

## **Stages of Surrender (2014)**

**By Jon Paulien**

### **Introduction**

I have to confess that I used to suffer from a very significant disease. You might not have noticed it by looking at me, but if you had lived with me for a while you probably would have. It has a very special name, and it's called Grandparent Deprivation Syndrome (GDS). Some of you probably have it too. That is when you have adult children who are married, but you don't have grandchildren. For a number of years, my wife and I were in this condition. It can be quite serious.

One day I was returning home from Florence, Italy, and took a short hop to Frankfurt, Germany. There I got on a 12-hour flight to Los Angeles and sat down in an aisle seat in the center block of seats on a 747. A short while later I saw an older gentleman coming up the aisle, holding the hands of a 2-year old blonde girl who was walking in front of him. They came up the aisle, stopped right next to me, and he said, "Sir, you just have won the prize! You get to sit with this young lady for the next 12 hours." I rather suspect he was trying to deflect a negative reaction, but all I could think of to respond was to rub my hands together and say, "Oh goody!" The whole trip the two of us were making up games and doing all sorts of fun things. It was at that moment that I realized I was suffering from GDS. And there was only one possible cure.

Knowing this the excitement was great in our home a couple of years ago. We got a call from our oldest daughter asking if we could connect on Skype that night, She said she had a very important announcement. I thought to myself, "I know what this announcement is! She's going to have a baby, awesome!" As the day went on my wife and I got more and more excited. Then the Skype call came through. Our daughter and her husband were there and she said, "Are you ready for the announcement?" I said yes! And she said, "I was just awarded my counseling license!" Yeah, awesome. I tried to look excited.

Around a year ago, however, we had another Skype call and this time it was the announcement we were waiting for. My daughter and her husband were going to have a baby! That announcement changed our lives. My wife started going on the internet every day to relearn the whole process and see what size the baby must be at each stage. It was all pretty exciting stuff! I was suddenly seeking out other grandparents and discussing their annoying pictures at great length. Everything was changing. Then on April 6, 2014, the baby was born. Six pounds nine ounces and twenty and a half inches long. His name is Julien Johann Clouzet.

But why am I telling you all this, besides the fact that I am now one of those annoying grandparents myself? There is an important spiritual lesson in all this. While Julien was born at a certain size he was not at that size three months before. And he has not stayed that size in the days and weeks afterward. He is eating and eating and growing and growing (great diet program for mom!). Every day he is a little bit bigger. Every week there are features there that were not there before. When it comes to babies, both before and after they are born, it's all about growth, it's all about development. You see, growth is wired into everything in life. If a plant or a creature is alive and healthy, it's going to grow in some way. It is the same way with spiritual life. In Mark 4:26-28 (NIV) Jesus told a parable. It's unique to Mark. He said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain— first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head." It doesn't take long to figure out that Jesus isn't telling this story so we can know more about plants.

Notice a few things here. First there's development. A healthy person never stays in the same place. A healthy person is always growing in some way. If they are no longer growing physically then they are growing mentally, emotionally, or spiritually. When it comes to spiritual things (the kingdom of God) there is growth, development, and change. The parable tells us that spiritual life is developmental, but there is a second piece to it. Spiritual growth does not arise from human effort. You don't grow either physically or spiritually by human effort. My daughter today is not working very hard to make the baby grow. She is working very hard to allow the baby to grow (by feeding and caring for its needs), but the growth itself is actually a miracle, just as it was when Julien was a fetus. You can't grow spiritually by trying to. When spiritual growth comes, it is always a miracle.

### **Not By Human Effort**

I had a great-uncle who died a number of years ago and loved to tell this story: He was an engineer in his working days, and he attended a convention of engineers once. They were all excited about their latest projects, like building a skyscraper in Los Angeles, or an academic building at a university. They were all excited about the great things that they were building. My great-uncle was the kind of person you might call stubborn, he was on a different page than everybody else. He stood up in the middle of the conference, and announced to everyone, "You're all talking about this great stuff you're doing, and I'm not impressed. Not one of you could make a blade of grass."

