

The Wall

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 0 0] There was a young girl named Agnes, and after she became a follower of Jesus, Agnes was absolutely full of faith. We might say that she was on fire for Jesus, and she wrote in her journal extensively about the deep union that she felt with God. She would write that she felt a continual sense of God's presence in her life. You know, I read that and I think, man, I would love to feel that. She wanted to devote her entire life to loving Jesus, so she eventually left home and she became a missionary among the poorest of the poor. But the story doesn't end there. After a while, her journal entries began to change. She wrote things like, where is my faith?

Deep down, there's nothing but emptiness and darkness. In one place, she wrote, my God, how painful is this unknown pain?

And then much more directly, I have no faith. Now, of course, I'm talking about Mother Teresa, and these writings were intended only for her spiritual directors. Nevertheless, some people decided to publish them and make them widely available. And so, a lot of atheists and secular people came out and said, well, here you go.

Mother Teresa lost her faith. But more mature, seasoned believers recognized this for what it actually was, what we might call the wall, or what St. John of the Cross called the dark night of the soul.

Every genuine believer is going to face the wall at some point in your journey. Every follower of Jesus, sooner or later, is going to go through a dark night of the soul. Some of you have been there, and I know you've been there because I know you, and you've been through it. Others of you, I think, are probably there right now. I think this last year has probably caused many people to go into a kind of dark night of the soul for one reason or another. Just pick your reason. There's plenty out there. All of us are going to face this at some point in our journey. I've gone through the wall at least three times since I came to faith a little over 20 years ago. And so, it's going to happen.

[2 : 3 5] And knowing what the wall is, and knowing how to get through the wall, is essential for anyone desiring to grow in your faith. Because at a certain point, going through the wall becomes necessary in order to progress. People who have never gone through this are sort of stagnant. Their growth stops.

So, what we're going to do is we're going to look at Psalm 13, which was written by David, I think, as a young adult when he was going through the wall. And we're going to learn three things from this passage.

We're going to learn first, what is the wall? And then number two, why does it matter so much? Why is it so important? And then finally, of course, a very important question, how do we get through it? So, what is it? Why does it matter? How to get through it? Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. And as we say every week, it doesn't always say what we want it to say. Sometimes it says things that align with what we want to be true. Other times it says things that are baffling, confusing, offensive. But Lord, perhaps that's what we need. Perhaps what we need is to be disturbed, to be upset, maybe even to be offended. Because sometimes there are things that are true that we don't want to face, that we don't want to admit. And Lord, sometimes those are the things that we most need to hear. And so, I pray that you, in your wisdom, which is far greater than ours, would tell us what we need to hear this morning in the power of your Holy Spirit. We ask this in the name of your Son, Jesus. Amen. So, first of all, what is the wall? So, I want to clarify that first by saying a couple of things that the wall is not. Number one, the wall is not necessarily the same thing as a bout of depression. All right, I've experienced depression. I've taken antidepressants at a point in my life. I've also been through the wall, and I can tell you they're not the same thing.

There are times when you can be severely depressed, but you're not necessarily at the wall. Likewise, you can hit the wall in your faith, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you feel depressed. They can coexist, but they can also be separate experiences. Another way of disambiguating this is to make it clear that the wall is not synonymous with facing a life crisis.

Right? Life is full of trials and crises. And there are many times, and I have experiences in my own life, when a crisis actually brings you closer to God, where it deepens your prayer life, it strengthens your faith. It can be really good for us, and God's Word actually says that trials are one of God's ways of refining us, a kind of purifying fire. So it's not the same thing as a life crisis. The thing that makes a wall different is that in such cases, God is the crisis. God is the crisis. So usually it starts with a trial or a crisis of some kind, a miscarriage, inability to get pregnant, prolonged unwanted singleness, unemployment, a divorce, a cancer diagnosis, the death of someone that you love, a church splitting, a church splitting, the moral failure of a church leader, ongoing unresolvable chronic pain, right? We face something like this, but instead of leading us into a deeper faith, your faith starts to crumble. It starts to dry up. Your faith starts to come apart at the seams. If you consider the example of David, I think it's pretty clear that there are very few people who have enjoyed a closer relationship with God than David in the Old Testament. 1 Samuel 13 verse 14 calls him a man after God's own heart.

