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**November 4, 2020**

In all the years I've been writing, I have never had to type words more difficult, more devastating than these: Yesterday the Lord called my son to himself—my dear son, my sweet son, my kind son, my godly son, my only son.

Nick was playing a game with his sister and fiancée and many other students at his college in Louisville, Kentucky, when he suddenly collapsed, never regaining consciousness. Students, paramedics, and doctors battled valiantly but could not save him. He's with the Lord he loved, the Lord he longed to serve. We have no answers to the *what* or *why* questions.

Yesterday Aileen and I cried and cried until we could cry no more, until there were no tears left to cry. Then, later in the evening, we looked each other in the eye and said, "We can do this." We don't want to do this, but we *can* do this—this sorrow, this grief, this devastation—because we know we don't have to do it in our own strength. We can do it like Christians, like a son and daughter of the Father who knows what it is to lose a son.

We traveled through the night to get to Louisville so we could be together as a family. And we ask that you remember us in your prayers as we mourn our loss together. We know there will be grueling days and sleepless nights ahead. But for now, even though our minds are bewildered and our hearts are broken, our hope is fixed and our faith is holding. Our son is home.

—*Blog entry at Challies.com*

## prologue

*“we did everything we could”*

Things happened that evening that I can barely bring myself to remember, much less to describe in any detail. Much of it has blessedly disappeared from my memory and must have been erased by some kind of a self-protection mechanism within. What remains is isolated fragments, tiny vignettes. I remember receiving the phone call every parent dreads—the one in which a doctor says, “We did everything we could.” I remember the anguished cry of a mother who has been told that her son has died and the piercing wail of a sister who has learned that her brother will not come home. I remember the traumatized face of another sister who had watched her brother fall to the ground and die before her eyes. I remember words of disbelief escaping my own mouth: “My boy. My boy. My poor, poor boy.” These are sacred moments, haunting memories, that are best left where they are, buried deep within, to rise only amid infrequent flashbacks and disturbing dreams of the night.

But even as the skies went dark that evening, there began to flare up distant glimmers of light, for amid the grief I also remember love. Friends hastened to our side, summoned by the only words we could speak: “We need you.” As we wept together, they began to comfort and console us, to speak the highest truths to our deepest sorrows. A mighty chorus of prayer began to be lifted to the heavens on our behalf. As we sat in numb disbelief, a determination arose within us to endure this sorrow well, to face it with faith. The pieces fell into place so we could depart immediately from our home in Canada to be with our daughter in Louisville. Through it all, God was so gentle, so kind, so present—present through his Spirit and present through his people.

In the skies somewhere over Ohio, in the dim light of a darkened aircraft, I began to write. I have often said that I don’t know what I think or what I believe until I write about it. Writing is how I reflect, how I meditate, how I chart life’s every journey. And so when the sorrow was still new in my heart, when the tears were still fresh in my eyes, when I barely knew up from down and here from there, I began to write. I *had* to write because I had to know what to think and what to believe, what to feel and what to do. I had to know whether to rage or to worship, whether to run or to bow, whether to give up or to go on. I had to know how to comfort my wife, how to console my daughters, how to shore up my own faith. I put fingers to keyboard and pen to paper to find out.

I wrote for my family. I wrote for my friends. I wrote for myself. I wrote my praise and my lament, my questions and my

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doubts, my grief and my joy. I wrote through depths of sadness and heights of joy, through terrible fears and agonizing pain. I wrote through seasons of sorrow.

Some of what I wrote in the year that followed this evening was shared with the public on my personal website, Challies.com. Most of it was not. In this book, I trace my journey through four seasons, beginning in the fall and advancing through winter, spring, and summer. It ends exactly one year after it began, on the first anniversary of the death of my beloved son, Nicholas Paul Challies.

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# fall

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CHAPTER 1

# unnatural

I awoke this morning with a tear in my eye. I awoke thinking—or was it dreaming?—of a day long ago when Nick was just a little boy. He was only three years old at the time, and he had just become aware of the existence of death. But his capacity to wonder and to fear was far greater than his capacity to understand.

