

Unstuck: “#1 Getting Stuck” – Matthew 13:1-23

Dr. Matt Cassidy – 1/15/2012

Video clip from Canadian commercial

Man: Oh, that's not good.
Woman: I don't need this. We are already late.
Man: Somebody will come. [shouting] Anybody out there?
Woman: Do you have a phone?
Man: No, sorry. – Somebody? Hello? There are two people stuck on an escalator and we need help now. Would somebody please do something?
Woman: Help!! [echoes]
Man: [laughing] I don't believe this. You have got to be kidding me.
Woman: I am going to cry.
Man: Well, there is nothing else left to do, is there.

* * *

That would never happen, two people on an escalator, neither of them with a cell phone. That is so improbable.

Clearly the video is a metaphor for our series “Unstuck.” We are starting that today because people get stuck in their walk with God. They seem to be tracking along nicely and then all of a sudden, everything stops and they cry out for help but don't know what to do about it. We will spend some more time on that video.

This is a pretty exciting time for us at Grace. If you are visiting, this is the first day for the rest of the life of this church. We would love you to catch up to where we are right now. The last two weeks, the first two weeks in January, we talked about what the church is doing and where we are going. We are counting on this year being quite possibly the biggest year in the last 20 years. We will give you a free CD on the way out if you can't get on the internet; or if you want to listen or watch it on the internet that would be great. Go to our web site [www.grace360.org]. But in the Recording Ministry room, there are free discs so that you can get the bigger context of how today's teaching time fits into the greater context of the whole year, the rest of the 50 weeks or so.

Today we will look at getting “Unstuck.” We are reading a book together which are for sale out there in the courtyard. We have re-titled the books for obvious reasons, calling them “Unstuck” because

the other title will not be mentioned again; it is a sissy, girly title. Also, our small groups, life groups, that meet throughout the week are going through this study with us, so as the whole church goes from the pulpit here on Sunday mornings, so the little churches are going so that we can better apply what we are looking at.

Today we will look at Chapter 6 in the book. If you buy the book today, I recommend starting with Chapter 6 or otherwise it is a hard book to get through.

We are going to learn new words together, to be able to negotiate the path of life that we go through as followers of Christ. It is a well worn path, let me say. We will be able to use these words in our future, six different stages of our walk with God together. We can help ourselves understand where we are and also, since every believer here is a minister, we can help other people grow and understand where they are, and how to get through some difficult parts of that.

One of the words we are going to learn is *wall*. We will spend two weeks on understanding what the wall is and how to get through it because that is where most people stay. They get stuck at the wall and can't get out.

Learning words is really important. A few years I didn't care much and probably could not even tell you the name of that thing in my knee called a *meniscus* but now I do know what that is and now I know what it does and I know when it breaks. I can help you -- if yours is broken, go to a doctor and get that thing repaired.

That is what we are doing today. We are going to learn a lot of words today, going through this life cycle of what it means to be on this journey. I want you to see though that this is nothing new to us. For thousands of years, people have been following God wherever He calls and they go through these stages and somehow they get stalled or stuck.

Matthew 13:3-15

When Jesus was talking 2000 years ago in Matthew 13, He is going to start telling stories at this point from Chapter 12 on in parables. He doesn't want to give up the obvious answer. It is because people around Him are bullying Him and the people bullying Him are *stuck* people. They are bewildered because they are superficial in their understanding of how God works. Jesus is going to now start shooting over their heads towards the people farther down the road. Look at Matthew 13:3.

Matthew 13:3 Then He told them many things in parables, ...
Parables are a little proverb where He tells a story of a farmer who goes out to sow seeds. The seeds represent the truths of the kingdom of God.

:4 As He was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Those never got a chance to root.

:5-9 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop – a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear.

:10 The disciples came to Him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?”

:11 He replied, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.

:12 Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.

If there is a truth in the Bible, it is that verse right there. Spiritually speaking, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. That is what has happened. If you understand things, you are going to understand more. If you have a tender heart towards God’s communication, you are going to see and hear things that other people don’t. But if you have a stubborn or calloused or proud heart, you will become more and more deaf.

:13 This is why I speak to them in parables:

“Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.

