LETTING GO OF POWER AND CONTROL

Walking a healthy spirituality out means that we sometimes **we need to go through the pain of the Wall**—or, as the ancients called it, “the dark night of the soul.” Anyone been through anything like that? Over the years, I have had more ‘Dark nights of the soul’ than I would like.

This week I have had a ‘Dark Night of the Soul’ – **TYRONNE Passing through to be with Jesus**

When we don’t understand that **we need to go through the pain of the Wall** it can cause long-term pain and confusion. Receiving the gift of God in the Wall, however, transforms our lives forever.

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE AS A JOURNEY

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.

- God called Abraham to leave his past life in Ur at the age of seventy-five and to embark on a journey.
- God called to Moses from a burning bush to begin a new phase of his journey at the age of eighty.
- God called the Israelites to leave Egypt and embark on a forty-year journey of personal transformation in the desert.
- God called David to leave the comforts of his job as a shepherd to conquer Goliath and to serve as king of Israel.
- God called Jeremiah to forty to fifty years of difficult work, standing firm for God’s values amid a rebellious people.
- Jesus called the twelve disciples to a journey that would change their lives forever.

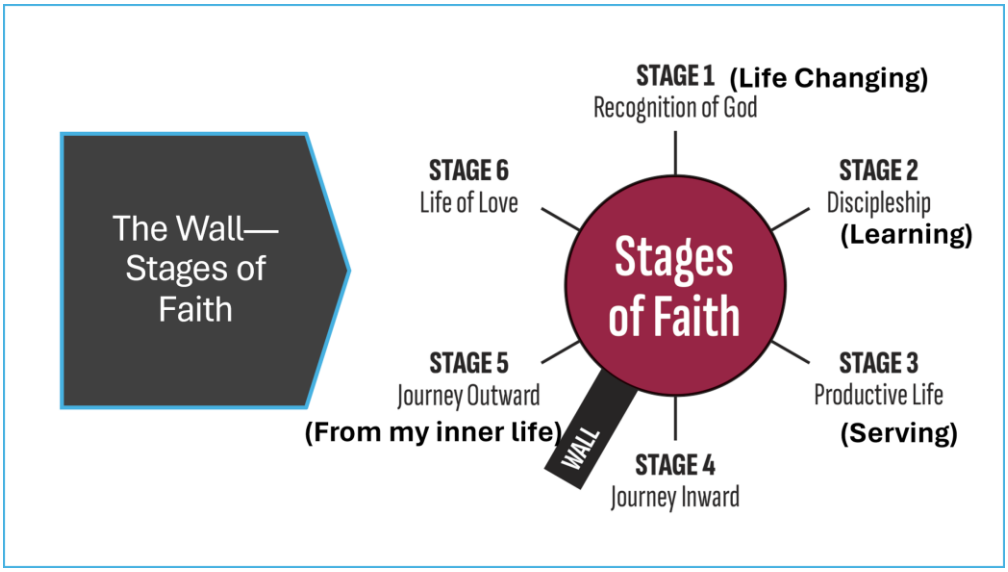
Judas, however, grew disillusioned and got stuck along the way. He couldn’t imagine what Jesus was up to, especially in surrendering himself to the authorities to be crucified! He could not see how anything good could emerge out of the disintegration of their powerful ministry that was helping so many people. Jesus’ plan offended him.

Judas’s “stuckness” eventually resulted in him quitting Christ altogether, resulting in perhaps history’s saddest account of a wasted opportunity!

I meet many believers today who also are stuck. Some have dropped out altogether. Tragically, they fail to see the bigger picture of the transforming work God seeks to do in them at their Wall. The 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 requires us to go through the Wall.

The Wall—Stages of Faith



Each stage builds naturally on 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. We can't jump from the discipleship of Stage 2 to the journey outward of Stage 5.

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. When we refuse to trust God into this unknown, mysterious place, we turn inward into ourselves. Our soil, ever so slowly, becomes hard

Mar 4:15-17 Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.

BACK TO OUR DIAGRAM

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 (Learning)—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: Productive Life (Serving)—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 Journey Inward—Notice that the Wall and the Journey Inward are closely related. The Wall compels us into the Journey Inward. In some cases the Journey Inward eventually leads us to the Wall. Most importantly, remember it is God who brings us to the Wall.

STAGE 5: Journey Outward from my inner life—Having passed through the crisis of faith and the intense inner journey 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 toward others).

The difference is that now we give out of a new, grounded center of ourselves in God. We have rediscovered God's profound, deep, accepting love for us. A deep, inner stillness now begins to characterize our work for God.

STAGE 6: Life of Love—God continually sends events, circumstances, people, and even books into our lives to keep us moving forward on our journeys. He is determined to complete the work he began in us, whether we like it or not!

His 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 (1 John 4:18). And the whole of our spiritual lives is finally about surrender and obedience to God's perfect will.

I prefer to talk about seasons to stages when describing our life in Christ. We don't control the seasons; they happen to us. Winter, spring, summer, and fall come to us whether we like it or not. **So do Walls.**

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.

Stuck at the Wall—The Dark Night of the Soul

Without an understanding of the Wall in the journey, however, countless sincere followers of Christ stagnate there and no longer move forward with God's purpose for their lives. Some of us hide behind our faith to flee the pain of our lives rather than trust God to transform us through it.

We utter platitudes like "God uses all things for good" (Romans 8:28). We smile and sing contemporary praise songs about our victory in Jesus. We don't curse or get bitter toward God. We keep it together to demonstrate to the weaker members of the body and the watching world that our faith is solid and strong.

The problem is that emotionally healthy faith admits the following:

• I am confused.

• I don't know what God is doing right now.

• I am hurt.

• I am angry.

• Yes, this is mystery.

• I am very sad right now.