[6 : 42] But then God calls David to go to work for a certain boss, a man named Saul. We looked at Saul a few weeks ago in our Emotionally Healthy Spirituality Series. We realized that Saul looked very impressive on the outside. He was an impressive sort of career Christian, to use our modern concepts, and yet underneath he was an abusive manipulator. And Saul was so threatened by David, he was so jealous of David, that he actually tried to kill him. And so David had to leave his family and he had to live on the run as a fugitive hiding in caves for something like 13 years. And during this time, David's faith starts to come apart. It starts to come apart at the seams. He writes in verse 13, how long, O Lord? I mean, you can imagine maybe even sitting in a cave. How long is it going to be like this? In the first stanza, he asks how long four times in a row. How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

How long am I going to pray? And I'm praying to the back of your head. He feels abandoned by God. And then he says, how long must I take counsel in my soul? You know what anxiety does to you when you just ruminate on things? You just ruminate and think and think and think and think and think, and think yourself in circles. That's what he's talking about here. How long will I have sorrow in my heart? All the day. From the moment I am conscious in the morning to the moment I am unconscious when I finally fall asleep. In the late hours of the night, I feel nothing but sorrow.

That's depression. How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? He feels powerless. When your faith crumbles, problems that used to seem like they were surmountable get bigger.

And the enemies that you face, the things that keep you up at night, get bigger and bigger and bigger. And all of a sudden, it feels like you're powerless against the obstacles and the problems that you face because your faith is coming apart. You feel all alone. You feel abandoned.

We might reword this first stanza this way. God, if you are all powerful and you are good and you love me, how could you let this happen to me? That's really what he's saying. So hitting the wall means everything in your faith starts to come apart. It means your faith no longer works. You know, up to this point, I believed and I had faith and I got strength from my faith, but now I'm facing this situation and my faith isn't working. I just can't make sense of this, right? And we lose all sense of God's presence in our lives. You sit there and you pray and you're like, I just feel like I'm speaking words in an empty room. I feel like my words are just bumping into the ceiling, but nobody's listening.

[9 : 41] So you go through a time like this, you may feel burned out, anxious, empty, angry, hopeless, or listen, you may feel nothing. Because sometimes the wall turns your heart into Teflon and you just go numb.

I was in my 20s. I was living in Boston. I was finishing up seminary. At the time, for a lot of reasons, I was overloading credit hours. So I was taking something like 20 credit hours per semester.

I was also working at a residential treatment facility for kids who were either custody of the Department of Social Services or the Department of Mental Health. So these kids had been through a whole lot of suffering. And at the same time, I was doing a separate internship for my counseling degree.

And so I'm doing all of this and I'm working all the time. So I'm doing overnight shifts at the residential treatment facility and I'm writing my papers for school. Probably shouldn't tell you this, but I'm writing my seminary papers, doing overnights during my residential shifts.

And all through my job, I was being confronted all the time with enormous amounts of suffering. Right? I was getting to know these kids. I was learning about things that had been done to these kids.

[10 : 59] It was a level of suffering that I just couldn't process. And so all this is happening. And then I realized one day, I can't remember the last time I felt any sense of God's presence. But more to the point, I didn't care. I didn't care.

My faith, I realized, had become this kind of joyless slog. And I remember just thinking, why am I even doing this? Why am I doing any of it? You know, that's the wall. And it can last for weeks. It can last for months. I think probably most often it can last for years. I mean, for me, it was at least a couple of years of feeling that. And who knows how long I've been feeling it before I recognized that I had been feeling it? Right? So that's the wall. Now, why does the wall matter? Why is it important? Why is it actually, as I said earlier, crucial to go through something like that? You say, man, I don't want to go there. Why does it matter? Well, I think our therapeutic culture tends to assume that our goal should be to feel happy all the time.

We treat negative emotions as pathology. We treat negative emotions as problems to be solved as quickly as possible. So, you know, our tendency is if I feel negative emotions for any amount of time, and they don't immediately go away, our knee-jerk reaction is to seek out counseling or medication.

And that's kind of our go-to is, man, I'm feeling sad. Maybe I need a pill. I'm feeling kind of anxious. It's keeping me up at night. Maybe I need to go talk to a therapist. And I want to make it clear that I think in some cases, this is absolutely necessary. Clinical depression is a real thing, and that needs to be treated. But I think it's safe to say that we have in our society an over-reliance on these things, because we don't want to feel negative feelings. And unfortunately, I think a lot of Christians buy into this way of thinking. I think there are a lot of Christians out there who are faithful Christians, but they think that being a faithful Christian means that you should always feel peaceful and happy. And that if you don't feel peaceful and happy, that it somehow means that there's something wrong with you or something wrong with your faith. You're not a good Christian.

