

From Rubble to Return: The Night Walk to Maturity

Nehemiah 2:6-3:5

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~The road to maturity requires action~

Please open your Bibles up to Nehemiah chapter 2. You will find that on page 343 in the pew Bible in front of you.

If you are new with us this week, in the Fall we are spending some time in the book of Nehemiah which would be the last book in the Old Testament if the Bible was put together chronologically. Of course it's not, it is put together largely by genre, so you have all the history together, and the poetry together and the prophecy together, and so Nehemiah turns out to be right in the middle, but chronologically it would be at the end. And that's because the story it contains describes life in Jerusalem in 400BC – that's 400 years before Jesus. And this is where the history of the Old Testament stops.

So what's going on in 400BC? Well, the people of Israel, which have been reduced to just two of the twelve tribes, have been released from 70 years of captivity in Babylon and they are back in Jerusalem. And this happened because God told King Artaxerxes he was to oversee the rebuilding of YHWH's temple.¹

Now just get your mind around this for a second; God told a secular king what to do and he listened. Of course that shouldn't be that surprising, because when God's sovereign will interacts with anything everything obeys. So when God says "let there be light" there is no debate, it just turns on. And if God can do this in the cosmos then some little king in some little kingdom – even if it is the biggest kingdom on earth – isn't going to cause Him any trouble.

Friends, God is sovereign, He is in control. And that was true 2400 years ago, and it's true today. Nothing has changed.

But what is surprising to some is that God being in control doesn't mean everything turns out "peachy" for His people. And we all know this from experience; even though God is active in our lives and as we look back we can see His involvement, we know the path we've walked has been far from easy – I can see this in my own life. And this was certainly the case with Israel and Nehemiah.

You see the miracle of deliverance from Babylon didn't make all the problems go away. And so when Nehemiah picks up his pen the walls of Jerusalem are still in ruin, and this means the city is in great trouble and disgrace as roaming bandits are continually having their way with it.

¹ Ezra 1:2

And when Nehemiah learned of this, in spite of the fact that he was 1200KM's away and living a pretty pampered life as the wine taster for the most powerful man on earth, his heart was softened, and he broke down and wept and fasted and prayed that God would have mercy on His people.

And that's where the story picks up today. But before we get into that we need to get on the same page in regards to the natural process that maturity takes to develop because today's text describes a step in that process.

So a bit over a month ago our family had some vacation time, and we went down to the Lower Mainland and visited family. If any of you have family you know exactly what this kind of a trip is like, but we did get to intersperse our visits with some good down time so it was actually pretty relaxing. But one of the less relaxing and more intense times occurred when our tribe descended upon Nikki's brother's tribe.

So between us and them there were eight kids running around the back yard and swatting wasps as they ate pizza and watermelon while us adults attempted catch up. It was a bit haywire!

But the ticket to our sanity arrived in their oldest daughter Karis. Karis is 9 and is a totally perfect mini-mom. She's as good as a sheep dog in herding kids away from stairwells and gate latches that lead to busy streets. And the best thing about it is that at 9 there is nothing she would rather do. This is evidence for intelligent design if I've ever seen it.

So we paid her \$5 and told her to deal with all the trouble the seven younger kids were getting into, and then we went and sat inside and slapped ourselves on the back for being geniuses.

And as I was reading Nehemiah this week this is what jumped into my mind: it really is amazing what a couple years difference does for maturity in the first decade of life. So they have a 9-year-old, a 6-year-old a 3-year-old and a newborn and of course we have a 5-year-old, twin 3-year-olds, and a 1-year-old. Now that's a lot of high-pitch voices, and a pretty diverse spectrum of development.

So Alexa, their newborn, can't do anything herself except eat, scream, and fill diapers. That's pretty much the factory pre-set. Nathan, who is 12 months older can do all that plus has added the ability to open door knobs, toilet seats and loves to go fishing – apparently this is an upgrade. The twins can pull their own pants up and don't do diapers anymore – that's a big step in the right direction. But then Elliana, she can not only speak sentences people can understand, but she can interpret the gibberish that comes out of her younger brother's mouths – that's borderline miraculous. Then there is Seth, who is six and can climb circles around all the younger kids, but none of them compare with Karis. She is able to do everything everyone else can do plus run a daycare while the parents hang out inside... If you need to judge me for being happy about this that go ahead and get it over with.

