

Series Slide

The 19th century painter Vincent van Gogh or van Goff or as the Dutch say van Gogh...

is a very complicated historical figure. Sometimes it's hard to tell if he was a success or a failure.

Very early on he wanted to be a pastor- following in his father's footsteps... he was first assigned by the church to a little mining town in Belgium.

In his ministry he lived a radical lifestyle...like giving away his clothes to the poor and cutting up his bed sheets to use to bandage up the miners.

This radically generous lifestyle was a bit over-the-top for the Dutch church-, and combined with a poor speaking ability, led to his dismissal from the church- a wound that Vincent carried with him for the rest of his life. He would experience a deep and abiding depression that would ebb and flow throughout his life.

But even through his often debilitating mental state, Vincent became an artist. He had an uncanny ability to see beauty in the ordinary....even painful moments in life.

Starry Night pic

His most famous painting "A Starry Night", was the view from his room in an asylum...or a sort of mental rehab facility. You'll notice in the painting that the church is dark...where as all the light is in the homes of the towns people- A little hint at how Vincent saw the world...and the church.

Van Gogh often used light or the color yellow to represent a divine presence. Basically Starry Night is a little dig at the church- "Lights are out at the church- but God is still clearly at work in the heavens...and in the homes of people."

The color blue often represented depth, tranquility, and beauty. You can definitely see that in Starry night...

but I want to draw your attention to another work of van Gogh.

Sketch

First is this sketch from 1882. We actually know who this guy is...he is an old military veteran who is now in the poor house. Clearly- someone who thought his life would turn out differently. But when Vincent sketches him... he sees something that maybe others don't.

This is what he wrote about the sketch in a letter to his brother.

"[T]he poor little wood-cutter or peasant on the heath or miner can have moments of emotion and inspiration which give him a feeling of an eternal home to which he is near"- Vincent van Gogh

In other words- God shows up in the lives of the most downtrodden people- he gives them a taste of eternity. In this sorrowful old man- Vincent sees an eternal hope. That is a spiritual super power.

8 years later, around the same time as he paints Starry night, and from that same Asylum... he paints the sketch of the old man- a couple of months before he ended his own life.

At Eternity's Gate pic

This time- he's painting a representation of himself- his own despair and sense of loneliness in his depression. And, just like with pastoring- becoming a well respected artist was another dream that died. van Gogh was unappreciated in his time. In fact- he only sold one painting while he was alive. Think about this. Locked in an asylum, full of the ability to see wonderful things in people and in creation- and yet rejected- by the church- by the art community...van Gogh no doubt felt like a failure...a life wasted.

But notice the colors in this picture. the fire- the light- the presence of God close by...and notice the man now is completely covered in the color blue.

Just like in Starry Night- Vincent is showing the depth and beauty of this anguishing man and the nearness of God to him in his pain.

The name of the painting is as confusing as van Gogh himself.

"Old Sorrowing Man"...ok yeah. I see that.
But he gave it an alternate title- "At Eternity's Gate"

One sounds like a frustrating end of a life of regret and failure and rejection.
The other- Sounds like a person on the precipice of joy and life.

Is this man despairing? or Praying?
Is he weeping tears of regret...or shedding tears of joy?
Are his fists balled in frustration and anger...or in the intensity of communing with God?

The fact is...we can't be sure...but it seems like some of both...and if you've ever been through times of deep suffering- you know it can also be a time where you have felt God the nearest to you.

Unfortunately- Vincent van Gogh ended his own life shortly after he painted it...so we can't know.

Vincent van Gogh died believing he had failed...the church...the world...his God. He died believing that his life was worthless...and all that he had done was a waste.

If only he could have had the vision to see—> his paintings have inspired generations of people to see deep, tranquil, beauty in the ordinary...the presence of God in a peasant. An old sorrowing man...at Eternity's Gate.