:14 In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

So Jesus is talking 2000 years ago, referring to a 700 year old prophecy that Isaiah said:

‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.

:15 For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’

So, listen, the people Jesus is talking to, He is talking about the people who cannot see or hear the spiritual truths any more. They were extremely well versed in their Bible knowledge. They had memorized the first five books of the Bible in Hebrew and could quote any verse. They prayed a lot to God, regularly, at least three – five times a day. They didn’t hear much though; they just talked a lot. They were actively involved in a community. They were connected through relationships. They had a fraternity and sorority of people getting together regularly to talk about God. They served one another well. They

were committed to service. Jesus said that they were so stuck that they were deaf. How did that happen? Look at the word highlighted here.

:For this people's heart has become *calloused*; ...

Their hearts had become calloused. My point is that if it could happen to these religious leaders 2000 years ago, and then the people Isaiah was referring to which was 700 years before that, then it could happen to us.

Getting stuck is part of the process of developing your spiritual life but it is also the biggest threat to our spiritual life. When we hit this wall, we could stay there our entire lifetime if we choose to stay calloused. That is what happens with most people. We just find ourselves in a journey where we are hearing from God something we didn't want to hear and so we just turn Him off. Or from people of God and we don't want to move further.

Stages in Life of Faith

Today we are going to look at a synopsis of some authors who studied the Old Testament, front to back, and then the New Testament and even the life of Christ. They wrote a book together called "The Critical Journey: Stages of the Life of Faith". It is an outstanding book that chronicles the similarities of everyone of these saints in the Old and New Testament and Jesus himself. Then they project it on some people in modern church history as well. They say, you know what, there are these common six steps that everyone seems to have to go through. If we were to know those steps, we would have a better understanding of where we are and where we need to be. I want us today to learn some road signs of the stages of faith. If we understand the stages of faith, then we can negotiate where we need to get to.

Here is the point. As we go through these, there are a couple of things to be looking for:

1. Where are you in the stages of faith right now? Ask for God's Spirit to help you understand where that is and then
2. What do you need to do to move to the next stage? If all the saints in the Old and New Testament and Jesus himself had to go through these six stages then you will too. What is your next step and what are you going to do to prepare for that?

Stage One: Life-changing awareness of God.

Stage One: The life-changing awareness of God; this is the newborn stage. This is when God is serving you in these first two stages. It is a fun time to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Yesterday we were down at the trails around Town Lake. Melinda and I were walking and our daughter went for a run. Every time a stroller came by with a mother or father pushing it, I kept seeing those kids sitting there in their blankets, looking around at all the glory of Austin without having to do a thing, while their parents were sweating and running and huffing and puffing. I thought – that is living right there.

That is how it is in the early stage of our life with God. We have this new awareness of God and we come to realize it is God's greatness and His goodness, but also in His perfection that really we are not going to try to earn His favor.

Then we stumble across the idea that God's Son has come for us so that we would not have to try to earn our way to heaven. It is a gift from God. His death was payment for our crimes against God. His resurrection was to assure us that the debt was paid in full. Then once we receive this gift of forgiveness, we are like a kid on Christmas morning, overflowing with joy and excitement.

God seems to wait on us, honestly. It seems like whenever we pray an incidental, superficial prayer, God just answers those.

It is a very pleasant time. It is like falling in love. So many different stories about falling in love apply to falling in love with God too.

A lot of children have this awareness of God early on about the power of Jesus Christ and His forgiveness because their souls are pretty innocent. Most people choose to follow Christ at an early age, statistically. They are naïve in their love but they are pure in it.

Older people, when they fall in love with God, when they receive this gift of forgiveness, they are a little more shrewd about what they are getting into and they are more dedicated as well. But again, there is this first, initial stage where all is well and it is a great time to be a follower of Christ.

2. Stage Two: Life of Discipleship

The next step that comes is this discipling or learning stage. This is a fun stage because we are most productive, at a growth spurt because of our learning and belonging. Those are the two things the authors accentuate in this stage of spiritual life.