But my point is that in general kids are all on the same trajectory, and we call the direction they are headed “maturity.” Now some kids hit certain stages at different ages, and that’s fine, as long as maturity happens in the end. It’s only when we bump into that 35-year-old who is still living in the basement playing video games that we say the process has broken down. Diversity in the developmental spectrum is fine as long as there is movement towards maturity.

Now I think everyone would agree with this, but what sometimes isn’t as clear is that maturing doesn’t just apply to children, it applies to everyone. And I think the reason we forget this is that while it’s easy to recognize maturity growing while shoe sizes are changing, once physical growth stops we sometimes don’t think as much about the fact that character shouldn’t.

But it surely makes sense that someone who has been working on their anger for 60 years should be better at controlling it than someone who has only been working on it for 30 years – but that doesn’t always happen right? You see some people stop maturing – and that’s a problem. Maturity should increase with vintage – vintage seems like a friendlier word than age.

Now where all this comes over to scripture is that this doesn’t just apply to the world of manners, it also applies to the spiritual world. So Jesus told us:

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. (Matthew 28:19-20a)

Jesus didn’t say “go make converts.” Now yes, new birth is important, but we can’t stay there. He said “Go and turn sinners into disciples” which means turn godless folk into people who look more and more like Jesus over time. That’s the goal.

And sometimes this goal gets short-circuited. So people who have been Christians for decades occasionally get stuck at a particular level of Christ-likeness rather than continuing to move on. Now this isn’t a new problem, the church has been dealing with this since its first generation had the opportunity to grow and didn’t. So the author of Hebrews who wrote in about 70AD, chastised his readers who had been Christians for up to 40 years saying:

In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. (Hebrews 5:12-14)

So immaturity is only a problem when it exists in someone who should have developed beyond that. If 9-year-old Karis was still sucking on a bottle and filling diapers that would be a problem, but nobody blames Nathan for doing that.

And likewise spiritual maturity is something we should expect from people who have been following Christ for a long time, but we shouldn't expect it from those who haven't been around Jesus long. That makes sense right? This is why we have to make disciples. Not find them. None of us start out looking like Jesus! It's over time, as we marinate in His grace, and as we pursue our own sanctification, training ourselves as Hebrews says, that this happens.

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And the process of spiritual development, or maturity, is one of the concepts that the book of Nehemiah lays out for us. And so as we read it we should be asking ourselves am I still growing in this or have I stagnated? I'm getting older, but am I looking more like Christ than I did a year ago or a decade ago? Am I a disciple?

Alright, let's pick the story up in Nehemiah 2 verse 6. Remember, at this stage in the story Nehemiah's heart has been pricked; he feels the pain of those who are not like him. And he has gone to God in prayer. And then about six months later, in the month of Nisan, or the month of happiness, Nehemiah uses his sad face skills to get the king's attention and asks for permission to go to Jerusalem and rebuild the city.

So chapter 2 verse 6:

[Read Nehemiah 2:6-8]

Now there is something you have to see here. Nehemiah has trained his eyes to recognize God at work. So the king of Persia hears Nehemiah's appeal and grants his request, and Nehemiah doesn't say "I carried out my plan and it worked." Instead he sees that God is involved, and credits Him. "God's gracious hand was on me, that's why the king granted my request."

Now the mistake here would be to say "well of course Nehemiah could see this was God. It's pretty obvious. A king bending over backwards to let some nobody rebuild an enemy fortress city! Only an idiot wouldn't see that this was God at work!"

But here's the thing, God is active in exactly this way all over the place right now. You see often when we think of the miracles in the Bible we think of the splitting of the Red Sea or feeding the 5000, and we say "Man, God isn't active in my life the way He was in the Bible." But the fact is that many of the miracles of the Bible are like this one.

And a big part of the miracle in these stories is that the person doesn't attribute what's going on to coincidence, he or she sees God at work – that's the miracle.

So friends, if you are going through life not seeing God act what do you think is more likely: that the God of the universe who doesn't change and worked powerfully in Nehemiah's life and countless others, has made an exception for you and decided not to show up; or could it be that you simply haven't acquired eyes able to see Him?

The fact is that seeing God at work in the midst of a world everyone else thinks is operating on chance isn't crazy, it is a stage of spiritual maturity that you have to develop.

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So let's just back up for a second. The book of Nehemiah started with a man 1200 KM's away having his heart touched so that he cared about some people who weren't anything like him.

And we said that this wasn't just descriptive, it wasn't just something that happened to Nehemiah, this is something that needs to happen to us all. Every Christ follower's journey needs to start with God's touch.

