


ROBERT C. MEHNER



**THE
EXPERIENCE**

**Breaking through the Barriers
That Block Spiritual Growth**

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For my loving wife, Kristy, and children, Stefan and Casey. Thank you for your love and support.

And for my spiritual mentor for many years, Pastor Johnny Thomas. I miss you, my friend.

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Foreword

I like timely books. Just having attended a New Room Conference in Brentwood, Tennessee, I so appreciated their emphasis there on bands. Rob Mehner has drafted a model for Christians around the world to capture the spirit of just what the band meeting is all about.

I have spent most of my life researching the life and theology of John Wesley. I am well aware of his emphasis on bands as the lifeblood of the movement called Methodism.

As you read, note especially Mehner's discussion of issues like unforgiveness and idolatry that propel the reader into his outlining the person and work of the Holy Spirit that enables the seeker to overcome. God does not promise to deliver us from trouble; God guarantees trouble that we might be at one with our neighbors and friends, many of whom have never heard an intelligent presentation of the gospel. Sixty percent of Americans cannot name the four Gospels. Significant here, however, is that Mehner demonstrates how the band can launch believers into the kind of body that can not only change them but also the world in which they live.

Christians are about gathering. Wesley insisted that there is no gospel but social gospel and no holiness but social holiness. Methodists that did not gather in small groups, sharing their faith and holding each other accountable, did not survive the onslaught of the eighteenth century. Mehner insists that Christians that do not gather, sharing their faith and holding each other accountable, will not survive the twenty-first century.

Rob Mehner has not only read the Bible, he has tested biblical principles on the mission field, both at home and abroad. Quite frankly, I trust the man. I like his balance between theory and praxis. I also appreciate his heart for the full gospel as it promises hope for those most in need of a Word from On High.

Read this book with interest and share it with your friends as an important way of sustaining your own walk and of reaching your neighbors for Jesus Christ.

Robert G. Tuttle Jr., PhD
Emeritus Professor of World Christianity
Asbury Seminary

Preface

Hunger is driven by two things. If I get a whiff or taste of my wife's chili, I become hungry for that chili. A positive interaction whets my appetite for more. Conversely, if I am deprived of food long enough (in my case, about an hour and a half), my hunger grows. In either case, there arises in me a desire to find food and eat it.

Spiritual hunger operates much the same way. Perhaps you've caught a glimpse of God's love and offer of abundant life and you absolutely want more. Or, maybe, life's circumstances have created a spiritual drought which has left you hopeless and powerless on your own. And, now, there is rising in you a desire for a deeper connection to God and to a story larger than your own little one.

In my experience there are two ingredients that work together to produce a strong, spiritual hunger. The first is active obedience. Perhaps you've had a small taste of God's love and purposes and you are thinking about doing this study because you want more. I would

suggest God has put it in front of you for a reason and I encourage you to enter into it along with a few spiritual friends. The second ingredient is perseverance in adverse life situations. There is a rarely used word in our language that is found somewhat frequently in the Bible—*long-suffering*—which captures this idea.

Most of what you will find in this study was birthed during a season in my life when I was experiencing both of these things. The Holy Spirit had done a new work in me and I was experiencing the love, presence, and power of Jesus in my life like never before. At the same time, our family was living through problems of Goliathan proportions, and we felt completely knocked around, beaten up, and pushed down. With help from my coworker, Daniel Taylor, a class was formed from what God was revealing at that time. I taught and tweaked the class twice a year for the next ten-plus years. During that time, I saw God's power work through it to transform lives. With more than one thousand alumni, I've seen the following results:

- About 15 percent did not finish the class or completed it, saying, "Mmmm, not so great."
- About 70 percent were moved to follow up on one of the specific topics they recognized as critical to moving forward in their spiritual journey.

- About 15 percent saw significant life transformation; surrendering more of their lives to Jesus and becoming better spouses, parents, employees, friends, and ambassadors for God's kingdom.
- Some who were in the first or second categories moved to the second or third after they repeated the class with a friend.