We are learning because there is so much to learn. At Grace Covenant Church, we offer the Discovery Class and the Foundations Class. We want to learn about Jesus and find out what He tells us is right, real and true. We sign up for classes and we meet with other people. The community part is that we find ourselves being in an apprenticeship. Somebody is mentoring us through the doctrines of God and the

truths of the Bible. Everything is brand new to us and we are taking notes and trying out new things. The community part is a bonding thing. Sometimes it is one person and sometimes it is a small group bible study. Some where along the line, it is not uncommon to realize ‘I am closer with these three people than I am with my own family.’ There is a Proverb that says there is a friend who is closer than a brother. That is what it means. It means you are now involving yourself and that is why church members call each other brother and sister because there is a tie that is deeper than blood, called the spirit of God. So you connect with one quite well, as you learning. It is a time where you are committed to relationships, and that is what we do here at Grace.

Stage Three: The Active or Productive Life

The third stage is the active life, the serving life. The adolescent stage says: I have been given so much, enjoying so much, and so I am going to give some back. This is a new stage where you are serving other people. You could be serving in our children’s ministry or around the world in a missions context. What happens is that you realize ‘I have something to bring to this.’ You find out about your unique abilities and gifts and your own history and you can start giving back to the church, God’s bride. You find yourself expressing that in so many different ways. It is our version of Committed to Service here at Grace. You involve yourself with other people in community, in the context of the first stage of this renewed Wow of who God is, but now in this means of giving.

I would love to say – that is it. There are three road signs, three stops and that is all there is to it. That last one is fun because you get the applause of people. People thank you for serving in the ministries you are involved with, especially if you are good at it. You get to enjoy that little buzz.

The problem is, there are six stages and we are really just barely half way.

Stage Four: The Journey Inward

The next stage is this journey inward. Just like late adolescence (and that is why I put it that way) we start having deeper thoughts about things. We start internalizing. Up to this point, stages 1, 2 and 3 are focused outward and doing and involving. Stage 4, we start turning inward and asking some serious questions about: What is right and real and true? We want deeper answers. As a matter of fact, at this stage we often have way more questions than we have answers. During this late adolescence stage (in the Faith, not necessarily in your age) we start exploring and people often times start giving us shallow or superficial answers to some very profound, deep-seated questions. The shallow answers are not helping but actually making it worse.

The simple faith is not working any more. That is what is happening. God is not as loud as He was when you were a newborn. How does this happen? We will spend more time on that next week. But sometimes something happens in life that says: You need to grow out of the elemental truths. You need to get into some deeper mysteries. Sometimes it is the life stage. The 25's, the 35's, the 45's, each one of these are major life transitions where answers that worked in the previous decade simply don't work any more. The waters underneath are running way more rapidly than they were before and it is getting harder and harder to have a tranquil life. So you ask around and keep hearing the repeated lines of other people. That worked before but it is not working now.

That is when the *wall* comes. The wall happens because you can't move to the next level until you transition through the wall. You have grown closer to God than you bargained for. He is not answering like you want Him to. You find out that you might know a little about God but He is not knowable. He is not predictable. The wall is the place where dreams go to die because a lot of the dreams that we have, somehow we are in the middle of them. Those are not the dreams that God has.

So this is a season of great discontent for our hearts. This is where, honestly, the author of "Unstuck" says 80% of Christians stall. **There are three ways to deal with the wall.**

The first one is to bail. That is it; I am done. This is not what I expected. It is not working anymore. Religion? I did that in the 90's. I went to church and even did the Sunday school class and went to mid-week study, did everything.

The second one is circle back to Stage 3 when things were so good. Remember three? We did a bunch of stuff and stayed busy in serving and serving and serving. The questions are getting louder and the people around, if they are married, their mates are sometimes in a similar phase. They just say: *We are going to stay here where it is shallow and safe.* So that is what they do. It is the American Way in many respects – just get busier.

Personally, I think one (bail) is better than two (refuse to engage). Church is run on this model of just keeping everyone so busy that they can't know they are at the wall. They insist on bumper stickers for answers so that you can keep Jesus in your pocket when you need Him. I would rather leave church than to attend a church that keeps things superficial and shallow because there is a contradiction in terms. You can't have a *superficial spiritual* life. The purpose of a spiritual life is to go deeper than you can in any other context. So by intentionally keeping it shallow, I would rather stay home.

