

February 9, 2025—“*Understanding Our Journey*”

In my younger years, I did a lot of cross country running. One of the keys to effective cross country running, that most people may not appreciate, involves the course tour. When you were really little, you’d walk the course right before your race—even though hiking before an endurance event probably didn’t make much sense! But it was important for everyone to have toured the course, not just the person who’d be leading the race at the front, because it was critical to know the journey you were about to embark upon. It was critical to know when the tough uphill stretches were, when the trail was thin and you couldn’t pass, and when the wind would be at your back.

Knowing the course was essential to your race. So, when it comes to our faith:

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

Following Jesus is all about increasingly putting Jesus at the centre. But have you ever stepped back to consider what that “course” involves? Whether you’ve followed Jesus for a little or a long time, are you familiar with what the journey of faith looks like?

For the next three weeks—in between our mid-section study of the book of Acts, and a deep dive into the pre-Easter season of Lent—we’re going to dig into one of the models of the spiritual journey that’s been most helpful to us as a leadership. It comes from a book written by Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich called **The Critical Journey**, and uses stage theory to map out the common patterns of a life of faith in Jesus. Essentially, *The Critical Journey* identifies the main invitations of Jesus that, as we deepen our faith in Him, we can increasingly consider taking to get closer to Him.

So, for today, we want to first get ourselves acquainted with **The Critical Journey**, particularly with the six-plus-one stages of faith it represents. It begins at **Stage 1**, called the **Recognition of God**. The title is just as it suggests, because this stage is when a person embraces the idea that someone is actually behind all of this. And their awareness of a spiritual dimension to life begins to open up. This can happen for someone at three years old, and it can happen for someone at ninety-three. It can involve a bit of a process, or happen in a snap instant. And it can be experienced largely intellectually or emotionally—i.e.: it can be driven by your head or your heart. It can look very different across different people's experience, but the common theme is an openness to the reality of a spiritual dimension to life that previously wasn't there.

Stage 2 is described as the **Life of Discipleship**, when someone in Stage 1 chooses to move from ignorance to learning. This stage is all about learning, particularly learning from others, so who you trust with your learning is an important factor at this stage. At Stage 2, we're the learners, not the teachers, but, boy, can that life of learning be fun! For some, it can feel like a Pandora's box has been opened, where a whole new world of opportunity has presented itself. Many times in this stage, people will absolutely devour content—reading books, listening to talks or podcasts, or attending conferences. And, at Stage 2, we can experiment with the learning pathways that are most effective for us—where, for some, it involves solitude and silence, while, for others, it involves a whole lot of community. Some of us grow through the intensity of private study of scripture, while others grow through the inspiration of large-group worship. In this experimentation, our schedules can get busy, while we attend and experience anything and everything we can. Our lifestyle is bending towards devotion.

Then at **Stage 3** it takes another major jump. Stage 3 is called **The Productive Life**, where, for the first time, our faith shifts from an identity to a calling. In our learning we discover that God intends to include His followers in His Kingdom-building plan, and has uniquely gifted each of us to serve Him and others. So, Stage 3 is that time when we begin to take responsibility for other people. The best way to describe Stage 3 would be “busy”, because we find ourselves experiencing the sensation of “working for God”, regardless of our professional vocation. Maybe our work is primarily in a ministry position within our local church, but maybe it’s unleashing hospitality on people both inside and outside our faith community. Maybe our work is defined by mercy, being on the front lines with those who struggle most in society, or maybe it’s more administrative, serving behind the scenes to bring order to what would otherwise be chaos. There’s a tremendous amount of significance to be enjoyed at this stage.

Then there’s **Stage 4**, called **The Journey Inward**, which is typically not something you move into by your own volition (although you can fight against it). This is a deep and personal experience where you suddenly face an abrupt change in opposite direction and mode. Stage 4 involves a lot of questioning and doubting, and is full of confusion and uncertainty—it’s very de-stabilizing. What triggers Stage 4 is different for everyone—maybe it’s the process of healing from a hurt, or feeling like you’re living a script for your life that’s not truly yourself. Sometimes Stage 4 is the result of a break (or a sabbatical), or some work with a therapist, or some extended time in prayer. While it certainly doesn’t sound like much fun, Stage 4 is an extremely valuable period of time, where the reflecting, processing, and healing opens you up to new dreams and possibilities, where, deep down, you knew there was more to life than stages 1-3.

Then you'll notice on the map of *The Critical Journey*, this in-between-y stage that's not identified as an actual stage, but might as well be, given its significance in people's spirituality. This is what's referred to as **The Wall**. The Wall can happen anywhere in Stage 4—it can be the trigger that prompts the shift into Stage 4, or it can be the result of the reflection and work of Stage 4. Regardless, The Wall is simply described as “a pain you can't get around”. Before this stage, you can find ways to effectively numb the pain, but, here, you recognize that you will never be able to erase this stain. You face the reality that this “scar” of sorts, is now a permanent part of your life story. And even though the pain can block your way forward, you know that the only way out is through. At The Wall, the only way out is through. So, you can stop a spiritual journey, you can regress in your spiritual journey, or you can move through it.

