

Comfort in an Age of Pain: A Biblical Response to the Existential Problem of Evil

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**Introduction**

April 20, 1999 will always be remembered by the people of Colorado; yet that day began just like any other day begins. Parents in south-metropolitan Denver found themselves awakening to the sound of a buzzing alarm clock at 6:30 a.m. just like every other working mom and dad in the United States that morning. For most parents with kids who are still in school, every weekday morning presents a series of challenges. The challenges, however, that each day presents, are nothing new. Perhaps the most difficult challenge of them all is getting these kids out of bed before it is time for them to depart for their first period class. Every morning the kids have to be fed something as they begin their next day of academic and social training, and finding something that they will eat, and eat quickly, is quite a task. The kids have to get dressed, brush their teeth, and fix their hair under the same roof, and it is always a miracle when this is done without the beginnings of a conflict comparable to World War II. Finally, parents from coast to coast every morning face the wonderful chore of making sure that all the kids get out the door with all their books, papers, and projects, and that they leave the house in enough time not to be counted tardy by their first period teacher. The challenges facing the parents of teenagers in Jefferson County, Colorado that morning were just like every other parent's challenges; nothing that morning was out of the ordinary.

While the challenges for the parents of students who attended Columbine High School were routine on that spring Colorado morning, the challenges that many of them would face that

afternoon were uncomfortably abnormal. By the time the morning faded, over 10 students and one faculty member lay dead in hallways, classrooms, and the library of the high school located at the corner of Bowles and Pierce in Littleton, Colorado. The very day which began with routine challenges would end in excruciating pain. Surely, there is no experience more painful than to receive the news that one's child has been killed.

Everyone at some point must experience the pain that arises from the death of a loved one. Is there anything that can provide any comfort for the grief that is caused by another person's death? Does Christianity offer any meaningful consolation to those who mourn the loss of a family member or close friend? For some reason, God has not revealed to humans the precise reason for evil's existence; however, God has provided His people, through the Scriptures, with truths about the nature of evil that present Christians with a sufficient amount of comfort to deal with the suffering that results from the death of a loved one. This does not mean that the Bible intends to make mankind's grief disappear; rather, the Bible simply provides a way for Christians to persevere through their grief. It would not be fair to claim that the Bible has this capability of providing consolation for death and suffering without first examining someone's honest, emotional, response to the death of another person. Such a response can be found in Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Lament for a Son*.

### **The Testimony of Pain: Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Lament for a Son***

Wolterstorff penned *Lament for a Son* as a response to the death of his son, Eric, who was killed in a mountain climbing accident at the age of 25.<sup>1</sup> Explaining his purpose for writing the book, Wolterstorff comments, "Though it is intensely personal, I decided to publish it in the hope that some of those who sit beside me on the mourning bench for children would find my

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 5.

words giving voice to their own honoring and grieving.”<sup>2</sup> He begins giving such a voice to grief by immediately entering into a discussion concerning the moment he received the news of his son’s fatal accident, and recounting the details of the phone call he received from authorities in Austria telling him that his son was no longer alive.<sup>3</sup>

*Lament for a Son* is not a linear, continuous treatment of the painful experience of losing his son; instead, it is a collection of brief reflections about life without his son as he searches for answers about his son’s death in light of his Christian faith. There are a number of themes that consistently present themselves in Wolterstorff’s reflections and provide unity to his discussion. First, Wolterstorff regularly refers to death as a result of evil, and therefore he asserts that death is not a blessing, but an obstacle that disrupts human life in God’s good creation. While it may seem obvious that death is not a blessing, the Church frequently treats death as if it is a blessing from God. The understanding of death as a blessing from God perhaps arises from an unbiblical worldview, that is, an unchristian understanding of the essence of the very world in which humans live. According to the unbiblical worldview, the world in which humans live is not an inherently good place; rather, it is a place that is entirely wicked and purely evil. This worldview ignores the testimony of the Bible that God’s creation is good, and that the earth, as a result, is good.<sup>4</sup> Christians holding this worldview do not fall into error by their acknowledgment of the existence of sin throughout God’s creation; rather, they commit an error by not distinguishing sin

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>4</sup> *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. All references to the Bible are taken from this translation. Gen. 1:31a.

from the world itself, and they thereby equate sin with God's creation.<sup>5</sup> Death, according to this improper worldview, should be seen as a blessing, because through it, God provides an escape from the wicked, bad domain in which His people live.