And in this encounter God extends His grace and puts something into our heart which was not naturally there. None of us look anything like Jesus by nature. And when God extends this grace it is totally in spite of us - none of us deserve it.

I'm talking about salvation. I'm talking about a sinner being transformed into a child of God. That is the first stage in discipleship. Without this happening there is nothing any of us can do to increase in Christ-likeness. It is only when God starts to move on a person that that person can move towards God.

And this is what happened to Nehemiah. But it didn't stop there. Friends, thank goodness maturity doesn't stop at birth! So Nehemiah did something with the grace he received. He prayed. He set aside quantities of time in which he could get to know God, and he also utilized "trigger-finger" prayer when he found himself in the moment of need.

And both kinds of prayer are essential to maturity. You can't grow in your faith if the only kind of prayers you pray are "God find me a parking spot at the mall." Or when you crawl into bed and say "God you are so good to me, thanks for a great day." Now there is nothing wrong with prayers like those, but they can't be the extent of your relationship. You need to value God by giving Him not just your quality but your quantity time. All your important relationships need this.

So getting to know God through prayer is a stage in the faith development process. And now Nehemiah shows us that out of prayer, and especially expectant prayer, comes an ability to see God at work. And that's what's going on here.

So let's keep going. Look at verse 9

[Read Nehemiah 2:9-20]

Just a couple things here, first, isn't it interesting that while Nehemiah so obviously sees God at work, people without faith don't see anything at all. And so Nehemiah does something really smart. He limits his exposure to these guys. So he heads out on a night walk to check out what God has put on his mind. Now he goes at night because he knows there's trouble and he knows his faith is fragile. And he doesn't want the passion of his calling squashed by Sanballat and Tobiah. Friends, sometimes it is wise to keep God's calling to yourself until you are ready to act.

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The fact is that whenever you feel a call of God and set out to live in a way that honours Him there are going to be people who tell you it's a terrible idea. But the growth of your spiritual maturity demands that you don't listen to these people. And that may mean taking yourself out of a surrounding where that voice is large. Now Sanballat and Tobiah aren't in the faith community – these are pagans who are watching Nehemiah, and they are mocking him. But the negative voice isn't restricted to pagans. A lot of the time opposition for radically following God comes from inside the faith community, from people who would rather maintain the status quo than step out in faith. And you may need to limit that voice as well.

So Nehemiah gets it right and refrains from making the vision God has given him public right away.

The second thing we need to rest in for a moment here is just great thankfulness that none of our parents named us Sanballat? Will anyone give me an amen to that?

Okay let's keep going in chapter 3

[Read Nehemiah 3:1-5]

Now there are a lot of wall building and strange names in this section, and if we weren't careful we could get lost here. But I want to affirm again that God ordained this to be recorded with us in mind – do you believe that? So this isn't just descriptive story, it is prescriptive for how we are to live. Nehemiah is laying out the path to spiritual maturity.

So the road to maturity begins when God pours His grace into a person. And that grace changes hearts. People go from only caring about themselves and their own interests to actually being able to put the preferences of those around them before themselves – this is not a natural ability. And as care for others grows inside a person it turns into expectant prayer on their behalf. This is intercession. And out of a practice of expectant intercession, and a real relationship with God, comes the ability to see God at work. And now this leads to a partnership in what God is doing – it leads to action. Friends, the people acted on Nehemiah's vision and rebuilt the wall.

Action is a natural step in the process of discipleship. This means the evidence of being a mature Christian is not that you attend church regularly – there are people in every church who come all the time but haven't experienced even the primary transformative infilling of God's grace – they aren't Christians.

But maturity happens when your heart is changed, and you start to look out at the world around you through Jesus' eyes, and you pray that God's will would be done. And you expect God to show up. And see Him show up. And then you look for ways to partner with Him in what He is doing.

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So the next question is how can we spur this along in ourselves? Because none of us want to be stuck in the diaper stage of development. There is nothing glorious about immaturity. So how can people who are on the spiritual developmental journey ensure that they don't get stuck at one stage and not continue growing in Christ-likeness?

And the answer I'd like to give you based on this text is quite simple, but don't confuse this for "easy." I would say the foundation of all discipleship is tied to surrounding yourself with other Christians who know you and can speak into your life.

Negatively this means discipleship can't happen by yourself, but neither can it happen in a big room once a week. The fact is it's pretty easy to go undercover here. Yes everyone is wears nametags, but there is a lot of depth that goes unknown when all you know about someone is their name. So it's pretty easy to show up with a smile while life at home is going to the dogs and you are barely holding onto your sanity. Right?

