

The Problem of Pain

Study Guide

A Bible Study on the C.S. Lewis Book
The Problem of Pain



By Alan Vermilye

“Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” *The Problem of Pain*

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Version 1

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank God for allowing me to experience pain.

How else could I otherwise relate to this book at all?

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INTRODUCTION



The world suffers in pain. We take every precaution to escape it, but it's unavoidable. The fact is, we will experience some degree of pain and suffering in our lives. I was 19 when my mother lost her battle with cancer. Any faith I possessed at that time was suddenly rocked at the thought of losing her. In fact, I was angry and had a lot of questions. Many of those questions I expressed to her in the last few weeks of her life. I struggled with reconciling how a wonderful Christian woman could be taken in the prime of her life, especially while others, whom I perceived as evil, flourished. What's the point? What benefit does it serve?

You, too, have experienced pain—the death of loved ones, the betrayal of those closest to you, the loss of a job, a child in rebellion, the diagnoses that you were not expecting, and the list goes on.

Most often our pain results in a one-word question: Why? The answer is that we live in a fallen and evil world. Although this may be the root cause, it does little to comfort the one who is suffering.

I often wonder if the problem of pain would be easier to manage if I were not a Christian. If there's no higher power who has the ability to resolve my pain, then my only refuge is to exhaust every possible worldly option until I succeed or give up in defeat. But then I remember that in defeat, there's no more hope.

As a believer, I have hope because I know God is all-powerful and will resolve my pain in His time. Unfortunately, our pain also brings a certain amount of impatience, which leaves us wondering: Where is God in all of this? Does He hear my cries for help? Does He even care? Why is He allowing such pain and misery in my life?

In *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis sums up the problem of pain like this: “If God is good and all-powerful, why does he allow his creatures to suffer pain?” As Christians seeking to sincerely follow God, this sounds like a fair question.

Lewis does not claim to offer a complete solution to the problem of pain but rather takes a philosophical approach. He makes it very clear in the preface that his main purpose for writing the book is “to solve the intellectual problem raised by suffering” and not “to teach fortitude and patience while suffering.” So if you’re trying to understand the grieving process, this is not the book or study for you. Later Lewis would take a more personal approach in a reflection on his own experiences of grief and anguish at the death of his wife in *A Grief Observed*.

What Lewis does offer is a very detailed and thought out explanation of God’s ability to use pain for our good while never dismissing the fact that pain hurts. Pain is a reliable friend that keeps us humble and dependent on God, and when that friend departs, we often find ourselves returning to a life of self-sufficiency and sin.

Ultimately, Lewis challenges us to understand pain in the context of a God who provides meaning and hope in the person and work of Jesus Christ amid the pain. In His supreme act of self-surrender and love, He personally and profoundly experienced unjust pain and suffering to redeem our pain and suffering.

As His followers, we, too, are called to lives of submission and to walk as Jesus did. That walk will often include pain, although pain with a redemptive purpose. Perhaps as you have matured in your walk with Christ, you’ve been able to look back on your life and see how some of the worst experiences that you’ve had to endure have actually helped shape you into the person you are today.

As for my normal disclaimer, I’m not a biblical or Lewis scholar nor do I consider this study guide the most comprehensive work available on the book. However, it has helped me and many others come to a better understanding of this great Lewis classic. I hope it does for you as well.

COURSE NOTES AND STUDY FORMAT



HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The Problem of Pain by C.S. Lewis consists of a preface plus ten chapters. This study guide contains a study session for each chapter and can be used for individual study or as a group study gathering weekly to discuss each chapter.

STUDYING

You might find this book academic and difficult to read at times. I surely did, which is why I would suggest that each week you read one chapter all the way through. Then go back and reread the chapter, making notes in your book and underlining or highlighting sections that interest you.

This practice will prepare you to better answer the questions found in the study guide. Since Lewis tends to be a very verbose writer, I have provided definitions and descriptions to various references that you will find at the end of each session in the study guide as well as a full summary of each chapter in the back of the study guide. You will also find the page numbers next to each question to better help you locate the answer.