Wolterstorff addresses the understanding of death as a blessing regularly throughout *Lament for a Son*. He explains that while friends attempt to comfort him in his grief with the fact that his son went into the presence of God immediately following his death, this attempt does not achieve its goal of bringing him consolation. Wolterstorff further asserts that death is not something that should be desired, because it denies humans their life in God's good creation.<sup>6</sup> Humans should not desire to die, and be separated from their bodies and the world that God has created for them to live in and to enjoy. Wolterstorff straightforwardly rejects any notion that his son's fatal accident was some sort of blessing in disguise, through which God removed him from his wicked, earthly habitat. Instead, Wolterstorff maintains that his son's death was a means of deprivation of the many wonderful things that are a part of life in this world. He writes, "[Eric's] sudden early death is not just [my family's] loss but his: the loss of seeing trees, of hearing music, of reading books, of writing books, of walking through cathedrals, of visiting friends, of being with family, of marrying, of going to church, and—dare I say it—of climbing mountains."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 47. Wolters, in defining the biblical understanding of creation, explains, "The central point to make is that, biblically speaking, sin neither abolishes nor becomes identified with creation. Creation and sin remain distinct, however closely they may be intertwined in our experience."

<sup>6</sup> Wolterstorff, pg. 31, writes, "When death is no longer seen as release from this miserable materiality into our rightful immateriality, when death is seen rather as the slicing off of what God declared to be, and what all of us feel to be, of great worth, then death is—well, not friend but enemy."

Grief over death, says Wolterstorff, is not improper; it is the refusal to acknowledge death as something dreadful that is improper.<sup>8</sup>

Second, Wolterstorff frequently refers to the intense grief and emotional suffering that come as a result of the death of a close friend or family member. Wolterstorff insists that he will never cease to feel the emotional pain that has arisen from the death of his son as long as he himself continues to live.<sup>9</sup> He also describes the experience of touching his son's corpse as a painful one. Wolterstorff then claims that in order for one to truly understand the wicked nature of death, he must have such an experience with the body of deceased loved one. He writes, "I pity those who never get a chance to see and feel the deadness of the one they love, who must think death but cannot sense it. To fully persuade us of death's reality, and of its grim finality, our eyes and hands must rub against death's cold, hard body, body against body, painfully."<sup>10</sup> The cold pain that Wolterstorff felt as a result of his son's death did not begin when he touched his son's lifeless body; instead, this pain began when he first heard the news of his son's death via a telephone call.<sup>11</sup> The painful, emotional experience that accompanies the death of a loved one more than justifies outward expressions of grief; yet for some reason, men are afraid to show their unpleasant feelings to other people. Wolterstorff underscores the absurdity of this by saying, "But why celebrate stoic tearlessness? Why insist on never outwarding the inward when

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>8</sup> Pg. 35.

<sup>9</sup> Pg. 15.

<sup>10</sup> Pg. 36.

<sup>11</sup> Pg. 9.

that inward is bleeding?”<sup>12</sup> Death therefore is an emotionally painful experience that fully justifies and warrants the grieving of the friends and family of the deceased.

Third, Wolterstorff regularly discusses the mystery of the existence of pain, death, and suffering, alongside the existence of God. To be sure, Wolterstorff is not trying to cast a shadow of doubt upon the Christian faith; rather, he is presenting honest questions that have come as a result of the painful experience of losing his son. Wolterstorff, a professor of philosophical theology, finds himself struggling with the very question that is so prevalent in the minds of Christians around the globe: how should one understand the relationship between the existence of evil in the world, and God’s sovereignty?<sup>13</sup> Wolterstorff, in honest fashion, finds himself asking God, “If your conquest of primeval chaos went so quickly, why must your conquest of sin and death and suffering be so achingly slow?”<sup>14</sup> Not only does he ask God why He does not put an end to the existence of suffering, but he also inquires as to how humans should continue to trust God in the face of pain and misery.<sup>15</sup> The problem of the existence of death and suffering alongside the existence of a loving God is not one for which Wolterstorff claims to have a solution. For Wolterstorff, this philosophical problem is both an intensely frustrating puzzle and a very unsettling mystery.

