

Surprised by Suffering

by Rev. Joel Lehenbauer

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Surprised by Joy is C. S. Lewis' autobiographical account of his early life as an unbeliever and skeptic, and his surprising conversion to the Christian faith around the age of 40. If you're a fan of C. S. Lewis, you may know that there is a delightful and obviously unintentional irony in the title of this book. Twenty years after he wrote the book, as he was nearing the age of 60 and fully resigned to a life of bachelorhood, Lewis met a woman with whom he fell deeply in love, and she with him. Her name was Joy. Eventually they married, and Lewis marveled at being "surprised by joy" again and in a way that he could have never planned or dreamed or imagined.

The writings of C. S. Lewis bubble over with the message that the Christian life is full of surprises. Lewis also knew and understood that not all surprises are welcome or happy ones. Just a few months after Lewis' marriage, Joy was diagnosed with cancer. For three years she battled the disease, and then she died. The next book Lewis wrote was called *A Grief Observed*, an excruciatingly personal account of his attempt to deal as a Christian with the excruciating pain of losing God's precious gift of Joy. He writes as someone who knows God's promises about causing all things to work together for good:

"But oh God," he writes, "tenderly, tenderly. The terrible thing," says Lewis, "is that a perfectly good God in this matter is hardly less formidable than a Cosmic Sadist. The more we believe that God hurts only to heal, the less we can believe that there is any use in begging for tenderness. A cruel man might be bribed — might grow tired of his vile sport. . . . 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 our entreaties, if he stopped before the operation was complete, all the pain up to that point would have been useless. But is it incredible that such extremities of torture should be necessary for us? Well, take your choice. The tortures occur. If they are unnecessary, then there is no God or a bad one. If there is a good God, then these tortures are necessary. For no even moderately good Being could possibly inflict or permit them if they weren't. Either way, we're [in] for it . . . What do people mean when they say, 'I am not afraid of God because I know he is good?' Have they never been to a dentist?"

God as Divine Dentist — not the most pleasant or comforting picture in the world, and I suspect that in Lewis' day a trip to the dentist was even less enjoyable than it is today. But there is something instructive about this analogy, and I think it relates to what Peter says in our text [1 Peter 4:12-19]: "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you." If we went to the dentist expecting a facial or a pedicure or a full-body massage, I'm not sure we'd ever go back again. Expecting the discomfort, anticipating the unpleasantness doesn't

make the experience itself any less unpleasant, but it does make it less likely that we will avoid regular contact with and reliance on the very person who is trying to help us.

In the same way Peter says: Don't be shocked when suffering comes, whether it comes as a direct result of your faith in Christ or as a result of living in a fallen and sinful world. When you suffer, it doesn't mean that God doesn't love you. It doesn't mean you've done something wrong. It doesn't mean that God is not a loving God or that something has gone terribly wrong with His plan for your life. The same kind of thing, says Peter, is happening to your brothers and sisters in Christ around the world. In fact, if there's anything surprising about our suffering, Peter seems to suggest that it is this: that through our sufferings we are being granted the opportunity and privilege to participate in some mysterious way in the sufferings of Christ Himself.

We know, of course, what this does not mean. It does and cannot mean that our sufferings are in any way redemptive: we don't earn or contribute anything to our salvation by what we suffer. Jesus did all of that for us on the cross. But somehow, says Peter, in some true and truly surprising way, we have an opportunity through our sufferings to more closely identify with Christ's suffering for us: to understand more deeply, perhaps, why it was necessary for Him to suffer the way He did in this world filled with sin and ugliness and pain, and to appreciate more deeply what His suffering accomplished—the salvation of soul and body that we could never accomplish by any striving or suffering of our own. Reflecting on Christ's suffering in light of our suffering also enables us to yearn more deeply for what still lies ahead as a result of what He suffered for us—the indescribable joy that awaits us when His glory is revealed, when all creation is set free from its groaning and its bondage to decay.

When you think about it, what should probably surprise us more than anything else is not any aspect of our suffering but the “simple” fact that the Son of God was willing to suffer in the first place — and in our place. The Christian dramatist Dorothy Day once wrote: “it is curious that people who are filled with horrified indignation whenever a cat kills a sparrow can't hear the story of the killing of God told Sunday after Sunday and not experience any shock at all.”

Don't be surprised when you suffer, says Peter; instead, think about how surprising it is, how incredibly amazing and wonderfully mind-boggling it is, that God chose to bleed and die for you, to lay down His bruised body as a bridge by which you can escape the sufferings of this life: not the pain of suffering, but the indelible stain of suffering — the guilt and despair and hopelessness of a life (and death) apart from God.

Martin Luther once wrote: “Without trials . . . a person can know neither Scripture nor faith, nor can he fear and love God. If he has never suffered, he cannot understand what hope is.” Our God may not be a “safe” God, but He is a God of Martin Luther hope. The cross and the open tomb are the source of our hope. Suffering points us to that cross and that open tomb, and to the heavens ripped open for us by the glorious ascension of our Lord. And that's why Peter is able to say what he says at the end of this text and of this letter [1 Peter 5:6-11]:

“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.”

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