The third solution is to sit at that wall and to face towards God and say: I won't leave here until You show me Your face. It is a desire to say – there has to be something more. You couldn't be lying to me when You say that I came that you would have life and life abundantly. This is not it. So I am staying

here until that abundant life comes to me. If you stay at the wall and say: I resolve to get through this somehow, God will drag you through it but it will be at the cost of formula Christianity and certainty and clarity. You will have to leave those all behind on that left side of the wall. They don't make it through. In that time is a loneliness that is so dark and forboding that loneliness will make you feel like you are unraveling. But most people don't make it through the wall. It is just too hard. The wait is long. But if you get through the wall, you are transformed by God's grace all over again. It is a whole different way of living.

Before we move on, I want you to see that everyone does this. Everyone gets to the wall; not everyone gets through the wall. Go to this book and you can pick your favorite saint and run them through their spiritual journey and they are going to be on this highway. They will have these stops along the way.

John the Baptist could not have been more confident about his place in the world. Yet when he was in a prison and soon to die and he knew that, he sends one of his disciples to Jesus to ask the question – Are you the one we have been waiting for? – How does John get there, to that extremely dark night of his soul so that he is second-guessing his own words? At the beginning of John's ministry, we know: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This Jesus is the one we all have been waiting for. I can't baptize You; I am unfit to unfasten your sandal." But not now, not in this prison. No, John is past Stage Four, sitting in that wall, wondering: If God is sovereign and powerful over all the universe, why would I be next in line to have my head removed? John has a plan for God's will in his life and it is not being played out. Jesus sends back word to John: No, I am Him and you are going to die. And God will still be God. Jesus does not send back the bumper sticker verse so that Jesus would stay nicely in His pouch.

We have to spend more time talking about this wall – maybe next week.

If you get through the wall, here is the best part and you start getting into adult living.

Stage Five: The Journey Outward

You are a grown up now and it is a journey outward. Now you have a new sense of surrender because you have given up everything: your dreams and ambitions and hopes and even your theology, I hope, that is suffocating to God. You have suffered well. You have endured hardship with grace. Now you can give with confidence, knowing God will be God and He is not checking in with you. He can do whatever He wants, anytime He wants, and that is okay. Now, you give and it is a little like Stage Three: Active or Productive Living, but this Journey Outward is that you are serving but you don't have the

answers you used to have. Other people are trying to give you quick ways to understanding God and you are looking at them and wondering: Really? We can put Him in that box? I don't think so.

Here is the other thing. You have lost so much of yourself on the other side of that wall, that you are giving – not for accolades – just giving, just serving and there is nothing back in it for you. Here is what happens when you get to the adult stage in the spiritual sense, you just enjoy God. You don't need to put something on your resume.

