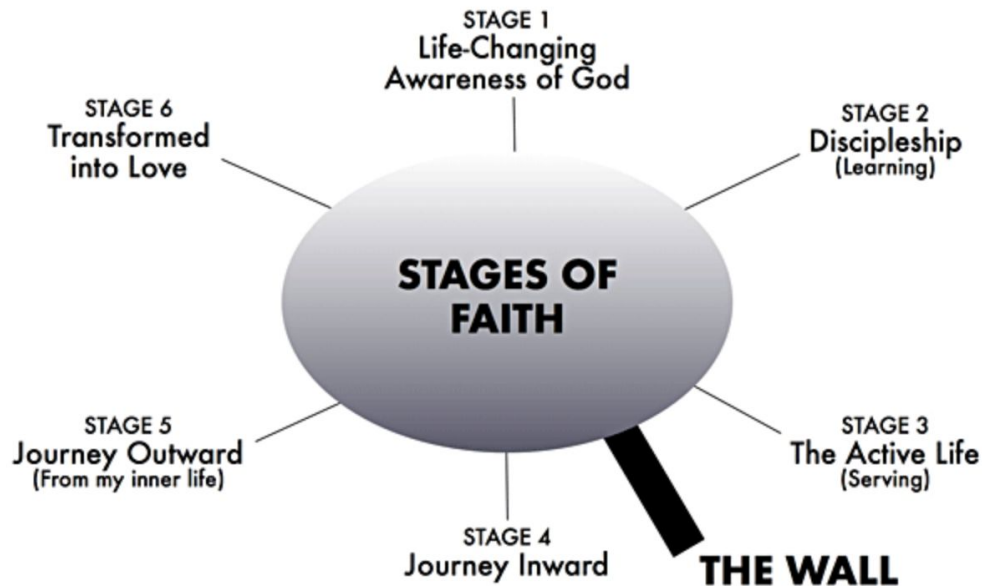


The Wall - Stages of Faith

taken from the book "Emotionally Healthy Spirituality"



Note that each Stage builds naturally upon the other. In the physical world, babies must grow into young children and then into teenagers who become adult men and women. In a similar way, spiritually, each stage builds on the ones that go before it.

An important difference, however, is that we can stagnate very easily at a certain stage and choose not to move forward in our journeys with Christ. We refuse to trust God into this unknown, mysterious place.

Stage 1: Life-Changing Awareness of God — This stage, whether in childhood or adulthood, is the beginning of our journey with Christ as we become aware of his reality. We realize our need for mercy and begin our relationship with him.

Stage 2: Discipleship — This stage is characterized by learning about God and what it means to be a follower of Christ. We become part of a Christian community and begin to get rooted in the disciplines of the faith.

Stage 3: The Active Life — This is described as the “doing” stage. We get involved, actively working for God, serving him and his people. We take responsibility by bringing our unique talents and gifts to serve Christ and others.

Stage 4: The Wall and the Journey Inward — Notice that the Wall and the Inward Journey are closely related. The Wall drives us into an Inward Journey. In some cases people feel compelled to move into an Inward Journey that eventually leads them to the Wall. It has been said that perhaps 85% of believers do not get through the Wall. Often our image of God doesn't allow for such a difficult experience.

Stage 5: The Journey Outward — Having passed through the crisis of faith and the intense inner journeywork necessary to go through the Wall, we begin once again to move outward to “do” for God. We may do some of the same active external things we did before (e.g., give leadership, serve, and initiate acts of mercy towards others). The difference is that now we give out of a new, grounded center of ourselves in God.

Stage 6: Transformed by Love — God's goal, in the language of John Wesley, is that we be made perfect in love, that Christ's love becomes our love both toward God and others. We realize love truly is the beginning and the end. By this stage, the perfect love of God has driven out all fear (see 1 John 4:18). And the whole of our spiritual lives is finally about surrender and obedience to God's perfect will.

For most of us the Wall appears through a crisis that turns our world upside down. It comes, perhaps, through a divorce, a job loss, the death of a close friend or family member, a cancer diagnosis, a disillusioning church experience, a betrayal, a shattered dream, a wayward child, a car accident, an inability to get pregnant, a deep desire to marry that remains unfulfilled, a dryness or loss of joy in our relationship with God. We question ourselves, God, the church.

We discover for the first time that our faith does not appear to “work.” We have more questions than answers as the very foundation of our faith feels like it is on the line. We don't know where God is, what he is doing, where he is going, how he is getting us there, or when this will be over.

On a certain level it is correct to say that Walls come to us in various ways throughout our lifetimes. It is not simply a one-time event that we pass through and get beyond. It appears to be something we return to as part of our on-going relationship with God.

Regardless of how we get there, every follower of Jesus at some point will confront the Wall.

The best way to understand the dynamics of the Wall is to examine the classic work of St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, written over 500 years ago. He described the journey in three phases: beginners, progressives, and perfect. To move out of the beginning stage, he argued, required the receiving of God's gift of the dark night, or the Wall. This is the "ordinary way" we grow in Christ. A failure to understand this is one of the major reasons many start out well in their journeys but do not finish.

How do we know we are in "the dark night"? Our good feelings of God's presence evaporate. We feel the door of heaven has been shut as we pray. Darkness, helplessness, weariness, a sense of failure or defeat, barrenness, emptiness, dryness descends upon us. The Christian disciplines that have served us up to this time "no longer work." We can't see what God is doing and see little visible fruit in our lives.

This is God's way of rewiring and "purging our affections and passions". He does this so we might delight in his love and enter into a richer, fuller communion with him. God wants to communicate to us his true sweetness and love. He longs that we might know His true peace and rest.

To get there, however, false layers and our unhealthy attachments inside us must be burned away. Only then will we be able to actually taste and see that the Lord is good. Only then will we actually surrender to His will and not our own.

At the Wall we learn what true faith is- trusting God even when we don't feel Him.

We may hate Walls, but they are God's gifts to us.

It can be difficult to discern precisely when we began the journey through the Wall and when we might actually be on the other side.

Ultimately, God is the One who moves us through the Wall. And with that comes mystery. There is a lot we do not understand about the ways of God. His ways are not ours. Yet there are rich treasures at the Wall. Our image and understanding of God is dramatically transformed. We often have God in a small box. The Wall blows open that box and we begin to see God for the sovereign, mighty, loving, good God that He is.