Title Slide- "Sorrowing at Eternity's Gate: The Messiness of Maturing"- Nehemiah 10-13

The end of van Gogh's life is similar to the end of the OT book of Nehemiah. As we close out the summer- so we'll close out Nehemiah. And these last chapters of Nehemiah bring up some of the same questions that van Gogh's life bring us.

Is he a success or a failure?
Is he suffering a mental break- or doing something deeply beautiful?
What should his legacy be?

I've got selected verses over 4 chapters today to finish us out.

First - a three sentence recap.

Jerusalem was like an old abandoned mall full of people who lacked the motivation and resources to make it a thriving center of worship again.

Nehemiah- deeply burdened for its restoration and the revival of God's people- comes back rallies the people with prayer and vision...and they

rebuild the walls and the community, fending off opposition and threats to their lives.

This results in a spiritual revival...where they rediscover the law of God, confess their sins, and as we enter chapter 10- the people are ready to do whatever it takes to be faithful to God...They are ready to start again...its a rebirth... the start of a bright future.

Warning: Its about to get frustrating...and incredibly messy. Not the ending you hoped for.

Onward.

Nehemiah 10:28-29

The rest of the people — the priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, and temple servants, along with their wives, sons, and daughters, everyone who is able to understand and who has separated themselves from the surrounding peoples to obey the law of God — 29 join with their noble brothers and commit themselves with a sworn oath to follow the law of God given through God's servant Moses and to obey carefully all the commands, ordinances, and statutes of the Lord our Lord.

Everybody is signing on to a full commitment to live a life dedicated to the LORD.

Now look at the specifics of the Covenant. They promise three 3 things.

10:30

30 We will not give our daughters in marriage to the surrounding peoples and will not take their daughters as wives for our sons.

This is not some ethnic or racial purity thing. This is about compromise. Israel has long history of when they intermarry with Gentiles- they end up worshipping the gods of the pagan nations. Essentially- this is a commitment to not compromise their commitment to worshiping only God. Our

10:31

31 When the surrounding peoples bring merchandise or any kind of grain to sell on the Sabbath day, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or a holy day.

The Sabbath was a way that the people of God trusted not in their own ability to provide for themselves- but to not work or buy or sell one day out of seven was a way to trust in AND enjoy the Lords provision. And they also shared what they had and canceled debts

It was THE command that most set apart Israel from every other nation. It made them a distinct witness to their relationship with God.

10:35 & 10:39b

We will bring the firstfruits of our land and of every fruit tree to the Lord's house year by year...We will not neglect the house of our God.

The last one- they promise to give the first portion of their income to the temple for the purpose of caring for the Levites and temple priests. They promise that they won't let the house of God fall into neglect again.

12:43

On that day they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced because God had given them great joy. The women and children also celebrated, and Jerusalem's rejoicing was heard far away.

You know what's happening here? This is the classic Youth Camp high.

There are tears, confession, a recommitment, a deleting of explicit music and a promise to go to church every Sunday and share the gospel with your classmates.

That is not a bad thing!

They have real joy! They make real sacrifices! Nobody is faking it or pretending.

But in Chapter 13- They get back home, the parents go out of town...Parents go out of town- and its like they completely forgot everything they promised at camp- cuz they throw a huge party and invite the town bully...and they break all the lamps in the house.

This is why we can't have nice things!

13:6

Nehemiah after all his work in Jerusalem- is called back to Persia to his job with the King. He feels good about how he has left them...joyful...serious about their commitment to the LORD...

But he comes back to find all three of the promises they made- now broken.

v 4-5

4 Now before this, the priest Eliashib had been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of our God. He was a relative of Tobiah 5 and had prepared a large room for him where they had previously stored the grain offerings, the frankincense, the articles, and the tenths of grain, new wine, and fresh oil prescribed for the Levites, singers, and gatekeepers, along with the contributions for the priests.

Eliashib's nepitism has welcomed in the very guy who was leading the charge against Israel. All the stuff they collected for Levites and the offerings- gets thrown out and Tobiah- moves in.