One more set of bullet points before I close. While I sincerely and completely give God all the glory for any life change experienced by another person, I believe there are factors which God uses or even helps orchestrate to increase the impact of the class, and this study in daily devotional form:

- The level of hunger that a participant has at the time of doing the study; whether driven by a taste of God's goodness or a season in the desert.
- The level of commitment to do the work and pray "show me" prayers daily. For example, "God, show me the obstacles preventing me from drawing nearer to you, being more effective in my witness to you, loving and serving those around me, and becoming the person you created me to be."

- The presence of a small group participating together to support and pray for one another, and to reinforce what God is doing in each one of them.

Are you hungry? Are you searching for something to satisfy that hunger? Then dive right in with a few of your spiritual friends and see what God will do.

Note: I have facilitated the actual class in a two- to three-day retreat format for church staffs and leadership groups. Contact me if you would like to explore that option for your organization.

Acknowledgments

This work is born out of a class called The Experience, which I taught for more than ten years at La Croix Church in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. I am grateful for their support and for the feedback from those who participated in the class. I am also grateful to Pastor Daniel Taylor and Chris Patterson for their input to the class.

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WEEK 1

What Are You Seeking? and Four Other Big Questions about Our Spiritual Journeys

————— **Day 1** —————

What Are You Seeking?

Isaiah 57:14–15; 61:1–3; John 1:35–37

Imagine a dog in an open field hooked to a long leash that is tethered to a post hammered deep into the ground. The dog can walk or run until it reaches the end of its rope. Then if it continues to run and pull harder to move forward, it exhausts itself by running in circles and digging deeper and deeper ruts. Our spiritual journeys often look much like this.

As a pastor for twenty years I have focused on spiritual health and growth. I have a passion to see people become all God created them to be. In those twenty years,

I've enjoyed nothing more than helping people experience the things we read in Isaiah 61:

- knowledge of the good news of Jesus Christ and the love of God;
- healing of a broken heart;
- freedom and light;
- comfort, joy, passion, and empowerment;
- being grounded yet knowing adventure;
- salvation and right relationships (with God and others); and
- restoration and justice.

This is what Jesus said he came to give us, but so many are living a tethered, exhausting existence.

We grow and move forward, sometimes with great speed, and then—BAM!—something chokes us and keeps us stuck in one spot. The typical advice from church leaders or spiritual friends is to read the Bible more, pray more, or go to more church activities and events. But, typically, this leads to fatigue and frustration from running in circles and digging ruts in our spiritual lives with no forward movement. Then we just sit down and settle for something far less than the abundant life Jesus told us he came to give us.

Jesus asked two of his disciples just as they began following him, “What are you seeking?” (John 1:38). He asks each of us as well. Do you want to grow spiritually and experience more of the abundant life God has purposed for you? If so, then this study will help you overcome common obstacles that prevent us from experiencing healing, joy, spiritual maturity, and divine power to impact the world for Jesus Christ.

Closing Exercise

Commit to spending the time necessary to allow God to work through this study. Take ten minutes or less to read the daily Scriptures and devotional. Then devote a couple of five-minute periods during your day to pray contemplatively or to complete the short exercise. Finally, commit to sharing with your group or a spiritual friend what God is doing in you through this study.

Day 2

A Journey Led by God

Luke 5:1–11

There are many people who have no real idea what is meant by discipleship or spiritual formation. Others

reduce the meaning to religious practices like prayer, corporate worship, and reading the Bible. While such practices are important tools in our discipleship and spiritual maturity, they are not in and of themselves discipleship nor spiritual formation.

So, what are discipleship and spiritual formation? They are different terms for the same lifelong process of deepening our relationship with God in a way that transforms us. To deepen a relationship requires growing in understanding of ourselves, others, and of our interactions. Spiritual formation is about learning who God is, who we are, and what we are to become; how we are to relate to God and others. Spiritual disciplines definitely help. Reading the Bible reveals exactly these things. Praying connects us to the Holy Spirit who guides and empowers us. Corporate worship connects us to other followers of Jesus in God's presence.

