

JOURNEY THROUGH THE WALL

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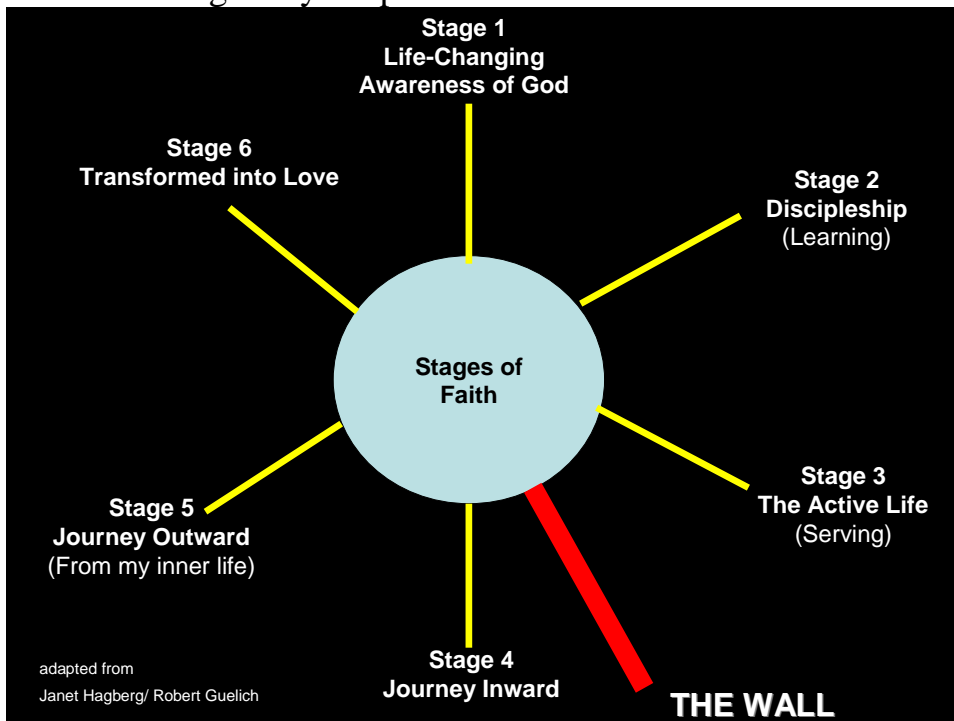
I meet many believers, and churches, today who are stuck at a Wall. Some are discouraged. Others have dropped out altogether. They often fail to see the larger picture of the transforming work God seeks to do in them at their Wall. The disorientation and pain of their present circumstances blinds them. And they feel unsuccessful in finding other companions for such a journey.

What most don't understand is that growth into maturity in Christ, both for us as leaders and for us as church communities, requires us to go through the Wall.

The Wall—Stages of Faith

Throughout church history great men and women have written about the phases of this journey to help us understand the larger picture, or map, of what God is doing in our lives. In *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith*, Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich developed a model that includes the essential place of the Wall in our journeys.¹

The following is my adaptation of their work.



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.

Let's take a look at the stages:

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 rightly been said that the perhaps 85% of evangelicals do not get thru 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, a building permit denied by the community for the fourth time.

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 ongoing relationship with God. We see this, for example, in Abraham waiting at the Wall for twenty-five years for his first child with his wife, Sarah, to be born. Ten to thirteen years later God led him again to another Wall—the sacrificing of that long-awaited son he loved, Isaac, on an altar.

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 five hundred years ago.⁵ 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. He works to free us from unhealthy attachments and idolatries of the world. He longs for an intimate, passionate love relationship with us. God desire is that His will truly be our will.

Failure to understand and surrender to God’s working in us at the Wall often results in great long-term pain and confusion. Receiving the gift of God in the Wall, however, transforms our lives forever.

For a fuller explanation of the Wall, look at *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*,(Nelson, 2006).

