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REL 131-D

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Nicholas Wolterstorff. *Lament for a Son*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987. Pp. 111.

*Lament for a Son* is a book of reflections written by Nicholas Wolterstorff after his son Eric died in a mountain climbing accident. Wolterstorff was a professor of Philosophical Theology and has taught at the Free University of Amsterdam, the University of Notre Dame, Calvin College, and Yale (Nicholas Wolterstorff). He has also taught at many other universities as a visiting professor.

The book is composed of short reflection pieces and quotes from literature (including the Bible) mixed together, with a brief Requiem at the end. The book does not proceed in chronological order, often switching between before the accident, shortly after the accident, and “present day” (the time the book is written). Instead, the book proceeds through the different stages of Wolterstorff’s grief.

The first part is Wolterstorff wrestling with the tragedy. The book starts with memories of who Eric was, grief that Eric is dead, and regret that Wolterstorff didn’t fully appreciate Eric’s life while he had the chance (1-13). Then, Wolterstorff expresses his emptiness and pain and asks why this happened (14-23). Wolterstorff expresses grief again and laments that the US culture (especially men) is to avoid expressing discomfort, lest it be taken as a sign of weakness; Wolterstorff pushes back against this and chooses to remember his son even if it causes him pain (24-29).

Eric’s life is over, and there are many things he never got to do (30). Grief isolates (56). The death of a child is the death of a future (57-58). Eric holds a special place in Eric’s heart because Eric is gone (59). The hope of resurrection expressed in the Gospel doesn’t console because heaven is so far away (31-32). Wolterstorff feels empty and alien in a culture that rarely acknowledges suffering (50-53). Death feels so final; the world seems empty and desolate without Eric; nothing on this earth lasts forever (36-49). Wolterstorff asks people not to minimize his sorrow or pretend that it doesn’t exist, because that just compounds his suffering. Instead, Wolterstorff says, to respond to someone who is grieving, share your presence, your love, and your concern for their well-being (34-35). Many people seem to think moving on from grief means being “at peace” with it or forgetting it ever happened. Wolterstorff pushes back against the idea of being at peace with death, because “Death is shalom’s mortal enemy” (63). Wolterstorff chooses to remember Eric and face his grief, because forgetting him would not be honoring his memory (54). Wolterstorff decides to live with his regrets about how he responded to Eric in life and use them to spur him on to living better (64-65). In this way he chooses to use suffering as a flowerbed prepared with a terrible fertilizer that eventually leads to beautiful growth, rather than staring at suffering and death and allowing his life to wither.

The second part is a reflection on the theology of suffering. God shares in humans’ pain over death. He is not an “agent of death”, he is not powerless about death, and he is not using death as a punishment. Wolterstorff doesn’t know why God allows death, but he knows that any simple explanation is an incomplete picture (67). Wolterstorff doesn’t know how to address God anymore, and he’s trying to figure out the tension between lament and trust (68-73). The Bible explains the “why” of sin but not so much the “why” of suffering (74). Wolterstorff is trying to understand his faith in God given the epistemological gap and the presence of suffering; yet due to his firm foundation of faith, he continues to believe in God despite the problem of evil and friends telling him to give up his beliefs (75-77). God suffers, so suffering is part of the image of God (80-83). In “Blessed are those who mourn”, “those who mourn” are those who long for “God’s new day” and ache when they see injustice and suffering (including death) in the world, reminding them that God’s new day is not yet here (84-87). We are one in suffering; one with each other and one with God because everyone suffers, and God is Love (for us), so God is “suffering-Love” (88-90). Just as we are united in suffering, so we are united in deliverance (91). Belief in resurrection means continuing to love in the face of the grief caused by suffering and death (92-93). Wolterstorff wonders if suffering itself can bring peace (94). Suffering can be a blessing because it makes us grateful for things we might otherwise have taken for granted, but suffering still hurts and can still be lamented; holding both of these in balance is complicated (95-97). Wolterstorff longs for the resurrection (78-79). He wonders what the resurrection will be like (100-102). He says we must look forward and keep moving despite our grief (103).

The final part is the requiem, which is clearly outlined on page 105: “Part I expresses the awfulness of death. Part II is a lament. Part III affirms that we are not alone in our suffering, but that God shares it with us. Part IV is what Eric himself might say. Part V expresses the endurance of faith. And Part VI speaks of Christian hope.” (105). The requiem was composed by Cary Ratcliff and includes passages from Job, Psalms, Isaiah, Habakkuk, and Revelations.

*Lament for a Son* was written primarily for people who have experienced a similar loss. Wolterstorff said he hopes that “some of those who sit beside us on the mourning bench for children would find my words giving voice to their own honoring and grieving” (5). Other people who have experienced loss (even if not the loss of a child) may feel the book speaks to their experience and thus appreciate the book. However, some people may read the book even when they have not experienced loss as a way to empathize with other people and to more fully appreciate the life and the blessings that they have, because “every lament is a love song” (6).

Works cited

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