*Lament for a Son* presents some very unsettling truths about the nature of death. Death is a wicked obstacle that deprives humans of their lives in God’s creation, and is therefore not something that should be seen as a blessing upon mankind. Death, by virtue of its wicked evil

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<sup>12</sup> Pg. 26.

<sup>13</sup> Pp. 66-67.

<sup>14</sup> Pg. 78.

nature, brings intense grief and emotional pain to surviving friends and family members of the deceased. Death, furthermore, is of such a wicked and painful nature that it is a complete mystery that it could exist in the same world with an omni-benevolent God. Death has such a disturbing, unsettling nature that it appears to be an invincible demonic adversary which nothing can overpower. Death strips every human of his life, overpowers everyone's emotions, and confounds each person's thinking and reasoning capacity. Is there anything more powerful than death? Christianity assures people that there is a greater force than death. The Christian faith maintains that while unsettling truths accompany the existence of death, greater comforting truths accompany the existence of Yahweh. The Bible neither brings comfort to its readers by explaining God's reason for creating a world with evil in general and death in particular, nor by claiming that the consequences of death are insignificant. To the contrary, the Bible provides significant answers to the problem of death through assuring its readers that God has not left His people without comfort in the midst of their pain. Specifically, comfort can be found for the Church through the Bible's teachings regarding eschatology, Christology, and God's redemptive acts in history.

### **Death's Defeat: Christian Eschatology**

Wolterstorff paints a picture of death resembling a thief that terrorizes cars in apartment parking lots in the middle of the night; however, instead of stealing stereos and compact discs, death snatches away the lives of human beings, and halts their existence in God's good creation. This is a biblical picture of death; death is not an instrument of blessing, but a result of living in a world infected with sin.<sup>15</sup> First Corinthians 15:12-58 gives its reader a taste of the biblical

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<sup>15</sup> Pg. 80.

picture of death. Paul first mentions that the resurrection of the dead is an integral doctrine of Christianity, and that faith in Christ is meaningless if the teaching of the resurrection, namely Christ's resurrection, is false.<sup>17</sup> The teaching of the resurrection is of great importance to Christianity, because just as Christ died and came out of the grave, so Christians will all rise from the grave upon Christ's return to the earth.<sup>18</sup> Paul then asserts that when Christ returns, every one of his enemies will be conquered. He emphasizes this statement by saying, "The last enemy to be destroyed is death."<sup>19</sup>

Any reader of 1 Corinthians 15 should note that while Paul acknowledges death to be an enemy of God, and is therefore something that naturally does not belong in His good creation,<sup>20</sup> he further describes this enemy as one that will be defeated. Death's defeat, says Paul, will come at the hands of Jesus Christ when He returns to this world, and the Christians who have died will rise from the grave.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Paul links this conquering of death with the end of the

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<sup>16</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 811. Grudem writes, "Although death does not come to us as a penalty for individual sins (for that has been paid by Christ), it does come to us as a result of living in a fallen world, where the effects of sin have not all been removed."

<sup>17</sup> 1 Cor. 15:17 says, "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins."

<sup>18</sup> 1 Cor. 15:20-23.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Cor. 15:26.

<sup>20</sup> Grudem, pg. 812, writes, "Nevertheless although God will bring good to us through the process of death, we must still remember that death is not natural; it is not right; and in a world created by God it is something that ought not to be."

<sup>21</sup> Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987). Concerning 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, Fee writes, "Paul's concern is singular: to demonstrate on the basis of Christ's resurrection the necessity of the resurrection of the dead by tying that event to the final events of the End, particularly the defeat of death" (752-753).

present age, for he writes, “Then the end will come, when He hands over the kingdom to God the Father after He has destroyed all dominion, authority, and power.”<sup>22</sup> Eschatology is therefore of utmost importance to the Christian faith, because it is at the end when death is defeated, and the people of God can reclaim the life in God’s creation that was ripped away from them by death. The elimination of death as a major part of Christian eschatology is again mentioned in Revelation 20:14, where John tells of death being “thrown into the lake of fire” following the Great White Throne Judgment. John’s discussion of death’s elimination does not stop with Revelation 20; he reaffirms its elimination in the following chapter. In 21:1, John writes, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.” What exactly does John mean when he says that the first heaven and earth will pass away? John answers this question in 21:4 by writing, “There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

