

C. S. Lewis.

A Grief Observed

Foreword by Madeleine L'Engle



A
GRIEF
OBSERVED

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FOREWORD

When *A Grief Observed* was first published under the pseudonym of N. W. Clerk it was given me by a friend, and I read it with great interest and considerable distance. I was in the middle of my own marriage, with three young children, and although I felt great sympathy for C. S. Lewis in his grief over the death of his wife, at that time it was so far from my own experience that I was not deeply moved.

Many years later, after the death of my husband, another friend sent me *A Grief Observed* and I read it, expecting to be far more immediately involved than I had on the first reading. Parts of the book touched me deeply, but on the whole my experience

of grief and Lewis's were very different. For one thing, when C. S. Lewis married Joy Davidman, she was in the hospital. He knew that he was marrying a woman who was dying of cancer. And even though there was the unexpected remission, and some good years of reprieve, his experience of marriage was only a taste, compared to my own marriage of forty years. He had been invited to the great feast of marriage and the banquet was rudely snatched away from him before he had done more than sample the hors d'oeuvres.

And to Lewis that sudden deprivation brought about a brief loss of faith. "Where is God? . . . Go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face."

The death of a spouse after a long and fulfilling marriage is quite a different thing. Perhaps I have never felt more closely the strength of God's presence than I did during the months of my husband's dying and after his death. It did not wipe away the grief. The death of a beloved is an amputation. But when two people marry, each one has to accept that

one of them will die before the other. When C. S. Lewis married Joy Davidman, it was a pretty certain expectation that she would die first, unless there was an unexpected accident. He moved into marriage with an imminent expectation of death, in an extraordinary witness of love and courage and personal sacrifice. Whereas a death which occurs after a full marriage and a reasonable life span is part of the whole amazing business of being born and loving and living and dying.

Reading *A Grief Observed* during my own grief made me understand that each experience of grief is unique. There are always certain basic similarities: Lewis mentions the strange feeling of fear, the needing to swallow, the forgetfulness. Perhaps all believing people feel, like Lewis, a horror of those who say of any tragedy, "Thy will be done," as though a God of love never wills anything but good for us creatures. He shows impatience with those who try to pretend that death is unimportant for the believer, an impatience which most of us feel, no matter how strong our faith. And C. S. Lewis and I share, too, the fear of the loss of memory. No pho-

tograph can truly recall the beloved's smile. Occasionally, a glimpse of someone walking down the street, someone alive, moving, in action, will hit with a pang of genuine recollection. But our memories, precious though they are, still are like sieves, and the memories inevitably leak through.

Like Lewis, I, too, kept a journal, continuing a habit started when I was eight. It is all right to wallow in one's journal; it is a way of getting rid of self-pity and self-indulgence and self-centeredness. What we work out in our journals we don't take out on family and friends. I am grateful to Lewis for the honesty of his journal of grief, because it makes quite clear that the human being is allowed to grieve, that it is normal, it is right to grieve, and the Christian is not denied this natural response to loss. And Lewis asks questions that we all ask: where do those we love go when they die?

Lewis writes that "I have always been able to pray for the dead, and I still do, with some confidence. But when I try to pray for H. [as he calls Joy Davidman in this journal], I halt." And this feeling I well understand. The beloved is so much a part of ourselves that