Grass doesn't grow by human effort. You can fertilize it, water it and trim it. But that doesn't make it grow. The growth is a complete miracle from our perspective. The farmer doesn't make anything grow. The farmer allows stuff to grow. The mother doesn't make the baby grow, but instead allows it to grow, through care and feeding. A

mother can get in the way of the growth. There are things she can eat or drink, or drugs she can take, that would be very damaging for the baby. But no matter what she does, she cannot make a baby grow. That growth is a miracle: a miracle of God. When grain grows it is a miracle. When grass grows it is a miracle.

And so it is with spiritual things. Spiritual life doesn't grow by human effort. Spiritual growth is a miracle. No matter how hard we try we cannot make ourselves grow spiritually any more than an engineer can build a blade of grass. This is where surrender comes in. We cannot make ourselves grow spiritually, but we can surrender ourselves to the miracle-working power of God.

I realize the word "surrender" comes with baggage, it can easily be misunderstood. Some people don't like the word because they think of it in military terms. To them surrender sounds like someone is not free anymore. They are stuck in prison, or have been sent to a slave labor camp. In those terms surrender doesn't sound like fun. But the military sense is only the root meaning of the word surrender. In the spiritual sense surrender is not about a power differential. Surrender is not about somebody bigger forcing you to do things their way. When a lot of people hear the word surrender they think, "God is going to force me to do it His way."

But force and coercion is not what surrender in the spiritual sense is about, rather it is simply opening the channel to God's blessings. Surrender is allowing the power of God to flow into our lives. It is allowing the miracle to occur. Just as a mother has the capacity to harm her baby, and just as the farmer has the capacity to ruin a field, so we all have the capacity to block the miracle when it comes to spiritual growth. And surrender is all about opening the channel of blessing.

Recently my wife and I were visiting Volcanos National Park in Hawaii. There we learned the story about Kilauea Iki, the smaller of two large craters on the outer slopes of Mauna Loa. In the 1950s this crater was 800 feet deep. Then in 1959 a great fountain of lava burst forth. At its most spectacular this fountain of lava reached an altitude of 2000 feet in the air and singed people's hair at a distance of more than a mile. The constant lava flow began filling up the crater until the lava lake was only 400 feet from the rim of the crater. At that point an interesting thing happened, because the fountain was coming out from the side of the crater rather than spraying in from the top. When the lake reached the level of the opening of the fountain, the lava poured back into the fountain and clogged it up. Because of that the fountain stopped and that means that today you can walk on the hardened surface of the lava lake (which still flows beneath). You can even walk right into where the hot lava was coming out in 1959. It's safe today and the floor of the crater is cool. Why? There is no danger because the flow of lava has been stopped.

That is sometimes what we do to ourselves spiritually. By hanging onto beliefs or practices the flow of blessing from God stops. Not because God wants it to stop. But

because we block the channel, and then the miracle of spiritual growth does not occur. If we can recognize when that is happening and work with God to remove the blockage, the power of God can once again flow freely into our lives. That's what this series of blogs is all about.

### **Connected with Stages of Faith**

I have been studying stages of faith that people at certain times of life go through (see the document "Stages of Faith" at the Armageddon web site). I recently came to realize more fully that those stages of faith happen because God does the miracle. It is God who grows us from stage to stage, yet we are quite capable of getting stuck at various stages. The choices we make sometimes keep us from moving forward. And it dawned on me that the stages of faith should be connected with stages of surrender, because the one thing we need to do to grow spiritually is to let the miracle happen. It is allow God to do the work that we have blocked Him from doing in the past. While we may at times slip into feelings of rebellion, most of the time we don't even realize we are blocking the work of God in our lives. Surrender, very simply put, is letting God grow you.

What I plan to do from here on out is walk you through the stages of faith (read the above-mentioned article first if you are not familiar with them) and how at each stage surrender may take on a different form or meaning. That means some of the following types of surrender might apply to where you are right now but the others might not. Possibly you will say to yourself, "I recognize all of them." More likely you will say, "I recognize this one or that one, but not the others." There is no single point in all that follows that is going to fix everybody. I wish I knew such a point. But what I can do is list some of the challenges that people face at different stages in their spiritual life and how one can unblock the channel to God's blessing in those times.

There are six stages of faith in all. But I am suggesting that moving through those stages brings us to eight different points of surrender. In a general sense, each stage of surrender builds on the others. You will not be able to surrender for tomorrow's issue. It is sufficient that you confront the primary issue you face today. What God wants to see happen in your life tomorrow or next year is not going to happen today, but you can surrender to Him the place where you are now. As you read the blogs that follow, God may be calling you to say, "Here is something in the way! Here is something I'd like you to move forward on."

