary points out of order in which he first came across them.

On the day of his opening this chapter, Lewis records having been for a walk through a park in which he found particular pleasure before he was married. He discovers it full of its old beauty, but finds the invitation it offers of that same old joy utterly unpalatable. To merely return to his previous state as if his marriage had never been is to render the marriage too insignificant to consider. He comments to his wife that he never knew how much she had the power to change, and just when he thinks he is healing, he finds a new way of hurting.

Here Lewis makes note of two observable and encouraging changes that have taken place in the process of his grieving. One is that he no longer feels shut out of communion with God when he prays, and the other is that he no longer feels the vast emptiness or fear of remembering his wife wrongly. While encouraged by that, he also briefly scolds himself for the proportion of time spent writing about God and his wife compared to what he spent writing about himself. He expresses a desire to praise the two of them as a way of buoying up his joy. To praise God as the Giver and his wife as the gift would salve his thinking and restore them both to their proper places in it.

To that end, he observes the missing descriptives in his talking about his wife that would characterize her as a life-giving, soul-nurturing garden, and comments that in every way a being is worthy of praising, it is in that way like its Creator. At the same time, being made to represent its Creator is also ultimately made useful to Him, like her being now a sword grasped by the hand of God.

Following those observations, there comes an account of a moment the previous night that Lewis describes in simile. He describes a man standing alone in complete darkness and a sound he hears but cannot identify to demonstrate how mistaken one can be about the state he is actually in. The man could as easily be in a vast open space and hearing a loud sound from far off as in a tiny room and hearing a very soft sound just by his ear, and the two experiences would be very alike. This launches Lewis into a commentary on the very feeble information delivery system that is the human intellect, accompanied by our five senses. The number of things that affect our thinking that we

never identify, and the limited the amount of information we can take in at once make our apparatus a very limited tool. So, Lewis looks as rationally as he can at the possibilities he can see laid open before him. One is that God has much more pain in mind for humanity than we think, and the other is that everything will be fine in the end, and he leaves the two possibilities open before the reader.

Next, Lewis' thoughts go to representations of God and people. In churches, wafers symbolize the flesh of Jesus crucified during communion ceremonies, and photographs symbolize people we wish to remember. But, Lewis observes, what is really needed is the beings themselves and not only the things that remind us of them. The beings themselves are the only things making the reminding worth doing, and the reminders bring with them the danger of becoming sacred in themselves. He observes that rather than allowing the symbols of the holy to become holy themselves, one must allow God's continuous iconoclasm—His shaking up and redefining one's definitions of Him—to be the solid evidence of His presence. The same is true of the people one loves. It is their resistant reality, the conversation between one's perceptions and realities of the studied that makes reality worth embracing.

The challenge of loving people once they have died is the same as the challenge of loving God. One must, as Lewis describes it, reach out the hands of love, since eyes cannot be used, across "all the changeful phantasmagoria of my thoughts, passions and imaginings". One cannot, in short, worship only his thoughts about God, or love only his thoughts about people, living or dead. He compares constructed images of people with the house of cards he had previously built as his image of God. People assume too quickly that they have one another figured out, and must be as willing to let their images of one another be transformed as to let God knock down their house-of-card faiths, so that they may look at Him afresh and be able to construct a more reality-based faith.

There follows this contemplation another commentary about the fanciful reunions people look so forward to having in Heaven. Lewis notes that God must not be used as a means to an end, nor will He be used as such. Worshipers must have their relationships with Him for Who He is rather than for what they want from Him. He asks God aloud whether it is really so that in order to see his wife again, he must love God so much that his reunion with her ceases to be important to him. He compares it to a child wanting toffee and being promised as much as he wants once he has grown up and no longer wants it.

Lewis categorizes questions like this among the questions our very feeble apparatuses of understanding, or very limited perspectives cannot ask in such a way that they can be answered. Like, "how many hours are in a mile?", or "is yellow square or round?". That being the case, he brings his focus back to the two commandments he has been given clearly: to love God with his whole being and to love his neighbor as he loves himself. While his wife was alive, Lewis admits he could place her in importance above God and these commands, and now that she is removed, he can set about the business of living the way he has been commanded.

