**The life of Watchman Nee**

**2. Learning to walk**

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In the early part of his life, the famous Chinese Christian leader Watchman Nee was learning what it meant to be seated with Christ (Ephesians 2:6). His middle years were given to Christian service and to walking worthily of the gospel (Ephesians 4:1,17, 5:2,8,15).

Throughout the Bible ‘walking’ is a metaphor for Christian life and conduct. Nee did not envisage a life of passivity, but of a step-by-step obedience to the will of God. He himself was very active in ministry, and in *Sit, Walk, Stand* he taught that the Christian life must be worked out in practical ways, as described in the middle chapters of Ephesians. ‘Sitting describes our position with Christ in the heavenlies,’ he wrote. ‘Walking is the practical out-working of that heavenly position here on earth. Unless we bring heavenliness into our dwellings and offices, our shops and kitchens, and practise it there, it will be without meaning.’

The great vision that fired his own heart was for the gospel to reach the whole of China. He taught much about the inner life but was always concerned with evangelism, and travelled extensively throughout the country to preach the good news.

Nee quickly saw the potential of literature to reach this goal, and moved to Shanghai in 1927 to begin a publishing ministry - producing a teaching magazine, along with booklets and tracts based on his preaching. These proved to be both popular and effective in spreading the Christian message because his style was simple and uncomplicated. The only book he actually authored - *The Spiritual Man* - was published at this time. The many other books that bear his name were later transcriptions of his spoken messages.

Nee longed to see a local church operating on the principles of the New Testament, and in Shanghai he met others with the same desire. They began meeting together in a ‘house’ fellowship, free of the trappings of more organised religion. They rejected the need for ordained clergy, concentrating instead on developing the gifts of lay people. They provided their own training conferences for emerging leaders, and attracted many able men to their ranks, so that the movement (nicknamed *The Little Flock*) grew quickly. They wanted to see an indigenous, Chinese expression of Christianity distinct from that associated with the colonial powers.

The fact that none of the leaders were paid, and that believers were willing to use their homes as meeting places, meant that the movement could expand easily into other parts of the country. As people were transferred in their jobs, new centres for witness were opened up. Some moved voluntarily, taking jobs that allowed them to be involved in ministry as well (many chose to be barbers!). Soon there were more than two hundred such workers.

Nee was an enthusiastic leader, influencing many others, but not always in good health. He contracted tuberculosis (TB) and had to step back to convalesce, having almost died. Although he recovered, he continued to suffer bouts of the disease. Occasionally too he was afflicted with depression, especially when he found himself the subject of hostile criticism from fellow believers. All of this meant that he rejected extreme forms of the victorious life teaching, reminding his followers that even the apostle Paul ‘despaired of life itself’ , and that ‘we have this treasure in earthen vessels.’ (2Corinthians 1:7, 4:7). He often said, ‘To keep our hand on the plough while wiping away our tears – that is Christianity.’

As his ministry grew, and his writings circulated, so his reputation increased. He came into contact with some of the leaders of the Brethren assemblies in London, and visited England in 1933 at their request. While they had much in common, Nee was too ‘open’ in his fellowship with other Christians and the links petered out. He returned to Britain again in 1938 to speak at the Keswick Convention, and then to travel in Western Europe. His eloquent ministry and gracious manner endeared him to many.

Nee was never satisfied with his experience of God, and hungered for more. He was conscious, for example, that he often fought a battle with his temper. He experienced personal renewal through the realisation that everything we need is found in Christ ‘who has become for us wisdom from God – that is our righteousness, holiness and redemption.’ (1Corinthians 1:29) The theme of brokenness as a precursor to Divine blessing became prominent in his teaching, and while he was open to the emphasis on revival and the work of the Spirit, he felt that some revival methods worked like spiritual opium – addiction to them required an ever-increased dosage.

In early 1942 Nee stepped aside from his ministry to join his brother in establishing a pharmaceutical company. Ostensibly this was to help finance more workers, but his fellow leaders were aghast, and withdrew fellowship from him. Rumours circulated as to why Nee took this course of action but there was no evidence of any wrongdoing on his part. Later he admitted to a certain ‘boredom’ in ministry, perhaps what medieval theologians called the sin of ‘accidie’ or spiritual sluggishness. Whatever the cause, it took him some time to recover, but in 1948 he made a full confession over his failings and was restored to fellowship in the Little Flock.

He returned to ministry wiser and stronger, and with an increased output in his writings. Perhaps through the trial God had been preparing him for an even greater challenge that awaited him when the Communist Party began to gain power in China in 1949. Having learned to walk in the way of Christ he would soon be called to learn to stand his ground against those who wanted to eliminate Christianity altogether, and who would threaten his very life.

For Reflection

How does Watchman Nee’s life help you understand the metaphor of ‘walking’ as a picture of the Christian life?

Consider prayerfully his watchword: ‘To keep our hand on the plough while wiping away our tears – that is Christianity.’

What does Nee’s experience of failure and recovery say to you in your own walk with God?

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