

## 7 Stages of Spiritual Growth – Part 2

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### 1. The Fifth Mansion:

#### a. Discussion:

- i. God has been increasingly revealing Himself – His “touches of Love” and glimpses into His grandeur draw our heart to Him.
- ii. We are drawn to His love and begin to understand Him as the Bridegroom... in the most relational way possible we move into a “Lover and beloved” relationship.
- iii. Quiet adoration becomes more the norm of our prayer life.
- iv. We begin to learn to “see with both eyes” and to “hear with both ears” – that is... both physical and spiritual perception simultaneously.
- v. The 5<sup>th</sup> mansion is a time of transition where our focus moves us further from “doing” to “being” and from serving to loving.
- vi. We need to remember that the spiritual journey is not lineal... but that it is more of a spiraling with movement back and forth with greater growth occurring even when we seem less aware of it.
- vii. It is important to note that the “call to union” happens in the 5<sup>th</sup> mansion, but is not realized until the 7<sup>th</sup>.
- viii. St John of the Cross notes that the 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> mansions are often clouded with “dark nights of the soul” where struggle with the call to longing for love and purity in the fallen condition of life in a broken world. Jesus’ “High Priestly Prayer” of John 17:20-26 and Paul’s encouragement in Rom 8:38-39 are illustrative of this condition.

#### b. Life in the 5<sup>th</sup> Mansion:

##### i. Your heart’s desire:

1. Hunger for greater intimacy continues to intensify as God calls us deeper into knowing and loving Him.
2. Our desire to serve God is now more fully the result of wanting to please God, rather than wanting to curry His favor or do the right thing.
3. We realize more clearly that we cannot follow Jesus closely enough, that our sin-nature bothers us more profoundly than before as we begin to see God’ perfection more clearly.
4. We wonder why there are not more people motivated to care for Jesus and His ministry more deeply... and we are troubled by those who claim faith yet offend God freely and often.
5. These dynamics heighten personal frustration in our personal and corporate inability to live as we know we should. Though we fear we are stalled in our growth, this dynamic is actually a result of growth and an increased desire to hunger and thirst for God.

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### ii. Key activities:

1. As our zeal and ardor for God grow, ministry takes on a new imperative as we more closely identify with Jesus' mission. People notice an increased intensity as the flames of love are fanned in our life and we desire that others should share the experience as well.
2. Prayer and work integrate in loving God with greater intimacy and deepened communication resulting. Rather than doing what we think Jesus expects from us or what He would like us to do, we identify with Jesus' mission and seek to do what Jesus does. Our responsive nature of prayer enables greater intuition as we are becoming more conformed to God by the Spirit.
3. God's grace takes on new life and understanding, we know more of its richness and it chastens us. We are now more actively cooperating with the Spirit as He moves us in our life and ministry.
4. We are still aware of our fleshly failures and must expend considerable effort in living in the Spirit and controlling/crucifying the flesh.
5. As our understanding of ourselves and comfort in the Spiritual world grows more natural, we experience a greater integration and alignment of who we truly are with the ministry we were created to do. Busyness gives way to specific focus and direction, and we concentrate more on the things that truly matter in the Kingdom of God.
6. Love of God and love of others becomes more real and sincere.

### iii. Changing patterns of prayer:

1. Contemplation becomes the focus of prayer where we are consciously and purposefully entering the presence of God. There we find rest, and listening in silence replaces multiplying the words God already knows are in our mind or hearts.
2. Intercession morphs as well – into “holding a person [event/thing] before the Lord in restful silence” where we are more engaged in active listening than merely on interactive demands. God has at heart the best for what is on our mind/heart, in restful silence we now seek to catch up with God to get a glimpse of what He's doing and how we can move with His purpose.
3. Be still before God is entering into God's rest... it is God who works things out for His good pleasure, He doesn't need us to control Him or gain His attention... the reverse is true.

### iv. Jesus' initiatives:

1. We have all had moments when God seemed closer or more distant... the rich difference between the intimacy we experience with God and the

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distance we suffer intensifies. As our heart longs for intimacy, God also stands back developing trust and confidence in who He is.