In the process of putting things into perspective, Lewis comments that both his ideas of the fruition of God and the reunion of the saints are extrapolations from experiences he has had and observed from his very limited earthly perspective. Both are inevitable realities, but his perspectives on them could be based on emphasis he has put on all the wrong experiences. Their actual realities will no doubt blow his preconceived notions completely away. The things that seem like contradictions and problems from our earthly perspectives will define themselves in ways that will do more to show the limits of our perspectives than to demonstrate the reconciliations between those perceptions and reality. Notions will be gone completely, and disarming simplicity will be the ultimate iconoclast.

Speaking of knowing reality, he changes his perspective to the dead's at last perfect knowledge of the living, and invites his wife to look steadily and see him completely. He notes that they kept no illusions about themselves or each other, and desires that all that was fluff or falsity about his love for her be stripped away. Love when it is fully functioning, he explains, allows us to continue loving even with complete knowledge of the person in all their imperfection. He supposes that women are given the ability in greater measure in life, to see through the façade and not recoil: in short, to see like God.

Some of Lewis' clearest thinking and most thought-inspiring observations come at the close of the fourth and final chapter. One is that God made the creatures he invited to fashion themselves after Him to live in the bodies of animals, full of animalian appetites and free to follow their whims: "spiritual animals", and notes the paradox with head-shaking fascination.

Next he recounts a sort of encounter he had the previous night with the mind of his wife. As rational as Lewis is known to be, and qualifying the experience as completely non-emotional, he describes facing for a moment her clean intellect, and being cheerfully refreshed by the encounter. He spends a good deal of time contemplating the purity of non-emotional, intellect-to-intellect intimacy, and wondering whether that is love itself: nothing as changeable or warping as emotion, and with complete understanding. He wonders whether heaven and the communion of souls will be, since it has escaped the realm in which everything must pass through the animalian nervous system and imagination, that sort of brisk, alert, solid interaction, and is roused to optimistic hope.

Lewis recalls that at the end of his wife's life, he asks whether it would be allowed for her to return to him on his own deathbed, to which she replies that neither heaven nor hell could keep her from him. He allows here that he cannot pretend to understand what his idea about the continuation of the essential person and the resurrection of the body will in the end mean, and concludes that the best things are probably the ones we understand least. Lewis closes the final chapter, however, convinced of the cruelty of calling the dead back from what they have already passed through. He releases her for her journey through eternity quoting Dante's words about Beatrice's finally turning from having led him to heaven: "poi si torno all' eterna fontana", "then she turned back to the Eternal Fountain".

Characters

C.S. Lewis

Clive Staples Lewis, or Jack as he was called by friends, is both the narrator and the main character in this book as he sets out to turn his highly logical, well-read, and famously philosophical, introspective intellect to the subject of mourning the loss of his wife. He says he wanted to create a sort of map to describe the state as one watching it objectively and learning the pattern it followed. As a very analytical man, perhaps this was a way of creating his own therapy, becoming a rational observer of a state that his intellect had very little power to control. He is vulnerable, at times even irrational, and so honest about the thoughts, questions, frustrations and fears that come to mind in the days and weeks following her death. Both of Lewis' parents died of cancer, and cancer is what took his wife.

From his very vulnerable state in the beginning, Lewis is consistently very clearly descriptive of the state he is in, so the reader is able to identify very intimately with him throughout his process. He has moments of shocking anger and levels fierce accusations against God in the beginning. He doubts the quality of the life before him and his ability to rebuild his faith after the near demolition caused it by his wife's death.

As the book progresses, however, while his pain resurfaces periodically, he begins, with the aides of both logical working through and putting the distance of time between the initial wound and himself, to work through the questions and problems with God he introduces in the early parts of the book. He proves the value of a mind trained both in the clean scriptural characterization of God and in logically looking at what the mind does when it is dominated by emotion. In the end, he is able to release his wife from his call for her to come back, and to be able to remember her and worship God with joy.

H.

Lewis' wife is referred to throughout the book only as H., a common convention in books of the early 20th century, but unusual in a memoir. Lewis describes her in every way as his intellectual equal, which is high praise from a man as respected in as many circles as C.S. Lewis. She called him on his silliness and held him accountable to clear thinking. She challenged him to live his faith consistently and coherently, and lived hers in such a way that he learned by her example to listen faithfully to the voice of God. He describes her both as a sword, tempered and straight, and as a garden or a collection of gardens, nurturing and giving life to everyone around her.