### **The first Stage of Surrender: Pride and Rebellion**

Starting today I will summarize the six stages of faith and the implications of each for surrender to God's will and His work in your life. To begin with is the stage before you

are saved, before you have accepted Christ. We could call that zero stage on the path to faith. You are not yet a Christian, you don't know Jesus, and yet one way or the other the gospel comes to you. What is the gospel? It is all about Christ's death and resurrection (1 Cor 15:1-11).

Why are these events so important to us? First of all, because the cross represents the human condition and its consequences. Hanging on the cross, Jesus carried the sin of the entire human race in His body (Rom 8:3; 1 Pet 2:24). As the creator and the second Adam, Jesus represented the whole human race. His death, therefore, was a judgment of God on the whole human race. Our rebellion, our perversity, our bad choices, our neglectfulness, everything was poured upon Christ. The death of Christ, therefore, is a statement about the human condition: we are hopeless, we are sinful, we are rebellious, and we are lost without him. That message is the first fundamental truth of the gospel.

The second truth of the gospel is that the resurrection of Jesus Christ represented God's acceptance of His perfect life of obedience. And in that acceptance the entire human race was accepted by God. While Jesus' death represented the condemnation of the whole human race, His resurrection represented the acceptance of the human race. So a balanced view of the gospel holds two things together. Number one: we are lost, we are helpless, we are hopeless without Jesus Christ. Number two: we are accepted by God in Jesus Christ. To receive the gospel is to accept the truth of both of these statements; who we are as a result of sin and who we are in the person of Christ.

So why wouldn't anyone accept those truths? Why would anyone reject the gospel since it's free! I would suggest two reasons why people reject the gospel. First, People don't want to accept that they are so rebellious and hopeless. "Don't tell me I'm not good enough! Don't tell me I'm a sinner. I'm not so bad! I've never hurt anyone." Second, there something about the human condition that doesn't want to be rescued. We want to do it ourselves. It's called pride! "I can do this!" In a real sense, these are two sides of the same coin of pride. "Don't tell me I'm not good enough! I can handle this."

So the first stage of surrender includes the surrender of our pride. The gospel's diagnosis of the human condition is dire. But our beliefs and the condition in which we come to the gospel can block our willingness to accept that. We don't want other people to know how needy we truly are. On the other side the gospel is totally free, a gift from God to us. Jesus Christ accepts you as you are, but the human reaction is: "Well, I need to earn something here! I don't deserve anything I haven't earned." I have a German background, and Germans are pretty good at that one. They don't deserve anything they haven't earned, so they work hard to earn everything they're supposed to get in life.

The initial surrender involves accepting both of these truths of ourselves. On the one hand, we are helpless, hopeless, rebellious. There is nothing in us of which we can or

should be proud. Surrender underlines that apart from Jesus Christ we are nothing and can do nothing, an admission which is very hard for us to make. On the other hand, we need to surrender to the truth that we can do nothing to earn the gift either. It is totally free, we don't need to "deserve it." Surrender at this initial stage of the walk with God involves yielding ourselves to the double truth of our sinful condition, on the one hand, and the complete freeness of the gift, on the other. In other words, our salvation is free but it means giving up everything we have, a double punch that human nature resists with every fiber of its being. The first stage of surrender, therefore, needs to be a double one.

### **The Second Stage of Surrender: Unworthiness and/or the Comfort Zone**

When we have accepted the gospel, we enter into the first stage of the Christian experience, which is acquaintance with God or what I like to call the romance stage. When you first come to Jesus it is such a great experience, somewhat like being in love. There is joy, excitement, a new lease on life. It may not be entirely rational, but it's just a great feeling to know that God accepts you and that your sins are forgiven. His righteousness is now over you and you have a new life and a new experience. There is a child-like openness and trust in that new experience. Jesus said, "Unless you become like a little child you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." Note that He didn't say "stay" in the kingdom. Childlikeness is a quality that enables entrance, he didn't say that it is good to stay as children in our relationship with God. He said, "Unless you become like a little child you cannot ENTER the kingdom." What does that mean? At some point you simply have to throw all caution to the wind and say, "I'm not going to make it on my own. God's offer is my best shot and I'm taking it." Just say, "Lord, take me as I am, I don't have anything else to give you. Lord, I'm going to trust you as I have no other way, yours is the only way." So the first stage of Christian experience requires that kind of childlike trust. We open ourselves up to God, we come to trust Him, either out of positive experience with God (awe) or out of a desperate realization that we have no other hope (need).

