

“Moving Through Walls” (James 1:2-4)

As I look back last one year, I think the biggest incident for us was the death of my father in law. In his sickbed, he received Jesus as his God, Savior and five days later he went back to heaven.

Yumi, my wife spent three weeks before her father’s death and seven weeks after his death in Japan. She was the only Christian in her family. She was tired physically, heartbroken and also down spiritually. She faced the greatest wall in her life. Moving forward through it, she grew stronger spiritually and emotionally. As her husband and pastor, and her fellow soldier for the Lord’s battle, I am glad to see her growth. I appreciate all your prayers and support.

The new year has begun. We look forward the great works of our great Lord. At the same time, we may face unexpected incidents, difficulties or walls. But they will be opportunities for us to grow. In his book “Saying Yes to God” Tim says “Hitting a wall is actually a positive sign that you are growing... The wall prepares you to experience God and to develop in new ways, previously unavailable to you.”¹

Our topic for today is “Moving Through Walls.” It’s a very simple message. You’ll face walls, I’ll face walls. And we can go through them. “Hitting wall is a sign of hope, because it means you are now ready to listen to God in a new way and at a new depth.”² It is our spiritual journey.

1. There are walls in our journeys

James 1:2-4 (NLT)

Dear brothers and sisters, whenever trouble [trial (NIV)] comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy. ³ For when your faith is tested, your endurance [perseverance (NIV)] has a chance to grow. ⁴ So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything. [You may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (NIV)]

One thing we should note is that the troubles and trials we encounter each day are not the wall. The troubles and trials are the traffic jams, annoying

¹ Timothy Geoffeion, *Saying Yes to God*, Cascade Books, 2017, p.3

² Ibid., p.2

bosses, delayed airplane departure, car breakdown, fever, and barking dogs in the middle of the night. Walls are David fleeing a jealous king for thirteen years in the desert. Walls are Abraham waiting twenty-five years for the birth of his son, Isaac. Walls are Job losing his ten children, health and all possessions in a day!³ But the principle works in the same way as this scripture says.

What kind of walls do you remember in the Bible? Two kinds of walls immediately came to my mind. One is Nehemiah. He went back to Jerusalem from the land of their captivity, and he and his people rebuilt the wall. The other one, is the battle of Jericho.

God chose Moses as a leader of Israel, and He set the people of Israel free from Egypt. But the people wondered in the desert for 40 years because of their unbelief. The people who came out of Egypt all died (Joshua 5:6). Moses saw the promised land, but he didn't enter it (Duet 34:4-6). God chose Joshua as a new leader, and he led the next generation into the promised land.

Through God's miracle, they crossed the Jordan river. And the first challenge they faced was Jericho. The city of Jericho was surrounded by a strong wall. The wall was firmly closed, and there was no chance to attack it. God promised Joshua a victory. God gave him instruction for the battle. They followed God's word. They marched around the city once a day for six days with no talk, and on the seventh day they marched around the city seven times with no talk. Then the priests blew the trumpets to sound a long blast, now Joshua gave a signal and the people shouted. Suddenly the wall of the city collapsed. The people attacked the city and took it (Josh 6:1-20).

The real wall, the spiritual wall comes after that. After their great victory in Jericho, they attack the city of Ai. Ai is a small city. Only 3,000 Israelites went for a battle to attack them. But they were defeated miserably. This doesn't just end with their failure in taking Ai. Once other nations hear about it, they will surround Israel, attack them and wipe them out (Josh 7:2-9). As soon as they entered the promised land, Israel faced the crisis of the extinction of their whole nation. Now they hit a wall.

"For most of us, the Wall appears through a crisis that turns our world upside down. It comes, perhaps, through a job loss, the death of a close friend or

³ Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality (Book)*, Zondervan, 2006, p.126

family member, a cancer diagnosis, a divorce, a disillusioning church experience, a betrayal, a shattered dream, a wayward child, a car accident, an inability to get pregnant, miscarriage, a deep desire to marry that remains unfulfilled, a spiritual dryness or a loss of joy in our relationship with God.