2. These times of God's purposeful separation coupled with our own increasing awareness of our sinful nature complicates life in the 5<sup>th</sup> mansion.
  3. The resulting "dark nights of the soul" that St John of the Cross wrote about come into vivid life. We yearn to know and please God, but our self-knowledge of our inadequacy and sinfulness in light of greater understanding of God's perfection brings us near despair. Grace abounds as do wounds that are opened to promote healing – and through it all God is calling us into greater dependency and intimacy.
  4. Opening of old wounds promotes healing, and healing promotes humility and compassion. The 5<sup>th</sup> mansion is a place of great paradox – that is only resolved through faith and persistence as the Spirit moves us into a different dimension of grace.
  5. While this process continues, we are often dissatisfied with our Spiritual progress... which doesn't feel like growth at all. We have to remind ourselves that the work of Grace God is performing is totally His work – we can cooperate but He will ultimately fulfill it [Phil 1:6].
- v. Schemes of the enemy:
1. What may be interpreted as God's leaving us alone or leading us into temptation is more akin to a Dad helping his child learn to ride their bike without training wheels. Increased attacks force us to greater dependency, and a greater realization of our need for healing.
  2. Teresa notes that self-love is a real danger... by reinforcing our weakness and need; we are actually driven away from self-sufficiency to God-dependency.
  3. Our enemy would have us believe we are fine now at the place that we're at... which would only stunt our growth. Or to discourage us so we accept a lesser calling. The greater danger is to become full of ourselves and overly reliant on our favored status as God's elect. Authentic discipleship leads to humility, dependence on God, and amazement of Grace.
  4. Another area of conflict is discouragement that comes from friends and even within the church – when a heart is set afire by the Spirit we see the higher calling of God and want to encourage others to explore it. Since many are satisfied with their status quo or not want to live dependently on God, and some may actually ridicule us for our passion. It is important to

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find those who share values and calling and encourage each other to growth.

**vi. Keys for growth:**

1. God's love draws us like a moth to a flame as we become more intimate with God. The committed relationship with God is as a betrothal... and it is often supported by covenant relationships with other authentic disciples.
2. Growth still needs to be intentional and purposeful, though our cooperating with God's work is becoming easier and our kindled love keeps us close.
3. Continued cooperation with God takes place on two fronts – in service to others, and extended times of silence, contemplation and communion with God.
4. Three aspects of spiritual growth are identified:
  - a. Purgation – which is the cathartic work of the Spirit to convict us of sin and to cleanse us and purify us.
  - b. Illumination – which is the work of the Spirit to lead us into all truth and spiritual knowledge & experience.
  - c. Union – which is where our hearts and minds are conformed to God's and we sense our kinship with Him as His children.
5. Reading becomes more consciously spiritual where we seek opportunities to hear from God personally rather than merely gain information.
6. Covenant groups, spiritual directors/coaches, and interaction with authentic disciples become more important means of maintaining relational intimacy with God.
7. Our hearts of stone are being replaced with hearts of flesh (Ez 11:19, 36:26) and the creation of a pure heart (Ps 51:10) is becoming a reality.

**2. The Dark Interlude – Dark Nights of the Soul:**

**a. What are the “Dark Nights” about?**

- i. These refer to extended periods where God seems removed from our life, and His presence seems to retreat from us. The patterns of God providing tastes of eternity to draw us toward Himself that we experience in the 1<sup>st</sup> 5 mansions seems withdrawn. Our times of meditation and prayer seem dry... our prayers bouncing off the ceiling rather than penetrating Heaven.

**ii.**

**b. Why/how would God allow such difficulties and potentially despairing moments to occur?**

- i. I believe the answer lies in our disparate natures – a perfect and sinless God and an imperfect and sinful human. Perhaps the bigger question lies in how can these two live in proximity with each other?

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- 1. For myself, I have made an uneasy peace in the matter as I contemplate God’s judgment of humanity. In my youth I often pictured God’s final judgment as an inquisition... books being opened, all the things I have done being recounted on a celestial “Jumbo-tron” where my life is displayed in 3D-HD for all to see and laugh at. As I have matured and gained a better understanding of the heart of God, I have a different view of judgment. I now see it more as a moment from Isaiah:**

<sup>Isa 6:5</sup> “Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.” <sup>Isa 6:6</sup> Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. <sup>Isa 6:7</sup> With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

- a. God didn’t have to judge Isaiah, he judged himself when he looked upon perfection. I think it is reasonable that we become painfully aware of our weakness, sin, and limitations as we come closer to seeing God for Who He is.**
  - b. I think it interesting that God didn’t excuse Isaiah’s self-condemnation, but instead agreed with him and then made provision for him... atoning for his sin.**
  - c. So many people get so worked up about God judging people and sentencing them to hell... in my way of thinking, we’ll most likely sentence ourselves... and either the atoning provision of Jesus will be applied or not dependent upon our choice.**
- 2. In this context, the dark nights are more our coming to grips with God’s perfection. It is part of a necessary maturing process enabling us to be in the Presence of a Holy and altogether Righteous God.**

<sup>Isa 55:7</sup> Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. <sup>Isa 55:8</sup> “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. <sup>Isa 55:9</sup> “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

- a. In this context, God’s provision of Grace is far more radical than we can ever imagine.**



