

“Rebuilding Your Broken World” Book Summary 01/2020

Summary by Mark R. Elliott*

Pages 36-38

Initially, the broken-world experience is usually private and very personal. It may include a period of resistance to the truth, shocked disbelief that anything like what has happened could have occurred, and anger at the possible consequences and anyone who might make sure they happen. We call this living in denial. He may attempt to blame others and interpret events so that he is able to see himself in the most charitable light. He may do this to avoid the awful feelings of guilt and self-recrimination. But if this thinking continues, it will lead to nothing good, certainly no hope of a broken world that is capable of being rebuilt.

The more healthy but nevertheless very painful part of this secretive phase occurs when the broken-world person faces facts: a self-realization of what has actually happened and his responsibility for it. There can be times of churning fear and feelings of cheapness, self-dislike, and quiet turmoil when topics too close to his experience are raised in conversation. It can be a time of depression; a period in which there is an overwhelming desire to escape, even hope that somehow life would come to a sudden end in an accident or a physical illness. He may work harder than ever in an attempt to outrun the anguished thoughts or to try to atone—as if he could—for what has happened.

These are the terrible, lonely moments for a broken-world person, and many of us know what they are like. Relief comes only when the individual looks heavenward and treats the matter for what it is: a serious offense against God and His standards. Then, in such an acknowledgement, the initial stages of healing and rebuilding are likely to begin.

This may be the time, a second stage of the broken-world experience, when a man or woman then turns to others who might be willing to forgive and provide the comfort necessary for the rebuilding process to begin. A spouse; close, intimate friends; a pastor or counselor. Ultimately, rebuilding broken worlds can never happen alone. It is a team effort, and it has to be accomplished in concert with those who can give grace and affirm progress.

When we purchase something of value that is fragile or delicate, it comes in a carefully designed box and is packed in various forms of Styrofoam to protect it against all but the most crushing blows. A whole industry is dedicated to such packing and protecting. A broken-world person needs the same kind of protection. That is why Paul called for the Corinthians to forgive and also to comfort a broken-world person in their congregation (2 Cor. 2:7).

Naturally, there are some downside risks when misbehavior and its consequences become known. Perhaps someone who cannot forgive wishes to punish or hurt the broken-world

person in return. There is the risk that some relationships will never be restored, that silence and antipathy will be the way of the future. Divorce, lawsuits, periodic acts of vengeance, are some grim possibilities. The broken-world person may not be able to do anything about these unfortunate reactions. Apart from confession, expressions of sorrow, and the pledge to change, it is difficult to see what the individual can offer an offended party that will elicit restoration if the other does not wish to give it.

A possible third stage of the broken-world experience is the one anyone would dread because of the magnitude of its humiliation. And that occurs when news of one's misbehavior reaches a larger public. No matter how one might wish these things would never happen, with public knowledge may come serious damage to one's reputation, the loss of credibility, the requirement to relinquish public responsibilities of leadership, and the loss of some friends who will find it expedient to withdraw because they are hurt or feel betrayed. Add to all of that the pain of gossip, of people feeling that they can be perfectly free to discuss and analyze the misbehavior in any forum of their choice.

When my sinful act resulted in a personal broken world, Gail and I chose to wrestle with a significant question that one of our pastoral advisors placed before us. The wording went something like this: *will you concentrate on the pain of this broken-world experience and resist it, OR will you permit the pain to become an environment in which God can clearly speak to you about matters He deems of ultimate importance? The choice is yours.*

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A few years ago I gave a speech at a college commencement. Before the festivities began, a member of that school's board sat with me in the president's office. We'd never met before, and we were asking questions of each other that might help us get better acquainted.

Suddenly, my friend asked a strange question. I've thought about it many times since then. "If Satan were to blow you out of the water," he asked, "how do you think he would do it?"

"I'm not sure I know," I answered. "All sorts of ways I suppose; but I know there's one way he wouldn't get me."

"What's that?"

"He'd never get me in the area of my personal relationships. That's one place where I have no doubt that I'm as strong as you can get."

A few years after that conversation my world broke wide open. A chain of seemingly innocent choices became destructive, and it was my fault. Choice by choice by choice, each easier to

make, each becoming gradually darker. And then my world broke—in the very area I had predicted I was safe—and my world had to be rebuilt.

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Call it the occasion of PERSONAL INSIGHT, the instant of ruthless truth! It's a startling moment. When it's experienced, one will never forget it, especially if one has been avoiding the truth for a while and has gotten out of the habit of facing personal facts. It's an event that almost everyone who has had a broken-world experience would wish had come much earlier so as to avoid the choices that led to terrible consequences. Usually, there are such chances; but the reality is that in those moments, when a different outcome could have been arranged, the person in question, like the prodigal, wasn't watching or listening.

