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GROWING TOWARD
WHOLENESS,
HOLINESS, AND LOVE
A Reliable Map

There are far, far better things
ahead than any we leave behind.

C.S. LEWIS

Life is a pilgrimage—a journey to our eternal destination. For all of us, there is the life we planned, the life we have, and the life that is waiting for us. “We must be willing to get rid of the life we’ve planned,” Joseph Campbell writes, “so as to have the life that is waiting for us.”¹ While Joseph Campbell refers to a life of our own making, Jesus invites us to a journey on the path to the “life that is waiting for us”—one that He has destined from eternity, a path marked by freedom in Christ and His unfailing love. His invitation is to leave behind our well-ordered, predictable lives to live an

extraordinary life filled with deep meaning and purpose. This sacred way involves entering into a whole new way of seeing and thinking, a whole new manner of moving and relating. Through this process of discovery that we will call the five Stages of the Soul, we discover who we are, our unique place in this world, and the humble honor of knowing and being known by the One who created us.

Like a hiker setting out to walk the trails of the mountains of Colorado, we must have a reliable map of the terrain ahead to help keep us on the right path. It is the same with our spiritual life. To understand the spiraling path of the five Stages of the Soul—from Our First Love (conversion) to deeper, Intimate Love—we need a way to navigate and then assess the growth of our love for God over our entire lives. This process can give us a language for our experience and can assure us that we are not alone in our doubts and struggles.

In the courses I have taught on Christian spiritual formation, I have asked students in the beginning of the course, “How does God actually change us?” Generally, students look bewildered and offer vague responses about prayer, Bible reading, and trials. The students seem confused not only about how God forms us but about what the process of spiritual growth and change looks like.

As a young believer, I was told that a commitment to follow Christ would involve a lifelong journey of living life with Christ and for Christ. At some unknown point, I would come to the journey’s end and then enter into my eternal, heavenly home. The process, I was told, was clear: salvation (conversion), sanctification (a very, very long process!), and

glorification (seeing Christ face to face in eternity). I was further instructed that God would be transforming me into the image of Christ through the process of sanctification as I chose to obey the directives in His Word and live a life of surrender. I would hopefully end my journey as a follower of Christ reflecting something of the character of Christ.

But what about the days when I wasn't following Christ? What about the seasons of doubt and dryness? What about the days when my heart was cold and rebellious and I wanted nothing to do with God? Had the sanctification process stopped? Or what about the days when all seemed well, from my perspective, and I was faithfully following Christ? Was I actually changing then? If I was being kind to others, did that mean my heart was actually changing or had I just learned to act nice? How did I know, other than gaping flaws in my character, if I was actually *becoming* more like Christ?

To be formed into Christ's image and continue to mature and persevere through trials, we need to understand the stages of growth and change. These Stages of the Soul can serve as markers of where we are in our formation so that by the end of our days we can, with full confidence, know "how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:18b–19).

What will it take to become like Christ? Most of us start with the notion that we first must change. We were told, somewhere along the way, that God would love us *if* we change. But the truth is actually the reverse. God loves us

first so we will change. What motivates us to grow in our love relationship with God is actually experiencing His love in the depth of our souls—to know God as a lover rather than a rule giver. Real intimacy with God—not only worship, discipleship, or practicing moral uprightness—is a giving of ourselves that mirrors the radical gift of God in Christ. We are called to become whole and holy (Lev. 11:45), which means conformity with a love that is willing to give up everything for others.

This journey takes time, radical honesty, and examination of our hearts. It will require us to be willing to enter into the unknown territory of our souls—the parts we are afraid of examining. Daily, it will cost us letting go of everything we hold dear to realize what has eternal value. It will mean being primarily concerned about grieving God’s heart in all the decisions we make. It will mean loving God more than anything else and allowing Him to remake us entirely.

C. S. Lewis vividly describes and compares the process of our soul transformation to the reconstruction of a home. He writes:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You

thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.²

During this transformation, God is co-creating with each one of us to make something beautiful out of our lives that we never could realize on our own. He does not call us to be wandering travelers on this journey. He calls us to actively participate with Him so that we can become the fulfillment of His divine purposes in this world.

A RELIABLE MAP

The five-stage model presented in this book follows the life of Jesus and integrates truths from the Scriptures as it unfolds the *process* by which a Christian will mature in the faith.

Stage One is *Our First Love—Called into Saving Faith*. In this stage, we are embarking with joy upon the spiritual journey with Jesus Christ as our Redeemer and Savior. We see this in the example of Jesus' calling to Peter to drop his nets and follow Him.