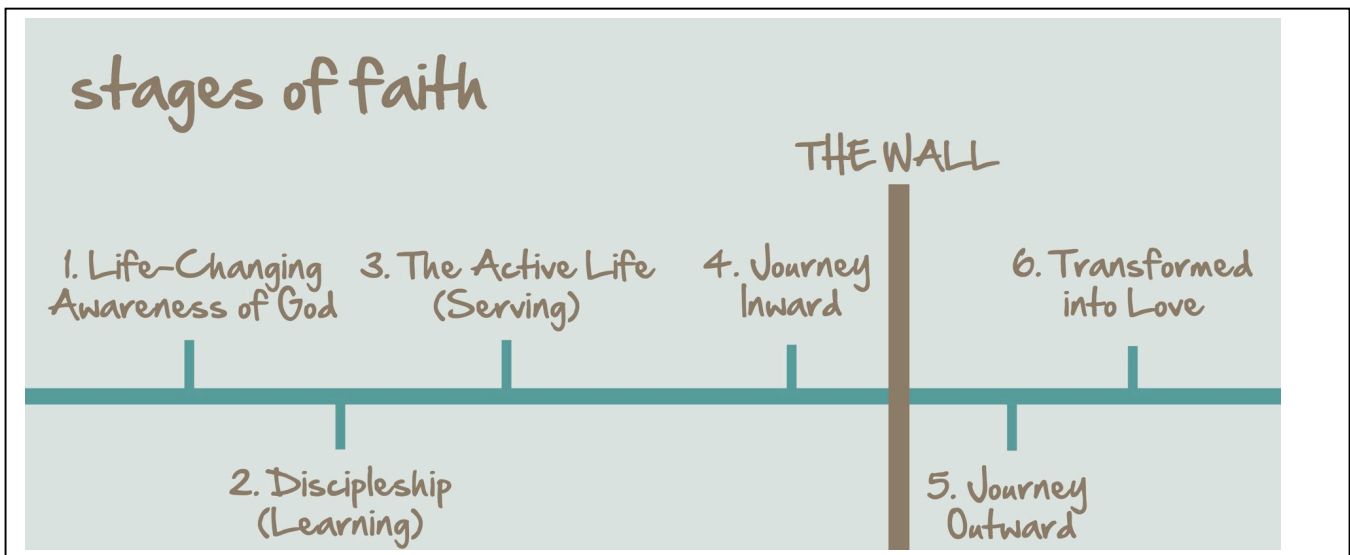
Stage Six: Transformed into Love

The last stage is where you are transformed into love. You are reflecting God's love onto other people. You see people as souls, encased in skin. You look for that soul and you meet them in a soul-kind of way. The overflowing love – and I don't want to feminize that word 'love – does not mean you become a sissy and let people mow you down.

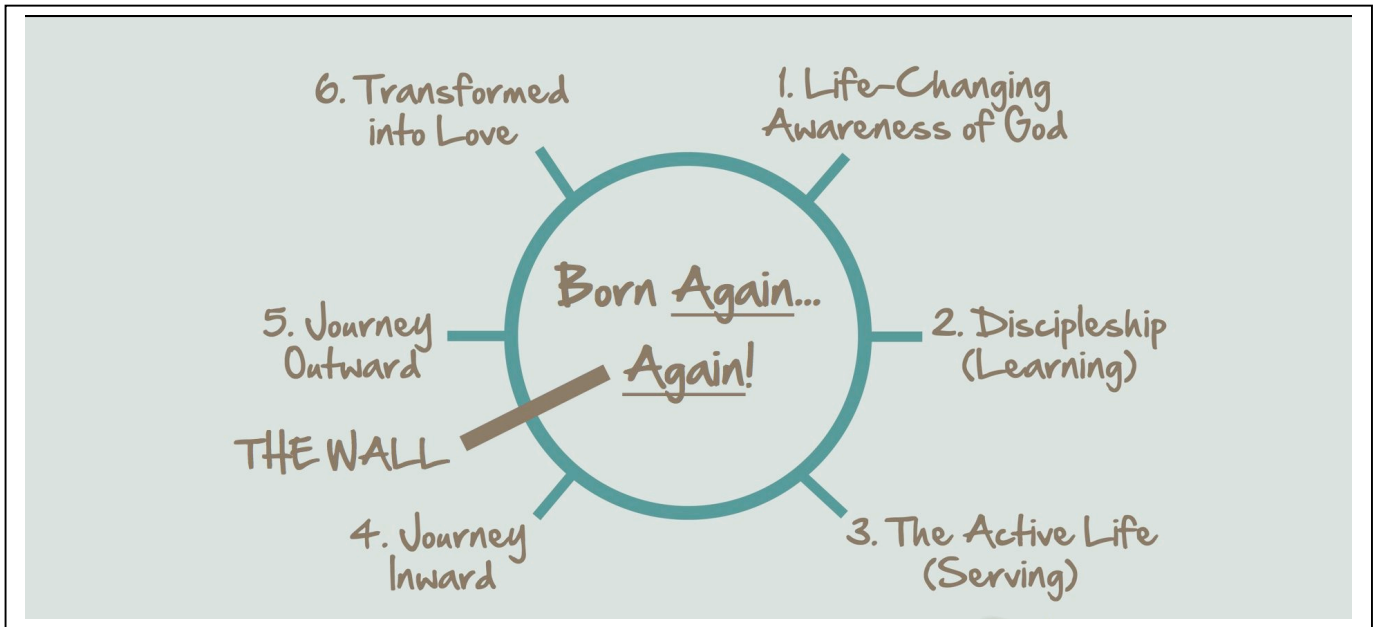
One of our elders has a friend in Iraq who is a master sergeant and a Christian. He said: I have learned how to be a Christ master sergeant. If you know anything about master sergeants, you probably don't think they can be Christians. But they are still yelling and screaming and throwing people around and still loving people deeply. It is hard to grasp.

