

5 Stages of Spiritual Growth Every Believer Must Go Through

As I reflect on my own journey, I have come to the conclusion there are at least five major stages of spiritual development. I base this on almost four decades of church and marketplace ministry, which includes serving as a lead pastor since 1984. I have also observed the lives of many other believers.

These five stages are important for us to understand so that we do not become confused when we transition from one stage to the next. However, there are some who stunt their own development through disobedience to their calling. This results in not experiencing anything past the second stage.

Additionally, there is no set time for each stage, and since I am using a broad stroke, each stage may overlap other stages at times. That being said, there is truth in these general observations.

My objective is to encourage believers to press through to all five stages, no matter how difficult.

Stage One: The Honeymoon Stage

This is the stage when we are excited about our newfound salvation. After all, Jesus told us to rejoice because our names are written in the Book of Life (Luke 10:17–20).

In this stage, we are not thinking about our calling; we are just excited about finding this new life in Christ. Nothing else matters except Jesus! It's like when you first fall in love with that special someone: The goosebumps and romantic feelings are so amazing you cannot picture them ever leaving you.

However, as good as this stage is, God prods us to enter the next one.

Stage Two: The Experiential Stage

This is the stage when we begin to learn how to walk with God and process our faith during the challenges and minutiae of everyday life. During the experiential stage, we learn how to apply our faith to our personal life, family, spheres of influence and responsibilities. We learn how to respond and repent in the midst of our own shortcomings and sins.

In this stage, we also begin to learn how to “work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12b). Generally, this is the stage that uses tests and trials to reveal our heart, motives and level of commitment to Christ. In the Parable of the Sower and the Seed, Jesus illustrates how people in this stage can sadly fall away from Him because they lack strong roots due to persecution and a lack of understanding (Mark 4).

Stage Three: The Discovery Stage

During the third stage, we first become aware that we have a purpose and calling in Christ. It is an exciting stage as we realize that we were not just saved to go to heaven but to walk in a divine purpose. This is when we first realize God has called us to have a major impact in our spheres of influence, whether with a few or with many.

Here in the discovery stage, the Spirit of God will challenge us to be responsible as His stewards to manifest His kingdom on earth as it is in heaven (Luke 11:2-4).

Stage Four: The Purpose and Identity Stage

After we discover the fact that we have a purpose, we almost become obsessed with identifying that purpose through analyzing our natural gifts, abilities and personality. This

is the stage in which we learn to walk a purpose-driven life and begin investing our time in learning and growing in our capacity as a Christ follower. This is also the stage in which we begin to sift our time commitments and relationships so we can streamline our focus and hit the mark of our divine calling.

Although this is an exciting stage, it is not the most important one. Until recently, I thought this stage was the most rewarding and highest of all stages. However, the next stage is by far the most important one.

Stage Five: The Unison Stage

This fifth stage is when we experience such oneness with Christ that we no longer obsess over our purpose or identity because we have lost our functional life in Him (Gal. 2:19-21). Jesus' prayer to the Father was that His followers would be "one" with the Father and with Him (John 17:20-24).

Although there is a positional and legal element to oneness that has nothing to do with us, my experience has shown me that there is also an existential and experiential oneness. Some may even label this stage mystical. I have referred to this stage as "unison" because it describes the reality of losing one's self in Him to the point in which our desires, plans and passions emanate out of His heart and will.

In this stage, you are walking in freedom and an almost unbroken fellowship with Him while becoming ever more acutely aware of your own shortcomings and unholy motivations and desires. In this stage, you not only treasure your times worshipping and adoring God, but learn to delight in doing His will, no matter how painful and joyless it may seem at time (Heb. 12:1-2).

During the unison stage, we learn that the highest expression of loving God is not just to enjoy the person and presence of God but to put our flesh on the cross and obey Him without

complaining and remorse (Luke 22:42, Rom. 6:6–9). We live to express Christ alone, and anything else—including our individual purpose—becomes boring and unappealing compared to His splendor and majesty.

I discovered the unison stage initially out of concern that I had become bored with thinking about my purpose and identity. It wasn't that I was disinterested in my calling anymore; on the contrary, I am even more passionate now than ever about serving Christ! It was that I found myself so consumed, enamored and identified with Jesus that I intuitively knew my calling would unfold organically as I continued to walk in His steps. I have discovered that Christ is all (Col. 1:16-19).

In reflection, I also discovered that when we are obsessed or passionate about our divine purpose, it can still be about us and not Him. Moreover, being passionate about our purpose is still showing more spiritual development than the first three stages, but it is not the highest level of faith and practice.

The apostle Paul said the high calling of God is to know Christ Jesus above all else: "Yes, certainly, I count everything as loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have forfeited the loss of all things and count them as rubbish that I may gain Christ, and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is of God on the basis of faith, to know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if somehow I might make it to the resurrection of the dead" (Phil. 3:8-11).

The temptation here, of course, is to think you are already in the fifth stage because your spirit leaps when you read about it, and your rational mind agrees with the concept. However, it takes years of brokenness, poring over Scripture, and emotional and spiritual growth before you begin to grasp this degree of unison. Truly, one of the most important attributes

needed to unleash potential is simply patience. As we go through God's building process, we must be patient with ourselves and those we are called to mentor or lead.

We read in Numbers 14:20-38 that a whole generation of the children of Israel failed to reach their potential and enter the promised land because they were filled with unbelief and gave in to grumbling and complaining against the Lord. They became impatient with God's process and lost their inheritance. Instead of destroying the whole nation for their sin and unbelief, God patiently waited until the next generation was ready to take the promised land. This teaches us that God will not promote us unless we pass the tests of faith and patience while in our wilderness experiences. It also reminds us that God's purposes cannot be thwarted even by our impatience. If we are unworthy or unwilling to do what it takes to accomplish God's plans, they will be fulfilled through the lives of the next generation.

In conclusion, my prayer is that the truths regarding the process of maturity in Christ will encourage all of us to continue to press on to know the Lord (Hos. 6:3) and "that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:16-20, NIV).

Joseph Mattera *has served for almost 40 years of ministry in which he has personally nurtured many high-impact leaders. He has become one of the primary spiritual leaders in his community.*

CHARISMA is the only magazine dedicated to reporting on what the Holy Spirit is doing in the lives of believers around the world. If you are thirsty for more of God's presence and His Holy Spirit, subscribe to CHARISMA and join a family of believers that choose to live life in the Spirit.