If that happens, **Stage 5** awaits, known as **The Outward Journey**. It's called “outward” because it fundamentally involves living outside of our self-centredness. Having journeyed through The Wall, we're enjoying a new and more grounded centre. There's a new wholeness to us, that enables us to begin to actually enjoy life like never before. At Stage 5, we're much more calm and at peace. And the “growth” journey, at this stage, primarily involves resting—not like weekend or retirement-type resting, but the spiritual practice of resting on God. “Resting” means accepting our story, including our wounds, and embracing the ways that God has used them to shape us into the image of Jesus to a greater degree. And, because we're learning to live outside of our self-centredness, we're actually more eager and more focused on bearing the likeness of Jesus than we ever have been before—even though some of those former stages felt like leaps-and-bounds-levels of spiritual growth at the time. We're moving forward now!

Then, finally, there's **Stage 6**, simply known as the **Life of Love**. It's called this, because, by this point, love is more than something you feel or something you express or do from time to time. By Stage 6, a person has become love. They embody love, as they reflect God to the world. Stage 6 is the most at peace, with virtually zero ambition. It's defined by contentment and gratitude, where you're no longer stressed out. And, oddly, the process almost comes full circle again, because you begin to experience what'd referred to as a "second naiveté"—a recaptured innocence where you take wonder in the simplest of details of the life that God's given you. Very few people make it this far on the spiritual journey, but when they do, you tend know who they are.

This is the stage theory that Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich refer to as *The Critical Journey*. As we absorb the components of it today, let's appreciate that this model is not linear—in fact, it's probably more of an accrual, where you build off of previous stages of experience. Some have even diagrammed it like a spiral, constantly swirling upwards and down. Typically, the rates of development go from faster to slower, meaning that each successive stage tends to last longer and is harder to work through. And often, the essence of spiritual growth from one stage to the next involves working through the things that, particular to that stage, tend to keep you stuck there.

If you never want to move from ignorance to learning, you'll never advance to Stage 2. If you can't grow beyond black/white thinking and an "us/them" mentality, you'll never progress to Stage 3. At Stage 3 you're run by ambition, not obedience, so you have to overcome living as a performance. At Stage 4, you have to overcome the unhealthy introspection of navel-gazing. By the time you hit The Wall, you need to bring together the spiritual and psychological. And, only time will move you from Stage 5-6.

As I reflect on *The Critical Journey*, appreciating that it's a biographical map more than a biblical one (meaning, it's a practical tool, based on decades of people's real-life experiences, more than theology), I do see the invitation of Jesus at every stage. For example, in 2 Peter chapter 1, Peter invites his readers into spiritual growth this way:

Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love.

His language of "add to..." has the same accrual-type feel to *The Critical Journey*, and so many of those terms echo the essence of the various stages mapped out in the model: the knowledge-focus of Stage 2, the perseverance of Stage 4, the mutual affection of Stage 5, and of course, the bottom line that everything leads to a life of love.

So, as we consider where we find each of ourselves in this model today (and, if you're interested, there's a link available here, from Janet Hagberg's website, to do a personal assessment), let me make just one more initial observation of the model for today. I want us to notice how the first three stages—Recognition of God, Life of Discipleship, Productive Life—are naturally well-supported by the programs and ministries of local churches (worship services, small groups, ministry opportunities, etc.). Yet, the later three stages have increasingly less to do with the influence of local church programs. That's how maturity works—you gain an independence. (I'm looking forward to the day my children mature in that way financially!). But what often happens, especially when you add the pain and disorientation of The Wall, is that people find themselves disenfranchised by the lack of deliverables of their local church to support them in those later stages, that they bail on community and seek to journey alone.

I say that so we can all appreciate that Jesus' vision for His Church—which He also referred to as His Body and His Bride—did not have a cap on spiritual maturity. Simply put: you're not too spiritually mature for Jesus, and the family He loves. In fact, the process of maturity sheds consumerism, and—like in a healthy family dynamic—allows the more mature, less-dependent-on-the-family members to shift responsibility and leverage and be the church even more generously in the latter stages of faith.

This is what we're going to dig into in the coming weeks: how we can all support each other's spiritual journeys, appreciating that we're all in unique places. Next week we're going to view this map through a collective lens, appreciating that, in some ways, communities of faith journey together, and see where we find ourselves collectively as a family. And then, in the final week, we'll discover how to enjoy a unity of spiritual growth—in Jesus, towards a life of love—amidst the diversity of hundreds of us in hundreds of different places on the course of the race of faith. What we're excited to stir up through this mini-series is a greater awareness and understanding that we are, in fact, journeying, and journeying together, towards a life of love following Jesus Christ.

For today, let me leave you with one bottom line question captured by John Mark Comer in his summary of the book, that should help each of us more accurately identify where we're at in our own spiritual journey: **“Where is Jesus leading you, that you would rather not go?”** North American culture is an enemy of the interior life, and is strongly averse to moving past Stage 3. It takes a deeper level of trust in Jesus to have the courage to continue moving along *The Critical Journey* than any of us have probably ever known so far. But thankfully, we're not alone. Thanks to Jesus, we are, in fact, journeying, and journeying together, towards a life of love following Jesus Christ.