In **Stage Two**, defined as *Obedient Love—Learning the Ways of Godliness*, the believer is trained up in the fundamentals of the faith to live and grow within the body of Christ. After accepting Jesus' invitation, Peter becomes a disciple of his Rabbi, following closely and obediently.

In **Stage Three**, marked by *Persevering Love—Invitation to Intimacy*, the believer is invited into a more in-depth understanding of what it means to surrender, along with developing a sacrificial heart that God shapes and forms for

His purposes. This stage involves a more profound internalization of one's faith and belief and a greater desire for intimacy with Christ. This stage often contains unexpected setbacks and realizations about oneself. For instance, we see Peter deny his beloved Jesus three times: "While the words of denial were being spoken, Peter heard the crow of a rooster ([Luke] 22:60b). At that instant, the Lord turned and looked at Peter ([Luke] 22:61a). One can only imagine the searing pain of conscience that swept over Peter at that moment . . . "The effect on Peter was shattering."³

The believer in **Stage Four, *Sacrificial Love—Living the Kingdom Here and Now***, is mature and steadfast in his reliance upon Christ in order to serve and love others. After Jesus is crucified and resurrected, we see a new Peter emerge. The impetuous, anxious Peter becomes empowered to courageously proclaim the message of Jesus to the Jewish authorities; he is becoming the "rock" upon which Jesus said He would build His church (Matt. 16:18).

In the final stage, **Stage Five—*Intimate Love—Being Light and Love for the World***, the believer rests assuredly in the presence of Christ and surrenders all to serve Him. This is most notably seen as sacrificial love for Christ and His kingdom, even unto death. We see the apostle Peter and the other disciples encounter the risen Christ at the Galilean seashore, the third time Jesus appears to the disciples after the resurrection. Three times Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me? . . . then feed my sheep" (John 21:15–17). Peter, now tried and tested, is being invited by Christ to love Him by living not for himself but for the benefit of others. Peter's

last season of the journey culminates in giving up his very life for his beloved Rabbi.

Underlying Assumptions of the Stages of the Soul

As we explore these stages in the following chapters, there are some fundamental assumptions and critical elements that are important to keep in mind:

- Jesus is our model of life, character, and conduct; our hearts are formed by Him.
- Each stage builds on the stage preceding it.
- The process is not as linear as it appears but rather more of a spiral. As we continue to grow, we will inevitably be circling back and picking up what has not been thoroughly learned in prior stages.
- Suffering and pain take on different dimensions in each stage as we grow closer to God.
- We will encounter unique obstacles to our growth in each stage that may inhibit us from continuing to mature.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EACH STAGE

Each stage includes a section describing the **characteristics** and concepts unique to that stage. We will identify notable qualities often demonstrated in each stage, and what moving on to the next stage entails.

As with any journey, we will encounter **obstacles** in each stage, including temptations that, depending on our choices, can impede our growth. Until we walk into eternity, we will

be confronted with all the aspects of ourselves that are not Christlike, all the idolatrous values and affections that keep our hearts from being fully devoted to Christ.

In the book of Matthew, we see this in the man who wants to follow Jesus but whose father has just died. He asked Jesus if he could first give his father a proper burial. Jesus challenged his priorities by saying, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead” (Matt. 8:21–22). We always have before us the ability to freely choose our way or God’s way. God will never override our choices.

In each stage, God allows **suffering** for us throughout the stages to purify us and teach us. Enduring suffering—such as relational difficulties, physical ailments, emotional infirmities due to job loss, divorce, or death of a loved one—can be the most significant means by which we change.

By nature, human beings are pain avoidant and pleasure seeking. God will allow the times where our circumstances are unmanageable and our fear and insecurities rise to the surface to draw us to Him. As we move through the various stages of the soul, we will see how God tenderly uses pain and suffering to encourage us to move to the next stage of transformation. Like a small child receiving a vaccination for the first time, we often are confused about why God is allowing us to experience pain. Just as that child comes to understand the good purpose behind the vaccination as she matures, so we may eventually come to see how God masterfully crafts situations to teach us and to see His goodness in the suffering.

The chart on pages 32–33 provides an overview of the stages and their components.

Quite simply, this is a model of following the pattern of our Rabbi to become like Him in all our ways. It is no small thing to accept Jesus' invitation. For each of us, there will be certain things we will need to leave behind—things our hearts cling to.