In addition, you will find the answers to each question in the study guide online at www.BrownChairBooks.com. However, do not cheat yourself. Work through each session prior to viewing the answers. A downloadable Scripture Reference Guide is also available online to save time spent looking up Scripture in class.

GROUP FORMAT

For group formats, the study works best over an eleven-week period. The first week is an introduction week to hand out study guides (if purchased by the church), read through the introduction, and set a plan and schedule for the remaining ten weeks. You might also have those who have previously read the book share their thoughts and experiences.

This study can certainly be used by Sunday school classes, but recognize that Sunday morning time in many churches is relatively short. Thus, the study lends itself very well to midweek times at the church or in the homes of members.

Session length is variable. Ideally, you should allow at least 90 minutes per session. For longer sessions, take a quick refreshment break in the middle.

If you're the group leader, your role will be to facilitate the group sessions using the study guide and the answers found at www.BrownChairBooks.com. Recognize that you are the facilitator. You are not the answer person, you are not the authority, and you are not the judge to decide if responses are right or wrong. You are simply the person who tries to keep the discussion on track and in the timeframe allowed while keeping everyone involved, heard, and respected.

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The following are some suggestions for shaping the learning environment for group sessions that help manage time, participation, and confidentiality.

- Ask the Holy Spirit for help as you prepare for the study. Pray for discernment for each member of the group, including yourself.
- Before each session, familiarize yourself with the questions and answers as it may have been several days since you completed the session. Consider reading the weekly chapters again.
- Be prepared to adjust the session as group members interact and questions arise. Allow for the Holy Spirit to move in and through the material, the group members, and yourself.
- Arrange the meeting space to enhance the learning process. Group members should be seated around a table or in a circle so that they can all see one another. Moveable chairs are best.

- Download the quick Bible reference handout at www.BrownChairBooks.com, and distribute it at the beginning of class to save time looking up Scripture.
- If using Bibles, bring extras for those who forget to bring one or for those who might not have one. (If someone is reading aloud, you might ask the person to identify from which Bible translation he or she is reading.)
- If your teaching style includes recording responses from participants or writing questions or quotations for discussion on a board, you may want access to a whiteboard or an easel.
- Agree on the class schedule and times. In order to maintain continuity, it would be best if your class meets for eleven consecutive weeks.
- The suggested session time is 90 minutes. Because each chapter can lead to substantial discussion, you may need to make choices about what you will cover, or you may choose to extend your group sessions to allow more time for discussion.
- Create a climate where it is safe to share. Encourage group members to participate as they feel comfortable. Remember that some will be eager to give answers or offer commentary, while others will need time to process and think.
- If you notice that some participants are hesitant to enter the conversation, ask if they have thoughts to share. Give everyone an opportunity to talk, but keep the conversation moving. Intervene when necessary to prevent a few individuals from dominating the discussion.
- If no one answers at first during a discussion, do not be afraid of silence. Count silently to ten, and then say, “Would anyone like to go first?” If no one responds, provide your own answer and ask for reactions. If you limit your sharing to a surface level, others will follow suit. Keep in mind that if your group is new, cohesion might take a couple of weeks to form. If group members do not share at first, give them time.
- Encourage multiple answers or responses before moving on.
- Ask “Why?” or “Why do you believe that?” or “Can you say more about that?” to draw out greater depth from a response.
- Affirm other’s responses with comments such as “Great” or “Thanks” or “Good insight”—especially if this is the first time someone has spoken during the group session.
- Monitor your own contributions. If you are doing most of the talking, back off so that you do not train the group to listen rather than speak.

- Honor the designated time window. Begin on time. If a session runs longer than expected, get consensus from the group before continuing.
- Involve participants in various aspects of the session, such as offering prayer and reading Scripture.
- Because some questions call for sharing personal experiences, confidentiality is essential. Remind group members at each session of the importance of confidentiality and of not passing along stories that have been shared in the group.

SUGGESTED SESSION OUTLINE

Based on the amount of reading each week, we suggest that you follow the study outline below over an eleven-week period, but you are by no means locked in to this format. The key is group interest and involvement, not the calendar.