We question ourselves, God, and 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.”⁴

And “The Wall is not simply a one-time event that we pass through and get beyond. It appears to be something we return to as part of our ongoing relationship with God.”⁵

Failure to understand this is one of the major reasons many people start out on the journey but stop to move forward. “Without an understanding of the wall in the journey, countless sincere followers of Christ stagnate there and no longer move forward with God’s purpose for their lives.”⁶ Peter Scazzero says, “85% of Evangelicals do not get through the wall. Our image of God often does not allow for such a difficult experience.”⁷

“Our great temptation is to quit or go backwards, 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.”⁸

Moses was keeping the flock of sheep. And he heard the voice of God at Mount Horeb. “The cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt” (Exodus 3:9-10). Moses came before Pharaoh, and said to him, “Our God has met with us. Now let us all Hebrews go a three days’ journey in the desert that we may offer sacrifices to the Lord our God.” But Pharaoh wouldn’t listen to them at all. On the contrary, he called them idle and lazy, and made their labor even heavier (Exodus 5:1-9). So the situation became worse, far from liberation! Moses heard God’s voice again, and went

⁴ Ibid., p.120-121

⁵ Ibid., p.121

⁶ Ibid., p.122

⁷ Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality Course DVD*, Zondervan, 2014, Session 4

⁸ Book, p.124

Pharaoh. But no matter how many times he went, no matter what miracle happened, Pharaoh wouldn't listen to him at all. Nothing went well. Nothing changed. He hit a wall. At the wall, you don't know what God is doing, where he is going, how he is getting you there, or when this will be over, even often you don't know where God is.

There are walls in our journeys. You'll face walls, I'll face walls. And we can go through it.

2. Moving through the wall

What is happening to us at the wall? God wants to communicate to us his true sweetness and love. He longs for us that we might know his true peace and rest. But to get there however, false layers and unhealthy attachments inside of us must be burned away. Only then will we actually be able to taste and see that the Lord is good. Only then we actually surrender to his will and his love and his power, and not our own.

At the wall we learn that true faith is trusting God even when we don't feel him. You may hate walls. We may hate walls. But they are God's gift to us.⁹

The story of a woman named Agnes. From the time she was a young girl Agnes believed God, not just believed, she was on fire. She wanted to do great things for God. Agnes had an undeniable calling. She wrote in her journal that "my soul at present is in perfect peace and joy." She left her home. She became a missionary. She surrendered everything.

After a while, however, it seemed as if God had abandoned her. At least that's how it felt to her. She started writing different words in her journal. Words like, "Where is my faith?" And she asked deep down there. There's nothing but emptiness and darkness. "Oh God how painful this is. This unknown pain. I have no faith." She struggled even to pray.

She still worked. She still served. she still smiled. But she struggled at the wall that didn't seem to move.

⁹ DVD, Session 4

This inner darkness continued on year after year for nearly 50 years. God seemed absent. Such was the secret pain of Agnes, who is better known today as Mother Teresa.

Some prominent atheists said that Mother Teresa had lost her faith. Many said she struggled with clinical depression. But spiritually she would hit a wall. But as we know today, God was doing a mighty work in and through her. And it was this wall that made her the great woman she is today.¹⁰

“Regarding her painful struggle with God’s absence throughout her fifty-year service among the poor, Mother Teresa wrote:

“When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven – there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. Love – the word – it brings nothing. I am told God loves me – and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul...

In spite of all – this darkness and emptiness is not as painful as the longing for God...

Before I could spend hours before Our Lord – loving Him – talking to Him – and now – not even meditation goes properly... Yet deep down somewhere in my heart that longing for God keeps breaking through the darkness...”

Mother Teresa came to realize that her darkness was the spiritual side of her work, a sharing in Christ’s suffering, a treasure for her and her unique work. She eventually wrote: “I have come to love the darkness. For I believe that it is a part, a very small part, of Jesus’ darkness and pain on earth.”¹¹

This is God’s way of rewiring our souls. Moving through walls, God is purifying 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.¹²

“How do we know we are facing a wall? Our good feelings of God’s presence disappear. We feel the door of heaven has been shut as we pray.

¹⁰ DVD, Session 4

¹¹ Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality Day by Day*, Zondervan, 2014, pp.81-82

¹² Book, p.123

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.”¹³

I have gone through some walls in my life, pretty hard ones. And I think I may hit some more walls in the future. I want to share one of walls I faced. This is more like a corporate wall as a church rather than my personal wall.

Yumi and I have served in HCMC Vietnam for about 11 years since year 2000. We studied Vietnamese language and we were serving for Vietnamese people. On Sundays, we committed ourselves at NLF International church. To make the long story short, our church was suddenly closed in August 2005. We had Sunday worship services at a hotel meeting hall. We used to have 150 people. It became 220. We moved to a bigger place and now 350 people gathering there. The hotel stopped us from gathering there any longer.

From the following Sunday, we started 12 home churches that came out of Lifenet groups. Except pastor Eric and myself, all other home church leaders were business people. Every Tuesday morning, before they go to work, at 6:30 AM, about 15 of us gathered and pastor Eric opened the Bible and taught. Based on it, the leaders preached a message at home churches on the following Sunday. On Sunday mornings, from 8 AM about 25 leaders gathered for a prayer meeting. And we were sent out to each home churches.