And I think a lot of churches buy into this by assuming that every single gathering, that the one goal of getting together is to create an emotional mountaintop experience. And so they pour enormous amounts of resources into making sure the production value is as high as it can be, so that there can be this emotional experience that is created for people. And all of that is buying into this idea that being a Christian is about being happy, being peaceful, celebrating, living on the mountaintop. But we need to understand that the ancients, our predecessors in the faith, people like St. John of the Cross, knew better than us. Allowing people to experience negative emotions is absolutely crucial for spiritual growth. And St. John wrote that the only way to progress in our journey through the dark night of the soul is to be willing to receive it as a gift.

[14 : 21] You say, well, go through this horrible experience and you're telling me that I need to see that as a gift from the Lord. And that's exactly what St. John of the Cross says. He says, you hit the wall.

That is not a pathology that needs to be treated. That's a gift that needs to be embraced. And he goes on to say this. He says, God uses these times to purge our souls.

One of the most common forms of idolatry is the tendency to worship our feelings about God rather than God himself. One of the most common forms of idolatry is to worship our feelings about God rather than God himself. And so John says that God uses the dark night to strip away that idolatry. You know, a couple of weeks ago, we talked about the importance as Christians of listening to our emotions. We said it's very important to listen to our emotions, to be aware of them, to allow ourselves to feel them. The dark night is the other side of the coin.

The dark night is what keeps us from enthroning those feelings and making them ultimate. And the truth, as I said, is that hitting the wall is a crucial step in the road to spiritual maturity.

Because coming through the wall, you know, life on the other side of an experience like this, it will profoundly change you as a person. I would put it this way, even from my own experience, the wall blesses us by breaking us. It blesses us by breaking us. And being broken, if you're a Christian, is a good thing. Jesus actually says at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, blessed are the poor in spirit. He's talking about people who've been broken. If you have been broken, broken, you're blessed. And it changes you in some amazing ways. You know, you find that you actually become much slower to take offense. It's much harder to offend somebody who's been broken.

[16 : 35] Because people who have never been broken, you know, they're kind of puffed up with pride. And when you're puffed up like that, you're prickly. You know, that puffed up, stretched, bloated sense of self is really super sensitive to any perceived slight is going to irritate you. But if you've been broken over your own sin, and somebody comes along and they just straight up criticize you to your face, your response isn't to blow up and get offended and get righteous indignation and all of that, your response is to just kind of laugh and say, you've got no idea. You think that's my biggest problem? You have no idea. I'm so much worse than you think. But you don't say that out of any sense of self-loathing. You've become secure enough in God's love, because that's what got you through the wall, that you can just say what's true. Right? You think that's my biggest problem? I wish that was my biggest concern. Right? It changes you in the sense that you, I think, become much more compassionate toward other people who are struggling in their faith. You know, there are some Christian cultures where if you express any doubt or ask questions, you're sort of outed as a not a true believer. And you go through an experience like the wall, and you're like, oh, of course you have questions.

This faith is unbelievably hard at times. And there are questions I will never know the answer to until I meet God face to face. You become, I think, much more charitable toward people with whom you disagree. You know, people have never been broken. Their theology is like very black and white. It's very watertight. Everything is crystal clear. It's this way. It's all mapped out. You know, it all fits into a spreadsheet and in a textbook. You go through the wall, and you're like, yeah, I can understand how we would disagree on that. You develop a much greater capacity for mystery and for paradox. You realize that you can have an orthodox faith, but within orthodoxy, there's mystery. There's some truths within orthodoxy that seem incompatible. How can God be both three and one? How can we be both sinners but also saints? You know, how can salvation being enacted right now be both already here and yet not fully here? You know, and you realize, wow, these are paradoxes. These don't seem to make sense. You become much more willing to admit when there are questions that you simply don't know the answer to. You know, you're a small group leader, you're a pastor, and somebody asks you a question, and instead of kind of faking your way through it, or, you know, you say, man, I don't know. That's a great question. So hitting the wall profoundly changes you. It breaks you. So this is what the wall is. This is why it matters so much. This is how it grows us by breaking us. Now I want to talk about how to get through it, right? That's a pretty pressing question. There is no surefire way to get through it. There's no surefire way to get through the wall. There's no way to guarantee that you're going to get through it in any amount of time.

Like I said, it could be weeks, could be months, probably going to be years. There's no surefire step-by-step process. But what I can do is to tell you three things that I think will significantly help you in the journey if and when you find yourself in the wall.

The first thing that is going to really help you is to simply recognize the wall for what it is. Extremely important. A lot of people fail to recognize that they're at the wall.