But there are challenges for people in the romance stage. A sense of unworthiness comes over you, as you don't progress as fast as you expected or wanted to. You say to yourself, "Now that I have accepted Jesus, I won't ever be angry again, I won't ever overeat again. I'll never do this, or never do that." Then you come to the horrifying realization, "Whoops, I did it again!" So a sense of unworthiness can block the way to further growth.

Another challenge in the first stage is that you can get comfortable with ignorance. People in the romance stage often latch on to superstitions, beliefs that just have no basis in reality, yet ring true in their own minds. They might have gotten them from the person who led them to Christ or they might simply have brought them along from their previous life. An example of such a superstition is, "If I don't have my worship this

morning, God will punish me. He will make me sick, or I'll have an accident." But that is a very dark picture of God, one not in accord with the God we have come to know in Jesus. If God wanted to be mean he could have gotten rid of us a long time ago. The fact that we're still here in spite of all we have done means there is still a loving God at the center of the universe. If Satan had his way we would have all been destroyed. God is not watching every moment looking for opportunities to make us sick or send us to the hospital. Superstitious beliefs like this can block one's way to growth. We obey God out of fear and fear is not a good basis for a relationship. Nevertheless, beliefs like that can be hard to give up. They have become part of identity going all the way back to childhood, they seem as obligatory as the ten commandments.

Surrender is about recognizing what's blocking the way and saying, "Lord, I'm sick and tired of being stuck here. I need to grow and open myself to the fullness of the relationship you have offered me. I need to go where you want to take me." So it is important at this stage to surrender two things. The first is a sense of unworthiness. We believe that we are not worthy enough to draw closer to God than we are now. And that unworthiness keeps us from moving forward. Unworthiness can be hard to let go because it may have become a part of us that we are unwilling to let go. We fear that if God were to take that away we might end up in a place we don't want to go. Second, a further barrier to growth in the romance stage is a reluctance to leave our comfort zone and risk a new kind of life. For many, the thing that blocks the way to God's growth is the comfort zone we find ourselves in. We don't want the romance to end. We want to retain the shallow giddy relationship with God that is so appropriate at the first stage, yet never lasts long. To believe that the romance should never end is to set ourselves up for failure. A relationship with God that will last for a lifetime needs to be grounded on more than feelings and happy experiences. It needs to be grounded on God's Word and the rock of correct beliefs about God and salvation. Those that allow God to change them at this point move on to the second stage of the Christian life, which I call the discipleship stage.

### **Third Stage of Surrender: The Need to be Right/Certain**

This stage is a time when you're learning the faith, growing in the faith, discovering what it means to be a Christian, to be a Seventh Day Adventist Christian, to learn the community, understanding how to fit in, and so on. You explore the belief system, you learn it a little bit to practice it, and the discipleship stage comes with it a strong sense of identity. People know when they join a community that they found the right community and say, "This is where God wanted me to be!"

There is a strong sense of being right at this stage. Sometimes the strengths and challenges are two sides of a coin because this particular stage can be pretty legalistic and judgmental. "If I am right then you must be wrong," comes easily at this stage. To get stuck in this stage is to get stuck in a very dark place. You can be really rigid when

approached to the faith. You can't get any flexibility, and everything has to be just right. "We have to sing the hymn in just this way, and use only this instrument." and so on.

There is an us versus them mentality, so these challenges are also surrender points. What do you need to surrender in order to grow at this stage is the need to be right. Think about it: who is the smartest person in the room? Are they closer in smartness to God or a 2 year old? What do you think? It's definitely closer to a 2 year old. If my intelligence was closer to a 2 year old than God's, what was God doing in the bible? He was writing to 2 year olds essentially. Can you talk to a 2 year old? Yeah. Can you tell them about the 7 trumpets of Revelation? I don't think so. Can you tell them about quantum physics? I don't think so. You have to get down on your knees, cup your hands, and talk baby talk, right? That's what God was doing in the scriptures.

