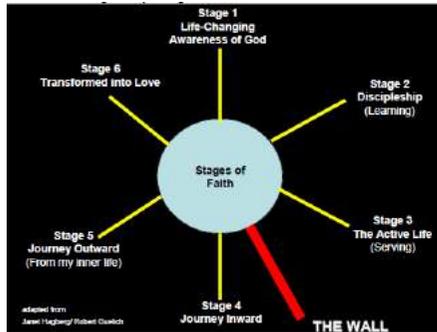


## Hitting the Wall

[Pete Scazzero](#) has a wealth of helpful material in his books on Emotionally Healthy Spirituality to aid us in understanding the various stages of faith. His adaptation of a model first proposed by Hagberg and Guelich in *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith*, suggests that "Hitting the Wall" is an essential stage in gaining emotional and spiritual maturity.

Although each stage builds naturally upon the other, we can very easily stagnate at a certain stage and choose not to move forward in our journey with Christ. Our Wall could be that intellectual questioning described by Peck and Fowler or it could be something more "affective," a crisis that turns our world upside down. It may come, 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, or a dryness or loss of joy in our relationship with God. This crisis of faith (which others call a desert experience) drives us into an Inward Journey, an unknown, mysterious place where we need to deeply trust. Often our image of God doesn't allow for such a difficult experience. It has been said that perhaps 85% of evangelicals never get past the Wall, to the new, grounded centre of knowing ourselves in God and then being free to truly love and serve.



## And don't forget:

The notion of seasons is preferable to the word stages, when describing our life in Christ. Circumstances may send us through them more than once. We don't control the seasons, they happen to us. Winter, Spring, Summer and Autumn come whether we welcome them or not. When we become conscious that there is such a thing as spiritual growth, they can be tempted to try and direct the process. But we cannot get to God under our own steam. We must allow God to do the directing.

Useful links:

Scott Peck <http://www.wmeades.com/id252.htm>

James Fowler <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/2219.htm>

Peter Scazzero <http://www.emotionallyhealthy.org>

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## Spiritual Practices

### Practice Eight

# "Seasons of the Spirit"



*"To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven" Ecc 3:1*

*"..they understood the times and knew what to do...." 1 Chronicles 12:32*

"Practice" means the repeated performance of a task or action regularly over time. A spiritual practice is exactly what the word suggests, a way to be deliberate about matters of the soul. This month's booklet introduces the notion of stages of faith, a concept where practice will need to be worked out in your life as an individual, for it reminds us that God has made us with wonderful variety.

*"A godshaped life is a flourishing tree" Proverbs 11: 28*

Vivian Coleman

[www.godshapedlife.com](http://www.godshapedlife.com)

## Noticing the Seasons

Some of us are more aware of the natural world than others. They notice the buds on the trees, the time of high tide, the songs of the birds, and the phase of the moon. But we can all choose to notice these things, to watch and listen and wonder. The spiritual journey has seasons too. You may not have used that metaphor, but you will have noticed an ebb and flow in your life with God. Some examples of factors that come into play are:

- intensive study
- demanding work seasons
- job security or insecurity
- single, couple and family seasons
- parenting babies, kids and teenagers
- grief and loss seasons
- overseas experiences
- poor health or acute illness
- financial abundance or stringency
- loneliness or depression
- busyness...and many more



All of these will affect the time we have for connecting with God and his people. And they will affect our energy for worship, service and discipleship practices.

God knows that. He doesn't often expect a business person working six days a week to devote the evening hours to intercessory prayer. He doesn't usually expect a low-income student to sponsor a World Vision child. He doesn't expect the mum of three pre-schoolers to serve in the Kids Programme (unless she is so passionate about an under-resourced ministry that she can do so with joy and realistic self-expectation – I've been there!) Christ invites us to journey with him in ways that fit with our seasons and don't lay a heavy burden on our soul.

*“Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light.”*

Jesus in Matthew 11: 29f

So how do we become aware of, and embrace the limits and possibilities of a particular stage of our faith journey? How can we flourish in the spiritual season that God wants us to enjoy at this time?

Here are few helpful concepts.

of fundamentalism or the vague scepticism of Sea of Faith liberals.

An understanding of the stages of spiritual development is important for building community. A group of only **Stage IV** people or only **Stage III** people or only **Stage II** people is, of course, not so much a community as a clique. A true community will likely include people of all stages. It is possible for people in different stages to transcend the sense of threat that divides them and to become a true community. Can we do that at our own local church?

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Peck's user-friendly outline and Fowler's academic work are just one way of seeing our spiritual seasons.

Here are some other useful concepts:

### Modified Engel Scale (as described by Signpost Communications)

The point of spiritual growth for ourselves and for those we care about, is to keep moving further down (up) the scale, one step at a time.

