

How the Soul Grows Through Loss

BY PHYLLIS KERSTEN

Though the tragic losses of their loved ones were deeply personal, the spiritual insights that emerge as Nicholas Wolterstorff and Gerald Sittser reflect upon them are of great benefit to the community of faith. Reading their books, we can glimpse the world they now know, which “dry-eyed” they could not see, and the terrible splendor of the suffering God they encounter there.

Though the loss of a loved one is always deeply personal, the spiritual insight that can emerge from reflection upon it can be of great benefit to the wide community of faith. We see this especially in Nicholas Wolterstorff’s *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1987; 111 pp., \$10.00) and Gerald L. Sittser’s *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995; 184 pp., \$9.99). Reading these books we learn that our souls can grow through loss as we enter honestly and fully into its pain and grief.

After his son Eric died in a mountain-climbing accident in Europe, Wolterstorff turned to the lament “as a mode for [his] address to God” in the darkness of grief. He describes the different kind of faith that is “fastened” to lament: a “bruised faith, a longing faith, a faith emptied of nearness,” but still a faith that trusts in hope in God (pp. 70-71).

Wolterstorff puzzles over Jesus’ beatitude, “Blessed are those who mourn,” but he finally concludes that mourners are “aching visionaries” who have caught sight of God’s promised new day, God’s coming kingdom, when death and mourning and tears will be no more. While Stoics

urged humanity to “disengage” from the suffering of the world, he observes, Jesus tells us to be “open to the wounds of the world,” but to “do so in the good cheer that an end is in sight” (pp. 85-86). Wolterstorff finds that looking “at the world through tears” enables him to “see things that dry-eyed [he] could not see” (p. 26).

In one of the most powerful segments of the book, he draws new insights from the story of Jesus showing his wounds to Thomas after the resurrection. Wolterstorff’s wounds from Eric’s death, like Jesus’ wounds, will still mark him, be part of his identity, for a long time to come. “But,” Wolterstorff adds, “to believe in Christ’s rising and death’s dying, is also to live with the power and challenge to rise up now from all our dark graves of suffering love.” Wolterstorff goes on to say that if sympathy for the world’s wounds is not enlarged by our

anguish, if love for those around us is not expanded, if gratitude for what is good does not flame up, if insight is not deepened, if commitment to what is important is not strengthened, if aching for a new day is not intensified, if hope is weakened and faith is diminished, if from the experience of death comes nothing good, then death has won (p. 92).

The faith of Wolterstorff demonstrates that death has not won.

In the days and weeks after the accident that took from him his wife of twenty years, his mother, and his four-year-old daughter, Jerry Sittser says he cared for his three surviving children and fulfilled his teaching responsibilities. But there “was a radical split between the self that did my work and the self that watched me from the shadows” (pp. 35-36). Even in the darkness, however, Sittser says he began to experience the wonder and sacredness of ordinary life, the holiness of tucking his children into bed, or talking to a student. Three years after his traumatic loss, Sittser finds that the sorrow hasn’t gone away, “but it has been integrated into my life as a painful part of a healthy whole” (p. 42). “Sorrow enlarges the soul,” until it “is capable of mourning and rejoicing simultaneously, of feeling the world’s pain and hoping for the world’s healing at the same time” (p. 63).

Catastrophic loss can cause people to reevaluate their priorities and focus on what’s most important in their lives. Sittser says that in that first year after the accident, he “reflected on the kind of person I wanted to be, not to please others but to be true to God and myself,...[and] found satisfaction in the doing of life, not in the getting done of it.” What he discovered was a great paradox: that “under the surface” of his grief, of “this vast sea of nothingness” he sailed on, was a world “teeming with life,” if only a person is attentive to it. “Even in loss and grief we can choose to embrace the miracle of each moment and receive the gifts of grace that come to us all the time,” he writes. “The past is gone, the future not yet

here. But the present is alive to us." Receiving these gifts of grace "requires a kind of sacrifice" from us, Sittser says, "the sacrifice of believing that, however painful our losses, life can still be good—good in a different way than before, but nevertheless good" (pp. 65-66, 68).