The moment we are absolutely certain that we are right about everything, we're in trouble, because we're just 2 year olds. And if a 2 year old thinks they're right about everything, then you know what? They're in trouble! I remember when my oldest daughter was 7, the pregnant one now. She came up to me one day and said, "Daddy, I know everything!" and I said, "Really? That's interesting. So you can tell me, 'Why is the Sky blue?'" She thought about it for a bit and said, "Well, I know everything but that!" She was pretty confident. There are times when we need to surrender the need to be right. Ever had an idea, and you just can't seem to let it go, and eventually realize that idea is keeping you from moving forward?

There are times when you need to surrender the need to be right, the need to be better than others. As Seventh-Day Adventists, we often have a word of critique for the wider Christian church, recognizing that Christian history is not as pretty as Jesus' teaching might suggest. When we read Jesus' teaching we see a beautiful teaching, yet we look at history and wonder how many Christians actually practiced Jesus' teachings, His self-sacrificing love? Often it's been inquisitions, crusades, Bosnias, Rwanda's and stuff like that. So it's not a pretty history. Sometimes you just need to call a spade a spade. However, the danger there is if you think you're better than others. That has a spiritual danger all in itself. There comes a time where we need to surrender the need to be better than everybody else.

I think I struggle with that, as I was talking about that this morning. I don't like to make mistakes because that means that somebody else can do what I was doing better. Sounds like a need to be better than others. We need to surrender that if we want to grow. That can also be part of the blockage.

#### **The Fourth Stage of Surrender: The Need for Applause/Perfection/Certainty**

Stage three is the success stage. It's the doing stage. This is where people become pastors, Sabbath school teachers, church elders, they become leaders, not just disciples.



They help other people learn what they have learned. You develop a high-level reputation in the community, you win awards. People praise you and you get nice letters, and things like that. But that very success has its challenges. We would probably like if the stages of faith stopped right there. “I made it now. I’m teaching Sabbath school, I’m good. I’m the pastor, so I’m good. I’m the conference president, so that’s good, nothing to worry about now.” However, that’s not what the New Testament preaches.

The New Testament says that every stage has its challenges. Those who stand up front are often motivated by applause, by what people think of them, by how others respond to their ministry. They can be stuck in perfectionism. That’s the idea where you don’t want to be better, but instead you want to be the best. People in stage three are often motivated by perfectionism. Again, like stage two, this is a particular stage that likes to be right. That is also part of the motivation that makes them go. What is the need to surrender here? Surrender the need for applause.

Ellen White said of Jesus, “He was never elated by applause or downcast by censure.” Does that apply to you? Not me. This is a surrender point that I recognize in myself, surrender the need for applause, the need for perfection. Because, when you strive for perfection, the miracle can’t happen. You’re trying to grow the blade of grass. You cannot be perfect. If you were going to be perfect it means that God did a miracle in your life. It’s that simple. You can’t make a blade of grass. That is only something God can do. You can’t make perfection. That is something only God can do. The more you focus on the perfection the less likely it will happen, a miracle when it happens. And the need for certainty: it is an important piece in the Christian experience. You want to be certain of some things. You want to be certain of the cross and that Jesus loves you and other things. But what I have found is that conservative Christians are certain about everything.

If you’re certain about your political and dietary habits, exercise routine, religion, being in the right job, and everything else, that can get in the way of letting God work. So, some of us need to surrender the need of certainty, but did you notice that there is a problem here? The problem with the people in stage three, and that includes us pastors, elders, teachers, etc., but the problem is that they don’t take mentoring very well. They arrived, they’ve made it, and everything is all good. The reality is that there are still issues there. There is still pride and selfishness, and because surrender at this stage is so hard, God often does something that we don’t expect. That is called the dark night of the soul. Because it can be so hard to surrender at this stage, God allows us some special help and motivators, and the dark night of the soul is a personal crisis which usually begins at the middle stage of your life, when you are in your 30s and 40s, and when you reach your 50s it can hit the hardest. Past uncertainties can be inadequate, but it’s the call in this darkness, suffering, and pain, the certainty shattered. We won’t give it up so God sometimes shatters it.