This INSIGHTFUL MOMENT--biblically speaking—is the occasion when individuals see *the truth* for what it is; when they see *themselves* for what they are; and when they see what I would like to call the *environments of choice* for what they make possible.

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Secret carrying may be a spiritual epidemic. It just might be the common cold of Christian living. Why? Because it is so easy, so natural for all of us. Men and women have tried to carry and live with secrets ever since Adam and Eve tried to hide from God when He sought them in the garden.

“Why are you hiding, Adam?” God asked. He was hiding because he was keeping a secret, and he was ashamed to expose it.

Cover-ups are accomplished in a host of ways in the church. Some do it with the façade of an unusually passionate concern for theological and doctrinal correctness. They keep everyone on the defensive with their accusations and suspicions. Some cover up by being extremely emotionally expressive in their spiritual lives. We find it hard to doubt the sincerity of someone who seems able to weep or rejoice at key moments. Others cover up through a style of never-ending busyness and activism. Who can find fault with someone who is always serving, always giving, always leading? We've already noted the cover-up of leading by righteous indignation or pointing out the sins and irregularities of others. *All of these categories include individuals who are absolutely sincere and genuine in their pursuits of life and faith;* but people who have secrets to keep can abuse church- and spirit-related endeavors.

The Bible speaks often about secret carrying. It is most likely to come out in verbs like *deceive* or *lie*, or in nouns like *darkness* or *hardness* (as in harness of heart). And when one studies the great biblical biographies, it's not unusual to see a secretive phase in almost every person's broken-world experience.

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I've used the term REFORMING GRACE to describe the often slow but certain reshaping of one's life into what the Bible calls Christlikeness. This process also is a gift from God, and we are told that God sends His Spirit into the life of the follower of the Lord to make this possible. The gift of His Spirit is part of that Grace.

Then there is RESTORATIVE GRACE, and that is what this chapter is about. This kind of grace comes to a broken-world person who comes to insight and acknowledges misbehavior in attitude or deed. Restorative grace is God's action to forgive the misbehavior and to draw the broken-world person back toward wholeness and usefulness again. It is God's response to the acts of repentance and brokenness. Restorative grace doesn't mean that all of the natural consequences of misbehavior vanish, but it does point toward a wholeness of relationship between God and the one who has returned in repentance.

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In the *Journal of the American Medical Association* a few years ago Jane McAdams told the story of her sixty-nine-year-old mother who had lived a life deeply marked by the Great Depression of the 1930's. The evidence showed in her frugality and utterly practical perspective on all material things. The only extravagance she had ever permitted herself, McAdams wrote, was a frilly nightgown kept in a bottom drawer, "In case I should ever have to go to the hospital."

That day had come. All the symptoms that made her visit to the hospital necessary spoke of a serious cancer, and McAdams feared the moment when she would have to tell her mother that the prognosis for the future was very poor.

The daughter wondered, "Should I tell my mother? Did she already know? If not, did she suspect? . . . Could I give her any hope? Was there in fact any hope?"

As she wrestled with these questions, McAdams noted that her mother's birthday was approaching. Perhaps she could brighten her mother's days by purchasing a new nightgown because the one that had been in the bottom drawer was yellowed, limp and unattractive. So she purchased and presented a new nightgown and matching robe. "If I could not hope to cure her disease, at least I could make her feel like the prettiest patient in the entire hospital."

McAdams described how her mother studied the gown after the package was opened. And after a while she pointed to the wrapping and the gown and said to her daughter, "'Would you mind returning it to the store? I don't really want it.'" Then picking up the paper she pointed to a display advertisement and said, 'This is what I really want, if you could get that.' What she pointed to was a display advertisement of expensive designer summer purses."

My reaction was one of disbelief. Why would my mother, so careful about extravagances, want an expensive summer purse in January, one that she could not possibly use until June? She would not even live until spring, let alone summer. Almost immediately, I was ashamed and appalled at my clumsiness, ignorance, insensitivity, call it what you will. With a shock, I realized she was finally asking me what I thought about her illness. She was asking me how long she would live. She was, in fact, asking me if I thought she would live even six months. And she was telling me that if I showed I believed she would live until then, she would do it. She would not let that expensive purse go unused. That day I returned the gown and robe and bought the summer purse.

That was many years ago. The purse is worn out and long gone, as are at least half a dozen others. And next week my mother flies to California to celebrate her 83rd birthday. My gift to her? The most expensive designer purse I could find. She'll use it well.

The gift of restorative grace to a broken-world person is the gift not of a nightgown that announces death but of a summer purse that says there is life after failure. That is the message of the Cross and the empty tomb. And it must be the message of the church to the broken-world person.

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Three important things happened that morning on the beach. First, *Jesus came to Peter in his world*. The rebuilder went to the broken-world person knowing, perhaps, that Peter was too wounded to take the initiative himself. Second, *Jesus gave Peter a chance to replace his earlier three denials* with three honest attempts at a reaffirmation of his love for the Lord. And, third, *Jesus reissued His call*. When the beach scene was over, there were no longer any second-class citizens in the community of Jesus.