Ask yourself again, before we move on, where are you on this journey? Where is your next step?

For the sake of clarity, in your books, the author there moves the wall to the other side. He says the wall makes us journey inward. The original author said: No, you start journeying inward, asking more questions and then the wall shows up. I am not sure it matters that much but I am going with the way it was originally done.



Another thing I want you to see is the journey, I wrote it out in a line because that makes sense to us that we are going somewhere. But in actuality, it is a circle.



What happens when you get to Stage Six is that your life is transformed and then you are back again being born again / again. That is why being born again / again around Grace Covenant Church. Then you are like a child again. You are like – Wow! You are transformed by God’s grace in a whole new way. You get your innocence back and your wonder and amazement. Then the next thing you know, you are discipling other people. You are the person giving and not answering all the questions so much any more. You are moving to Stage Three again. –

I am going to tell you this because it is true. But you hit another wall. That is why it is in a circle. You hit a wall again. If you get through it, and that is entirely up to you, then you get the Stage Five prime and then Stage Six prime. Then you have not arrived; you go around again.

Here is why I want you to see this, memorize the six stages and where the wall is because the wall is often the same wall. We just keep circling it again. This is different than being stuck there. I am just saying, you went through it at 35 and then you come around and hit it again hard at 45. You go: Wait a minute. That smells the same. See the notch where you hit it the first time. If you live to 55, it will probably be the same wall. – We will talk about that in the coming weeks. I want you to see that it is cyclical. Each time, if you choose not to stall out, if you choose not to stay stuck at that wall, then Stages Five and Six, the “journey outward” and the “transformed into love” just gets sweeter and sweeter. It is

just a joy. It is so exhilarating. You become innocent and generous and light hearted. You would think somebody who has been through that like four times would be melancholy and sullen. They are overflowing with joy. They laugh at almost anything. They are children all over again. It is a good place to be.

The Other Side of the Wall

Let me show you what you get on the other side of the wall. I want you to see that you get thick skinned and a soft heart.

What I mean by thick skinned is that it becomes more and more difficult for you to be offended because after you go through the wall once and maybe twice, there is not a lot of you left to offend. I have found people – two of them were professors oddly enough – and the contempt the students had openly towards them in class was despicable. Other people would take offense for the professor. I was working for them and I had to tell them that they were being offended. But their humility so overflowed their hearing that they never even understood that a 22 year old was telling them how it is. When there is not much left of you, you don't care if someone kicks it around a bit.

The other part that is fun is you become invisible. In Stage Three a lot of service you do is sometimes because you like the letters and the atta-boys. But when you get to Stage Five and you are outward focused again, you don't like the attention. It is hard for me to illustrate outside of this so try to grasp this because it is not an illustration a lot of people understand.

When you are up here – especially people who sing – when you start singing for God at Stage Three, you love the lights hitting you. It is fun. Let's just call it what it is; intoxicating. Look at everyone looking at me. Then you hit the wall and you hate you and you hate the lights. You never want to be on stage again. Then you get to the other side of that wall and realize it was never about you anyway. Get back up there. What happens around here – one of the things Mike does behind the scenes – is he is looking for people who can sing back there. The fight up here on this stage is for the back of the stage, not for the front because when you get up here, after the wall, in stage five, you are reminded of how you used to like it so much and that is repulsive to you. But you will do it anyway. That is the point about being invisible. You don't want to be known as the person doing these things. You know you won't be forgotten and that is okay. You just move on. It is so freeing.

Being soft-hearted towards others means you are no longer the standard of what it means to be right. This is the spiritual standard, the book I am reading and where I am in life and anyone who is not

doing that is beneath me and should be treated that way. And there are probably very few people above me. You don't have to judge people or churches or other's lives. In fact, when you see someone in a stage that you have been through, you don't look down on them after your wall because your ego has been lost in the filtration. You look at them and think: I remember. I can walk in those shoes and feel their suffering. I wonder if I could help somehow – maybe just by joining in that same suffering? You are soft-hearted towards others.