## **The Fifth Stage of Surrender: Yielding to God's Purpose**

In the shattering of that certainty, we hear the call to a deeper intimacy with God. A psychiatrist once asked me, "What's the difference between the dark night of the soul and depression?" I said that they are certainly related, but what I meant by the dark night of the soul is something that comes from God, something that God allows into your life for a spiritual purpose. Depression can be just a chemical problem, something that needs treatment, something that needs getting out of as quickly as possible.

The dark night of the soul can be a call from God to a deeper intimacy, to the pride being worn away, to us being more open to the real truth about ourselves. The dark night can be precipitated by a stage of life, like when you hit 30 or 40. Sometimes it kicks in as a mid-life crisis. It can be an external event like the loss of a loved one, an accident, being fired at your job, or an internal event, like cancer, heart disease, an illness, or some kind of psychological trauma of some kind. It can simply be that the presence of God just simply isn't there anymore, and your prayers just simply bounce off the ceiling. The dark night of the soul can be a very painful thing, and if you're more than 50 years old you may know what I'm talking about. You may even be there now.

The only remedy I know is solitude with God and mentoring. The problem is that the only mentoring that helps is from people who have already been through the dark night of the soul. The stage three people can't help you. That is a high percentage of our leaders. It takes a person who has truly suffered to help the suffering. It takes a person who knows darkness to help someone else through the darkness. If you've lived with a bright light your whole life you can't help someone through the darkness. So it's only those who have suffered can help the suffering.

The fact we suffer is that God has a big plan for us. You ask, "Why is this happening to me?" and God may say, "I got big plans for you. That's why I'm allowing this to happen." There are challenges in the dark night of the soul. People are tempted to escape it by going back to stage three. They say, "Let me go back to preach, to teach, to do what I always did. I was successful before. I can't give that up! People expect me to be strong for them. How can I admit I'm a failure? How can I admit that I'm in darkness? How can I admit that I'm struggling?" It's hard for stage three people to go through the dark night of the soul and they often go back and say, "Oh no, everything's fine!" They keep on preaching, keep on teaching, and most people may never notice. But, deep down inside, you know in your heart that God called you and you said no. There can be an emptiness and hollowness inside.

Other people, including some people I'm really close to, decide in the dark night of the soul that the whole problem is the church, decide to ditch it. "This whole spiritual walk, I'm done with that!" and they leave the faith. Tragic decisions. The call of the dark night of the soul is to go deeper with God, not a call to be avoided. What do you need to

surrender the dark night of the soul? A false sense of purpose. In stage three, people have big ambitions for God. They have big plans for their ministry, a sense of purpose, but maybe it was a purpose that was given to them by their parents, a purpose given by the church, a purpose given by the conference president. They think they're living God's purpose, but in the dark night of the soul they realize, "All of that was for me!" It was all about pride! "I wanted to do all I wanted for God so I could be a bigshot."

And the walk of faith is a walk of increasingly turning away from pride and becoming more and more like Jesus. Jesus is the opposite of pride, the opposite of selfishness, of self-centeredness. In the dark night of the soul, God is saying, "Can you let it go, your plans, your ambitions, your purpose? If you find my purpose for your life, it will be the greatest thing that ever happened to you." To know that you are where God wants you to be, doing what God wants you to do is the greatest experience ever. It may not be anything that you thought it could be growing up. God has taken me places in the last ten years.

I remember when I turned 40 I was thinking, "Man, I'm more than halfway there. I'm just about ready to totter into the grave. What I've done is about it. Now it's all downhill from here!" It's been nearly 25 years later, and God has done lots of things in the last 10 years that I never would have dreamed of. Yet I realize, looking at all those 50 years before that, all of that was preparation for the thing God wanted me to do in my 50s and 60s. Plants, when they're healthy, means to keep growing. When you're 60 it doesn't mean stop growing. It may be the beginning of the greatest work in your life. To be 75 doesn't mean to stop growing. It may be the beginning of the greatest work that God has ever done with you. If you let him, free up the channel and let him do the miracle.