God

Lewis spends a good deal of time in this book contemplating the aspect of the character of God that inflicts pain, and trying to reconcile that with the God who loves His children

and works constantly for their good. He describes feeling shut out of heaven in the beginning of the book, when his pain is most acute, as if God only makes Himself available when people have praise and thanks for Him, but not when the need for intervention and comfort are most great.

As the book progresses, Lewis ultimately comes to understand that God designed life on earth to be a semi-blind walk through a story all the parts of which only He can see, in bodies bound to distract and cloud our thinking, and so life will necessarily be painful and confusing. He compares people to animals, and God to the veterinarian, inflicting pain in order to cure us, and offers the hope that we will see perfectly the purpose for the pain when we are free of the distractions of our bodies and limitations of our minds. He comes to understand that God designed the ultimate separation of spouses as the necessary conclusion of marriage, as naturally as adulthood follows adolescence. Instead of an absent, arbitrary, or aloof deity, God becomes a deliberate, attentive, omnipotent, and compassionate teacher, tenderly guiding His children through the seasons of life and into His presence in eternity.

Sons

Lewis and his wife have two sons, and Lewis mentions that they look embarrassed by the topic of their mother whenever Lewis tries to broach it with them. He supposes that he remembers a similar reaction in himself at the mention of his own mother, who died when Lewis himself was quite young.

Lewis' Mother

When Lewis was a very young boy, Lewis' mother died of cancer. He mentions her only a few times, first to point out that it was cancer that took her, and once to remember that when his own father would talk about her after her death, Lewis felt a kind of embarrassment that allowed him to identify with a similar response in his own sons.

Friend Who Died Years Before

Looking for reassurance, in the first months of grieving for his wife, of life's continuation after death, Lewis recalls feeling that assurance very strongly following the death of this friend, and wonders why he can't latch on to a similar assurance in reference to his wife.

The Man Lewis Saw After Ten Years' Absence

This man serves as an unpleasant object lesson to Lewis of how much the impression and memory of a person can change over time, and how quickly and perfectly seeing the actual person again can correct the warped memory. Lewis imagines in dismay that his memory of his wife will warp toward his own tastes and lose the unique qualities that made her her own.

First Friend Who Quotes Scripture

One friend in whom Lewis had apparently confided some of his frustration with his reality quotes the scripture to him, saying, "do not mourn like those who have no hope". The friend had intended to offer comfort and reassurance of God's promises for eternity, but Lewis points out its inability to offer the comfort he wants. He will, as will all mourners, have to allow to die in himself the part of him that loved and needed his wife, just as a mother who loses her child will have to let the mothering part of her wither away for lack of an object.

Second Friend Who Quotes Scripture

Another friend points out to Lewis that even the Son of God Himself felt distance between himself and God as a part of His earthly sojourn when, from the cross, he asks, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Lewis finds very little comfort in that shared experience, however, wondering to himself whether God is just out to play a series of cruel tricks on His children, this one having its punch line at the moment when an innocent Jesus was being killed as a faithfully executed act of love.

H's Reappearing Intellect

Toward the end of the book, Lewis describes an encounter with what he describes as the stripped-down intellect of his wife. He sat amazed and reveling in the cleanliness of an encounter of love without the cloudiness of emotion. The only emotion he does describe is joy, pure and crisp, as if removed from the encumbrance of the human nervous system and incomplete mind. The encounter leads Lewis to wonder whether that is the kind of perfect relationship humanity will experience in heaven, without the clumsy and limited humanity through which relationships are translated on earth.

Objects/Places

Parkappears in non-fiction

Lewis describes a park in which he found particular pleasure in the years before he was married, and walks there again after his wife dies. He is surprised to discover that its invitation to a happiness he was familiar with as having been his before he was wed was wholly unpleasant. It was something that, if he were to embrace, would ask him to discount, forget, write off the happiness he had while he was married, and it breaks his heart to consider it.

H's Death Bedappears in non-fiction

Lewis describes conversations he and his wife had in her final days, while she lay at the end of her strength. In one, he describes being able to enter in to her pain only in part, since a body that is not itself close to death has no real way of empathizing with a body that is. He recalls her quoting to him that she was going "alone into the Alone", and he learned from her peace.

