

Running from the Past

From chapter 3 (“Leaving Hurts—and Home”) of Penny Maxwell’s new book, *Setting Broken Bones*

At some point Mom developed a medical condition, and it was serious. After moving to Bon Air, we had begun attending church, and the leaders there told Mom it was God’s will for her to have this condition. If she died, she died. Somehow whatever happened to people was God’s will and could not be avoided, according to their view.

Mom got tired of hearing that and began searching for a place that actually believed God could heal. She found a new kind of church for us—a large Spirit-filled church. Gone were the hymns and the organ. This place had a rock-style band, overhead projectors, and loud, upbeat music. People really seemed to believe and live what they sang and preached. Mom took us there week after week, though our stepfather wasn’t enthusiastic about attending.

I plugged into the youth group, though in my snobby view the kids there weren’t very cool. But I was hearing about a powerful God, and the teaching started to sink in.

By this time, I had seen enough of the world to form the opinion that Mom was nuts. As great as it was that she no longer drank, smoked, and cussed the way I remembered her doing when I was younger, she developed a set of sanctified vices including perfectionism and pride that now ruled the household. Overnight, Mom seemed to become a version of the model Christian woman. I always felt she made strong judgments about how unholy and unrighteous other people were and how no one could hear God the way she could. Of course I wanted my mom to hear from God; I just wanted her to realize that other people did too. And the outbursts and attacks she directed toward me never went away but now took on a holy veneer.

The restrictions she placed on us became religious rather than just random. For example, I was not allowed to attend my high school baccalaureate because it was held in a Baptist church and in her view they were not as holy as she was. My Jewish friend wasn't allowed to park his car in our driveway or come into our house. If I wanted to hang out with him, I had to walk down the street, and he would pick me up.

This new set of rules, combined with my own desire to be independent from all of it, drove me to do as much as I could outside our house. I often quipped that we didn't have a home; we had a mausoleum.

Healing Away From Home

I had moved out before to attend college at Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Being away from home for long stretches of time, free from the daily threats of physical attack and psychological manipulation, I began to see and think clearly for the first time. At some point I realized I was becoming a healthier person. I didn't wake up fearful except about the outcomes of my test scores. I had to find God for myself more than ever and decide how I wanted to live. Nobody was over my shoulder telling me how to behave.

"This feels a whole lot different, and I like it," I thought.

My brother was at ORU as well, though we didn't overlap much socially. I knew nobody when I arrived, and I didn't feel particularly needy for friends. I was too busy exploring the novel feeling of personal freedom.

After one year I had this urge to move back to Richmond to consider if I wanted to return to ORU or take another path. I enrolled in classes at a local college there, moved back home, and began trying to find another place to live right away. The plan was to return to ORU in January if I hadn't made other plans.

I started attending our church again, and it meant more to me now. Though I was a pretty faithful person, my lifestyle still had some gaps in it. I didn't party, but I hung around people who did. I actually considered it incredibly amazing that I never did drugs or smoked or slept around, considering the heritage my mother and father had given to me. That said, I still liked being social, and one night I went with a couple of friends to a frat party near the local college campus. I was not a drinker, but I wanted to meet other people my age, and that night I met a guy named Troy Maxwell.

Troy was engaging, fun, and most definitely not saved. I don't think he knew one thing about the Bible or Jesus. But he was interesting to talk to, and he was definitely interested in me, though a relationship was the last thing I was looking for. I let him know I was in a place in my life where I had seen a lot of nightmare marriages and didn't want one of my own. I'd also had a high school boyfriend for a while, and that did not work out well. I was not interested in going down that path again, though plenty of guys wanted to date me—Troy chief among them.

Finally Troy said, "Hey, what are all the walls for? Why are you so adamant about us not being in a relationship?"

"Because you're not on fire for God," I blurted out.

"I don't even know what that means," he said truthfully. "Tell me. Maybe I could be. If you're asking me to go to church, I'll do that."

I had meant it to chase him away, but he got even more curious about this being "on fire for God," and he fulfilled his word by attending church with me. His first time there, his life dramatically changed. He raised his hand and gave his life to Jesus, and it was real.

Troy started going to church more than I did. He went even when I didn't. Then he started correcting my behaviors. "Why

do you listen to that music? Why do you hang out with those people?" Then the clincher: "Why were you even at the party where I met you?"

Troy, by all evidence, was getting on fire for God, and I was amazed. For several months I simply sat back and watched his pursuit. His radical change had an effect on me, and things started to shift about my future.

Troy and I became very involved in the church's youth ministry as youth leaders. We basically treated it like a second job, even though the pastor of the church didn't believe in paying anybody. Around this time, I started noticing things about myself that weren't as whole as I wanted them to be, but I was always able to say, "I'm not as broken as that other person." I chose the worst examples around me, compared myself with them, and came out looking OK. In any case, there was no urgency to dive into the pain. Life was exciting; Troy was fun. We were becoming serious about each other and about God—so why go into the dark places? I just knew I wanted to serve God. I didn't know what that looked like or how to walk that out, but the desire was growing within me for a brand-new path.

Staying In Richmond

Plans to return to ORU went away after I met Troy. Initially even my mom loved him. Then, as it became clear that Troy and I gained strength from each other and weren't going to be controlled, she seemed to turn on him.

"Why don't you like him?" I asked her. "What has he done to you?"

"I think he's faking this whole Christian thing," I remember her saying, and then she actually spoke these words: "I watched him eat a sandwich, and he didn't even pray over it."

I felt her dislike was deeper than that. Troy's family came

from poverty. His dad was a full-blown alcoholic and had lost all their money. His mom was a flower child with a purple shag rug and a pot-smoking habit.

“Are we going to judge him based on his parents? Because I certainly wouldn’t want him to judge me based on my parents,” I challenged her.

When engagement entered the discussion, Mom made it clear she would have no part in our wedding. I was far from heartbroken.

We got engaged Easter Sunday 1992. A couple of months later Mom came back with her tail tucked between her legs and said she and my stepdad wanted to pay for the wedding. I couldn’t understand why at the time, but I can only assume that it was her way of keeping up appearances. I suppose our getting married in a back room of a church messed up her high-society ambitions, and she couldn’t bear that.

I was too naive to realize that letting them pay for it also gave them a sense of control over what happened that day. I’ll never forget during the reception when the bandleader stepped to the mic and said, “I want to read a statement on behalf of Penny.”

“What?” I thought. “I didn’t write anything.”

He continued, “Penny always had a dream of having a wedding where her father gave her away with one last dance. This is the song that Penny wanted.”

“OK, this is ridiculous,” I thought. My mother had created an image of some nonexistent relationship and was now playing it out publicly. But I was wise this time: I took my brother’s previous advice and just went with it. My stepdad came out to the dance floor and took my hand, and we danced. Then he turned me over to Troy.

With that I was free of them. Troy and I had a new life in

front of us. Whatever it looked like, it wouldn't look anything like my past.

Little did we realize that all the broken bones we were bringing into our marriage would need to be healed in the years to come. {eoa}

Read articles like this one and other Spirit-led content in our new platform, CHARISMA PLUS.