### **The Sixth Stage of Surrender: Negative Thinking/Hidden Pride**

The journey inward, the fourth stage of faith, is to discover God's purpose, our uniqueness, His personal direction for life no longer just a broader mission of the church, but a very specific mission gifted by God, to be just the person you are, to be unique, to be special, to do the work for God that maybe nobody else can do. There is the healing of unresolved issues that often block the way. Relationships get deeper at this stage as we move from the head to the heart in the spiritual walk. However, there are challenges at this stage as well, because people in stage four sometimes get consumed with self-assessment. They're always trying to figure out where they are. "Am I doing this right?" Or, they may wallow in self pity, in negative thinking. Any of you recognize any of that? Sometimes it's like, "I could have done so much, yet here I am and now it's never going to be as it could have been." Sometimes, you have to surrender that stuff. Negative thinking blocks the channel and doesn't allow the miracle to occur. Actually, it's a secret form of pride, did you know that? The person says, "Woe is me! I could have been great but they blocked my way. I could have really done something, but this person abused me or this person made fun of me, etc." You start going to the places

where you were disadvantaged, where all the bad things happened to you, and moaning about it all the time. That's a form of pride, because where is your attention focused? Me, me, me.

You go to a mental institution and what word appears in every sentence? I, I, I. Negative thinking is just another form of pride, it's a hidden pride, an unexpected pride. And pride blocks the channel like nothing else. God calls at this stage to surrender that pride by his grace. It's a miracle! You can't do it! Try as you will you cannot get rid of pride. Humility is not an option for us but it's simply a miracle. When you are truly humble it is a miracle of God.

### **The Seventh Stage of Surrender: Fear of What Other People Think**

The fifth stage of faith is the journey outward with a renewed sense of purpose. If you've gone through the dark night of the soul and have been transformed with a new sense of purpose, you can go back and do the things that you were successful at before, but now with a new sense of purpose, a venture outside of self-purpose. Instead of ministering to God to make you look good, there is now a focus for others, ministering for God for what is out there. The motivations, the passions, are more authentic. There's a focus on compassion, not just on numbers and bringing the people along. We're willing to go smaller, humbler, riskier, newer. One of the startling things that significant leaders in the General Conference over the last 10 years who have simply quit and said, "I want to move to a small church in the middle of the country." Too bad they didn't come here, right? Smaller, humbler, riskier, newer, because it doesn't matter how big your mission is, nor how big your job is, but where God wants you to be. Doing what God wants you to do is the most awesome place of all.

There are challenges to this stage as well. People at this stage may appear out of touch. You would think that a person who was emptied of self, someone who is loving and self-sacrificing, would be the most popular person in the church. Nope! Most people won't recognize what's going on. They'll feel like, "He used to be kind of something, but now he's kind of weird now. He's just a little bit odd." Got any odd people in the church? (Don't mention any names.) Sometimes those people are odd because they are following God in places you don't know. And they seem odd because God is working with them in a way that hasn't happened in your life yet. And as people walk this walk with God they feel more alone, even in the church, because God has led them to a place that others don't understand, because they haven't been there. They may even appear careless about the faith, that they don't take it as seriously, that they don't dress right anymore, that they don't do the devotional exercises that they used to, they don't do this, and they don't do that. What's wrong with them? Maybe it's because they are tuned into God, that they are walking with Him in a different way than you could possibly walk with Him. Surrender at this stage is probably the most difficult, the fear of what other people think.

I used to have a malady which is a stress-related thing. Every time I felt stress, I felt something like a golf ball in my lower intestine. Maybe nobody else feels that, but the moment I feel it I know I'm under stress. You want to know what God revealed to me recently? One of these times I wondered why I was under so much stress. Sure, my job has been stressful for 7 years, but why am I having this now? It dawned on me that there was an issue going on, and I was worried what other people would think about my actions, and my words relating to that issue. I realized that I was still stuck with that one, worried about what other people think. That can be the biggest block of anything.

You're afraid to move on with God because you're afraid of what other people will think of you. So, at this stage, the call to surrender has to do with that fear, because if you are right with God, it doesn't matter what anybody else thinks. If God approves of you, then it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. When did God approve of you? At stage one. So, if you are in stage 2, 3, 4, 5, or wherever you might be, and you may be in more than one stage at a time, or wherever you are in your walk, God approves of you. If God approves of you, it doesn't matter if anyone else does.