But spiritual practices are not enough. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ means to submit our small story to God's larger story, to have our lives serve God's purposes rather than our own. I don't recall who said it, but I love this quote: "God is always inviting us to play a small role in the greatest film ever made, but we regularly demand to be the star in a B movie no one will ever remember." A

grand purpose of our spiritual formation is to realize our full potential in serving God and his kingdom. And God is the leader in that process.

Read through the book of Luke and watch Jesus disciple his disciples. He reveals who he and the Father really are. He prods the disciples out of their small stories and into the Father's greater story. At each point, there is a critical decision to be made. Will Peter the fisherman let a carpenter tell him how to fish? How will the disciples respond to Jesus' comfort with their discomfort during a life-threatening storm? Will they forfeit their traditional ways of interacting with God in order to find the intimacy Jesus has with his Father? Will they accept the cost of following Jesus when the reward is for the lost rather than them? Will they continue to follow Jesus through amazing mountaintops and dark valleys that threaten their very lives? Will they remain in spiritually forming community (as the Twelve) despite their differences and disagreements?

While the context of our spiritual formation is different, Jesus presents the same basic opportunities and questions to us. Will we submit our small stories to God's greater story, follow Jesus where he leads, and do so in authentic community?

Closing Exercise

Identify where God is saying to you as he did to Peter in Luke 5, “Put out a little further . . . come follow me.” Ask him to help you respond, “Because you say so, I will do it.”

Throughout this study we will engage in “show me” prayers, asking God to reveal certain things to us. If this is a new concept of asking for God to speak and then listening for the Holy Spirit, try the following exercise. Close your eyes and imagine yourself in your favorite place (beach, mountains, wherever) on a perfect day. As you relax and enjoy this time, imagine Jesus is now sitting next to you, simply enjoying what you are enjoying. Imagine this for two to five minutes. Then without speaking, ask Jesus what he would like to say. How does he respond? Share the result of this exercise with your group.

Day 3

Where Are You?

Colossians 1:9–10; Hebrews 6:1–3

If you are standing in front of a large directory map at a mall, you must locate two things for the directory to be helpful: the “You Are Here” indicator and the store you’d like to visit. This is true for our spiritual journeys

as well. We must know where we are (today's focus) and where we are going (tomorrow's focus). There are any number of tools that can help locate you on the discipleship map. One church uses a line from -10 to 10, where -10 is actively killing Christians, 0 is accepting Jesus, and 10 is like Mother Teresa on steroids. Some churches use categories such as Exploring Christ, Growing in Christ, Close to Christ, and Christ-Centered.

The accompanying question to "Where are you?" is "Why are you there?" If you are passing through a point or category as a normal part of your spiritual formation, that's great! But if you are stuck there or have returned there, not so great. Imagine you are on a trip from one side of the United States to the other. If you find yourself in St. Louis because it's a point on the way, then there is no problem. If you find yourself in St. Louis for the third time on your journey, it's a problem. If floodwaters cover the Mississippi River bridge, that's an obstacle, but if you've run out of gas, that's a process problem. Sometimes we get stuck in our spiritual journeys due to obstacles. (We will spend much of our time in the coming weeks looking at three very common obstacles.) But sometimes we get stuck due to process problems. I will share three of those with you today.

First, the spiritual activities that catalyze our movement from one category to the next change as we grow.

Second, our growth is typically rapid early in the journey and heavily reliant on church programs. We grow fast early on by showing up and participating in things others have initiated. However, along the way our growth becomes slower and the responsibility shifts to ours. We often remember the early growth, romanticize the activities associated with it, and never want to move on to new activities. We begin to complain that church services, small groups, and leadership just aren't what they used to be. In reality, the issue is that we have grown and what we need to continue forward has changed. Our refusal to move from comfortable but ineffective practices and activities has us stuck. Are we willing to leave behind our boats and nets in order to follow Jesus further on the journey?

Third, the spiritual journey is a communal journey. While we need times of solitude along the way, the journey demands spiritual friends, mentors, and mentees to help us find our way forward. If we want to do this journey alone, we're precisely who God wants to place in a community.

Closing Exercise

Ask God to show you any spiritual activity or practice in which you are engaged that is no longer catalyzing your growth. Also ask him to show you a catalytic one that

might replace it. Share your thoughts with your group members.