Another of the conversations had at her bedside was on a very similar theme. Lewis, not wanting to pass from this life alone, asked her if she would come and be with him on his death bed. She told him with fantastic eye-twinkling assurance that she would, and it is not until the very end of the book that Lewis lets go of that hope and relinquishes her to her own eternal journey.

Lewis's Bodyappears in non-fiction

One of the more interesting places Lewis describes missing his wife in is his own body. He says that in becoming one flesh, each of their bodies became the grounds on which they enjoyed each other most intimately. His body was the only place he could not escape and in which he would always be reminded of her.

Lewis's Journalappears in non-fiction

Lewis goes to his journal regularly over the course of his initial grieving, in order to record the process he goes through and to be able to share with others what they might be able to expect. Like a doctor who first performs a surgery on himself so he can better explain to his patients what to expect, he writes as realistic a summation of his state as he can, one neither hyperbolized nor softened.

Prayerappears in non-fiction

Lewis's ability to come to prayer changes over the course of his writing this book. In the beginning, he tries to approach heaven and finds the doors locked tight against him, unmoved by the desperation of his screaming and pounding. Very shortly, however, Lewis's determination to recognize and submit to the character of God allows him to make sense of the initial silence as the only possible response to someone in his state. He recognizes that it was only possible for heaven to make itself heard once his own screaming and thrashing about had quieted.

Lewis's Pastappears in non-fiction

Lewis's childhood has a lot to reveal about the way he reacts to his wife's cancer. First his mother, and then later his father both died after struggles with cancer, so he meets it as if facing an old nemesis. His past is also where he spent such long years as a confirmed bachelor, married to study and teaching, and happy to continue without a wife. The fact that he finds one with whom he is so completely compatible, and who stimulates the intellectual exploration he prized so highly serves to highlight what a tremendous treasure and painful loss his wife would be.

Lewis's Presentappears in non-fiction

Lewis writes his reflections in real time, at the moments he is experiencing the turmoil he records. This allows the reader insight into his most uncensored moments, when he is most vulnerable to being tossed around by the intensity of his emotion. That fact also allows him to demonstrate what a determinedly steadfast faith will do to make sense of his upheaval and offer the opportunity to gain wisdom from his pain. Every accusation he levels at God in his moments of most intense despair is followed eventually with a logical examination of that accusation that allows Lewis to find loving intention behind the action that had previously infuriated him.

Lewis's Futureappears in non-fiction

The moment recorded near the end of the book in which Lewis's wife meets him as a pure intellect is perhaps the moment that gives him the most optimism for the future, specifically, his life in heaven. He wonders whether relationships in heaven will be the way that encounter was: purely intellectual meeting untainted by emotion and therefore allowed to be briskly sharp and honest, and says that if that is so, how much he will look forward to those interactions. He comments on what a clumsy apparatus we use in our earthly lives for apprehending truth and one another, and imagines that without the filters and emotional habits of a mind suited for this flawed place, relationship would be as bright and clear and honest as those moments were when his joyfully pure wife faced his mind.

Lewis's Darknessappears in non-fiction

Lewis wields a powerful intellect, and so can allow himself to follow it down severely accusative paths when thinking angrily about God. He imagines God in one part of his journal to be a Cosmic Sadist, taking pleasure in making tremendous promises and then snatching them away in our moments of greatest need. He imagines him later to be a torture-loving child, creating weak and helpless creatures that he can lead through torturous mazes and play cruel tricks on them. He even wonders whether the moment at which he had to look away from the sin-bearing Jesus on the cross was in fact his snatching away his promise to Jesus and the world to let that moment serve as payment for the sins of the world, making Jesus's suffering the punch line of a cruel joke.

Lewis's Logicappears in non-fiction

In the same way Lewis examines every other question of faith, he patiently examines the accusations he previously made against God. To the question of his loving to inflict pointless pain, Lewis uses the analogy of a physician. Asking him to stop his operation only allows the problem it was his intention to repair to remain, and so love and intention for good is what compels the Great Physician to continue cutting. He admits about the childish boy accusation that the mood he was in was no evidence to the character of God, and that the accusation had much more to do with attributes of the child he remembered than anything to do with the behavior or motivations of God. Lewis's logic cleanly works through every one of his own moments of sloppy thinking and arrives squarely in a place where his faith can remain logically sound.

