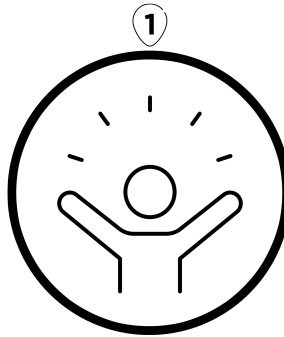




THE PATH

fellowship bible church

Stage 1 — Awareness of God



And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. - Hebrews 11:6

Awareness of God - awakening to the existence of a higher power that leads to faith in Jesus Christ.

Overview

We begin our faith journey at Stage 1. These early days of being aware that a higher power exists is nearly always child-like and often actually happens when we are children. “Some come [to awareness of God] through a sense of awe, others out of sense of need.”¹ This awareness is acute, distinct, and seldom ever as powerful as when we are first aware that there is someone “bigger” than us behind all of the world. Witnessing the beauty of creation and nature can lead us to an awareness of God. So too can a life altering event like divorce, illness, addiction, and loneliness be the catalyst of need that drives us to sense our deep need of God.

Stage 1 is where a person first becomes aware of the journey they have been on all along. No one steps onto The Path here — every person is already on it, made by God and for him, whether they know it or not. What begins at Stage 1 is not the journey but the awareness of it: the discovery of God, of one's purpose and place in the world, and of how the pieces of life fit together. Stage 1 of The Path ranges from those who become aware of a higher power through to those who place their trust in the finished work of Jesus that results in Salvation. Stage 1 is when a person begins their spiritual journey to discover God and choose to follow him. Both the child who is becoming aware of God and the teenager who becomes a follower of Jesus are on The Path and in Stage 1. Consider these examples of Awareness of God.

Case Study

Cindy is 9 years old and is on her first trip to the beach. Upon arrival, her parents take her to the beach near sunset, and she sees the sun dipping beneath the horizon. In astonishment and awe, she

¹Hagberg, J., Guelich, R. 2005. *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith*. Salem, WI: Sheffield Publishing Company. (34)

gazes upon the beautiful scene. At that moment, within her precious heart she becomes aware that humans didn't create this. At that point she becomes aware of a powerful force infinitely greater than she is. Cindy is in Stage 1.

Mark is a 49-year-old insurance salesman. He's a lifelong learner but he's never been very religious. In fact, Mark has never been to church and his only impression of what Christians are like are what he sees either on cable news or the cheesy bumper stickers on people's cars. Now he's in crisis as his wife of 20 years has divorced him and taken the kids. An old friend from high school reaches out to him, prompted to pray and reach out to Mark. He becomes aware of God through their chats and begins the journey of discovering who this God is. Mark is in Stage 1.

Denise is 44 and has been in church since she was a girl. When she was eight, she made a profession of faith because others in her class had, and she wanted her Sunday School teacher to be pleased with her too. She was baptized that summer and continued to attend church with her parents. Hard things happened in her family — a job lost, a grandparent's long decline, a marriage that strained and held — but they were handled behind closed doors and never spoken of on a Sunday. What she watched her parents do was show up, serve, and keep the rules carefully. She learned to do the same, and she has done it well for thirty-six years. She knows the songs, the language, and the right thing to say in a group. But Monday through Saturday, almost none of it holds. Prayer feels like talking to the ceiling. Her Bible stays closed. The things Christians are supposed to want — time with God, a heart for other people, a joy that outlasts a good week — she stopped expecting to feel a long time ago.

When she does pray and nothing seems to change, she reads that as confirmation rather than mystery — she has quietly come to believe God has larger concerns than someone as ordinary as her, and the silence is simply what her prayers get. She keeps showing up anyway. Some of it is duty. If she's honest, some of it is fear of what it would mean to stop. She assumes she is the only one in the room for whom none of this feels real — that everyone else around her actually has what she is only performing.

None of this makes her stop — if anything, it's part of why she can't. She has spent decades as the one people rely on: the one who remembers, who shows up, who can be trusted with the job nobody else wants. The church runs partly on people like Denise, and it lets her know it. Being needed there is real — it is a kind of love, and she has felt it. It has simply never been the same thing as being known by God, and for thirty-six years that was close enough not to notice the difference.

Lately, it isn't close enough anymore. Denise is increasingly aware that her faith, and everything she has built to express it, is hollow — and she's beginning to long for something real: an actual connection with the One she has spent her life serving. She has never confronted her own need for a Savior — the longing doesn't have a name yet, only an ache — because she has always assumed the performance was the real thing, since that is what was modeled for her all her life. Denise is in Stage 1.