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- ii. It has a characteristic set of identifiable symptoms:
  - 1. It usually begins after a season of consistent and satisfying meditative prayer.
  - 2. It follows increased development of our detachment from worldly things and dependencies.
  - 3. In this dark time we see little real satisfaction or consolation from previously satisfying spiritual practices and usually includes friends who have previously been spiritual help.
  - 4. It is not resultant from hidden sin, or internal depression – though it may feel as such.
  - 5. We feel we are not serving God well enough and are more aware of our failures and dependency.
  - 6. We feel like we are backsliding and the tendency is to try and go back and do what worked before – but this is something else.
  - 7. We often feel ineffective in our meditative approaches to Scripture, and we don't sense God speaking to us... and prayer seems fruitless and lifeless.
  - 8. Spiritual dryness is made the more painful by the absence of God's previously experienced consolations.
  - 9. We are more aware of our sin-nature and it grieves us to be so tainted and separated from God.
  - 10. In making us more aware of our own weakness and sinfulness, we are more alert to it in others... but instead of being judgmental or feeling superior we become more humble, more patient with others, more willing to comfort those who struggle themselves.
  - 11. Qualified spiritual coaching at this time is crucial.
  - 12. Sometimes this period may endure for months or even years... but it is the pain of separation – as of a lover from their loved one.
- iii. Tom Ashbrook speaks about his own personal experience in the dark nights of the senses – he observes that he was teaching others about centering prayer but his own prayers seemed dry and empty.
  - 1. As he pondered what he was experiencing he was made more aware of his own sinful nature by the Spirit. He says it was like having someone next to him all the time constantly pointing out all his faults, mistakes and weaknesses.
  - 2. It wasn't done in a cruel or malicious fashion, it was done objectively and without condemnation... the pain he felt was of his not measuring up to God's standard.

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3. When he confessed of his dilemma to Brother Boniface [his spiritual mentor], he responded... “Isn’t that wonderful! Don’t you see how God has blessed you by letting you see the truth?”
  4. As we go on into spiritual maturity, God’s blessings take on different shape and character... the intent is to enable us to remain in the presence of a Holy, Righteous God.
- iv. Dark nights are actually a new level of God’s Grace for His maturing children – rather than hiding or retreating from it, it is important to learn to embrace it and trust God’s motives and intent. See *The Collected Works of John of the Cross*.
1. John says that during this process God begins to change how He feeds our hearts. He used to nourish us by His Word, expressions of love and presence – mainly through our human senses... now He begins communicating to us in the Spirit to our spirit... where spiritual life is spiritually conveyed.
  2. John warns us that in meditation we use our own faculties to relate to God. In contemplation however, God relates to us in the Spirit... beyond thoughts, words, and pictures.
  3. This is a new form of relating and we must learn to trust God’s Word in our hearts in the ways that we cannot discern or understand from mere mental processes.
  4. Knowledge of our inherent human misery is a major benefit in this process. We begin to realize how far away from God we really are, and how dependent we are upon His grace. This leads to true humility, and even as we long for the familiar warm sense of presence we used to experience... a great work of Grace is going on in us as humility grows and spiritual pride diminishes.
- v. Once the dark nights of the senses have run their course there follows a period of consolidation and communion with God in contemplation.
1. In this part of our journey we are less dependent on the current experiences of the senses to affirm God’s presence or to know His love.
  2. We are now more we are free to abandon ourselves to experience Him spiritually and rejoice in our deepening intimacy with Him.
  3. We are now ready for the next phase of vision quest and life in the 6<sup>th</sup> mansion.
- d. Dark nights of the Spirit:
- i. Having been through spiritual boot camp, we are now prepared for the vision quest, which aims to work out the very roots of our sin. The initial reality we find is that God seems to withdraw in an even more profound way... and find ourselves

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being divested of the merely human ways of memory, imagination, intellect, and will. Cozy feelings of prayer and presence are few is not gone leaving us feeling that we're left suspended between earth and heaven.

- ii. The reality of God and His work in us is unquestioned, and the removal of the sensual validations has freed us from the milk of continual spiritual assurance.
  - iii. We are now being prepared to become Knights of the Realm where the spiritual reality becomes our home. In this state, God is flooding us with His light... though we often can't actually perceive it; God is working in amazing ways.
    1. The purification of the soul is the direction the Spirit is pursuing so that our love of God may also be pure.
    2. Awareness of God's perceived absence is profoundly painful in light of the experiential satisfactions we had come to expect, and we enter into a time of spiritual poverty.
    3. In this state the fire that purges us also gives new life in our deepest resources of the soul.
    4. Spiritual pride and presumption are being stripped away. Our attempts to reach God are familiar fashion fail and leave us feeling alone and relationally abandoned.
    5. There are but 2 choices – give up or persevere... and long since the former has ceased to be an option, so we persevere.
    6. In this formative period it is critical that we are engaged in relational community – where more mature believers who have already walked this path can nurture and comfort us, and where we can share our thoughts with others experiencing the same pain of separation.
    7. God's grace is extended in a special way... He will not leave us here longer than what is needed to prepare our hearts for Him or longer than we can endure and no longer than necessary.
    8. In this state... perseverance in love is our single focus.
    9. The dark nights John of the Cross insists are not optional, and they are unavoidable.
    10. God is committed to preparing His people to live in His presence in Trinitarian love... the vision quest transforms us into warriors of love and is an infinitely greater state for us to be in. Though the process is painful, the results are wondrous.
3. Interlude # 2 – God's Light Pervades all – John's thoughts:
- a. As I contemplate Tom's book, a few observations come to my mind.

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- i. **God is not a one size fits all Creator. The God who devised DNA and fingerprints to distinguish each individual doesn't compel one methodology for maturity. My mind suggests this, but my heart knows this about God.**
  - ii. **I have a hard time accepting that all must endure a radical separation from God... to me it is intuitively obvious that once joined to God... we are never separated. We may feel apart or distant, but God's grace holds us fast.**
  - iii. **We each have different backgrounds, and we have lived different lives... God knows what we must endure to become the person He created us to be.**
  - iv. **Having said that... I confess that I want whatever God wants for me... in whatever way or manner that He chooses. He is the Potter... I am the clay.**
- b. **We are each on a faith journey – not unlike all Christians through the ages. It is important to emphasize that each of us have unique spiritual experiences, and that trying to put them into words for others to understand is at best an inaccurate exercise. The reality of the experience remains, but the explanation we voice may not adequately or consistently translate the experience in meaningful fashion to another.**
- c. **I get the “boot camp” experience of Spiritual Formation, and I intuitively understand the “vision quest” experience. It seems to me that my whole life has been a vision quest. For me, the boot camp discipline of the senses was the result of my life experiences to date. The vision quest was the result of my seminary experience where my mind was strengthened and my heart was broken by the pervading love of God.**
- d. **God's Grace is so much more radical than we can ever imagine. Just when we think we get it... we find we are still light years away. And just because we think we got it, doesn't necessarily mean we have. This keeps us soft hearted and counters our tendency toward hard headedness.**
- e. **When you read these different stages in spiritual growth, don't presume you will have to experience each one in the same manner as others have. Rather, understand that Spiritual maturity is a developmental process where God transforms each of us into the full measure of His Messiah/Son.**
- i. **Remember that Jesus didn't use the same approach to heal each person He came into contact with... He gave them what they needed to get them where He wanted them to be. Such should be our guide as disciplers.**
  - ii. **Jesus didn't call each person to the same manner of life or service... just that for which they were created and equipped... one not being better than another – such is the Body of Christ.**
  - iii. **Understand that the journey we are each on has many common sign posts, but not necessarily a fixed manner in which we traverse them. Be open to the Spirit, and understand that we are all engaged in a much bigger world than what we see and experience.**

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- f. **Another difficulty I see is the problem of purging our sin-nature – a complicated matter indeed!**
- i. **Jesus 1<sup>st</sup> coming was the game changer in terms of humanity and eternity – He inaugurated the church age of the Kingdom of God that lives in the tension of the now and not yet:**
    - 1. **The promise of restoration – Jesus’ healings, acts of power over nature, and resurrection attest to the coming restoration of life as intended prior to the Fall.**
    - 2. **The promise of judgment – Jesus’ condemnation of the faithless Jewish leaders and His demonstrated power over the spiritual realm attest to judgment that will come [John 9:39].**
    - 3. **The reality of freedom from sin through Jesus:**
      - a. **Freed from the penalty of sin.**
      - b. **Freed from the power of sin.**
      - c. **Freed from slavery to sin and death.**
    - 4. **The reality of life in the Spirit conveyed through the Holy Spirit – we have spiritual life now as we await the Parousia when the new Heaven & earth is established, the faithful enter into their eternal reward, and the faithless into their condemnation.**
    - 5. **The reality of peace with God – attested by the torn curtain in the Temple and Jesus resurrection.**
  - ii. **The problem of sin is that it is not merely wrong doing... it is wrong being. Freedom is not just the payment of the penalty of our wrong doing, but the correction of our wrong being – a nature that wants to sin must be transformed by the Spirit in Grace into a nature that wants to please God by doing what is right... this is obedience not out of fear for the penalty, but as an act out of love.**
  - iii. **I question whether the sin nature can even be completely destroyed this side of eternity. We know Jesus paid the price for the penalty of sin, and saved us from the power of sin... we are no longer slaves to sin and our sin nature – this is Grace.**
  - iv. **Being saved from the presence of sin is achieved when we are in the presence of God – because God’s Presence alone drives out all sin and wickedness.**
- g. **Intimacy with God reaches its crescendo in Heaven, where our transformative process finds its completion in eternal union with Him. This is not absorption into the mind of God or the God-head as in Eastern metaphysics, but being completely human in the presence of God as we were intended to be in the Garden. Grace is transformational restoration.**
- i. **Earthly intimacy has its limitations – I believe we develop greater awareness of the greatness of God and thereby fresh insights of the awe, wonder, mercy and grace.**

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- ii. **Union with God is initiated by the Spirit at our “born-again” event, and the transformational process begins with the indwelling Spirit. Philippians 1:6 says that “He who began a good work in you will complete it.” The completion is guaranteed in the character of God, not in our feeble efforts... though we have the responsibility to cooperate with the Spirit in this transformational process, we are not the driving factor. This process continues throughout our life on earth.**
- iii. **An important part of this process is encouraged by our conceptualization of the greatness of God. Philippians 2:12-13 offers an insight:**

Phil 2:12 Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,

Phil 2:13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

In this passage a sort of mathematical formula is revealed... not that we can reduce God to math, but rather we may gain a better understanding of how God operates in us. The formula goes like this... **SPIRITUAL VITALITY (SV) is approximately equal to my obedience (O) resulting with intentional work which is the outward working of my faith (WO). God works in me (WI) to continue the Spiritual Transformation process He began and sustains it in accordance with His Will and Good Pleasure (WP). In this formula, Fear & trembling – literally awe & wonder (A+W) flows out of my close personal experience of God’s Greatness and from my dependence on Him. In this formula, I see the awe and wonder component as the Spirit transformational driver, and thus I give it a power of infinity.**

$$SV \approx ((O+WO) \times (WI+WP)) \times (A+W) \infty$$

- iv. **Consider the indwelling Spirit moving within us to experience new heights and depths of intimacy in the greatness of God. As God grows bigger, our spiritual vitality grows stronger.**
- h. **Whatever your thoughts on these matters, it is my hope and prayer that you will find your own place, and will see the vast complex and wondrous expanse of the Kingdom of Heaven... and make room for one another as we each traverse this life with God.**

**Blessings!**

#### **4. The Sixth Mansion:**

- a. **Discussion – a brief recap of the mansions covered thus far:**
  - i. **1<sup>st</sup> mansion – we were initially drawn into Christ and His Kingdom of light when we received Him as Savior and Lord. Through Grace we receive forgiveness and peace with God and ourselves, and the sealing gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit.**

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- ii. **2<sup>nd</sup> mansion** – our hearts are enduring the conflict between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan – between the heavenly and the worldly. Our choices to follow Jesus and not the worldly life sharpen the conflict.
  - iii. **3<sup>rd</sup> mansion** – finding our place in the family of God we discover our spiritual gifting and something of our calling. We learn to serve Jesus in our daily life. God orchestrates through circumstances an ongoing transformation in our hearts that allows us to experience God’s love more deeply and express it to others in service. We find new identity and challenges for growth in the fellowship of the church.
  - iv. **4<sup>th</sup> mansion** – we experience God more deeply and profoundly in mountaintop experiences with God, and persevere in service and following Jesus on the plains of life. In this dual environment we begin to see more profound evidences of God’s grace and love and our hearts are becoming more captivated by Jesus. We sense an inner pull that draws us toward God even as the world attempts to pull us in the other direction. We see that God is the treasure for which we yearn, and become more devoted and disciplined disciples.
  - v. **5<sup>th</sup> mansion** – we learn to see and accept ourselves as God’s beloved children... though yet imperfect, we know we are being perfected and seek to cooperate with God’s Spirit in furthering His effort. Longing for God’s presence increases as we learn to stand in His light and hear His voice... becoming more aware of and obedient to His promptings. We also become aware of the dark nights in which we sense our detachment from God, and the imperfection that remains within our hearts. Instead of seeing God as part of our life... we realize He is our life.
  - vi. **6<sup>th</sup> mansion** – is where we experience more profoundly the grandeur of Jesus as God and King, and along with an awareness of how much further we need to go to become the beautiful beings God intended us to be. In the 6<sup>th</sup> mansion we realize more profoundly the love of God and we respond to Him as His beloved... His betrothed. Here we know our calling to love and intimacy, but experience the prolonged times of separation all who are betrothed experience before consummation. As we long for consummation, we realize the pain of waiting.
- b. **Life in the 6<sup>th</sup> mansion:**
- i. **General thoughts** – the divisions between the last 3 mansions are less distinct than the earlier 3 mansions. In the 5<sup>th</sup> we were largely unaware of significant spiritual growth, but now in the 6<sup>th</sup> we realize that a wonderful change has taken place... we learn what it means to live more fully in Christ. Through spiritual experiences Jesus heals our hearts and draws us to Him as dependent individuals.
    - 1. We sense God’s presence pretty much constantly, and we serve Him more consistently in responsiveness and obedience. The desire to do this was

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begun in the 5<sup>th</sup> mansion and now becomes a more fully experienced reality in the 6<sup>th</sup>.