Like Wolterstorff, Sittser describes his loss as like "an amputation," an "amputation of the familiar self." He began almost immediately, however, to forge "a new identity that integrates his loss into it"—establishing new traditions, remodeling the house, encouraging his children to begin some new activities as well as pursue their prior ones, all "to paint a new portrait of our lives" (pp. 74-75).

It is not all bad, Sittser says, when loss "strips us of the props we rely on for our well-being." God is the one who is able "to help us forge a new identity...to help us become persons whose worth is based on grace and not on performance, accomplishments and power." Greater dependence on God, he believes, has resulted in his giving up "trying to be a perfect parent for his children and [has] instead invited God to be their parent through me. I have found myself praying for them almost constantly, even asking God to protect them from my weaknesses" (pp. 77-79).

WHAT BLOCKS THE SOUL'S GROWTH

A Grace Disguised is particularly helpful in alerting us to some of the attitudes and emotions that can stunt or permanently block the soul's growth after loss. Sittser speaks of a "second death" that is worse than the first death people experience. He calls it the "*the death of the spirit*," that "death we bring upon ourselves" by becoming permanent prisoners to any of those destructive emotions that can naturally follow a loss: guilt, anger, bitterness, self-pity, despair, hatred, cynicism.

In *Lament*, Wolterstorff says he seeks to "own" his grief "redemptively." And he does. He decides, for example, that he will not put his regrets toward Eric out of his mind, but "allow the memories to prod me into doing better with those still living," waiting for that day, he said, "when we can all throw ourselves into each other's arms and say, 'I'm sorry'" (p. 65).

Sittser acknowledges that regret is inevitable because "in loss we lose the tomorrow that we needed to make right our yesterday or today." But our regrets and "if onlys" can keep our wounds from healing and put "us in a perpetual state of guilt" (pp. 84-85). Without forgiveness—God's forgiveness and forgiving oneself—regret can also become "a form of self-punishment." But, he adds, if "God lavishes us with grace then surely we can stop punishing ourselves and live in that grace." (p. 91)

Regret can lead to personal transformation if loss becomes an opportunity for soul-searching and taking inventory of our lives, particularly of our destructive patterns of behavior. Sittser speaks of changes he made in his work habits and relationships with his children. "I had been attentive

to them before, but since the accident I have begun to carry them in my heart. I once *performed* as a parent; now I *am* a parent" (p. 90).

In a chapter called, "Why Not Me," Sittser addresses our demand that life be fair:

On the face of it, living in a perfectly fair world appeals to me. But deeper reflection makes me wonder. In such a world I might never experience tragedy; but neither would I experience grace, especially the grace God gave me in the form of the three wonderful people whom I lost (p. 112).

"So, God spare us a life of fairness!" Sittser concludes. "A world with grace will give us more than we deserve. It will give us life, even in our suffering" (p. 115).

Oftentimes victims of wrongdoing want justice to prevail after their loss because the "moral order in the universe" has been violated. Sittser, for example, wanted the driver of the other car in the accident to "suffer and pay for the wrong I believed he had done" (p. 119). And after the man was acquitted, Sittser realized that he was poisoning himself with his preoccupation with this man and the failure of the justice system, and with his desire to get even. Even when justice is served, Sittser observes, victims are still sometimes disappointed, because they "want more than justice." Their "desire for revenge" becomes "a bottomless pit" (p. 120). "The real problem, however, is not revenge itself but the *unforgiving heart* behind revenge." Sittser says he chooses to forgive for his children's sake, as much as his own. "If I lived like a victim for the rest of my life, they would probably do likewise. If I drove all mercy from my heart, they would probably follow my example. They, too, would insist on fairness and, when that failed them, as it surely would, they would want revenge" (p. 126). Forgiveness is essential because it brings freedom to the one who gives it. Though it is a life-long process, our forgiving acknowledges that "God runs the universe."

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Sittser believes that faith "changes our attitude about the people who wrong us, for it forces us to view their wrongdoing in the light of our own. Once we see ourselves as people who need God's mercy, we will be more likely to show mercy to others" (p. 131).