So when Dad gets home- Nehemiah returns and sees what is going on- watch what he does.

Nehemiah 13:8-9

I was greatly displeased and threw all of Tobiah's household possessions out of the room. 9 I ordered that the rooms be purified, and I had the articles of the house of God restored there, along with the grain offering and frankincense.

13:10

I also found out that because the portions for the Levites had not been given, each of the Levites and the singers performing the service had gone back to his own field.

the Levites have to go get jobs to make money for food.

So Nehemiah confronts them on their broken promise-

Nehemiah 13:11-12

Therefore, I rebuked the officials, asking, "Why has the house of God been neglected? " I gathered the Levites and singers together and stationed them at their posts. 12 Then all Judah brought a tenth of the grain, new wine, and fresh oil into the storehouses.

Then he utters a prayer- it feels like almost under his breath. Its part frustration...and part sincerity.

13:14

Remember me for this, my God, and don't erase the deeds of faithful love I have done for the house of my God and for its services.

I mean- this is kind of like when Mom walks in the house at the end of a summer day where the kids were at the house all day- they were supposed to fold laundry, load the dishwasher, vacuum the living room and make their beds. Instead she just walks into a mess with none of the stuff done. And as she's cleaning up she offers the same kind of prayer.

"Lord Jesus, you know I've taken care of these kids...JESUS I HAVE TRIED.- now I need you to help me not to kill them! DEMETRIUS! KEVIN! WHATCHALL BEEN DOIN ALL DAY? Y'all better have cleaned THAT TOILET!"

They broke their promise to not neglect the house of God...and handed the keys to the house over to the one trying to stop the house of God from being rebuilt in the first place.

But wait...there's more

v 15-16

15 At that time I saw people in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath. They were also bringing in stores of grain and loading them on donkeys, along with wine, grapes, and figs. All kinds of goods were being brought to Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. So I warned them against selling food on that day. 16 The Tyrians living there were importing fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them on the Sabbath to the people of Judah in Jerusalem.

There goes the promise to set the Sabbath apart as holy! They fall right back into the same pattern of looking just like the surrounding culture. The Tyrians...not GOD are setting the agenda for the people of Judah.

Nehemiah's response?

v 17

I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil you are doing — profaning the Sabbath day? 18 Didn't your ancestors do the same, so that our God brought all this disaster on us and on this city? And now you are rekindling his anger against Israel by profaning the Sabbath! "

Do y'all never learn?

So Nehemiah, once again, gets them back on track with honoring the Sabbath day...and watch this

v 20-22a

Once or twice the merchants and those who sell all kinds of goods camped outside Jerusalem, 21 but I warned them, "Why are you camping in front of the wall? If you do it again, I'll use force against you." After that they did not come again on the Sabbath. 22 Then I instructed the Levites to purify themselves and guard the city gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy.

He gives the CLASSIC dad line. DO IT ONE MORE TIME AND SEE IF I DON'T PULL THIS CAR OVER AND GIVE YALL A WHOOPIN right out here in the open so everyone can see!

Nehemiah has come to kick butt and chew bubble gum...and he's all out of bubble gum! And he prays another one of these little under-the-breath prayers...

v 22b

Remember me for this also, my God, and look on me with compassion according to the abundance of your faithful love.

Oh Lord Jesus! I swear I am TRYING!

Then...then...finally they push Nehemiah over the edge when they break the last promise.

v 23-25

3 In those days I also saw Jews who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. 24 Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples but could not speak Hebrew. 25 I rebuked them, cursed them, beat some of their men, and pulled out their hair. I forced them to take an oath before God and said, "You must not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take their daughters as wives for your sons or yourselves!"

After the intermarrying...Nehemiah curses them, beats up some of the men and pulls out some of their hair.

Then he FORCES them to re-promise to be good...like he's holding their head over the toilet and gonna give them a swirly if they don't say the promise... or he's twisting their arm behind their back until they say the phrase that pays.