They realize that their faith is stagnating. They realize kind of like I did, wow, I haven't felt a sense of God's presence in a long time. I haven't felt any connection to God in a long time. And so the first thing that most people do is to make some sort of external change. They start looking for new books to read. They look for retreats that they might attend. A lot of people, if they're going to church, think that it means they need to go to a different church. Well, I've gotten as much juice out of this orange as I can. Now I've got to find another setting where I can continue to grow. And so they move churches. And sometimes there's good reasons to leave churches. But what's funny is in a place like D.C., if you're a Christian in a place like D.C., it's kind of like a small town and a lot of the pastors know each other. And so the pastors are many times aware when people are going from their church to somebody else's church or coming from somebody else's church to our church.

[21 : 22] And we say, well, why'd they leave? Oh, they left over these concerns. And then you say, well, we have the same concerns in our church. Same problems. Same issues. Right? We have people leaving our church for the same reasons. And so what you see over time, and I've been up at a pastor something like 14 years here, you see people just moving around to churches. Right? And again, sometimes there's good reasons for that. But many times it's an external solution to an internal problem. And it's not going to work. Because the thing about the wall is you take it with you wherever you go. You can't run away from it. There's only one way to deal with the wall. And it's either to sit there in front of it and pretend like it's not there or to push through it. Right? But making an external change is not going to solve an internal problem. So the first thing to do is just to recognize that you've hit the wall. Other people say, you know, well, I feel like I've just, I lost my faith. I don't think faith is something that you can just misplace like your car keys. I think that, I think that you hit the wall and sometimes it can be years before you feel a sense of God's presence again. It doesn't necessarily mean you lost your faith. It might mean that God is doing something really deep and really painful in you. That you're on the surgery table and you've been spiritually anesthetized because God is doing something in you. Right? So the first thing is just to recognize the wall for what it is. Number two comes right along behind that. Accept it as a gift from God. Not because you're a masochist. Not because God is a sadist. Accept it as a gift from

God because you recognize that God is doing work in you that's going to change you. So what does accepting it mean? Well, it means don't hide behind spiritual platitudes. Well, I'm sure God is working all this out for my own good. You know, don't hide behind that. If you're angry at God, if you're frustrated at God, you can say that. God knows it. So don't hide behind spiritual platitudes. Don't hide behind spiritual superficiality. Don't try to escape the wall by numbing or self-medicating or distracting yourself. Here's a challenging concept, but I hope it's clear what I'm saying. We need to be willing to inhabit our feelings. Here's the weird thing about feelings. The only way to deal with your feelings is to feel them. Right? You have to feel it. You have to be willing to inhabit it. If you're angry, inhabit the anger. If you're sad, inhabit the sadness. And what will happen is it'll pass.

The feeling will pass eventually. So be willing to inhabit your feelings. Know they're going to pass eventually. And then along with this, let go of your need for control. A lot of getting through the wall is just realizing there is a God and I'm not Him. And God is going to have to do this in me. I can't do it on my own. And we let go of our need for control. So number one, recognize it. Number two, accept it.

Number three, learn to fly by the instruments. Learn to fly by the instruments. Pilots not only learn how to fly using their eyes. You know, if you're learning to fly a plane or a helicopter, first you learn how to fly based on what you can see. And so pilots learn how to fly using their eyes, but they also have to learn and be licensed in flying by the instruments. Right? So in clouds or heavy fog, when you have zero visibility, you have to know how to fly the plane trusting solely on the instrument panel. So you're not looking out the windshield, you're looking down at the dials. And you have to fly the plane by those alone. And it's the exact same thing for followers of Jesus. Right? There are times when you can clearly see God at work. It is 100% clear visibility. You can see for miles. You can see God doing all kinds of things. Prayers are getting answered. You're inspired when you're worshiping with people. You feel God's spirit and generosity moving you. You feel close to the people around you. You know, it's 100% visibility in your life. But there are other times when you hit the wall and you're in the storm and you're at 0% visibility. You look out the cockpit and all you can see. It's pitch black, thick fog, driving rain. You can't see anything.

And that's the point when you've hit the wall where you have to decide, am I going to continue to look out the window here and to try to see something? Or am I going to make a shift? And am I going to start flying by the instruments of my faith?

[26 : 08] What do I mean by the instruments of my faith? The things that remind us what is true, even if they don't feel true, even if we can't see them. Right? So number one, God's word. Am I going to look away from what I'm looking in front of me and I'm going to look at this and I'm going to say, I know I can't see it here, but I'm going to look here and I'm going to trust that this is going to guide me in the right direction and I'm not going to crash into a mountain. And I'm going to trust this. I'm going to fly by this instrument of my faith. Prayer. The faith of the communion of saints.