A Word on the Faith Shadow

Denise has been in church for thirty-six years. She would tell you she is a Christian. And The Path Inventory reads her at Stage 1 — the stage before a person has trusted Christ at all.

If that is your result too, this section is for you. Many who share her story carry the same quiet verdict about God: that he's occupied with weightier concerns than theirs, and the silence in their prayers is proof of it. Some assume they're the only one for whom this is true. Others assume this is simply what faith feels like for everyone, and long ago stopped expecting anything different. It is worth understanding, because a Stage 1 result for someone who has been in church a long time is not rare, and reading it wrongly in either direction does real damage.

What the Faith Shadow is

For some children, from the moment they are born, they are surrounded by the faith of their family and their church — prayers said over them, a community around them, rhythms of worship and Scripture they are raised inside of, long before they are able to own any of it. That covering is what The Path calls the Faith Shadow — the shadow of faith cast by those responsible for a child's spiritual nurture. It is the soil a child's own faith is planted in.

And when a child receives Christ inside it, that profession is genuine, simple, and complete on its own terms. Jesus set a child in front of his disciples and said the kingdom belongs to such as these. He did not say children may enter despite being children — he said their kind of faith is what entering looks like (Mark 10:14; Matthew 18:4). Childlike faith is the standard, not a lesser version.

The Faith Shadow is not meant to be a shield isolating and insulating the child away from the world's woes, but calibrated protection from what is beyond their ability to bear — the way shade still lets in light and warmth without the burn of standing in full sun.

The Faith Shadow works like a garden stake. Before a plant can bear its own weight and the weight of its fruit, a stake supports it so it can flourish and grow strong enough to eventually stand on its own. It still meets the sun, the wind, and the rain — just not more than it can yet withstand. The world's weight is not something a child is meant to face alone, but to bear only what they're able, with the rest carried alongside them, in plain view, by their family. A child inside a healthy Faith Shadow still meets real disappointment, real fear, real hard news — and meets it while watching people who love them depend on God to carry what they cannot carry themselves. Not insulation from hardship. Company inside it.

What fills it

The deposit is not the hardship, and it is not a parent's composure either. A parent who absorbs every difficulty without visible strain teaches self-sufficiency just as effectively as one who hides the trouble entirely — either way the child never actually sees anyone depend on God. What gets deposited is a child watching weight be carried by something other than human strength, while being let close enough to know the weight was real (Philippians 1:29–30).

What a working Shadow produces

Caleb is 26. He told his mother he wanted to follow Jesus when he was seven and meant it as completely as a seven-year-old can mean anything. He grew up watching his parents pray through a layoff, a hard diagnosis, and a season when the church they loved came apart — never pretending things were fine, never carrying it on their own strength either. He felt the weight of those years. He

simply never had to carry it alone. And little by little, as he grew, more of it became his to hold — and he held it. Nobody scheduled that. It is what happens when the Shadow works.

Caleb reads Stage 3. You will not meet a Caleb in this chapter, and that is precisely the point. Where dependence is actually modeled, ownership transfers in increments, over years, without anyone having to engineer it. A working Faith Shadow does not produce an adult sitting at Stage 1.

Sometimes that maturing surfaces later as a fresh, more personal profession of faith. When it does, that is not a second salvation — it is reaffirmation, the same faith becoming more fully theirs. The original profession does not need to be reinterpreted or protected from what comes later. It only needs to be trusted enough to let it grow.

When the shadow becomes insulation

Which is why Denise's result means something. Sometimes a child prays a prayer not because they have come to the end of themselves, but because it is expected — because the other children did, because the adults will be pleased. And where a working Faith Shadow would have let that child feel real weight while someone else bore it, insulation keeps the weight away entirely. What gets modeled instead is performance: showing up, serving, keeping the rules well. A child who has never felt their own need has no reason to reach for a Savior, and a child who has only ever watched performance has no way to tell the difference between performing and believing.

That is the risk that comes with inviting children to respond, and naming it is not an argument against doing so. Children come to Christ genuinely and often, and we should keep inviting them. But some do not — and they can spend decades inside a church without anyone noticing, because they know the songs, the language, and the right thing to say.

Jesus told a parable about this without ever making it a verdict on anyone's sincerity. A sower scatters the same good seed across different soils (Matthew 13:3–9). The seed never changes. What determines whether it lasts is what surrounds it afterward. A genuine beginning does not guarantee what grows from it — and that is a statement about soil, never a retroactive judgment on the seed.

What this does not mean

Do not run this diagnosis backward over everyone whose faith looks thin, including your own. A person can have made a completely genuine profession and still show almost no fruit, because life happened. A divorce. A death. A move that ended a church connection nobody restored. Or simply a decision made somewhere with no ongoing community to grow in afterward, so that years later all that remains is the memory of one moment. That is not a smaller conversion, and it is not insulation. It is a seed that was genuinely planted and never tended — and there is no ground for guilt in it, not for the person and not for whoever was doing their best in a hard season.