Date	Time	Session	Chapters
		Week 1	Introduction
		Week 2	Preface and Chapter 1
		Week 3	Chapter 2
		Week 4	Chapter 3
		Week 5	Chapter 4
		Week 6	Chapter 5
		Week 7	Chapter 6
		Week 8	Chapter 7
		Week 9	Chapter 8
		Week 10	Chapter 9
		Week 11	Chapter 10

PREFACE



In writing *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis makes it very clear that much of what he claims in the book is not original but rather “restating ancient and orthodox doctrines,” most of which are professed by all believers.

Without a doubt, Lewis is a great writer and a brilliant thinker. His books are filled with incredible insight woven through the depths of a very well-thought-out theology and philosophy. But sometimes he might write something that does not line up with your theology or seems a bit farfetched. Lewis, however, makes it very clear that he is not a Christian theologian but rather “a layman of the Church of England.” Therefore, he leaves it up to you to question if you will...which I found myself doing on several occasions.

*...when pain is to be borne, a little courage helps more than much knowledge,
a little human sympathy more than much courage, and the least tincture of the
love of God more than all.*

Discussion Questions

1. Why did C.S. Lewis want to first write *The Problem of Pain* anonymously?

2. What was Lewis’s only purpose for writing the book? What did he not intend this book for?

3. The definition of a problem is “any question or matter involving doubt, uncertainty, or difficulty.” Although Lewis’s quest for the intellectual answer to the problem caused by pain might seem insensitive, why might it be important to first seek to understand the “why” of a problem before we can start proposing a solution?

4. If Lewis was to give any suggestion for bearing pain, what would it be? Do you agree with Lewis? Why or why not?

PREFACE NOTES AND REFERENCES

Answer Guide and Scripture References Available at
www.BrownChairBooks.com

Ashley Sampson (1900–1947) was the owner of Centenary Press who invited C.S. Lewis to write *The Problem of Pain* after reading the “smuggled-in theology” in *Out of the Silent Planet*. Geoffrey Bless Ltd., another publisher of Lewis, later bought Centenary Press.

Walter Hilton was an English Augustinian mystic whose works became influential in the 15th century. (Wikipedia)

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTORY



Lewis starts this introductory chapter on a personal note: “Not many years ago when I was an atheist...” As an atheist, Lewis’s objection to God was based on his observed futility of the universe, which included the mass proliferation of pain, suffering, and death of the human race.

He soon finds one problem in his observation: If the universe is as bad as he observes it to be, how could man have ever conceived of an all-loving God in the first place? No human being, destined to undergo pain and suffering and to be erased from all eternity, would ever think to connect it to an all-loving and caring God. Such a conception doesn’t simply emerge out of the minds of men.

In the preface, Lewis’s stated goal for the book is to “solve the intellectual problem raised by suffering.” However, in order to do so, he must first examine the origin of religion and how it creates the problem of pain to begin with.

...for pain would be no problem unless, side by side with our daily experience of this painful world, we had received what we think a good assurance that ultimate reality is righteous and loving.

Discussion Questions

1. As a former atheist, how would Lewis have responded to anyone asking him why he did not believe in God? What had Lewis concluded about who or what created the universe? Given your own life experiences, have there been times when you struggled with the same question? Explain. (pp. 1–3)

2. At the beginning of this chapter, Lewis uses a short quotation from Pascal, who criticizes the attempts of others to prove the existence of God from the works of nature. Pascal goes as far as to say that no “canonical writers” ever used nature to make a case for the existence of God. This, however, is incorrect. Read Psalm 29:3–6, Romans 1:20, Acts 14:15–17, and Job 12:7–9. According to Scripture, what does nature reveal, if anything, about God?