I'm not feeling this, but the person on my left and the person on my right, they believe it and they see it and I'm going to trust them. I'm going to trust the communion of saints to have faith when I can't have faith. These are the instruments of faith. And this is exactly what David does, by the way. Even though David doesn't feel like it, even though David believes that God has abandoned him, he continues to pray. You see that in verses three and four. David continues to pray. He doesn't give up. And you say, well, why does he do that? How does he have the confidence to do that? Well, verse five, I've trusted in your steadfast love. I've trusted in your steadfast love. This phrase, steadfast love, *chesed*, is one of the most important words in all of scripture, especially if you're going through the wall. It might be the most important word if you're going through the wall. And here's why. This is not just sentimentality. This is not just saying, steadfast love, you know, God just, you know, he gets the good feelings when he thinks about you. This means enduring allegiance, right? It's a covenant word.

It's God's enduring allegiance to you. It means God is for you every minute of every day. It means that God never turns his back on his people. So God's steadfast love, here's why it matters for people who are at the wall. God's steadfast love means your relationship with God doesn't ultimately hinge on your commitment to him, but rather on his commitment to you. And that's a huge difference from other religions. It means that even when you hit the wall, even when your commitment to God evaporates, God remains committed to you. Now, some of us might ask, well, how can I know that God is committed to loving me? I don't feel it. I don't see it. I look out the cockpit, and it's pitch black outside. I can't see anything. Here's how we know. Nearly every major figure in scripture had to go through the wall, right? Abraham and Sarah. Do you know how long, you know,

God, they wait 75. It's Abraham 75. God finally comes and says, all the infertility is over. I'm going to give you a son. Do you know how long they have to wait after God makes that promise? You know, you read it and you think, what, a year? No, at least nine months. Maybe two years, you know. 25 years.

All right, God makes a promise, I'm going to give you a child. 25 more years. Abraham was 100 before that promise. Talk about hitting the wall. God, is this a horrible joke? You know, you get our hopes up and then just smash us into the ground? Abraham hit the wall. Sarah hit the wall.

[29 : 38] You know, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Naomi. Naomi says, I've lost everything. You know, I lost my husband. I lost my two sons. I'm stuck with these Moabite daughters-in-law that I don't even want to be around. Don't even call me Naomi anymore. Call me bitter. That's all I feel right now.

I'm bitter. She hit the wall. Jonah, Elijah. Jonah wanted to die. Elijah wanted to die. Jeremiah wanted to die. Nehemiah, Peter, Paul, everybody hit the wall. But no one more than Jesus.

Jesus. No one more than Jesus. You say, well, why did Jesus hit the wall? He was God's son. He was perfect. His faith was perfect, right? He never doubted God. What do you think? Because human beings turned our backs on God, right, a long time ago. That's what the word sin means. Sin doesn't just mean you broke the rules. Sin means you turned your back on God. It means we rejected God. It means that we live in the world that God made as though he doesn't exist. That's what sin means. But God's steadfast love means he'll never turn his back on us.

So if you're God, how do you deal with people who have turned their backs on you? And you can't turn your back on them. You won't because of your steadfast love for them. Jesus took our place.

On the cross, Jesus faced the ultimate dark night of the soul. You know, when we go through an experience like this, we feel like God has abandoned us. But on the cross, God actually abandoned Jesus. That's why he cries out in the words of Psalm 22, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? But the reason that Jesus was willing to endure that dark night was not only his commitment to his Father. You see, it was his commitment to his people. It was his commitment to us because of his steadfast love. And this is the hope of the gospel for anyone who's in the wall.

[31 : 48] The hope of the gospel is this. Because of what Jesus did, because of the dark night of the soul that Jesus endured, because God turned his back on him, he will never have to turn his back on us.

And it doesn't matter if your faith and your commitment to God evaporate. So even when our commitment to God falters, his commitment to us remains firm. And because of that, you can know that no matter how bad, even if it's been years and you've been in the wall, it will pass. The dark night will end. The sun will rise. The fog will clear. You will look up from the instruments and you'll be able to see again. And then we will say in the words of David, my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me. Let's pray. Lord, again, mere words apart from your spirit.

Lord, we know that we are treading on the edges. We are sticking our toes in the shallows of something that is deep and profound and terrifying. And Lord, far be it from us to make light of such a thing. I ask instead that your Holy Spirit would make true the truth of these words, even as you made flesh out of your eternal word. I pray that you would minister to those of us who need it right now, those of us who will need it, those who aren't here, anyone who is in the midst of this dark night. I pray that the hope of the gospel would shine like a beam of sunlight into a darkened forest and remind us that you're there and remind us of the hope that we have in your son, Jesus. And it's in his name that we pray. Amen.