-10	Allegiance is to prevailing culture, with no God framework (functional atheism)
-9	Vague awareness of and belief in God, often accompanied by feeling of emptiness
-8	Awareness of supreme being, and wondering if God can be known - no knowledge of Jesus
-7	Initial awareness of gospel and Jesus – uncertainty and questions
-6	Interest in Jesus – emerging awareness of gospel, dissatisfaction with other worldview options
-5	Seeking to understand Jesus' story and implications of the gospel
-4	Positive attitude toward Jesus and faith, experiences of love
-3	Conviction - recognition of personal problem
-2	Understanding of gospel, counting of the cost of following Jesus
-1	Decision to respond in repentance and faith, may follow personal challenge
0	Change of allegiance – publicly declared in baptism or other ways
+1	Post-decision evaluation and consolidation
+2	Incorporation into the faith community (often may have happened at earlier stage)
+3	On-going process of conceptual and behavioural transformation
+4 - + 6	Responsible for own spiritual growth
+7 - +10	Responsible for own growth and that of others

## Moving and Growing:

*What spiritual practices will enhance the movement from your present stage to the next?*

**I to II:** This is where personal relationships make the most difference. Some churches make use of the notion of Free Market Small Groups, where people gather round a shared interest or community need, and spiritual conversations happen naturally. The friendship-based [Journeys material](#) from Rob Harley can fit in here, if you can source it, as can the [Alpha courses](#) which offer a blend of love and information.

**II to III:** Reading the Bible using a [set study format](#), such as covering the whole of scripture in a year, will be very useful in this early period where the disciple needs information and guidance. A prayer schedule and [scripture memorisation](#) can be shaped around this devotional practice. Joining a home group where faith is discussed and prayer is modelled will build practical skills; many find the Alpha programme very helpful in this transition. Serving in a volunteer ministry at church or in the community will also strengthen faith, and develop openness to what God might be doing in the lives of others. Other useful practices to learn include Sabbath, confession and healing prayer.

**III to IV:** You need lots of “white space” to embrace the doubts and questions! If they are intellectual issues, this may be the time to explore other denominations and even other faiths. You only find out that your mum is the best cook by eating someone else’s food occasionally! Read books and blogs, study the genres of the Bible, listen to debates, interact with others asking the same questions. (but don’t fall into the trap of only listening to the oppositional voices). If your questions are more to do with feelings, journaling is a great prayer practice to use in this season, as is getting in touch with the world of nature, perhaps through [Celtic writings](#). Many have found that spiritual direction (a scheduled non-invasive conversation with a spiritual companion) can be very freeing in this equivocal stage. So can getting involved in “incarnation” or practical compassion.

**IV and onwards:** the whole gamut of spiritual practices can be explored. The centuries-old [Daily Office](#), binding and burdensome at earlier stages, can be a delightful reminder of the presence of God in daily life. Use the Bible in an open-ended devotional way, tapping in to ancient practices and grounding your practice in that ‘second naiveté’ that looks beyond the sceptics and critics to the very life and hope of God. Various kinds of contemplative prayer, meditation, journaling and accountability are balanced with the outward focus of social activism, compassion and hospitality.

**Did you notice I didn’t mention attending worship?** That’s because being part of a worshipping community is helpful in every stage of this journey. What a challenge to preachers and worship coordinators, to cater to the needs/preferences of a wide range of spiritualities! No wonder some churches opt to stick firmly in one section of the ship – the certainties



## Introducing Stages of Faith

Have you ever noticed that followers of Jesus have very different ways of expressing their faith, that some adopt rigid views about what makes a “real Christian,” and that others seem to go right away from faith and the church, at least for a season? Did you know that often these differences are not evidence that someone has backslidden or joined a cult, but are part of the wondrous variety in the way God made us as spiritually-aware human beings?

Just as there are discernible stages in human physical and psychological growth, so there are stages in human spiritual development. The most widely read scholar of the subject today is [James Fowler](#) of Emory University, the writer of *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. But the most useful analysis is a simpler framework written by author [Dr Scott Peck](#), a medical doctor and behavioural scientist, internationally recognised “for his outstanding achievement in the field of psychiatry as an educator, researcher and clinician.” He came to a firm Christian conviction in midlife and is best known for his book *The Road Less Travelled*, which explains how Discipline, Love and Grace are essential to the fullest human experience. His work on the Stages of Christian Faith is found in *A Different Drum* and *Further Along the Road Less Travelled*.

Scott Peck noticed how people could have been committed to Christ for the same length of time, but exhibit quite different levels in those qualities of personhood (Discipline, Love and Grace). He also noticed that in his own psychiatric practice, discovering the spiritual dimension was broadening and health-giving for some people, while others found healing by relinquishing their Christian commitment. He realized this meant we are not all in the same place spiritually. He was able to describe a general pattern of progression through identifiable stages in human spiritual life. Although he was careful to acknowledge **that individuals are unique and do not always fit neatly into psychological or spiritual pigeonholes**, he did offer his findings as a useful template for understanding the variety amongst those who follow Jesus.