He is understandably frustrated...after all Israel is just repeating what King Solomon did that lost him the kingdom. He had it all going for him and he threw it all away because he started worshipping other gods when he married a bunch of women that didn't know HIS GOD.

v 26-27

Didn't King Solomon of Israel sin in matters like this? There was not a king like him among many nations. He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel, yet foreign women drew him into sin. 27 Why then should we hear about you doing all this terrible evil and acting unfaithfully against our God by marrying foreign women?"

then there is one more frustrating thing that happens.

v 28

28 Even one of the sons of Jehoiada, son of the high priest Eliashib, had become a son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite. So I drove him away from me.

Not only has Tobiah moved in...but the priest son has married Sanballat's daughter! Sanballat! the guy who along with Tobiah severely ridiculed the Jews and wanted Nehemiah killed!

I'm not sure what the driving away looked like...but it probably involved Nehemiah chasing Eliashab's son down the Jerusalem cracking a whip... maybe the boy was hiding behind a dumpster or something and Nehemiah was like "Come on out and get whats coming to you!"

At the end of the book- Nehemiah prays one last prayer...but its not just a prayer for him this time...Its a prayer for God's judgment on those who led in this foolishness and sin.

v 29 & 31b

Remember them, my God, for defiling the priesthood as well as the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.

Remember me, my God, with favor.

And he essentially finishes with this prayer...LORD I TRIED...At least bless me.

And that is the strange...messy..confusing ending to the book of Nehemiah.

In short- I can picture Nehemiah sitting down at the end of this day praying this prayer looking exactly like...

At Eternitys Gate Painting

...this.

And the same order of questions come up for Nehemiah as they do for Van Gogh...and for the man in this painting.

Is this a frustrated old man lost in his grief and anger....or is this a man so connected to God himself that even at his lowest- he feels God's nearness?

And Nehemiah is experiencing some of the same frustrations with Judah that Van Gogh did with the church. For the people that they claim to be- full of promises- they sure don't act like it.

I want you to bring something to mind as you look at this picture. Just keep your eyes on the Old Sorrowing Man at Eternity's Gate.

Have you ever felt this way about anyone? Someone you have prayed for... over and over and over... served, loved...and they just keep going back to the same self-destructive sins.

Mom or Dad. A sibling. A friend. A child. a grandchild.

Is it alcohol addiction? Pornography? A hurtful commitment to a political party that has fractured the family? Is there deep anger that simply isn't dealt with? A trail of broken relationships- a dogged refusal to take responsibility?

What puts you in this chair for the people you love?

Does it ever feel like you have...wasted your life...wasted all your efforts ... and you are running out of time?

Sometimes...does it feel like you can hardly tell the difference yourself between Sorrowing in despair...or Praying at Eternity's Gate.

I feel that. And I have good news for you.

Nothing...no prayer...no effort to reform or change...nothing done in faith in God is ever lost.. It will all be transformed into something beautiful.

I want to show three things we learn from this text... before I show you one more thing about Vincent van Gogh.

1) Revival is exciting, but maturing is messy.

We have been praying...and continue to pray for revival to happen in our church and our city- repentance and faith on the scale that it happens in Jerusalem.

And often revival is accompanied by high emotions. It happened in Jerusalem. People wept for their sins. They were hungry for the Word of the Lord... and none of that is regrettable.

It often happens to people when they first begin following Jesus. In fact people often describe a new convert as "On Fire for Jesus". Now think about someone who is on fire. When you are on fire...you aren't thinking about anything other than the fact that you are on fire.

But what happens when you get back from the retreat? What happens when ordinary life sneaks up on you?