• O God, why have you forsaken me?

God adds something into our souls. He mysteriously infuses or imparts his love into us. God powerfully invades us when we persevere patiently through this suffering. Our great temptation is to

quit or go backwards, but if we remain still, listening for his voice, God will insert something of himself into our character that will mark the rest of our journey with him.

Finding My Way Through the Wall

There is a difference between the "dark night of the soul" and trials and setbacks. When we don't understand that it stops us from going through the Wall.

As for me, I have suffered more than the average Christian. That surely qualified me for undeserved blessings, doesn't it? It doesn't! However, as I persevered patiently through the suffering, I began to crawl and to feel for the first time, saying to myself, "Something is different. Totally different. I cannot explain it, but I feel freer than ever from people's opinions, more clear about who I am, more certain of God and his love than ever!"

I hope this means God has no other "dark nights" for me, but Biblical history seems to suggest this might not be the case.

How Long Will This Last?

I know this is not what you want to hear but ultimately God chooses the length and level of intensity. He has a unique purpose for each of us, knowing how much there is to cleanse out of our inner being, and how much he wants to infuse of himself into us for his greater, long-term purposes. Our Father knows how much we can handle.

What is important here is to note that 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 that 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 Abraham waiting twenty-five years for the birth of his first child, Isaac.
- Walls are Job losing his ten children, health, and possessions in a day!

Characteristics of Life on the Other Side

Ultimately, God is the One who moves us through the Wall. And with that comes mystery. How and when God takes us through is up to him. We make choices to trust God, to wait on God, to obey God, to stick with God, to remain faithful when everything in us wants to quit and run. But it is *his* slow, deep work of transformation in us, not ours.

So how do we know we are making progress or if we are, perhaps, even on the other side? The following are at least four dynamics to consider:

1. A Greater Level of Brokenness

Christians can be notoriously judgmental in the name of standing up for the truth. But people who have been through the Wall are broken. They have seen, as Karl Barth said, that *"the root and origin of sin is the arrogance in which man wants to be his own and his neighbor's judge."* Before we go through the Wall, we prefer to exercise the right to determine good and evil rather than leave this knowledge to God. Afterward, we know better.

"The Lord is near to the broken hearted and saves the crushed in spirit." **Psalm 34:7**

Another helpful way to measure your level of brokenness is to consider how "offendable" you are. (Yes, I realize *offendable* is not in the dictionary.) Imagine person who, when criticized, judged, or insulted, immediately pulls back and reacts. He either goes on the attack or decides we no longer exist.

Contrast that image with a broken person who is so secure in the love of God that she is unable to be insulted. When criticized, judged, or insulted, she thinks to herself, *It is far worse than you think!*

2. A Greater Appreciation for Holy Unknowing (Mystery)

I like control. I like to know where God is going, exactly what he is doing, the exact route of how we are getting there, and exactly when we will arrive. I also like to remind God of his need to behave in ways that fit in with my clear ideas of him. For example, God is just, merciful, good, wise, loving. The problem, then, is that God is beyond the grasp of every concept I have of him. He is utterly incomprehensible.

Yes, God is everything revealed in Scripture, but also infinitely more. God is not an object that I can determine, master, possess, or command. And still I try to somehow use my "clear ideas" about God to give me power over him, to somehow possess him.

Unconsciously, I make a deal with God that goes something like this: "I obey and keep my part of the bargain. Now you bless me. Do not allow any serious suffering."

God doesn't appreciate being demoted to the rank of our personal secretary or assistant. Remember who we are dealing with here: God is immanent (so close) and yet transcendent (so utterly above and far from us). God is knowable, yet he is unknowable. God is inside us and beside us, yet he is wholly different from us.

This is why Augustine wrote, "If you understand, it is not God you understand."

3. A Deeper Ability to Wait for God

The fruit of greater brokenness and holy unknowing is a larger capacity to wait upon the Lord. Going through the Wall breaks something deep within us—that driving, grasping, fearful self-will that must produce, that must make something happen, that must get it done for God (just in case he doesn't).

If I were to identify my biggest errors of judgment since following Christ, they would each go back to a failure to wait on the Lord.

What does it truly mean when we read:

"Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD" - **Psalm 27:14**

"I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord" **Psalm 130:5–6**

4. A Greater Detachment

The critical issue on the journey with God is not "Am I happy?" but "Am I free? Am I growing in the freedom God gave me?" Paul addressed this central issue of detachment in 1 Corinthians, calling us to a radical, new understanding of our relationship to the world:

> What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.**1 Corinthians 7:29–31**

We should live our lives like the rest of the world—marrying, experiencing sorrow and joy, buying things and using them—but always with awareness that these things in themselves are not our lives. We are to be marked by eternity, free from the dominating power of things.

Detachment is the great secret of interior peace. Along the way, in this journey with Christ, we get attached to (literally “nailed to”) behaviors, habits, things, and people in an unhealthy way.

For example, I love my home, my car, my books, Mandy, our children, our church, our comforts, and my health. Like you, I don’t often realize how attached I am to something until God removes it. Then the power struggle begins. I say, “God I must have that second car for convenience.” God answers, “No, you don’t need that. You need me!”

When we put our claws into something and we don’t want to take them out, we are beyond enjoying them. We now *must* have them.

The Wall, more than anything else, cuts off our attachments to who we think we ought to be, or who we falsely think we are. Layers of our counterfeit self are shed. Something truer, that is Christ in and through us, slowly emerges.

The journey with Jesus calls us to a life of undivided devotion to him. This requires that we simplify our lives, removing distractions.

Part of that will mean learning to grieve our losses and holding onto God as He adds something into our souls, as He mysteriously infuses and imparts his love into us, working powerfully in us when we persevere patiently through this suffering.