

Emotionally Healthy Spirituality Course

Session 4: JOURNEY THROUGH THE WALL

The image of the Christian life as a journey captures our experience of following Christ like few others. Journeys involve movement, action, stops and starts, detours, delays, and trips into the unknown. It also gives us the long view of the Christian life. Think about it:

- God called Abraham to leave his past life in Ur at the age of 75 to go on a journey.
- God called Moses out of a burning bush to begin a new phase of his journey at the age of 80!
- God called the Israelites to leave Egypt and embark on a 40-year journey of personal transformation in the desert.
- God called David to leave the comforts of his job as a shepherd as a teenager to fight Goliath and take a journey that would lead him to serve as king of Israel.
- Jesus called the 12 disciples to a journey that would change their lives forever.

You are on a journey. So am I.

But it is a truth about the Christian life that at one point or another, you will hit a Wall. By a Wall, I am referring to a season in your faith when you will feel stuck.

Consider the story of a woman named Agnes:

From the time she was a young girl, Agnes believed. Not just believed: she was on fire. She wanted to do great things for God. She said things such as she wanted to "love Jesus as He has never been loved before." Agnes had an undeniable calling. She wrote in her journal that "my soul at present is in perfect peace and joy." She experienced a union with God that was so deep and so continual that it was to her a rapture, ecstasy. She left her home. She became a missionary. She gave him everything.

After a while, however, it seemed as if God abandoned her.

At least that's how it felt to her. She started writing different words in her journal. Words like, "Where is my faith?" She asked. "Deep down there is nothing but emptiness and darkness My God, how painful is this unknown pain ... I have no faith." She struggled to pray. She still worked, still served, still smiled. But she struggled at this Wall that didn't seem to move. This inner darkness continued on, virtually year after year, for nearly 50 years. God seemed absent.

Such was the secret pain of Agnes, who is better known as Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa wrote letters (intended only for her spiritual directors) on the torment of her soul. After her death, they were published to much surprise. These letters stunned people. Some prominent atheists said that Mother Teresa lost faith. Many said she struggled with clinical depression. But spiritually, she hit "a Wall." And as we know today, God was doing a mighty work in and through her.

But I meet many believers today who also are a Wall. Some have even dropped out. They often fail to see the larger picture of the transforming work of what God is seeking to do in them, that this “Wall” is essential to their maturing in Christ and becoming the person God intends. The disorientation and pain of their present circumstances blinds them. 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. **PP 18**

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. 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.

I have experienced at 5-6 major Walls in my life – each of which changed me forever. Let me share just two:

The first was in 1994 when we had a split in one of our congregations. I felt betrayed, outraged. My faith was shaken. Everything in me wanted to quit Christianity. That was the beginning of this whole expanded view of God and Scripture called EHS Today

The second was in 1996 when my marriage with Geri hit a Wall. Our marriage was in deep trouble. God met both of us out of that deep season of pain. Out of the help we went after – we have a marriage today that is so far beyond my dreams. We made a decision to live out of the joy and overflow of our marriage. And equipping and training people to have marriages that point and taste to heaven is the greatest joy of our lives.

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. We see this, for example, in Abraham waiting at the Wall for 25 years for his first child with his wife, Sarah, to be born. He hits another wall when he has to let go of his eldest child –Ishmael. 10-13 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 500 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.

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.

Let me close with 2 thoughts here:

First, there is a difference between Wall and trials. The trials we encounter each day are not the Wall or "the dark night of the soul." Trials are the traffic jams, annoying bosses, delayed airplane departures, car breakdowns, fevers, and barking dogs in the middle of the night.

James refers to this: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2-4).

Walls are David fleeing a jealous king for thirteen years in the desert. Walls are 11 disciples at the crucifixion – confused, disoriented, when all their dreams are shattered. Walls are Job losing his ten children, health, and possessions in a day!

Secondly, 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.

Our work is to stay with God, to persevere, to faithfully wait on Him, to stick with God--even when everything in us wants to quit and run. Why? For He is good and His love endures forever.

Failure to understand and surrender to God's working in us at the Wall often results in great long-term pain and confusion. I know many people who have been through great sufferings and hit massive Walls. Yet the Walls did not change them. They only bounced off them. They returned to a similar, but different Wall later. Again they bounced off it, often becoming more bitter and angry than before.

Yet receiving the gift of God at the Walls that come to each of us, transforms our lives forever in ways that we never dreamed. Enjoy.