Themes

Disillusionment with God

Lewis spends a good deal of time wrestling with the contrast between his expectations and reality, and voices it most passionately as he expresses his seeming disillusionment with God. Thinking that God would be his most attentive sympathizer, Lewis finds himself kicking and screaming in his prayers for some comfort, and the doors of heaven seeming to be locked tight against him. For a man who so passionately sought honest and soul-refining communion with God as Lewis did, and who had set out to use his experience with grief as a way of teaching people who would follow him how to be in the state healthily, abandonment by God was a world-shattering thing to imagine.

As he examines the possibilities of God's true identity and relationship with His creation, Lewis gives full reign to his angry and fertile imagination. He pictures God as a gleeful divider of people from their happiness. He imagines the cross as a vile trap at last sprung after stringing His children and His Son along after hope, and then makes his punishment and abandonment complete. These imaginings come from the festering resentment Lewis holds for all the false hope he and his wife were given for remissions, seemingly miraculous recoveries seemingly given them by heaven, followed by the ultimate permanent removal of hope as she lay dying and in pain. "Time after time", Lewis writes, "when He seemed most gracious He was really preparing the next torture".

Lewis admits at regular intervals getting longer and closer together throughout the book, however, that he is giving voice to his tantrums, letting his internal writhing against the pain manifest in screaming. He goes to rationally assessing the accusations as quickly as he levels them, and those are the moments when he proves his mettle, and the substance of his faith.

He gives credit to God for inflicting pain with a purpose, instead of just for pain's sake. Comparing him to a veterinarian, for example, he allows for the limited knowledge and understanding of humanity as the group of patients, and God's much greater knowledge and setting that knowledge to humanity's healing. In a similar analogy, God as the dentist is most certainly to be feared for the pain He can inflict, but still sought out and listened to for the help and practical wisdom He can offer.

Lewis also spends time over the idea that it may, in fact, have been his own state that made it impossible for him to hear God rather than the unwillingness of God to speak when his pain was at its worst. When he was filled with grief, his mind screaming its agony and his vision flooded with tears, there was hardly fertile ground available, nor was there space between the screams for God to speak. It was only when Lewis was through the worst of his shock and raw emotion that he could be quiet and still enough to allow the comfort and right knowledge of God in. He revisits his idea of the house of cards that was his initial image of God several times and measures his old ideas against

a more informed and rational definition, and rights his own perspective on his ability to see reality for what it is compared with the ability of the omniscient and eternal Creator of it all, and ceases his accusations in favor of humble and grateful submission to a loving God.

The Intentions of God

A good deal of that for which Lewis cried out for in the beginning was relief from and comfort for the pain he felt at his wife's death. He later very eloquently explains, however, why there is no profit in making that particular entreaty, explaining that the kinder and more loving God is, the more determined He will be to persevere with the work causing the pain until it has accomplished its purpose. Therefore, asking Him to cause less pain or to anesthetize him against it is to ask Him to stop accomplishing His purpose. When, however, he sees the happenings around him as the acts of a God working to shake him free of his earth-centered, self-centered attachments and bring him into closer communion with his Creator, he can join Him in the work and have it accomplished both more quickly and with less pain.

Lewis offers another insight into his perspective on the intentions of God when he is talking about His reason for taking Lewis's wife when He did near the end of the book. He says it is as if God were saying, "Good; you have mastered that exercise. I am very pleased with it. And now you are ready to go on to the next", demonstrating Lewis's clear understanding and acceptance of life on earth as an education. Humanity is enrolled in a school whose headmaster is their Creator and whose curriculum is designed to perfect their souls and bring them into more complete communion with Him.

God's Purpose for Marriage

Understanding earthly life as an education designed to establish a foundational understanding of the character of God allows Lewis to view marriage as another of the courses in that education and to examine it for the wisdom it offers. Lewis acknowledges the marked differences in the tendencies of the sexes toward the characteristics that distinguish them; but rather than allow them to remain as "a sword between the sexes", Lewis follows the biblical idea of man and woman created in the image of God (found in Genesis 1:27) through to its logical and useful conclusion. If each of the sexes carries a part of the whole image of God, then their union and harmonization would provide a more complete image of God.