Certainly, the Christianity teaches that death is an unnatural intrusion, an enemy that steals life away from humans, and prevents them from enjoying life in God’s world. Yet the Scriptures promise that death will one day be removed from God’s creation, and will no longer rob God’s people of life in this world.<sup>23</sup> Are Christians such as Wolterstorff justified in understanding death as a wicked intruder, which robs humans of the goodness of life? Yes, but this understanding of death must be accompanied with the other side of the Biblical teaching of death, pain, and suffering. After Jesus Christ returns, death will be destroyed and finally

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<sup>22</sup> 1 Cor 15:24.

<sup>23</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 278. Ladd writes, “In the new order, all the evils that have burdened and cursed human existence will flee from the presence of God.”

removed from God's creation. Great comfort, therefore, comes to Christians disturbed by death's existence through a proper understanding of Christian eschatology.

### **God's Experience: Christology**

Wolterstorff also describes death as the source of great emotional pain and suffering for the friends and family of the deceased. Alexander Schmemmann says that "to 'comfort' people and reconcile them with death by making this world a meaningless scene of an individual preparation for death is also to falsify it."<sup>24</sup> While it is an error in and of itself to see life in this world as merely a preparation for death, it is an equally great error to try to use death as an instrument of comfort. The Scriptures do not try to sweeten death by making it a reason for people to rejoice; instead, they reflect that death justifiably provides a reason for people to grieve.

When Jesus arrived in Bethany to find that His friend Lazarus was dead, He was not filled with joy, nor did he celebrate that Lazarus had departed from the world. Instead, John 11 teaches that Jesus "was deeply moved in spirit and troubled."<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the passage says that Jesus outwardly displayed His troubled emotions by crying.<sup>26</sup> The story of Lazarus' death and resurrection, however, does more than teach Christians that the experience of death justifies grief. The story also shows that God Himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, subjected Himself to the emotional pain that death brings.<sup>27</sup> Incarnational theology, the perspective that Jesus Christ

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<sup>24</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of This World* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), 96.

<sup>25</sup> John 11:34.

<sup>26</sup> John 11:35.

is fully divine and fully human, shows that God cares about humans, and sympathizes with their emotional response to the death of a loved one. Jesus Christ's reaction to Lazarus' death shows that God is not apathetic toward human suffering and grief. Millard Erickson writes that if "God is no less a victim of the evil in this world than we are, His actions and attitude are as different from mere callousness as masochism is from sadism."<sup>28</sup> What could possibly be more comforting to Christians, who struggle emotionally everyday as they cope with the death of a close friend or relative, than the assurance that God Himself responds to death with tears?

God's subjection of Himself to death and its painful consequences is not limited to His experience with Lazarus. God has experienced the pain of death through the death of the divine man, Jesus Christ. Wolterstorff affirms this truth, and writes, "Though I confessed that the man of sorrows was God Himself, I never saw the God of sorrows. Though I confessed that the man bleeding on the cross was the redeeming God, I never saw God Himself on the cross, blood from sword and thorn and nail dripping healing into the world's wounds."<sup>29</sup> Incarnational theology assures Christians that God has not only experienced the pain arising from someone else's death, but that He has experienced the pain arising from one's own death.<sup>30</sup> The Bible nowhere condemns grief for the death of a loved one or for the pain preceding one's own death; however, the Bible does demonstrate that in the face of death, people can seek comfort from God, because He cares about pain and He understands pain.

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<sup>27</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 607-608.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 608.

<sup>29</sup> Pp. 81-82.

### **Christianity's Mysteries: Redemptive History**

When experiencing the death or suffering of a loved one, people frequently ask why God would allow, or in some cases, cause the death or suffering of that particular person. For some reason, humans have become convinced that they must know the purpose for everything that happens. There are some circumstances, however, that humans encounter for which God has chosen not to reveal His precise reasons. Scripture keeps the theological reasons underlying certain phenomena a secret and thereby preserves the mysterious nature of the Christian faith.