In talking about restoration we begin with the assumption that the broken-world person has acknowledged actions and attitudes that have led to consequences and offenses grievous to the Christian community. That is confession and repentance, and no one can do that for the sinner. But conversely, the repentant person cannot restore himself or herself; he or she must be restored by others. Again, I must say that I feel free to write on this subject only because I have received such restoration personally.

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Restoration first requires confession by the broken-world person. The secrets of the heart and past actions have to be put into light.

A second aspect of the restoration or rebuilding process takes place when the broken-world person and a restoration team take time to go into the history of the events that led to

misbehavior. This is an important process, like the drilling of that tooth before the dentist can fill the cavity and rebuild it to former strength. But it isn't a process for a large number of people—perhaps a group of three who are mature enough to sit with someone who has been in trouble and wants to bring the truth to the surface.

Counseling from a gifted therapist can go a long way to making sure that the “decay” is treated.

Third, *restoration requires discipline.* The broken-world person cannot take this into his own hands. He needs to trust in a body of mature, godly people whose agenda is rebuilding.

Then restoration involves comfort. No one but the broken-world person knows how painful can be the humiliation and the loss following misbehavior and its consequences. If the Christian community desires to restore an individual, regular attempts have to be made to pour courage and confidence into him.

A fifth aspect of restoration is advocacy. The process of rebuilding always has a stated objective, which is healing and a return to service or usefulness. Those involved in the rebuilding actually take on the responsibility to speak for the broken-world person, to represent the possibilities for his rebuilding to others.

Finally, *restoration requires an official declaration when it is accomplished.* A specific time must come when one is released from discipline.

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Jim Ryun. Ryun was a favorite in the Olympic 1,500 meter the day he fell. As a massive crowd in the stadium and on television watched, Ryun made his way around the track in a pack of finely conditioned runners. And then, just as it had happened to others, he crashed to the ground. In a race of that sort, a fall virtually guarantees that it will be impossible to win. And Jim Ryun must have known that as he lay there on the track. What were the options Ryun sorted through his mind in that moment? Quitting and heading for the locker room and a hot shower? Anger at having trained for so long for this event and now missing the chance for the gold medal? Self-pity over the seeming bad deal he's gotten by being jostled from the pack?

None of these, apparently. Rather he seems to have had only one thought that eclipsed all of these possibilities I've mentioned. Getting up and running again; FINISHING, even if he couldn't win. AND THAT IS WHAT JIM RYUN DID. He got up and ran again. Others won medals, but Ryun won a large measure of respect when he determined to finish the race.

Many biblical challenges call us to a performance in the Christian life worth of a medal. But underlying all of those encouragements is an even more important one: FINISH THE RACE.

This metaphor is also a challenge to the church, to the fellowship of men and women who have found the life of the Cross the only way to live. To them goes my plea: help broken-world people get up and finish the race. Confront them like Nathan confronted David; seek them out like Hosea did his wayward wife, Gomer; forgive them like Paul did the jailer; pray for them like Stephen did for his executioners; rebuild them like Barnabas rebuilt John Mark; and restore them to usefulness whenever possible like Jesus did for Simon Peter.

In recent years we've spent enormous amounts of energy asking how the church in the West might find renewal. We've sought the answers in the pursuit of powerful preaching, evangelistic marketing programs, group dynamics, and upbeat, contemporary services. Perhaps there is virtue in all of that. But I would like to propose that if we were to rediscover the ministry of restorative grace, we might find an enormous number of people crowding forward to receive what God has offered to give through Jesus Christ. There, in the ministry of restoration, may be a key to renewal.

Both inside and outside the church are broken-world people, and they are there in not small numbers. They yearn for an understanding and wise ear; they dearly wish for an amnesty that would provide the chance to make things right and new. If their spirit is right, they are not asking that their sins be diminished or overlooked; they are not asking that people pretend that nothing has happened. What they seek is what the cross of Christ offered: grace freely given, healing fully applied; usefulness restored.

*Mark R. Elliott served as a Director of Missions (Associational Mission Strategist) in western Iowa and eastern Nebraska for almost three decades. He is a strong advocate for obedience and Biblically based disciple making. As such, he knows that making healthy disciples requires Christian leaders to be constantly pursuing spiritual maturity—be lifelong learners. Because of the time constraints of ministry, most pastors focus their reading list on resources that assist them in teaching and preaching the Word of God. As such, books focusing on church health, leadership development, and church growth tend to find their way to the bottom of the stack. With that reality in mind, Mark has written discussion summaries on several books that have helped him to personally grow in Christ and that tend to find themselves on the bottom of most pastor's stack. Many pastors have found them helpful as they are able to more quickly process great insights from other pastors and authors.