But here is the thing I like. You are soft-hearted towards God. You are soft-hearted towards God because you have given up the predictability and the certainty [and that is why I called it infant], you back into the wonder part, into the amazement part. You are watching a leaf fall for the first time again when you are 40 or 50 or 25. You are going – Wow! Why does He do it that way? You aren't try to figure out scientifically but just enjoying it. It is like Jesus saying – you can see things you didn't see when your heart was calloused. You are not trying to systematize God so much.

Here is the other thing why you are soft-hearted towards God, you can wait on God. You don't have to be in such a big hurry all the time. When you are younger, you always want to jump in and act, jump in and do something. After the wall, you say: Let's see what God does. If we act too fast, some people might get hurt who don't have to. Some people might get lost who don't need to get lost. Why don't we just wait. We will talk about that when we teach on the book of Esther (April, 2012) because that is what that book is about.

I am trying to give you a bait there to hang in there.

Application

Here is some quick applications.

1. How long do I have to stay at the wall? Some of you are going: Okay, I get to the wall; now how do I get through it? How long do I have to be there? – I have to tell you something. It is entirely up to you. If you want to fear an attribute of God, I would suggest that you start fearing His patience because He will wait for as long as it takes and it is all about calloused hearts and stubbornness and pride. He will leave you there. That is why so many people get stuck at the wall.

This is what G. K. Chesterton was writing about when he said: Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.

We find when we get stuck at the wall at 3 or 4 and we just say: uh huh, there is too much of me to lose. So, I can tell you that I know so many people that are sitting with their hands folded, sulking, waiting for a thank you note for service they did. They are not moving until they get a big atta' boy in

front of a lot of people or a letter from the church or from me. Really? Because I thought you were not at stage three but at stage five. I didn't know we were still fueling you with all the accolades to get you to move down the road a bit. There they sit and there they sulk. And they will stay there for 10 or 20 or 30 years.

Here is the deal, two questions you need to ask yourself.

Where are you now? Look at the stages – where are you now? I want you to hear this. God is there with you – wherever you are, even stages 1, 2 and 3, especially, it is pretty obvious that God is with you there. If you are at the wall, He is there too and He is waiting for you to surrender.

Where are you now and what do you need to do to go to the next step?

How can you help others? One of the unique things about people who have been through the wall is that they are uniquely qualified to go back to people who are stuck at the wall and say: *There is another side to this and you are not alone and you are in great company – but there are things in you that have to stop.* It won't be simple answers. It won't be the bumper sticker answers. It won't be simple little verses. It will be truth and very hard to hear. They will say it anyway because they are consumed by love now that is palatable, that maybe even your ears can hear.

One of the things I love about this church is that we don't have one spiritual age group. We don't have a bunch of brand new believers and we don't have a bunch of old believers. We have staggered people everywhere. If you have been through this wall and I have met a couple in the lobby between services. You've been at that wall; look at the notches on your head. You come back and help. You can help other people, okay? Show them the way out. Show them the joy on the other side. Show them the wonder, the innocence, what it is like to be forgotten and invisible.

At Grace Covenant Church, we are here to help you get unstuck, as a family, as a community, as a body of believers, we don't want anybody to be standing on an escalator screaming for help. Help is out there.

Today we learned a lot of terms. Next week especially we are going to learn more about this dark night of the soul which is called the wall. Learn it so that you know it and can smell it when it is happening to you. This is preventative medicine for everyone on the journey with Jesus Christ. Let's journey together, shall we?

Let's pray about that and sing some songs.

Dear heavenly Father,

I say with hesitation that we are grateful that you would never leave us in a state of infancy and that you would call us to be grown ups, to be full and mature is what you said, lacking in nothing. In that, there are some things we have to leave behind. So, dear heavenly Father, I ask that your Spirit would give us unusual insight to tell us the truth about where we are in those six stages of life.

God, I ask that you would give us insight and the courage to stand up and take the next step towards that next stage of life.

Those who are stuck at the wall, Lord, I ask that your Spirit would send that clear message of humility that is required to move on. We ask you would grant us that or show us our arrogance. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen