

Andy Sytsma – Spiritual Story

For my spiritual journey with Christ, I am following the 4 stages of faith people progress through. Mike Johnson of Ascending Leaders helped us with the stages, including “The Wall,” which is a period of spiritual dryness or dark night of the soul. I highlight people and experiences, both positive and negative, which have formed and shaped me to be the person I am today.

Come and See (Childhood)

I grew up in Japan and lived there until I was 18 and came back to America for college. God made himself known to me as a young boy. I remember my dad praying with me before I went to bed, my parents reading the bible over meals and attending church each Sunday. My parents were missionaries to Japan but they were also missionaries to me. They introduced me to Jesus. I came to know that God loved me, that he revealed himself through the Bible, that he was one God in three persons, that he was holy, and that only Jesus could save me from my sin.

There has never been a time when I didn't know Jesus, but now that I am older I know that without Jesus, I would be filled with pride, need to be in control, be stuck on myself and dead in my sins. I remember one time I sassed my mom and she washed my mouth out with soap. Looking back, I am thankful for her discipline, since it made me aware of my sin. I don't remember the exact day I came to Christ. But I remember having a sense of peace that I was right with God because I had confessed Jesus as Lord and received forgiveness of my sins.

Come and Follow (Childhood – College)

As a young person, God grounded my faith through scripture memory, Bible studies, summer camps and sports coaches. Mr. Owsley, my 8th grade basketball coach, wrote in my yearbook, a paraphrase of Proverbs 3:5 and 6. *“Trust in the Lord with all you've got, and don't rely on your own hot shot. In all your ways acknowledge him, for he is the one who makes the shots go in.”* My teen years were good years. God helped me put down deep roots. I spread my wings as a teenager. I remember praying to God, asking him for wisdom. I desired to know God more, do his will, and go deeper with him. Looking back, I see how he answered that prayer.

My mentors in college helped me internalize and integrate faith. I learned Biblical truths like assurance of salvation, covenant, kingdom of God, sphere sovereignty and common grace. Chaplain Cooper's invitation to join a Calvin's Institutes study group was so enlightening and encouraging. I also lived with my grandparents and remember Grandpa Sytsma's love for Grandma, his passion for mission and how he was filled with the Holy Spirit. Before he died, he wrote personal reflections called So I Send You, a gift I still treasure today.

The Wall (College)

Yet, I still struggled. Especially with my sense of identity as a Third Culture Kid. Where was I from? Where was home? Where did I belong? I experienced some dark nights of the soul. Was God there? Did he care? I remember one time crying out to God and telling him how alone I felt and how much I needed his presence and direction. A short-while later God answered my prayers. My marriage to Jacie healed and matured me. Ministry gave me direction. When God called me to ministry, I was filled with purpose and meaning. My relationship with Jacie gave me joy. Internships in Houston and Seattle exposed me to multi-cultural church and church planting and were the beginning of a journey I am still on, serving God in North America.

Come and Be With (Mid-Twenties to Thirties)

My thirties were a rich season of maturing. Pastoring Bridgeway Community CRC in New Jersey and then New Life CRC in Texas helped me mature with different ministry skills. But it was my heart that matured the most. I remember stumbling across SOAP, a tool to reflect on scripture. I never felt closer to God, both taking in scripture but also allowing the Holy Spirit to apply God's word to my life. The Sonship course with Drew Angus taught me sanctification by faith (not just justification by faith), the sinfulness of my sin, and that I am deeply loved as God's son. I understood I am forgiven of my sin and declared righteous in God's eyes because of my union with Christ. My coach David Lyle helped me clarify my life purpose and vision so I could follow Jesus on mission in an intentional and obedient way. I matured leading people to Christ through ALPHA, rebirthing a church, helping start a community ministry, daughtering a church and providing leadership for classis. Partner ministries in Kenya (Bridgeway) and Nepal (New Life) gave us a front row seat into the Holy Spirit's work overseas.

The Wall, Again!! (Early Forties)

In my forties, I found myself being pruned and refined. I bumped up against the rough underbelly of ministry. Conflict, difficulties, and people who are stuck or apathetic, challenged me. Jacie and I laughed about the saying, *"Church would be great if it wasn't for the people!"* Yet, I was also part of the problem. Faithwalking helped me see my pride, need to be in control, and habitual disobedience. Wounds from the past surfaced, difficult conversations were had, and God seemed distant. Yet, God was gracious and used this to prune me of self-righteousness and self-sufficiency. I discovered my need for deep friendships. Spiritual disciplines took on new joy. The Holy Spirit helped me be less-anxious, more self-differentiated and practice deep listening.

Remain in Me (Current Situation)

We are enjoying our season here in Houston. Five years ago, Jacie and I took a trip to Israel, I re-read The Drama of Scripture, and fell in love with The Bible Project. God used these experiences to put the spotlight on his one big story leading to Jesus. There are lots of things I am busy with (daughtering churches, missional discipleship, preserving biblical orthodoxy, racial reconciliation, justice, etc.), but God's mission now flows out of God's story. I am captivated by Jesus' Gospel and Gospel-story and want our churches to be fueled by that story and mission. Grandpa Sytsma's life verse is my life verse: *"Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21).*