Then, when the two are working harmoniously and that lesson has been completed, one of the two must inevitably die. Lewis is at last able to view that passing as a necessary progression as natural as marriage following courtship. Rather than seeing it as a dance being cut short, it becomes graduation to a new phase for them both on their respective paths to completion. Acknowledging that while his wife was alive Lewis allowed himself to prioritize her even above his cultivation of relationship with God, as well as above his seeking to self-sacrificingly love his neighbor, he resets his focus on these two most

important commandments with a now more complete education with which to go forth and observe them.

Style

Perspective

C.S. Lewis is a world-renowned theologian and philosopher educated at Oxford, following several boarding schools in his youth, one of which put Lewis under the tutelage of a logician that would forever shape his thinking, Mr. W. T. Kirkpatrick of Great Bookham in Surry, or as Lewis called him, "The Great Knock". It is his very logical and well-read intellect that makes Lewis such a thought-provoking writer on whatever subject he tackles. Grief is a topic he approached during his own very intimate experience with it, recording his thoughts in a journal at points throughout the months following his wife's death. Lewis intended to put down a sort of map to allow people mourning losses to know what to expect. The result is at once an emotionally vulnerable and theologically sound examination of personal disillusionment and the character and intentions of God.

It is worth noting that Lewis wrote this book in 1956, himself a veteran of the second World War, among a generation not at all familiar with men revealing or discussing their emotional states. Perhaps that is the void in the human conversation that inspired Lewis to pen his own observations for publication on this very emotional subject. Being a highly educated and well-respected theologian already, he was particularly suited both to write the book and to be taken seriously by his peers.

Tone

Lewis's tone evolves and revolves a good deal as he moves from angry frustration and writhing against the pain of his loss in and out of moments of gratitude for his wife, forgiveness and deepened understanding of God, and humble submission to the purposes he sees God working to bring about. His raw vulnerability is undoubtedly what keeps his writing from being too cerebral to approach, and what makes his faith such an attractive and winsome thing to observe.

Lewis actively submits himself to the processes of moving through his grief, of carefully and deliberately rebuilding his faith, and of accurately recording the processes involved in both. Those parallel journeys require intense emotional honesty and heart-wrenching work on the part of Lewis and, at times, the reader as well. The resulting finished piece is an intensely intimate look into a deeply spiritual and interesting man.

Structure

Since Lewis wrote this book as he was moving through the process of grieving his wife it is a collection of separate thoughts, sometimes leading smoothly into one another and sometimes completely disjointed. That format allows for an accurate and proportional look into Lewis's moods in their real-life proportions, instead of how they might be

remembered and recorded in proportion to their perceived importance. Their rises and falls and the impressions they make on Lewis are quite immediately recorded, and so translated easily to the reader, enabling readers to enter in to those moods with much greater sympathy than if the conversation were not so immediate to the mood coming upon the writer.

The only drawback to that way of putting down thoughts as they come is that topics introduced in one part of the journal might not be revisited until much later, making the organization much more haphazard than if he were writing topically about the process he went through. The reader has to be willing to enter into his stream of consciousness and take the journey as it happens. The format may be quite foreign and abruptly intimate for some readers, but if readers understand the format going in and are willing to approach the book for what it is, it will be a valuable and unique insight into a unique man and a singular season in his life with tremendous potential to offering comfort and perspective to experiences inevitable to everyone's experience.

Quotes

"One never meets just Cancer, or War, or Unhappiness (or Happiness). One only meets each hour or moment that comes. All manner of ups and downs. Many bad spots in our best times, many good ones in our worst. One never gets the total impact of what we call 'the thing itself'. But we call it wrongly. The thing itself is simply all these ups and downs: the rest is a name or an idea." Chap. 1, p. 12

"Time and space and body were the very things that brought us together; the telephone wires by which we communicated. Cut one off, or cut both off simultaneously. Either way, mustn't the conversation stop?" Chap. 1, p. 13

"Unless, of course, you can literally believe all that stuff about family reunions 'on the further shore,' pictured entirely in earthly terms. But that is all unscriptural, all out of bad hymns and lithographs. There's not a word of it in the Bible. And it rings false. We know it couldn't be like that. Reality never repeats. The exact same thing is never taken away and given back." Chap. 2, p. 29