Christianity is indeed a religion that is full of mysteries; furthermore, these mysteries are abundant in God's acts of redemption throughout history. Certain passages in the Bible teach that God has sovereignly chosen from eternity past those who would come to believe in Christ as Lord and Savior.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, certain passages in scripture clearly teach that the Church has the responsibility to proclaim the Gospel to all people, so that all may have a chance to receive forgiveness of their sins.<sup>32</sup> The Church, however, must not conclude that because it cannot understand the relationship between these two concepts that the doctrine of salvation is untrustworthy; instead, it must concede that the reconciliation between these two concepts is a mystery, and that both of these components represent true aspects of the biblical doctrine of salvation. Likewise, throughout history, God uses some of the most wicked people and events to bring about redemption for His people and His kingdom. For example, God used the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and their deportation of the people of Judah in the sixth century B.C. to

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. 1 Peter 2:21-24.

<sup>31</sup> Eph. 1:4-6.

<sup>32</sup> Matt. 28:19-20; cf. 2 Pt. 3:9.

restore genuine monotheistic worship to the people of Israel.<sup>33</sup> Yet in certain Old Testament passages, God condemns the work of the Babylonians.<sup>34</sup> How can God justifiably use man's behavior to accomplish His desires, and then condemn that very behavior as wicked? The Bible simply does not provide an answer to this question. Indeed, sometimes God's acts in human history are a mystery.

Wolterstorff frequently presents his readers with one of the greatest mysteries of the Bible: why has God created a world that is characterized by death and suffering? While it is certainly expected, when faced with the traumatic experience of death, suffering, or intense pain, that Christians would ask God why these things happen, Christians should not exert so much energy trying to find comfort for their pain in the form of an answer to their question. True consolation comes not in understanding why God created a world with death and suffering, but in understanding the nature of death and suffering; namely, that death is only a temporary problem, and that someday it will be annihilated.<sup>35</sup>

What then can Christians experiencing the pain of death learn from salvation history, if not how to reconcile the existence of an omni-benevolent God with that of death and suffering? Such Christians can learn that one of the greatest demonstrations of God's power is when He uses wicked phenomena to accomplish His desires and bring about good for His people. Even death and suffering can be used of God to make us more like Himself.<sup>36</sup> While Christians will

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<sup>33</sup> Jer. 24:4-7. For further discussion on this text, see J.A. Thompson, *Jeremiah: New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 508.

<sup>34</sup> Hab. 2:8; Jer. 24:8-12.

<sup>35</sup> Erickson, 618.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 610.

probably never understand why God allows evil and death, they can certainly learn that he is sovereign over it; God can use death, pain, and suffering for His own glory and for the good of His people. Christians do not have to fully understand God's actions in order to be able to trust Him; rather, they can trust God, even in His mysteriousness. While the Bible does not exhaustively explain everything about God, the things the Bible does affirm are sufficient to lead Christians into a healthy, trusting, relationship with the Creator.

### **Conclusion**

In a time of human history permeated with suicide bombings, high school shootings, and hurricanes, people as much as ever feel the horrific consequences of death. As a result, people need consolation that is grounded in truth, and therefore in God's Word. It is not the purpose of Scripture to make grief that arises from the death of a loved one disappear. The Bible, however, does offer people comfort to the problem of death through the doctrines of eschatology, Christology, and redemptive history. The Bible assures Christians that God will one day put an end to death and suffering, and restore the life of His people in His creation. Scripture also teaches that God sympathizes with those who either experience the death of a loved one or experience death themselves. God understands and thereby sympathizes with humans as they experience death because He experienced death Himself by dying on the cross. The Word of God also testifies that God is completely sovereign over events in human history, even phenomena that are evil in their very nature. People therefore do not have to understand why God causes or allows death and suffering in order to be able to trust Him; rather, they can simply trust that God mysteriously uses death and suffering for His glory and the good of His people. God has not promised to protect His people from pain, suffering, and death; however, He has given His people a source of consolation in the form of the doctrines of the divinely inspired Old

and New Testaments. Christianity does not simply provide followers of Christ with future hope; through biblical teachings, it also provides them with comfort in the current age of pain.