2. While we seek to be alone with God in familiar forms of intimacy, those moments of escape and presence are replaced with a more general pervasive awareness. We know He is there even when we don't experience the spiritual touches we have before.
  3. The 6<sup>th</sup> mansion is characterized by a deep longing for God, in spite of the dark nights where we find virtually little sensation of God's presence.
  4. Betrothal in Biblical times is more than our form of engagement... it was a commitment of marriage with a postponed consummation to allow the two to grow into a more intimate love relationship.
    - a. It is a time of longing and development which heightens the expectation of consummation.
    - b. Obviously, this metaphor is relational and not sexual. Our Western thoughts of marriage tend to focus on the physical and minimize the spiritual relational connection.
    - c. The longing is a release from the separation and reality of the mystical union.
    - d. In this context, Phil 3:7-11 makes sense.
  5. Three changes tend to typify the changing life in our spiritual growth:
    - a. Our prayer community is accompanied by warm touches with one another as an extension of the Body, and the genuine blessing bestowed by the Spirit through us.
    - b. Our spiritual community becomes more accustomed to abide together in purposeful silence... not needing to multiply words for context as the spiritual reality creates the context.
    - c. Personal prayer flows more naturally into silent adoration, and intercession more naturally into silently holding up the person/place/object of our prayer before the Spirit... trusting He knows the need and will more adequately pray and intercede than any words we can offer.
  6. The dark night experiences teach us not to depend on our feelings just as we learn not to depend on our words in intercession.
- ii. Heart's desire:
1. As one experiences deep union with God our mind and heart becomes more attuned to His... and we become more fully occupied with God.
  2. We want to understand His intention and follow Him in every circumstance.

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3. In this season we also experience some extreme depths in the dark nights as the sensory dependence we've been accustomed to be removed.
  4. First our will and intent is moved in conformance with God, while our imagination and our memory lags behind. This is where we get attacked by the adversary as our imagination goes where we would rather not and old memories float by that accuse us and leave us winching in pain and distress.
  5. In light of our new knowledge of the Holiness and Perfection of God, these errant thoughts cause us distress and consternation as the mind and heart are more alive in God and the desire of the flesh is not yet destroyed but it's influence is ebbing.
- iii. Key activities:
1. We continue to grow in God-centered devotion and living a Gospel centered life. We have come to realize that every aspect of life contains the presence and will of God.
  2. Greater ability to know the mind and heart of God translates into living more responsively to His movements and desires. Discernment is a form of this maturity as we intuitively know what God would want or do in the circumstances we live in.
  3. A stabilizing inner confidence and joy in the Lord enables us to stand firm and transcends our emotional responses.
  4. We are far less dependent upon other people or many of the things we were formerly preoccupied with... we find our identity, significance, security, and approval more directly from God. This often presents a challenge in the church communities we operate through, and pastors and leaders may not understand or appreciate the depth of growth or the missions we have been called to, having been accustomed to our availability and compliance to their wishes we now are more independent in a Godly, healthy and wholesome way they may not understand.
  5. Criticism that would have previously confounded us, is taken more in stride as a sharing in the suffering of Jesus. Such awareness does not intimidate us but actually strengthens our resolve.
  6. The changing dimensions of silence:
    - a. In the 4<sup>th</sup> mansion – silence is a surprising relief from the need for words or thoughts... a chance just to be with God.
    - b. In the 5<sup>th</sup> mansion – silence takes on a new dimension of communication... in the absence of our words or thoughts being expressed, the presence of God communicating directly in our heart

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is more clearly heard. Our hearts are being transformed to become comfortable with God's abiding presence.

- c. In the 6<sup>th</sup> mansion – silence becomes an even more profound experience of God... not only can we remain still and commune [dance/explore] the Trinity within our heart, but we are sometimes drawn outside of ourselves into the mystical heavenly presence of God. We see His transcendent nature everywhere present... especially in nature. In this unseen mystical experience God continues to transform and recreate our hearts so we can abide with Him.
- d. In the 7<sup>th</sup> mansion – we experience unity with God – we are drawn into the dance in the Trinity... this is what we were made for.

### iv. Changing patterns of prayer:

- 1. Our practice of contemplation has so deepened that we are able to communicate with God beyond the limits of our natural senses and language.
  - a. In the 4<sup>th</sup> mansion we learned to listen to God in prayer more than talking to Him.
  - b. In the 5<sup>th</sup> mansion we learned to focus our attention on God alone that transformed normative prayer into abiding in Christ.
  - c. Now in the 6<sup>th</sup> mansion we learn that silent abiding... the contemplation of God alone... has become the very nature of our prayer life. In this wonderful mystical silence we may experience ecstasy, rapture, locutions, transport, and flight of the spirit.
    - i. Mystical experiences include:
      - 1. Ecstasy – means the experience of intense joy.
      - 2. Rapture – means being so captivated and absorbed with the wonder of God that we become unaware of our surroundings.
      - 3. Locutions – are experiences of hearing audible words or implanted messages from God.
      - 4. Transport – refers to the sense of being somewhere else and experiencing that reality... it is a mystical visionary or physical experience.
      - 5. Flight of the spirit – refers to the mystical experiences of being in heavenly places.

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2. **Mystical experiences must be properly evaluated and weighed against known Scriptural revelation, and it is useful to explore them with a trusted spiritual friend, coach, or advisor.**
  - a. **Be aware that God is consistent in normative revelation [Scripture] and non-normative revelation [visions, words of knowledge, etc.] – there should be precedence in Scripture that we can know that validates what we have experienced or heard in the spiritual realm.**
  - b. **Schemes of the enemy and tricks of the mind are a real concern, and should be taken to heart and properly validated... this is discernment.**
  - c. **Concerning “words from God” –**
    - i. **The 1<sup>st</sup> and truest test is the power and authority they bear on your heart and mind – is it Scripturally sound, is it compelling?**
    - ii. **The 2<sup>nd</sup> test is whether it leaves or develops into a quiet peace or resolve in your heart/mind – the initial response will likely be shocking, but how does it weigh on your heart?**
    - iii. **The 3<sup>rd</sup> test is that these encounters when valid should weight on your heart and mind for a long time – some will never be forgotten.**

v. **Jesus initiatives:**

1. **Mystics including Teresa and John of the Cross describe occasions of such powerful sense of communication of God’s love... powerful and fleeting, such that it seems a wounding as well as a blessing... wounds of love. The power of the experience causes great desire and longing for more that causes one to deliberate on the experience. The inconsistency of the experience causes one to persevere until the next experience.**
2. **After being enveloped in the radiance of God’s wondrous light... joy and fulfillment and life are known. When this experience subsides... we are left with an awareness of the emptiness and darkness we now live in. Perseverance in hope is where we are left... enduring the mundane in hope for the future where we’ll live in that state of bliss.**
3. **In this season of life... we see more clearly our own sin nature, and the incongruity with the life we aspire toward. Our brokenness and woundedness is ever before us... we move from radiance to suffering which steels the mind and steadies the heart.**

vi. **Schemes of the enemy:**

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1. Spiritual warfare is rife in the dark nights where the enemy attempts to accuse us that it is our error that causes these swings of experiences.
2. Another side of spiritual warfare are spiritual counterfeits that draw our attention... we must discern, resist, and persevere in this season.

vii. Keys for growth:

1. God takes the initiative in this season – in this mansion we are not actively pursuing God, it is His grace that is actively pursuing us. The discipline of perseverance is key.
2. The Spirit moves this process along at His own sense of timing... we cooperate with God in obedience until both obedience and perseverance become a natural condition of our life.
3. Times of extended prayer and reflection are essential for this discerning and growth process as our intellect and will as well as our memories and expectations are being more completely focused and fused upon God.
4. Scripture is an ongoing opportunity to hear from God personally, especially in the context of a supportive Christian community and friendships that help us navigate these unfamiliar waters of faith.

5. The Seventh Mansion:

a. Discussion:

- i. In the final mansion of spiritual growth, the love of God permeates and dominates everything. Much as the incense burned in the temple fills the air, God's love scents everything.
  1. This is as close to the experience of the richness and completeness of God's love and presence that we can receive this side of eternity. This is the abiding in love Jesus spoke about... it is the greatest amount of intimacy we can hold and yet be in our unregenerated physical state of being.
  2. The tyranny of sin has ended, combating against our daily sins has ended, and tasting the goodness of God is real. Peace permeates everything.
  3. Dryness in prayer is gone, dark nights of the soul are gone; the mystery of God's presence and comfort is everywhere.
- ii. Teresa describes 3 experiences that are unique for each person that occur in the 7<sup>th</sup> mansion:
  1. We are given a unique vision of the Trinity which transforms our understanding of God into a deeply experiential knowledge. The vision of the Trinity we now 'see' combines aspects of our intellect, emotions, and mystical experiences – so we understand God in a more comprehensive manner that strengthens and sustains us.

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2. Jesus reveals Himself to us in His resurrection humanity much as Jesus revealed Himself to His disciples after His resurrection. The result is we are drawn into relational closeness likened to a spiritual marriage. Jesus' disciples did not properly comprehend the Spiritual marriage Jesus spoke of until after His death and resurrection. The change they evidenced in their actions and words is the result of a life mystically transformed... with a strength and purpose not present before.
  3. Our lives are steeped in an ongoing and deepening relationship of this unique union with God. Teresa likens this union to 2 candles that burn so closely together that the flame becomes one – yet the candles may be separated.
- iii. In the 7<sup>th</sup> mansion – the work God has performed is now self-sustaining. We have been so infused with God that His Spirit radiates out consistently.
- b. Life in the 7<sup>th</sup> mansion:
    - i. Heart's desire:
      1. Our central desire is to know, love, and serve God. Though we still live in a fallen-world that often clouds our perceptions, our heart has pretty well been purged. The world and its pleasures and attachments have been set aside and we are free with undivided heart and mind to follow God.
      2. The longings and fears that have long dominated our spiritual experience have passed. We are confident of our place with God, no longer afraid of displeasing Him, and confident that He leads us according to His will.
      3. We are now a new person... fully alive and available to Him. The spiritual goal of a love relationship with God has resulted in our wholeness, holiness, and service.
      4. We live to love God and serve His will. As I consider a simile that would capture where we are... a Knight or Lady of the realm who confidently enters the throne room of the Great King and presents themselves for His pleasure comes to mind.
    - ii. Key activities:
      1. There are 2 categories of activities that dominate the 7<sup>th</sup> mansion – loving and serving God.
      2. Teresa says that the 'Mary' and 'Martha' parts of us are now joined together and working in harmony. There may be discord around us, and discord may result from what we do... but within us there is no discord.
      3. How loving and serving play out is expressed in a myriad of ways, there is no one way. God leads us in and we follow and obey.

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4. **Fruits of the Spirit now abound... they are really spiritual in nature and not emotional or behavioral.**
  5. **The calm confidence in which our faithfulness and service to God flow through may create some unintended jealousy or even spite in others, who may question our motives. Such conflict occurs when authentic faith comes up against the more petty forms of faith.**
- iii. **Changing patterns of prayer:**
1. **Prayer is now more of a trusting silence – an adoring attentiveness to God.**
  2. **The Trinity in its complexity in community, and Jesus in His humanity have been revealed to us... and we look at the world through His eyes, not merely our own. We see things that could be, and the beauty of the created order is breathtaking... as the Fallenness heartbreaking.**
  3. **Intercessory prayer flows freely from our hearts to God's... with words not being necessary.**
  4. **We are aware that everything is tied into the eternal plan of God and is filled with His love, power, and wisdom.**
- iv. **Jesus' initiatives:**
1. **The experiences of the clarity of vision of the Trinity and Jesus, the reality of our spiritual marriage, and the revelation of the new center where the Trinity resides in us and through us – all work together to bring about our calm assurance of abiding in Jesus.**
  2. **The struggles we previously experienced to maintain spiritual growth and development have ceased... it is now as if we are in a Spiritual current that carries us swiftly along, and instead of fighting against it we just relax and enjoy to ride.**
  3. **The transforming unity in the Spirit draws us into deeper and more profound intimacy, peace, and joy.**
- v. **Schemes of the enemy:**
1. **The ongoing barrage of lies, temptations, accusations, etc. have lost their sting. Instead of these assaults hitting home and eliciting a defensive posture and response, we know them for what they are and resist and repulse them automatically.**
  2. **Life in the Spirit is a reality... and the schemes of the enemy can't affect it. We know this because the full light of Christ exposes it for what it is. We also know our security in Christ fully protected in the full armor of God.**
  3. **Still, human nature is tainted by sin... and pride or other self deceptions we still need to be vigilant about... asking God to prevent and/or expose and remove any sin.**

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4. It is our desire to live and love as Jesus did... and in our fallen world, we can never do that completely or perfectly. The accusation of the enemy hits home here... and we agree with the Spirit of our need and dependence upon God. What the enemy meant for harm, actually keeps us close and safe.
5. While the likeliness of a fall becomes diminished, the magnitude of a fall increases exponentially. This drives us repeatedly back to prayer and grace.

vi. Keys for growth:

1. Prayer of 'attentive trusting silence' is the most significant condition for growth and union with God.
2. Although we are now more reflexive in our attentiveness and dependence on God, and our Spiritual life is fully alive and drawing us closer to God – still, we need to be intentional about our faith.
3. God is our faithful provider and sustainer, yet we must still determine to press on into Him, and encourage His continued work of transformation which won't end during our life time but only in eternity.
4. The Spiritual disciplines need to be exercised, or we will remain/become spiritual dwarfs not the giants we hope to be.
5. Immersion in the Scriptures is always an important avenue for growth, because He is always speaking to us through them. Fellowship and especially worship need to be practiced regularly.
6. We press on also knowing that the full mystery of God is something we can never grasp, and we will happily spend eternity contemplating.

6. Transforming Union – the Goal of Spiritual Formation:

- a. Relationship with God in Jesus is where we begin, and where we end our Spiritual journey. Our goal in Spiritual Formation is God Himself... not becoming better people, or more holy or any other 'good' thing that would keep us from the 'best' thing... God Himself.
- b. We often say that Jesus is Lord and savior – and this is true because He was Lord of all before He became our personal savior. But from the perspective of our personal spiritual growth – Jesus is savior, and then we declare and make Him Lord.
- c. Acceptance of Jesus as savior is an easy thing that cost us everything and yet nothing. Making Jesus Lord and keeping Him Lord is a life-long diligent and vigilant commitment and effort... with the Spirit wanting us and causing us to succeed.
- d. Each of us is unique... and the Spirit knows it well! God is delighted to bless our uniqueness to guide us along on our spiritual journey.

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