Friends, discipleship requires a smaller group of people who actually know you. And this is why we've been developing our Care Group ministry here at church. These are groups of roughly 10 people who you will live out the next year with. And during this time you will study scripture together, and pray and talk. And in the process the people in this group will get to know your passions and your problems. And you will share where God is speaking to you and they will encourage you to keep going.

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Now as I say this I know that some of you are nervous about this kind of idea. You are afraid that if people really knew you then they would judge you. And for some of you this is exactly what has happened in the past. You opened yourself up to someone or a small group, and pretty soon you became a project instead of a friend, or maybe worse.

And I'm not denying that this can happen, occasionally a few Sanballat the Horonites sneak into these groups and don't get grace and so aren't able to extend it to those around them. And if you've bumped into one these kind of people in the past I'm very sorry for you, but don't let someone who may not even be part of the covenant community – someone who doesn't get grace – keep you from being part of the covenant community.

Of course it isn't always Sanballat who hurts people. The Gospel tells us that all of us are messed up sinners who never get over our desperate need for a Saviour. So hurt can come from anyone. The Apostle John makes this clear saying:

If we claim to have fellowship with [God] and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin.

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make Him out to be a liar and His word is not in us. (1 John 1:5-10)

This was the Apostle John speaking – a man who looked a lot like Jesus – and yet he recognized that he was a sinner who still needed a Saviour. In fact, John says two big things attached to this, first he says the way to be forgiven - and he's not talking about salvation, he's talking about ongoing forgiveness - is to recognize you are a sinner who still needs forgiveness, and second he says one sign you haven't been saved at all is that you think you've gotten past the need for this – “doesn't happen” he says.

So when you risk letting people know you and find yourself surrounded by sinners there is a pretty good chance that some imperfection is going to result. But if the room is full of sinners who've experienced God's grace – men and women who get that they've undeservedly been saved by grace and still aren't perfect, then they are going to be able to extend the grace they've received to you.

And here's what this can look like: They are going to be able to care about you even though you aren't exactly like them – when that happens it is gorgeous. And they are going to be able to pray for you expecting God to show up in your situation. Do you need anyone like that in your life? And people like this are going to be developing the eyes to see God on the move so as things start to change in your situation they are going to recognize this isn't just chance. And they are going to encourage you with that. And then they are going to partner with God in what He is doing in your life. And as a result you are actually going to meet Jesus in them! And what would happen in your life if you met Jesus this week?

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Friends, what would you be willing to risk for the chance of having Jesus show up and touch your life? Man, I'd risk everything. I want this more than anything else. And that's why I'm in a care group. And that's why I've surrounded myself with some other godly men in the city who know where I struggle – that I can confess my sins to – because I want to be forgiven, and I want to live in fellowship with God.

And Nehemiah wants this too. And Nehemiah knew he was no James Bond. So while this book bears his name he didn't go it alone. He surrounded himself with people who could encourage him. Look back at Chapter 2 verse 12. As Nehemiah sneaks out on his night walk to check out the wall he's got a Care Group around who are excited about the vision God has given him. And these are the people that he shares his plans with.

So brothers and sisters, here is the application today. Don't get stuck at the stage of immaturity you are currently at. All of us have some level of immaturity in us. None of us perfectly resemble Jesus so there is room for improvement. Don't get stuck where you are. Instead find a group of Christ followers that you can share your life with, and allow yourself to meet Jesus in them.

Now you can do that in all sorts of ways, and perhaps some of you are part of Christian community outside this church - that's fine. But if you don't have any Christian brothers or sisters who actually know you then sign up today. Today is the last day to get into a Care Group this semester. So this is it. Stop pretending you are James Bond and submit yourself to the truth of the Gospel which says "you aren't that good, you aren't strong enough to stand by yourself, you need a Saviour and this need isn't going away. And the means God has established for you to encounter His Saviour in an ongoing way are sitting right beside you in the imperfect men and women of this church who have Jesus' Spirit living inside them.

So surround yourself with people who are going to encourage your faith rather than tear it down.

Friends, it is night time in many of your lives, and you've got no choice about facing this. But you don't have to walk the night alone, there is a group of Christ followers available to you. These are men and women who are going to encourage you as you risk to step out in faith. And a group like this is exactly the kind you want if you're planning your own night walk to maturity.