- When you graph something that's exhibiting proportionately incremental growth, you end up with a line starts in the bottom left and keeps growing to the upper right.
 - Its neat.
 - Its clean.
 - ...but that works for graphing. Not so much for people.
- People change is less like a graph and more like spaghetti.
- You know, when you put a spaghetti noodle on a plate, its all squiggles. Its messy.
- And then when a noodle gets called upward, everybody gets messy...slinging sauce everywhere.
- Christians, especially, have tried to pigeon hole change into something you can graph...instead of something that ends up getting a lot of people messy.
- We say things like "Everyday I'm becoming more like Jesus."
- Well, for some Christians, if you were better today than you were yesterday, thank God I didn't run into you yesterday!
- The Bible is replete with examples of messy change.
 - Take **Jonah**. You might remember him as the guy who was swallowed by a big fish.
 - The book of Jonah starts with Jonah hating people and resisting God...then he has a repentant moment where we all say "Look at that. Jonah repents and now wants to do things Gods way." That's graph paper.
 - But then the book ends with him on hill baking in the sun telling God how much he still hates the same people.
 - Meanwhile, the people he hates have repented.
 - Problem is, the Ninevites, (the ones that repented when Jonah preached to them) eventually walked away from it all, and Jonah, because he wrote his story down...seems to have come back to love God and love the people he used to hate.
 - That's spaghetti
 - Or how about **Peter**. The famous Apostle.
 - Jesus said "Peter, I'm going to build my church on your confession of me as Lord."

- Then, in the same paragraph, Jesus calls Peter the devil.
 - Peter writes a couple of NT books, but then his buddy Paul has to get on to him for being a racist.
- Spaghetti.
- Speaking of **Paul**.
 - He Killed Christians.
 - But then planted churches.
 - Wrote half of the New Testament.
 - sounds kind of like a graph to me.
 - But wait,
 - Paul had a real honest moment in Romans 7 where he tells us, "I keep doing stuff I don't want to do, and I'm not doing the stuff I do want to do. WHAT'S Wrong with me?"
 - He said that WHILE HE WAS WRITING THE BIBLE under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
 - Spaghetti. With extra sauce.
- The spaghetti goes on and on.
 - Abraham has a "salvation" moment, then puts his wife at risk by lying to save himself. Then he sleeps with his servant.
 - Spaghetti.
 - David dances under the influence of the Spirit of God, then sleeps with his friends' wife WHILE his friend is out fighting for his country, then David has him killed...spaghetti.
 - It's a mess.
- The last chapter of Nehemiah foregoes the neat, categorical, stereotypical bow on the end of the story...and gives us a dose of a REAL SPAGHETTI MESS.

Nehemiah finds Tobiah in the Temple. This is like Darth Vader getting a bed on the Millennium Falcon...or an Orc moving into to Frodo's old place in the shire. or Vanilla Ice opening for Nickelback at the Ryman.

Look- everything that it seemed like the people of Judah were going to do... they compromised on.

But- to be fair...Nehemiah is pretty messy in this chapter too.

Throwing furniture out on the lawn, and cursing and pulling hair out while beating people isn't exactly righteous behavior.

Yes Jesus turned over tables in the temple...but the book of James in the NT says "The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God."

And there are complicated parts of Nehemiah's actions that at the very least deserve some thinking through on his part.

Even Nehemiah ends up messy.

City Church- you know what that means? YES- we will keep praying for revival. YES- we want people to be on fire for Jesus...

AND It ALSO means that for us to mature together- we should expect it to be messy. And that takes patience.

It takes seeing the log in your own eye and removing it so you can remove the speck from your brother or sisters eye.

It takes a community that recognizes our growth is not always going to be up and to the right.

And that's why in our 6 pillars of what it means to be a Covenant member at this church we say.

Don't quit when it gets difficult. That's when you'll grow.

Revival is going to be beautifully awesome. I'm still asking God to move among us in a way that is undeniably Him and I'm going to be super excited about it....as awesome as that spiritual high will be....

Deep Maturing is actually happening in the moments when we persevere through each others messiness and sin together. When we don't write each other off too quickly. We often think about NOT QUITTING as resisting outside pressure...but the truth is..the inside difficulty may be worse.

2) External persecution hurts, but internal compromise kills.