He speaks warmly of the people who became part of his family's community of brokenness. Those who decide to come close to suffering friends

must be willing to let another's loss change them. Friends, colleagues, a sister and brother-in-law, and his local church were among those who helped Sittser grieve, and in the process found "meaning for their lives in [his] experience of suffering." There was mutuality to the relationships that enabled Sittser "to risk loving again," even though that "means living under the constant threat of further loss" (pp. 164-165). Sittser says "choosing *not to love*...means imperiling the life of the soul," for if "people want their souls to grow through loss, whatever the loss is, they must eventually decide to love even more deeply than they did before" (p. 165). "Brokenness forces us to find a source of love outside ourselves. That source is God, whose essential nature is love,...the God who creates and sustains community for broken people" (p. 167).

SPIRITUAL QUESTIONS

Where is God when we are in the place of pain? In one of the finest sections of *Lament*, Wolterstorff speaks of the endurance of his faith "in the face of this deepest and most painful of mysteries,...why God did not prevent Eric's death." Sittser, like Wolterstorff, "was tortured by the question of where God was" the night of his family's accident, and "wondered whether [he] would ever again be able to trust" God. Wolterstorff says he lives with an unanswered question, not willing to say that God caused Eric's death, but not able to say either that there was nothing God could have done about it. "The wounds," the suffering "of all humanity," he writes, "are an unanswered question" (pp. 67-68).

Through his tears, Eric's dad discovered the God who doesn't explain our suffering, but shares it. "It is said of God that no one can behold his face and live," writes Wolterstorff. "I always thought this meant that no one could see his splendor and live. A friend said perhaps it meant that no one could see [God's] sorrow and live. Or perhaps his sorrow is splendor" (p. 81). He suggests that it is in our suffering—as well as in our love and creativity—that we "mirror God" (p. 83). Moreover, in "joining the crowd on the bench of mourning," we "hear the sobs and see the tears of God" (p. 88). To love is to suffer, and since "God is love," God suffers. In fact, Wolterstorff says, "God so suffered for the world that he gave up his only Son to suffering" (p. 90).

Sittser, too, saw meaning for his suffering in the incarnation, in the sovereign God giving up his sovereignty to become "a vulnerable human being," to suffer loss with us and for us. "No matter how deep the pit into which I descend," he reports, "I keep finding God there. He is not aloof from my suffering but draws near to me when I suffer. He is vulnerable to pain, quick to shed tears, and acquainted with grief. God is a suffering Sovereign who feels the sorrow of the world" (p. 143).

Sittser concludes that he will never fully "be able to comprehend God's Sovereignty." But, in "a waking dream" of the accident scene one night,

Sittser found “a partial resolution” to his questions. A “beautiful light” suddenly illumined the scene. Sittser writes that the light enabled him and his children “to see the presence of God in that place. I knew that moment that God was there at the accident,...to welcome our loved ones into heaven...to comfort us...to send those of us who survived in a new direction” (pp. 144-145).

The “supreme challenge” of loss “is met when we learn to take the loss into ourselves and be enlarged by it, so that our capacity to live life well and to know God intimately increases,” writes Sittser. “Above all, I have become aware of the power of God’s grace and my need for it. My soul has grown because it has been awakened to the goodness and love of God.... God is growing my soul, making it bigger, and filling it with himself” (p. 180).

Wolterstorff describes “faith [as] a footbridge that you don’t know will hold you up over the chasm until you’re forced to walk out onto it.” He is standing “over the chasm” now, inspecting that bridge, he says, but he has the sense that he is doing so in the presence of God, “the Creating, Resurrecting One” (pp. 76-77).

Maybe the most important thing Sittser experienced through his loss was the reality of God’s unconditional love:

Night after night I sat in my living room, unable to say anything, pray anything, or do anything. I was empty of energy and desire. All I could do was *let God love me*, even though I hardly believed that he loved anyone, least of all me.... I learned through that experience that nothing can separate us from [God’s] love—not even our inability to love him in return!” (p. 92).

Is there anything more important for us to know?



PHYLLIS KERSTEN

is Associate Pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in River Forest, Illinois.