"If God's goodness is inconsistent with hurting us, then either God is not good or there is no God: for in the only life we know, He hurts us beyond our worst fears and beyond all we can imagine. If it is consistent with hurting us, then He may hurt us after death as unendurably as before it." Chap. 2, p. 31

"Do I hope that if feeling disguises itself as thought I shall feel it less? Aren't all these notes the senseless writhings of a man who won't accept that there is nothing we can do with suffering except to suffer it?" Chap. 2, p. 38

"If I had really cared, as I thought I did, about the sorrows of the world, I would not have been so overwhelmed when my own sorrow came. It has been imaginary faith playing with innocuous counters labeled 'Illness,' 'Pain,' 'Death,' and 'Loneliness.' I thought I trusted the rope until it mattered to me whether it would bear me. Now it matters, and I find it didn't." Chap. 3, p. 42

"But 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. If he yielded to your entreaties, if he stopped before the operation was complete, all the pain up to that point would have been useless." Chap. 3, p. 50

"There is, hidden or flaunted, a sword between the sexes until an entire marriage reconciles them. It is arrogance in us to call frankness, fairness and chivalry 'masculine' when we can see them in a woman; it is arrogance in them, to describe a man's sensitiveness or tenderness or tact 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." Chap. 3, p. 57

"Grief is like a long valley, a winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape." Chap. 4, p. 69

"Praise is the mode of love which always has some element of joy in it. Praise in due order; of Him as the giver, of her as the gift. Don't we in praise somehow enjoy what we praise, however far we are from it? I must do more of this." Chap. 4, p. 72

"Five senses; an incurably abstract intellect; a haphazardly selective memory; a set of preconceptions and assumptions so numerous that I can never examine more than a minority of them - never become conscious of them all. How much of total reality can such an apparatus let through?" Chap. 4, p. 75

"For this is one of the miracles of love; it gives - to both, but perhaps especially to the woman - a power of seeing through its own enchantments and yet not being disenchanted. To see, in some measure, like God. His love and His knowledge are not distinct from one another, nor from Him. We could almost say He sees because He loves, and therefore loves although He sees." Chap. 4, p. 84

"Can that intimacy be love itself - always in this life attended with emotion, not because it is itself an emotion, or needs at attendant emotion, but because our animal souls, our nervous systems, our imaginations, have to respond to it in that way? If so, how many preconceptions I must scrap!" Chap. 4, p. 87

Topics for Discussion

Why is the human instinct to so quickly call pain injustice?

What is behind the human tendency to blame God actively for the things we do not want in our lives but not to, with equal passion and attitude-changing constancy, praise Him for the things that are good?

If marriage is the reconciliation of the sexes Lewis describes, how does it change the people in it to bring that reconciliation about?

What is the need in humanity that inspires the traditions in cultures all over the world and throughout history of preserving possessions of the dead, celebrating important dates from their lives, and believing that they continue beyond this life? Why is the continuation of life beyond this life such a nearly universal belief?

Discuss forgiveness both as an action from God to humanity, and as it becomes necessary for humanity to forgive God. What do you think stops that exchange? What restores it?

Discuss the notion that human pain is a tool used by God to shape the human soul. Do you think that is a universal truth? How much ability do humans have to reject the shaping God would try to do?

Do you subscribe to the view of this life as a refining of our souls in preparation for eternity? If so, does the majority of the refining happen during or after this life? If not, what is the purpose of human life?

Would the thoughts recorded in "A Grief Observed" serve as a comfort to a non-believer, or would they even make sense? How broad or limited is the receptive audience to this way of viewing life and death?

Lewis observes in "A Grief Observed" that couples avoided talking with him following his wife's death because, as he imagined, they so hated the idea that their love would eventually meet the same end. Is the idea of marriage as an education intended to be temporary and secondary to one's relationship with God likely to be comforting to most?

What do you think is God's intention in giving humanity such limited apparatuses of understanding as He did, knowing that it would cause humans to blame Him and reject Him for suffering they can't understand?

What do you think of Lewis' theory that humans cannot receive the comfort of God until they are through the worst of their passionate suffering?