An example of this ultimate surrender is seen in the life of William Borden. He could never have predicted the path ahead of him when he chose to follow Christ in his youth. He was an heir to the multimillion dollar Borden Dairy estate and was given an unusual gift upon graduating from high school—to travel around the world. While the average teenager was dealing with peer pressure, grades, and who they were going to date, Borden, with his mentor, was traveling through Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. In all of his rich experiences, he was most deeply moved by the poverty and inequity he observed. A passion grew within him to do what he could to bring God's love and hope to the least and the lost. "When I look ahead a few years it seems as though the only thing to do is prepare for the foreign [mission] field," Borden announced in a letter to his parents. His father discounted his desire stating, "Wait until you are 21 before making any life decisions."⁴

In the back of his Bible, Borden wrote his own response: "No reserves."⁵

Borden returned home and attended Yale. During his time there, he initiated and organized Bible studies and prayer groups. By the time he graduated, 1,000 of the 1,300 students were attending the weekly Bible studies.⁶

STAGES *of* THE SOUL

STAGES	STAGE ONE	STAGE TWO
	Our First Love— <i>Called into Saving Faith</i>	Obedient Love— <i>Learning the Ways of Godliness</i>
Key Scripture	"This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins. (1 John 4:10 NLT)	"For this very reason, 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. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 1:5–8)
Key Characteristics of the Transformational Process Into Christ-likeness	We have an encounter with God's love that leads us to salvation.	We allow God's love to bring our behavior, attitudes and desires into conformity with Christ.
Key Obstacles to the Transformational Process into Christ-likeness	We are tempted to refuse to relinquish control of our life.	We are tempted toward legalism and living a life of faith in our own resources. Doing acts of service and ministry for the approval of others rather than God.
Suffering	We perceive we suffer as a result of consequences of our own sin.	We perceive we suffer to receive training in righteousness and godly living.
Movement to Next Stage	Hunger for knowledge about God and life with God.	Coming to the end of our striving to please God by our works.

STAGE THREE	STAGE FOUR	STAGE FIVE
<p>Persevering Love— <i>Invitation to Intimacy</i></p>	<p>Sacrificial Love— <i>Living the Kingdom Here and Now</i></p>	<p>Intimate Love— <i>Being Light and Love for the World</i></p>
<p>"One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple." (Psalm 27:4)</p>	<p>"I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." (Eph. 3:16–19)</p>	<p>"But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ . . . and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead." (Phil. 3:7–11)</p>
<p>We find, through total surrender, that God's intimate love alone satisfies our deepest longings, and we learn to dwell with Him.</p>	<p>We love God by offering ourselves to Him and the world compassionately and redemptively.</p>	<p>We are completely abandoned to God in divine union.</p>
<p>We are tempted to refuse to surrender idols and deep attachments of the heart.</p>	<p>We are tempted toward feeling self-righteousness that we are set apart by God.</p>	<p>We may find others misunderstanding us and struggle with loneliness.</p>
<p>We perceive we suffer to be purified of our motivations and pride.</p>	<p>We suffer to show Christ's glory and power.</p>	<p>We share in Christ's sufferings.</p>
<p>Coming to a profound sense of our identity in Christ; ego attachments have fallen away; content in abiding in Christ.</p>	<p>Coming to a realization of a deep sense of union with Christ.</p>	<p>Coming into a deeper realization of the thin veil between eternity and the present moment.</p>

Beyond campus, Borden was involved in the local mission in New Haven, caring for those in need. To help people he found on the streets struggling with alcoholism, he founded a not-for-profit to assist them in recovery.⁷

After graduating from Yale, Borden followed his growing conviction to minister to people of the Muslim faith in China.⁸ He attended and graduated from Princeton Seminary and then joined the China Inland Mission. At that time, it is said that he wrote two more words in his Bible: “No retreat.”

Borden set sail for China and stopped first in Egypt to become proficient in Arabic. While in Egypt, he contracted spinal meningitis. And then, during his illness, with the threat of his life being cut short, it is said he wrote these words in his Bible: “No regrets.”

Borden’s entry echoes the words of the apostle Paul in his letter to Timothy: “For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (2 Tim. 4:6–8). Nineteen days later, at the age of twenty-five, William Whiting Borden entered into eternity. His tombstone in Egypt is engraved with these words: “Apart from Christ there is no explanation for such a life.”

This is the brief and devoted life of William Borden: *no reserves, no retreat, no regrets*. There is no human way to

explain the impact that Borden's life had on others. Borden was captivated by the love of God. He chose the path Jesus referred to as the "narrow road that leads to life" (Matt. 7:14).

May God grant us the courage to follow Him on the path of life. Let the journey begin.