We can get that strength and center out of God. So, sometimes God does a sequel on us. The 2<sup>nd</sup> dark night of the soul, because the pride of the 5<sup>th</sup> stage rises up into this fear of what other people think, and God says, "That's not something to fear. You really want to see something to fear?" You see the experience of Abraham's sacrifice. That was his 2<sup>nd</sup> dark night of the soul, the sacrifice of Isaac. Job was the first afflicted of his family, and then his friends, and in the end he experienced God and that was a pretty tough experience too. Job had multiple dark nights of the soul. Jesus in Gethsemane experienced his 2<sup>nd</sup> dark night of the soul. There are times where God calls us once again on the path of suffering, so that we may lay aside everything that is in the way.

### **The Eighth Stage of Surrender: Other-Centeredness**

The sixth stage of faith is the stage where a person becomes ruled by unconditional love. You know what? You would think that the person who loves unconditionally would be the most popular person in the church. That is not the case. You know why? Because the person who loves everyone unconditionally loves my enemy. The one thing I will not allow is for you to love my enemy. You say that none of us have enemies. In one sense we don't, and in another we do. And when somebody shows love and kindness to a person who has abused us, or has made life difficult for us, that can be a very big challenge. Ruled by unconditional love, people are compassionate, even under extreme hardship. God's love flows through others, and the channel is clear: a life of forgiveness.

My wife and I have learned that it's not enough to forgive now and then. In any marriage you need to forgive everyday, probably every hour, because we're human beings and we rub each other the wrong way from time to time, and to make

forgiveness a habit is just a wonderful way to live. People at this stage need less material things, so they don't say things like, "Why aren't they doing anything to the car, or to the house?" People who live a life of love don't pay attention to things anymore. However, there is a freedom of anxiety, and inner peace. Fear of what other people think will kill that fast, you see. That needs to happen in order for you to experience true freedom, true peace. Are there challenges to the life of love?

Above all people, these people seem out of touch with reality. Don't you know that there are enemies in this world? You can't love Osama Bin Laden, you can't! You can't love Adolf Hitler, you can't! Some people would say you can't love Obama, or Bainer. You can't and be my friend. So, the person who loves everything seems completely out of touch with reality. They often seem to be neglecting their personal needs, and you say, "What kind of surrender is possibly needed here?" Surrender your other-centeredness. Have you ever met someone who was so concerned for others that they don't take care of themselves? Not many people reach this stage in life, but should you ever be there, remember that there comes a time where God asks you to surrender your other-centeredness, and go out and take a vacation. Surrender your other-centeredness and actually take care of your health. Surrender your other-centeredness and take care of your family, those who are nearest and dearest, you see.

### **Summary of the Stages of Surrender**

Let me close with a quick summary of the eight stages of surrender: Stage one is where we need to surrender our pride, the idea that I can do it myself. Stage two: surrender that unworthiness, the comfort zone. If you're going to grow, you're going to change. If a plant doesn't change it will die. I find that for many churches, change is the toughest thing. People don't want to change because they are comfortable. However, you can't grow in a comfort zone. Stage three is to surrender to the need to be right, to be certain and better than others. Stage four is to surrender the need for applause and affection, of certainty. Stage five is to surrender a false sense of purpose. Stage six is to surrender negative thinking and hidden pride, stage seven to surrender the fear of what other people are thinking, and stage eight, if necessary, to surrender excessive other-centeredness.

I'm not here to tell you what you need to surrender today. I don't know you. I don't even need to tell my wife what to surrender today and I know her pretty well. I know that she wrestles with things I don't fully understand. I believe that somewhere in this chart is God's call to you. In the closing prayer I'd like to ask the Holy Spirit to touch your heart with what God has pointed out for you, for today. This may be the hardest thing that you have ever done. Why? Because surrender feels like you are losing everything. You are giving up identity, giving up that which gives you joy, giving everything that you're comfortable with and used to. It's the loss of everything. However, the surrender

of everything is the path to your true self, which you will never discover until you surrender.

Your true self appears when you let God grow you there. In light of the stages of surrender, we understand a little better the meaning of this strange saying of Jesus: “For whoever would save his life will lose it. But for whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel’s, will save it.” That’s what surrender is all about. It’s about losing your life for God’s sake. But the end result is to gain more than we ever imagined. A great irony of the Christian faith is that in order to win, you need to lose. But the good news is that when you lose, you gain everything that matters most.