**STAGE I: Undeveloped/Unprincipled** (what Peck calls Chaotic)

**Stage I** is a stage of undeveloped spirituality, and in that sense can be described as chaotic - disordered, reckless and unprincipled. Relationships with fellow human beings lack empathy and are essentially manipulative and self-serving. Like very young children, these people tend to defy and disobey, because they are unwilling to accept a will greater than their own. Many people who have never grown out of Stage I are criminals, but others who, despite their having no integrating principles, can learn to play the game and rise to positions of prestige and power. Peck says some may even be presidents or preachers!

Peck says the transition from Stage I to Stage II is often a sharp, sudden change, a quantum leap; the word “conversion” testifies to this.



## STAGE II: Formal/ Institutional.

**Stage II** is the stage of certainty, in which a person has “blind faith” in authority figures and sees the world as divided simply into good and evil, right and wrong, us and them. The child’s development of obedience and conformity is an illustration. The majority of good, law-abiding citizens are firmly positioned in Stage II. They have begun to discover an integrating principle, but they find it mostly in laws and conventions, and can come across as legalistic, parochial, and dogmatic. Many followers of Jesus are Stage II people, in the sense that they have blind faith in God as an “external” authority, and feel most comfortable with clear cut answers and expert opinions. With such certainty comes a delightful humility, and a willingness to obey and serve, but Stage Two people can feel threatened by anyone who thinks differently from them. They have the “truth,” and see it as their responsibility to convert or save the rest of humanity. They are also alarmed by changes in rules, forms or liturgy, which is not surprising because it was exactly these familiar forms



that brought them out of chaos into a life of meaning. Stage II people see everyone else as Stage I, and do not understand that there are other stages (III and IV) to experience. Anyone who changes from Stage II after coming to faith is viewed as a “backslider,” although they may have actually grown **forwards** into a different stage.

## Stage III: Independent/Curious

**Stage III** is the stage of scepticism and questioning, which echoes the upheaval and individuation of adolescence. A Stage III person does not accept things on faith but only if they are logically convincing. Many people working in scientific and technological research are firmly embedded in Stage III. They often reject the existence of spiritual or supernatural forces, since these are difficult to measure or prove scientifically. Those who do retain their spiritual beliefs move away from the simple, official doctrines of fundamentalism to seeing themselves as self-governing human beings. Although individualistic, they are not antisocial and are often deeply involved in, and committed to, social and environmental causes. They make up their own minds about things, and exercise scepticism about everything from what they read in the papers to what they hear from the pulpit. But despite their apparent “loss of faith,” these active truth seekers are arguably more spiritually-developed than others who are content to remain in Stage II.



## Stage IV: Mystic/Integrated

**Stage IV** is the stage where an individual starts enjoying the mystery and beauty of nature and human spirituality. The healthy scepticism of Stage III is balanced by a new appreciation of grand patterns in nature, a greater desire to practise meditation, reflection and prayer, and a deeper understanding of good and evil, forgiveness and mercy, religion and faith. This person’s spirituality is significantly different from that of a Stage II person, in the sense that they do not



accept things through blind faith or out of fear, but because of genuinely-considered belief. This is the stage of losing your attachment to your ego, loving others as yourself, and forgiving your enemies. Those of a different religious or ethical persuasion are not harshly judged or marginalised. This is a stage of both/and, rather than either/or.

Stage Fours tend to perceive God as immanent, indwelling Spirit rather than an external father figure. They are able to transcend their own background, culture and limitations and think more about an interdependent global community, where there are few clear-cut answers. They embrace the mystery of life along with a “second naiveté” (Paul Racour) that looks for the authentic voice of faith as received in Bible and History.

Peck argues that while transitions from Stage I to Stage II, and often II to III, are sharp, the transition from Stage III to Stage IV is much more gradual. The results of these changes are nonetheless noticeable to others and mark a significant difference in the personality of the individual. *‘Seek and you shall find,’* it has been said. If people in Stage III seek truth deeply and widely enough, they find what they are looking for — enough pieces to begin to be able to fit them

together, but never enough to complete the whole puzzle. In fact, the more pieces they find, the larger and more magnificent the puzzle becomes. Yet they are able to get glimpses of the “big picture” and to see that it is very beautiful indeed--and that it strangely resembles those “primitive myths and superstitions” they see in their Stage II parents or grandparents.

**So, an age-old dilemma faces church leaders:** how to bring people from Stage II to Stage IV, without allowing them to enter Stage III? Peck would say you can’t; there has to be an experience of doubt and questioning. Even those who describe themselves as atheists can be on a higher spiritual level than Stage II, because their openness and curiosity is a required stage of growth to enter into Stage IV.

