

Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*

Week 4—Journey Through the Wall

Key Principle: Challenges, difficulties, and crises are part of life and relationships, even the life of faith and our relationship with God. Knowing how to get through those times is essential for growth.

Every follower of Jesus at some point will confront the Wall—or, as the ancients called it, “*the dark night of the soul*.” Emotionally healthy spirituality helps provide a (partial) roadmap of both how one goes through the Wall and what it means to begin living on the other side.

Failure to understand its nature results in great long-term pain and confusion. Receiving the gift of God in the Wall, however, transforms our lives forever.

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 descend 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 we see little visible fruit in our lives.

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.

This is God’s way of rewiring and “purging our affections and passions” that 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. For this reason, John of the Cross wrote that God sends us “the dark night of loving fire” to free us. John listed the seven deadly spiritual imperfections of beginners that must be purified:

1. **Pride:** They have a tendency to condemn others and become impatient with their faults. They are very selective in who can teach them.
2. **Avarice:** They are discontent with the spirituality God gives them. They never have enough learning, are always reading many books rather than growing in poverty of spirit and their interior life.
3. **Luxury:** They take more pleasure in the spiritual blessings of God than God himself.
4. **Wrath:** They are easily irritated, lacking sweetness, and have little patience to wait on God.
5. **Spiritual gluttony:** They resist the cross and choose pleasures like children do.

6. Spiritual envy: They feel unhappy when others do well spiritually. They are always comparing.
7. Sloth: They run from that which is hard. Their aim is spiritual sweetness and good feelings.

While in week 2 we talked about the critical importance of paying attention to our feelings in order to know God, the “dark night” protects us from worshipping them. This is one of the more common idolatries of the spiritual life.

St. John of the Cross knew the human tendency to become attached to feelings of and about God, mistaking them for God himself. These sensations, rich or empty, are not God but only messengers from God that speak to us of him. There is no other way, John of the Cross would say, for our souls to be strengthened and purified so that we don’t worship our feelings than for God to remove them altogether. This is God’s way of rewiring our taste buds that we might taste of him ever more fully.

St. John wrote: “[God] is purging the soul, annihilating it, emptying it or consuming in it (even as fire consumes the moldiness and the rust of metal) all the affections and imperfect habits which it has contracted its whole life...These are deeply rooted in the substance of the soul...At the same time, it is God who is passively working here in the soul.”

In addition to purging our will and understanding of the deadly sins mentioned above, God also 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 backward, 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.

It can be difficult to discern precisely when we began the journey through the Wall and when we might be on the other side. I know many people who have been through great sufferings and hit formidable 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 more bitter and angry than before.

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.*

Karl Barth notes, that “*the root and origin of sin is the arrogance in which man wants to be his own and his neighbor’s judge.*”

-Free from judging others. Free from offend-ability.

2. *A greater appreciation for holy unknowing (mystery)*

-God is everything revealed in Scripture, but also infinitely more.

-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. For this reason Augustine wrote, “*If you understand, it is not God you understand.*”

-Most of the time we have no idea what God is doing.

3. *A deeper ability to wait on God.*

4. *A greater detachment*

-The critical issue on the journey with God is not “Am I happy?” but “Am I free?”

-We are to live our lives as 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.

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.

Richard Rohr has written extensively about the five essential truths to which people must awaken if they are to grow up into their God-given humanity and spirituality. His conclusions, I believe, describe the powerful biblical truths all of us can now truly know as a result of going through the Wall and experiencing a greater detachment:

Life is hard.

You are not that important.

Your life is not about you.

You are not in control.

You are going to die.

We joyfully detach from certain behaviors and activities for the purpose of a more intimate, loving attachment to God. We are to enjoy the world, for God’s creation is good. We are to appreciate nature, people, and all God’s gifts, along with his presence in creation—without being ensnared by them. It has rightly been said that those who are the most detached on the journey are best able to taste the purest joy in the beauty of created things.

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 embrace the gift of our limits.

- Q. Have you ever experienced (or are you currently experiencing) “the wall”/“the dark night of the soul”. If so, would you feel comfortable sharing your experience with the group? (When? What brought it on? What did you experience in the midst of it? What growth did you experience from it? Etc.)**
- Q. Christians should expect “the wall” (that’s one of the reasons we’re talking about it now). Is this all new to you, or are you familiar with it? (Explain)**
- Q. What do you think about the idea that “the wall” ultimately is about purging and purifying our affections so as to increase our affection and experience of God? Do you want God that much? (Explain)**

- Q. As you look over the “Seven Deadly Imperfections”, which is an area you feel you need to grow in?**
- Q. Which of the 4 dynamics have you experienced or have grown in? (Describe)**
- Q. As you consider the “five essential truths” offered by Richard Rohr, which resonates with you most and which is the hardest for you to swallow?**
- Q. As you consider your life, what do you feel God is inviting you to detach from?**
- Q. Consider this statement: “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.” Describe your experience of wrestling with “who you think you ought to be”, “who you falsely think you are”, “layers of counterfeit self”. (You might want to think along the lines of expectations and where they come from; freedom vs. bondage; fear vs. vulnerability.)**
- Q. Describe a time when you felt particularly close to God. Describe a time when you felt particular far from God.**
- Q. All this talk of “the wall” and “the dark night of the soul”...how does this jive with your faith journey thus far?**

* The majority of this document is excerpts from the book “Emotionally Healthy Spirituality” by Peter Scazzero (ISBN 978-0-310-34857-0), and the “Emotionally Healthy Spirituality Workbook” by Peter & Geri Scazzero (ISBN 978-0-310-08519-5)