How in the world did Israel get so quickly from a revival... to the point they have gone back on every promise they made?

You read the first 7 chapters of this book- It looks like Nehemiah is a story of a beatdown people who just can't persevere through external persecution and attacks. And, in a lot of ways- thats right!

Tobiah and Sanballat are external enemies that come after the people of Judah over and over through insults and murderous plots.

But at the end of this book, we learn something key...it is Israel's own willingness to make small compromises that end up them up in place where we aren't sure if they'll make it.

Think about it. This whole debacle started when Eliashab let Tobiah move into the Levites store room. Tobiah was a relative of Eliashab...undoubtedly felt some pressure. Maybe there was a little emotional manipulation on Tobiah's part- Come on, I'm family! I know I said some terrible things but you can't turn your back on family!

"Yeah- and you can't just use these streets as your own personal race track, Tobiah Diesel!"

but fine...I'll clear out a store room for you. hopefully nobody will notice."

And there is a domino effect to Eliashab's choice-

v 28

Eliashab saw his father make a compromise- and so he thinks its not a big deal to marry one of Sanballat's daughters.

I can picture the conversation now between Eliashab and his son.

Reminds me of an old 1987 "Just say no to drugs" commercial.

"Son- you married a Horonite? Sanballat's daughter? WHO TAUGHT YOU TO DO THIS STUFF?"

in his super angsty teenager voice

"YOU ALRIGHT! I LEARNED IT BY WATCHING YOU!"

Back to 2)

Parents- your sin will trickle down to your children. Your small compromises will be noticed and taken up by your kids.

What you prioritize- your children will learn.

Call somebody an idiot in traffic- your son will soon be saying the same thing?

Make every practice and ball game for your daughter's softball team but make it to the worship gathering 2x a month- listen- you can list all the reasoning you want- but your kids are absorbing your choices- your compromises- and they are building a understanding of the world with it.

Compromise is a seed that multiplies.

Your materialism. Your complaining and discontent. Your obsession with your self-image. Your demanding others respect while you disrespect them.

What is neglected in one generation will be abandoned by the next.

And that doesn't just apply to the nuclear family- but even more so to the family of God.

So think for a moment? What are you compromising on? What have you made excuses about for your own life- that you would never advise your friends or kids or your friends' kids to do.

External persecution won't touch the family of God- but internal compromise will kill it.

3) Good Confrontation is correction with connection.

When Nehemiah comes back to Jerusalem the 2nd time, he could have easily seen Tobiah in the Storeroom- and Eliashab's son married to Sanballat's daughter...and Chick Fit A open on a sunday with a line around the building...and just said...

"You know what- that's it. I already did this once. I already gave years of my life helping these ingrates. Forget it. My life was 10 times better back in the Persian capital."

But that's not what he does. Instead- he stays connected. (If you ask some of the guys he beat up...maybe TOO connected.)

He doesn't leave! Its kind of like he helped them build a domino train...but just before they got the last piece put in, somebody tripped and knocked it over.

At that point its so much easier to walk away. But Nehemiah- too his credit- stays. He starts setting the dominos back up.

But he doesn't just stay connected- He also commits himself to correction.

- **and that correction always has 2 parts to it.**
- Take a look at how Nehemiah does it.
- First, He confronts.
- **V 11**
 - When he found out they weren't paying the Levites, he got the leaders together and said, "Why have I found the house of the Lord like this?"
- **V 15**
 - When he found the people violating the Sabbath because of their lack of trust in God, he warned them.
- **V 17**
 - Then he went to the leaders and said, "What's going on? What you are doing is evil."
- And then of course, you have the time when he was slapping folks and pulling their hair out. Which again...you should NOT do.

Back to 2)

- But here's the point.
 - We live in a time where many of us believe that patience is passivity. That confrontation only happens when people lose their cool, or lose perspective.
 - But I'm telling right now, there's a lot more impatience going on in passivity than there is patience.
 - See, when I stereotype people. When I see them as one dimensional...I don't confront. Because confrontation is pointless. Instead, I quietly walk away. I disconnect.
 - I try and get myself out of harm's way, and then as I watch that person that I'm supposed to love self-destruct, I have my little private side conversations about them, feigning my care for them in some dressed up "prayer-request."
 - The truth is, I hated them all along. Because I never saw them as someone the Lord could change. Which means...I was looking at God the wrong way the whole time. As some powerless idea....instead of a REAL person that loves and created that person in his image....and made a way that they could change.

- So, before we jump all over Nehemiah for doling out the beatings here (which again, you should NOT do)...lets be honest...the brother was trying to set them straight....and I'd rather him sin boldly in love....than passively walk away and secretly hate them.

- **That's loving confrontation.**

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- But that's not all Nehemiah does.
- He also **disciplines. That's the second part of Correction.**
 - Now, for most of us, when we hear the word discipline, we think punishment.
- But that's not what Nehemiah is doing here.
- See, punishment looks to your past and doles out repercussions for your past actions.
- Its PUNITIVE. Do the crime, Do the time.
- **Punishment looks at where you were yesterday, and makes you pay for it today.**
- But discipline doesn't look backwards. It doesn't look to equalize your past by making you pay a penance.
- **Discipline looks at where you are today...in all your messiness... and does what it takes to make you who you need to be tomorrow.**
- So, for **example**: When my kids were little. When they did the wrong thing. My goal was not to "give them what they have coming to them."
- Instead, I think about how messy they are in the moment, I confront them... and give them a correction.
- Parents, if you spank, and sometimes keva and I did, there is a colossal difference between rising up in anger and saying "THAT's IT! You are gonna get it now!"
- And looking patiently in your kids eyes and saying "Hey, daddy loves you. Momma loves you. And so in all your messiness right now, I need you to understand the severity of sin, how it breaks, how it hurts, how it echoes into all your relationships...how it isolates you from people...and to do that, I'm going to give you a physical representation of that. Something your bottom will understand probably before your soul will."

- ...but I never stopped there. I also have a plan for them. A plan for them to flourish. I've got my eye on their tomorrow more than their yesterday.
 - So, I'm reading scripture with them. I'm having conversations with them about choices they are making. I have chores for them to do to teach them a work ethic in their laziness.
 - When they sin, I'm not only letting them know how sin breaks us, but how God heals us.
- Watch Nehemiah do this.
- **v 12-13**
 - See, he doesn't just confront them about not providing for the Levites, he set them up with trustworthy people who would help them follow through with their promise
- **v 19**
 - He doesn't just tell them to stop working on the Sabbath, he helps them establish a new pattern...new habits...so that they don't quickly fall back into their past sins.
- **v 30-31**
 - And he doesn't just say, "stop all your evil ways!"
 - He provides them with everything they need to continue the work of temple so they are constantly reminded of God's faithfulness, his love and his patience for them.

Back to 2)

- Listen, City Church is committed to being a church in the mess. We believe in Gospel change for Broken People...on purpose.
- We don't ever expect people to come in cleaned up...pastors included.
- Every week I step up in front of you with sinful spaghetti sauce splattered all over my face.
- Every week you all sit and listen with the same sauce.
- ...and that's exactly why we need each other.
- We need to be Nehemiah to one another to mature together.
- Lovingly confronting. Asking "Have you neglected the house of the Lord?"
- We need people helping us to see whether or not the mess in our lives is a normal part of growing up...or if we are intentionally compromising.

- City Church....we NEED each other. We need each other to be disciplined. To help each other set up patterns in our lives that are helping us grow into who God wants us to be.
 - Read the Bible with someone.
 - Go for a walk with someone and talk about who you are, and who God is, and how messy the whole thing is. Ask for help.
 - But that never happens if we shut ourselves off from one another and convince ourselves that walking with God is just listening to Sermons.
 - Israel needed Nehemiah, to patiently confront and lovingly discipline.
 - God has given us each other to do the same.

Transition: but even more importantly...he's given us himself.

Eternity's Gate Pic

I want to finish today by going back to van Gogh.

van Gogh- just like his painting of a sorrowing old man at eternity's gate, was a complicated and confusing character.

Just like Nehemiah at the end of this book.

There is an old episode of Dr. Who...which is a British television show about people who travel through time to fix stuff...in history.

Well- in this old episode from 2010- the Dr. and his assistant go back in time to help Vincent van Gogh.

And they bring him to (what was then) present day. They take him to a museum...and they walk him into the van Gogh exhibit.

(you really need to watch this scene on Youtube. along with the final scene of 2011 film, Warrior- its one of my go to videos I watch when I need a boost of LOVE IS REAL AND MY GOD IS AWESOME AND NOW IM GOING TO SHED TEARS OF JOY ABOUT IT"- If you don't have that category of YouTube video- GET IT!)

So they walk Vincent into the gallery- and position him behind the curator. Then the Dr. asks the curator a question.

Where do you think Van Gogh rates in the history of art?

With van Gogh just behind him listening in...without the curator- of course- knowing that van Gogh is right behind him... he says.

To me, Van Gogh is the finest painter of them all. Certainly, the most popular great painter of all time, the most beloved. His command of color, the most magnificent. He transformed the pain of his tormented life into ecstatic beauty.

Pain is easy to portray, but to use your passion and pain to portray the ecstasy and joy and magnificence of our world... no one had ever done it before. Perhaps no one ever will again. To my mind, that strange, wild man, who roamed the fields of Provence was not only the world's greatest artist, but also one of the greatest men who ever lived.

The doctor then notices Vincent weeping. And quickly runs to his side and asks, 'Vincent, I'm sorry...Is it too much too much?'

Vincent replies "No. They are tears of joy."

Then he walks right up to the museum curator and kisses him repeatedly on the cheek. and says "Thank you, sir. Thank you."

Eternity's gate pic

Vincent had no idea the way God had used his life and work to touch so many people. To transform pain into beauty and joy.

He believed only what he thought he could see...that he was a failure who amounted to nothing...an old sorrowing man that killed himself.

If only he could have had a time machine. If only he would have realized that God draws straight line with crooked sticks. If only he would have believed that the gospel changes broken people.

He could have seen this painting less "Sorrowing old man" and more "at Eternity's gate"

The Cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a time machine.

Because they have the power to transport you to a beautiful future- where you can see that all the suffering you have been through...all the mistakes you have made...all the compromises and sin you have given into...that God transformed it all.

To borrow and adapt a line from that Dr. Who episode-

Pain is easy to portray, but Jesus used his passion and pain to portray the ecstasy and joy and magnificence of our LORD... no one had ever done it before...and will never do it again.

On the cross, Jesus was cut off...he willingly gave himself up to death...he became sin for you...so that you could become the righteousness of God.

In other words- all of your failure, all of your compromise was put on Jesus... and you were given his clean record of perfection. You are now forgiven... forever...and welcomed into the family of God. Jesus transforms you from the sorrowing man to entering eternity's gate.

And the writer of Hebrews shows us- that when we see into the future- by looking at christ crucified and resurrected- forgiving us and enjoying us as his brothers and sisters...when we know that our way home is already marked out for us and that we can't fail to get there...it completely changes how we live in the present.

Just like van Gogh- if he were transported back after seeing that Exhibit and hearing the testimony of the curator- HE WOULD NOT HAVE KILLED HIMSELF IN DESPAIR- he would have kept painting for the glory of God even though no one bought anything. He would have a transcendent purpose that not even the worst circumstances in his life could have touched.

Hebrews 12:1-3

Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every hindrance and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us,

2 keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

3 For consider him who endured such hostility from sinners against himself, so that you won't grow weary and give up.

Jesus is the sorrowing man on the cross, and he opened eternity's gate in his resurrection. Keep your eyes there.

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