3. Regarding the universe, what was the one question that Lewis never dreamed of raising as an atheist? (p. 3)

4. Some might say that religion was developed in the fearful minds of our ignorant ancestors, who created the idea of a wise and good God. What does Lewis say is wrong with this assumption? (pp. 4–5)

5. Lewis proposes that religion from its very beginning has included three elements (with Christianity proposing one more). The first element is the Numinous. Describe the Numinous. Why is the feeling of awe and dread of the supernatural (the Numinous) innate in all humans? (pp. 5–7)

6. Using current and historical literature, Lewis states that we do not know how far back in human history the feeling of the supernatural goes. It somehow came into existence, is widespread, and “does not disappear from the mind with the growth of knowledge and civilization.” How does our world today attempt to explain the supernatural? What sources seek to influence our understanding of the supernatural? (pp. 7–8)

7. Describe the second element found in all religions, the “moral experience.” What is the one commonality found in all moralities throughout time? (pp. 10–11)

8. Describe the third element found in all religions. Why is it not obvious why man would link the first two elements found in all religions? (pp. 11–12)

9. Describe the historical incarnation, or the fourth element that is unique to Christianity.
(p. 13)

10. Read John 10:30, John 8:58, Luke 22:70, Matthew 28:18, John 5:17–22, John 14:6, John 11:25, and Mark 14:61–62. Who does Jesus say that He is? What are the only two possible views of Jesus Christ?

11. How might becoming a Christian change your perception of God from awe and dread to hope? (pp. 13–14)

12. How does not believing in Jesus Christ (the historical incarnation) impact your opinion of God?

13. What are the consequences of rebelling against the supernatural or disregarding morality? What are the consequences of ignoring the Numinous with morality? (pp. 14–15)

14. How does Christianity create rather than solve the problem of pain? Do you struggle with identifying the reason for pain? What are some conclusions you've arrived at? (pp. 14–15)

CHAPTER 1 NOTES AND REFERENCES

Answer Guide and Scripture References Available at
www.BrownChairBooks.com

Blaise Pascal was a French mathematician, physicist, inventor, writer, and Catholic theologian. He was a child prodigy who was educated by his father, a tax collector, in Rouen. When he was about thirty-five, Pascal began to prepare *An Apology [Defense] for the Christian Religion*. He died at thirty-nine, however, before it was completed—leaving only a collection of notes. These were published after his death under the title, *Pensees* (“Thoughts”). – Wikipedia

Claudius Ptolemy was a Greco-Roman mathematician, astronomer, geographer, astrologer, and poet of a single epigram in *The Greek Anthology*. – Wikipedia

Theodicy: The defense of faith and God’s goodness in light of suffering and the existence of evil

Rudolf Otto was an eminent German Lutheran theologian, philosopher, and comparative religionist. He is regarded as one of the most influential scholars of religion in the early twentieth century and is best known for his concept of the numinous, a profound emotional experience he argued was at the heart of the world’s religions. – Wikipedia

Numinous: A term coined by German theologian Rudolf Otto to describe a sense of the mysterious, supernatural, and holy that incorporates both awe and dread.

The Wind in the Willows is a children’s novel by Kenneth Grahame, first published in 1908. Alternately slow moving and fast-paced, it focuses on four anthropomorphized animals in a pastoral version of Edwardian England. – Wikipedia

William Wordsworth was a major English Romantic poet who, with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, helped to launch the Romantic Age in English literature with their joint publication, *Lyrical Ballads*. – Wikipedia

Sir Thomas Malory (flourished c. 1470), English writer whose identity remains uncertain but whose name is famous as that of the author of *Le Morte d’Arthur*, the first prose account

in English of the rise and fall of the legendary King Arthur and the fellowship of the Round Table. – britannica.com

Publius Ovidius Naso, known as Ovid in the English-speaking world, was a Roman poet who lived during the reign of Augustus. – Wikipedia

Publius Vergilius Maro, usually called Virgil or Vergil in English, was an ancient Roman poet of the Augustan period. He wrote three of the most famous poems in Latin literature: the *Eclogues*, the *Georgics*, and the epic *Aeneid*. – Wikipedia

Aeschylus was an ancient Greek tragedian. He is often described as the father of tragedy. Academics' knowledge of the genre begins with his work, and understanding of earlier tragedies is largely based on inferences from his surviving plays. – Wikipedia

Chloroform – A colorless, volatile, sweet-smelling liquid used as a solvent and formerly as a general anesthetic. To render (someone) unconscious with chloroform.

A priori – Relating to or denoting reasoning or knowledge that proceeds from theoretical deduction rather than from observation or experience.

Anfractuosity – A winding channel or course; especially: an intricate path or process (as of the mind)