Aileen was at a Bible study that day and had taken baby Abby with her, so Nick and I had time to ourselves. We settled onto the couch to watch a children’s movie together, and inevitably, as it drew to its close, one of the central characters died. I found myself watching Nick as much as the movie while this unfolded. I could see his body begin to quiver as the sorrowful soundtrack swelled. I could see tears begin to form in his eyes as he watched the loved ones gather around their fallen friend. I could see his face begin to crumple and fall.

He turned to me and, with tears spilling down his cheeks, sobbed. “Daddy, why did he have to die? When is he going to come alive again?” I gently pulled Nick onto my lap and, holding

him tight in my arms, reminded him of heaven. I told him that heaven is a place where God lives, where there is no more fighting, no more dying, and no more sadness. I told him that it is a place where boys and their daddies can be together forever. He tried to understand, but how is a three-year-old mind supposed to grasp a concept as unnatural as death, as wonderful as heaven?

And so we sat on the couch and we wept together. Nick put his head in my lap and cried about something he could not understand, something he was not created to understand. I stroked his hair and wept for this world—a world that was created perfect but has long since been defiled by sin and death. I wept that a mere child needed to concern himself with matters so sad, so scary, so tragic.

I asked Nick if I could pray with him. Wiping the tears from his cheeks, he said yes and closed his eyes. So I asked God if he would help Nick understand that death is not something to be feared if we love him. I asked God that Nick would trust Jesus to forgive his sins. And, of course, I asked God to comfort Nick so that his young heart would not be troubled but be at peace.

And later that day, I sat at my desk and wrote these words: “I wish I could explain to my son about the death of death accomplished through the death of Jesus Christ. I wish I could make him understand that if he places his trust in Jesus, he has nothing to fear in life or in death. I hope, I trust, I pray that such an understanding will come in due time, so that when someday Nick’s eyes close in death, he and I will be reunited in that place where death will be no more, where there will be

no more mourning, pain, or sorrow and where God will have already wiped away the tears that filled his little eyes.”

I would never have imagined that it would not be me waiting for Nick in heaven, but Nick waiting in heaven for me. But I am certain he will be, for just a few years after this, he decided he would live according to the Christian faith and toward the purpose of making known the goodness and mercy of God. He put his faith in Jesus Christ. He came to believe that Jesus could give meaning and purpose to his life and a good and glorious future after his death. Of course, he didn’t know how short that life would be and how close that future was. He couldn’t have known. But that didn’t keep him from preparing himself.

It became Nick’s confidence, Nick’s sure conviction, that when his body died, his soul would carry on, that when his body would be buried in the ground, his soul would go to be with God. And though for a time body and soul would be torn apart, a day would come when they would be reunited. The hope his Christian faith offered him is not of a future in which humanity becomes disembodied souls or angelic beings or a part of the cosmos, but something so much better, something so much more fitting for our humanity. The Christian faith offers the promise of a future in which this earth will be renewed and restored, in which all pain and sorrow will be comforted, in which all evil and sin will be removed. And it is in this glorious context that our bodies and souls will be reunited so we can live here in this beautiful world, but with no fear of sickness, no fear of sorrow, no need for three-year-old boys to weep about death, no possibility of twenty-year-old men falling to the ground to die.

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It was not my wish that Nick would live so short a life. It is not my wish that I now have to go on without him. The loss is painful beyond any I've ever known and is causing me to cry out from the deepest parts of my being. But I cannot and will not mourn as one who has no hope, who has no confidence, who has no assurance, for I have great hope, great confidence, great assurance, because Nick was ready. Even though he was young, he was ready to die. He had settled the state of his soul. He had prepared for the day of his death.

And so I know in my heart of hearts that I have said goodbye *for now*, that I have said farewell *for a while*, that Nick has not been sent *away* but merely sent on *ahead* to that place where death is no more; where mourning, pain, and sorrow are gone; where God has already wiped away every tear; and where my son is now waiting safely and patiently for his father to join him.