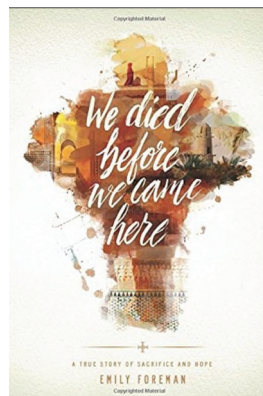


We Died Before We Came Here: A True Story of Sacrifice and Hope

By Emily Foreman. NavPress. 2016.
173 pages.

Reviewed by Drew I.

Drew I. (M.Div. Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) is an American who has served in Northern Africa for ten years in various roles: entrepreneur, teacher, and translator. He and his wife co-lead a multicultural church planting team.



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This modern missionary biography tells a story of God's faithfulness despite suffering and loss. Emily Foreman (pseudonym) lived and served in North Africa for seven years with her husband and family. Her husband was tragically shot and killed by al-Qaeda operatives. She wrote this book around five years after returning to the US, her home country, and writes under a pseudonym for the sake of others who continue to live and serve in North Africa.

Foreman has written a full story of a modern practitioner from her first-person perspective: from initial calling, transitioning overseas, early years, and fruitful service. The story climaxes in devastating loss and yet, completed work and ongoing faithfulness. This book will serve practitioners as a real-life, modern-day example of cross-cultural service, especially amidst opposition and persecution. Foreman openly shares her wrestling and reasoning through examples and stories.

Newer practitioners will find excellent models about how to respond and move through early years, and more experienced practitioners will be re-inspired to bold evangelism. While there is much here for practitioners, Foreman writes with American evangelicals in mind. So, her work can also serve as a useful book to help mission supporters (especially those from the US) better understand the missionaries they're praying for and ministry among Muslims in general.

The title, "We Died Before We Came Here," is a phrase that Foreman's husband Stephen (also a pseudonym) would often say. What he meant is a core theme of the book; because Jesus died for Stephen, Stephen's life was not his own. So, he did not live in fear of death as an ambassador of the gospel in North Africa. Foreman hopes the same is true for all Christians, that we would all freely sacrifice and suffer because Jesus is worthy, and find God to be faithful in the midst, and in the aftermath, of suffering and loss. A secondary theme is built on the first; because of Jesus' loving sacrifice, Christians should be moved toward loving sacrifice for their enemies (or those they assume to be enemies).

One strength of this book is Foreman's writing style. In her reflective, missionary memoir style, she is remarkably open and honest about her fears, struggles, hopes, and joys. I felt like I got to know Foreman as a sister in Christ, and found myself rejoicing with her highs and crying with her lows. Her descriptions are rich and evocative. I spent two years in Foreman's country of service concurrently with her (we lived in different parts of the country and only met once or twice), and I found her descriptions brought it all flooding back with the sights, sounds, smells, people, the feel of the place shine through.

Because of that intimate writing style, the book is, on an initial level, a page turner that sucks you in and brings you along an emotional journey. Yet that serves not as simple entertainment, but sets up Foreman's thesis. Because we've been through the story with her, we ourselves, as readers, are more ready to be moved to make sacrifices for Jesus.

From another angle, the book is full of situations that can provide the basis of case studies for challenges commonly faced by practitioners today, such as how do you forge an identity and develop relationships in your new country? How do you prepare for and navigate reentry to your sending country? How do you care for the needy when you can't serve everyone? How do you know when to be bold and when to be quiet? What do we make of the sincere religious devotion of those we're seeking to serve? What about balancing marriage and family life, or subjecting children to risk? The chapters are short, and often structured around questions like these. Foreman would be the first to say that she and Stephen did not do everything perfectly. Different practitioners will of course come to different conclusions than they did. But Foreman's wisdom and examples give us much fodder to become more faithful practitioners in these challenges.

Some readers might have small quibbles. Sometimes, in an apparent desire to openly share her feelings and relate to American evangelicals, the book can fall into what some might call "othering" in its descriptions of North Africans. In one example, Foreman writes, "The twisted morality drove us crazy" (130). Foreman's overall message points in the opposite direction, but some readers sensitive to this issue might be distracted here and there (e.g., the phrase "these people" is used to describe North Africans a handful of times). Foreman also lovingly honors her husband throughout this book, and presents him as exemplary. This rightfully honors his legacy. But because we benefit so much from the author's internal wrestling, readers may be left wanting to hear more about how Stephen himself processed through these issues, and how God's grace was at work in his sin and weaknesses as well. Of course, it is Foreman's prerogative to honor her husband in the way she believes is best, and the reader certainly benefits from this picture of Stephen, and the picture of the God for which Stephen so faithfully and courageously lived.

For practitioners, this book can be used for a few different purposes. First, it can be read from start to finish as a story of God's faithfulness

in suffering and loss. Newer practitioners will benefit from seeing a real picture of common joys and struggles, and more experienced practitioners will likely find a level of catharsis as they see their own joys, struggles, questions, suffering and hope on the page. When read like this, practitioners will be invigorated with hope to keep persevering in the midst of trials, come what may, because Jesus is worth it.

Second, as mentioned above, teams can read a chapter or two together and take a team meeting to discuss and apply to their own setting. Chapters 6 to 14 are especially suited for this. For example, I recently heard a colleague say that the main goal for practitioners in our country of service is to remain as long as possible, in order to be a faithful, steady gospel witness. Stephen and Emily Foreman's example challenges that notion, and can help teams and individuals clarify values and convictions in the areas of wisdom and boldness in evangelism, risk, and the place of safety and security concerns.

Third, especially for practitioners from the US serving among Muslims, this could be a good book to recommend to mature believers who are nevertheless hesitant about ministry to Muslims or ministry overseas in general. The message is challenging. On one level the story is a tragedy, and yet Foreman winsomely writes with this group in mind. For those who have ears to hear, a book like this could result in greater devotion to Christ and understanding of missions. It is a healthy reminder to modern Christians in prosperous, safe countries that martyrdom is part of God's ways. That's a healthy reminder for many of us practitioners too. Jesus is worth every sacrifice, and following him brings hope, peace, and courage, no matter what happens.

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