Day 4

Where Are You Going and Do You Want to Get There?

Romans 8:29; Galatians 5:22–25; Matthew 16:24–26;
John 5:3–6; Mark 10:17–22

Of the four big questions, “Where are you going?” is the easiest because the answer has been given to us. The Christian spiritual journey has Christlikeness as its destination. Romans 8:29 says that the outcome God has always had in mind for us is to be like Jesus. What does that look like? Galatians 5:22–23 tells us that over time we will consistently become more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient and long-suffering, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled. These things are called “fruit of the Spirit,” which means they naturally blossom in our lives when we are moving forward with the Holy Spirit toward Christlikeness. If we do not see a measure of increase in at least some of these fruits, then we are probably stuck in our spiritual journey or traveling to somewhere other than Christlikeness.

Notice that these indicators of forward movement toward Christlikeness are not called “fruit of _____ (fill in your name)” nor “fruit of my church/pastor.” Trying to manage our behaviors in order to be more loving, kind, patient, et cetera, is exhausting. And while being influenced by the lives of mature Christians is helpful, relying on another human being to produce fruit in our lives is a dead end. Only God’s work in us through the Holy Spirit can consistently and successfully cultivate these Christlike character traits in our lives. The Holy Spirit leads, but we must cooperate, and that’s where our third big question comes into play: Do I want to go to Christlikeness?

This might seem like a silly question, but no sillier than Jesus asking a paralytic, “Do you want to be healed?” (John 5:6). People generally give three answers to this question:

1. *Yes.* If this is your answer you are ready to move forward.
2. *No.* An answer not reserved for nonbelievers. Perhaps you, like many in the church, consider Christlikeness to be extreme, fanatical, and reserved for clergy and super-Jesus-freaks.

3. *I wish I was Christlike.* The more common answer among believers is the third answer. But there is a huge difference between wanting something and wishing it were so. If we wish to be Christlike, we're asking God to wave a wand and make it so without our effort and hopefully without too much disruption to our lives.

A wished-for journey toward Christlikeness stops when things get hard or uncomfortable. The rich young ruler in Mark 10 wished for heaven, but didn't want it badly enough to cut loose the idol that had his heart. I had personally lived many years wishing for Christlikeness without really *wanting* to go badly enough to do what was necessary: to deny my own life and take up my cross daily.

Closing Exercise

Discuss the following questions with your group: (1) Have you seen growth in any aspect of the fruit of the Spirit in the last year? Explain. (2) Have you left something behind in the last three to five years to follow Jesus more fully? (3) Are you willing to give something up now to move forward?

Day 5

What Obstacles Are in Your Way?

Isaiah 57:14–15; John 16:33; Psalm 23

Recall the tethered dog metaphor from Day 1 and how it can represent our stationary spiritual journeys. Running and digging harder will not help the dog move forward, nor will overindulging in religious practices help us when we become stuck. What is needed is to step back, loosen the tension, identify what has us stuck, and allow God to remove the obstacle standing in the way.

We should not be surprised that we encounter obstacles on our spiritual journey. We are broken individuals living among broken people in a broken world. As we read about the spiritual journeys of the disciples, we will discover the obstacles and hiccups they faced. Also, we should not condemn ourselves when we are tripped up by obstacles. Shame and self-condemnation only increase and fortify our obstacles. Learning from our stumbles and taking time to allow God's Spirit to lead us in overcoming them is the way forward.

Over the next few weeks we will identify and discuss three very common obstacles that halt our spiritual journeys. While there can be any number of obstacles in all sizes, these three have been the most prevalent in my

twenty years of work in spiritual direction, pastoral care, and counseling. They are:

- the refusal or inability to forgive;
- our past wounds and how the enemy of our souls uses them to have us living out of lies; and
- idolatry, religion, and habitual sin.

And, of course, we will learn together what helps us overcome these obstacles and move forward toward Christlikeness.

Closing Exercise

Ask God to show you over the next several weeks what obstacles are in your way. Do not jump into trying to overcome them right away since we will talk more about that process. Share with your group if God reveals anything to you, or share which of the obstacles most interests or concerns you.