Every week, we all prayed passionately. We cried out to the Lord for his mercy, support, power and guidance. But nothing seemed changing. There were no hotels that let us use their meeting hall. We visited many local authorized churches too. But the door was not opened.

Church continued to pray more fervently. But still the situation didn't change. On the contrary, the number of the leaders reduced one by one. When their work in the country is finished, they leave for the next place. It was hard to raise up new leaders with the same level of commitment, willing to make that kind of sacrifices. Now 12 home churches were reduced to 7, and then three years later, it became 3. But the leaders continued to gather twice a week and continued to pray. In March 2010, when Eric went back to the U.S., the three home churches were combined into one, and we started to have two services in one place.

¹³ Book, p.122-123

Last August, the church celebrated its 20th anniversary. We were honored to be there to celebrate it together. Now there are very few people in the church who know what it was like in those days. For us who went through those days, we can see it's only by God's grace the church still remains. And it doesn't just remain, but it grew, matured, became stronger, became more committed to the Lord, became more connected with one another, and is now ready to face greater walls.

"It can be difficult to discern precisely when we began the journey through the wall and when we might actually be on the other side of the wall. Ultimately God is the one who moves us through the wall. And with that comes mystery. There's a lot we do not understand about the ways of God. His ways are not our ways.

Our work at that wall is to stay with God, to persevere, to faithfully wait for him, to stick with him, even when everything in us wants to quit and run. Why? For he's good and his love endures forever.

Failure to understand and surrender to God's working in us at the wall often results, if not always, results in long-term pain and confusion."¹⁴ Many people have had been through great sufferings and hit massive walls. Yet they did not get transformation because they quit to move through the walls. They returned to a similar but different wall later. But receiving the gift of God at the wall that comes to each of us transforms our lives forever in ways that we never dreamed.

Peter, Andrew, James and John met Jesus and convinced that he was the Messiah. They gave up everything and followed him. And many people were joining them and following Jesus. But now many of them, most of them actually turned their back on him and stopped following him, but the twelve continued to follow Jesus (John 6:66-69). However, this Jesus was caught, hung on the cross and killed. Everything had finished. They lost Jesus. They lost their hope, they lost their future, they were at a loss. Although the Resurrected Jesus appeared before them, they couldn't move forward any longer. They hit a wall. What did they do then? They went back to their original occupation, fishermen (John 21:2-

¹⁴ DVD, Session 4

3). By God's mercy and mystery, there they meet Jesus again, the Resurrected Lord. There they hear Jesus' call again.

Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me more than anything?" Peter said, "Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you. I cannot carry out your word by my own perseverance and diligence. I tried but I failed miserably. I cannot even love as I would like to. But I know you still love me in spite of all my mistakes, all my foolishness, all my failure, and all my weaknesses. You know everything about me, and you still love me. I choose to remain in your love." (John 21:17)

It is our choice to love him. It is us who make the decision that I remain in Your love, Jesus. Then we would come to know ourselves deeper, and we'd come to know the depth of his love.

There are rich treasures at the wall. Our image and understanding of God is dramatically transformed. We often have God in a very small box. The wall opens that box. We begin to see God for who he really is, sovereign, mighty, loving God.¹⁵ Now we are at the other side of the wall.

How and when God takes us through is up to him. We make choices to trust God, to wait for God, to listen to 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.¹⁶

There are walls in our journeys. You'll face walls, I'll face walls. And we can go through it because God is moving together with us.

Prayer:

Father, teach me to trust you even when I feel like I am alone and that you are asleep in the boat with storms raging all around me. Awaken me to the treasures that can only be found in darkness. Grant me the grace to follow you into the next place you have for me in this journey called life.¹⁷

For Lifenet groups or personal reflection

¹⁵ DVD, Session 4

¹⁶ Book, p.126

¹⁷ *Day by Day*, Zondevan, 2014, pp.82

1) What was your view of a Christian life like before this session? How did this session change your view, especially about hitting walls?

2) What are some possible reasons why we have a hard time accepting and moving through walls?

3) - Read John 21:2-3. What kind of situation were they in? Imagine the thoughts and feelings they might have had. Can you think where was Jesus while Peter and others were fishing in the night?

- Read John 21:17-19. Rephrase Peter's words on v.17, reflecting your thoughts and feelings in your current situation.

- While Peter was struggling to answer Jesus' question "Do you love me?" where was Jesus? Where was Jesus taking Peter in his journey with him?

- What did God speak to you? How would you respond?

4) If you have been through a wall, briefly share one way it impacted you and your view of God.