Hold this underneath all of it: a person's assurance rests on the finished work of Christ, never on how well their faith has been tested or how much fruit is presently visible. Scripture is plain that tested faith is faith proven trustworthy (James 1:2–4; 1 Peter 1:6–7) — but that is a statement about faith being proven, not about whether it was ever valid. Thin fruit is a reason to come closer. It is never, by itself, a verdict.

What to do with this

If this describes you, the question in front of you is not whether you have been a fraud for thirty years. It is simply this: what is your faith actually resting on? Not what were you told, and not what have you always said — what do you personally believe, and have you ever needed Jesus for yourself?

That question does not get answered alone, and it does not get answered quickly. Find someone who knows you and ask them to sit in it with you. If what you find is that you have been holding a real faith poorly, then take hold of it properly. And if what you find is that you are only now trusting Christ for yourself — that a profession first made in order to belong is becoming genuinely personal — that is not an embarrassment to be managed quietly. It is the thing itself, arriving, and it is worth celebrating exactly as much as any other.

There is no timeline anyone is behind on, and no schedule anyone has failed.

FOR THE DISCIPLE-MAKER

Walking Someone Through a Stage 1 Result

You will not sort this with a question on a form, and you should not try to sort it in one conversation. Ask what they remember about the day they professed faith. Someone whose faith was genuinely planted usually remembers something about God — however simply. Someone in Denise's position more often remembers something about the people who were watching.

Then ask what it rests on now. Not did you really mean it — that question is not yours to settle, and a nine-year-old's prayer is not yours to render a verdict on. You are trying to find out whether there is something to draw against, or whether there was never a deposit made.

Know that the Inventory may not surface this at all. Denise's particular difficulty is that she has always assumed the performance was the real thing, so she may sincerely answer that her faith is personally her own and read Stage 2 instead. That can be true even after she has begun to feel the hollowness herself — an ache is not yet the same as being able to name what it requires, and no self-report catches more than a person can already see in themselves. So when someone's result says Stage 2 or Stage 3 but their life has almost nothing in it — no appetite, no fruit, no evidence any of it reaches Monday — do not let the number settle the matter, and do not confront it early. Get close enough, over enough time, that they will tell you the truth. That proximity cannot be assigned or scheduled. It is earned by showing up before there is any diagnosis to deliver.

What You Carry Into This Stage

Stage 1 is where wonder begins — the awe of realizing there is a God and he is not you, and the honest sense of need that follows it.

Carry both forward. Wonder is not a beginner's emotion to be replaced by knowledge, and the sense of needing God does not diminish as you mature. A believer of forty years who can still be moved by

what they have long known is not being sentimental. They are keeping alive the thing this stage gave them.

Biblical Examples

Whether we become aware of God through awe or need, those first steps toward Jesus are scary and wobbly. We aren't sure of the next step of getting to know God but we know we must start somewhere. Throughout the scriptures we see people becoming aware of God and unsure of how to begin their journey with him. Consider Ruth and The Unnamed Woman at the Well.

Ruth

*And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you."*²

After the death of their husbands, Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah are left uncovered and unattached in a world very dangerous to women in their situation. Naomi desired for both of her Moabite daughters-in-law to return to their families and serve the gods that the Moabites served. Orpah does this. Yet Ruth makes a vow for the ages by not only attaching her self to Naomi but choosing to follow and serve Yahweh ("the Lord"). This was a monumental step for a woman who grew up in Moab with different gods. Ruth doesn't know what all this means, but she is choosing to attach herself to God. She's aware of God and will follow Naomi, and Yahweh, wherever their journey takes them. Attachment to others who are on the path is a normal and healthy next step for those just becoming aware of God.

The Unnamed Woman At The Well

*So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?"*³

This unnamed woman had an unique encounter with God in Jesus Christ. Her journey to the well in the middle of the day suggests that she was a social pariah. And when Jesus reads her mail concerning her current partners she is astonished and aghast. Being from Samaria she likely grew up with an awareness of God. She likely grew up knowing that name Yahweh. Yet for unspoken reasons her life did not match up with the expectations of God. Then Jesus comes along and supernaturally knows details that a stranger could not know. Furthermore this man is having an open conversation with a woman in a day and age when that was taboo.

She had a supernatural encounter with Jesus that left her seeking and desiring a deeper relationship with Yahweh and with Christ (Messiah) who would free her from her sin. Here's what's interesting:

²The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ru 1:15–17.

³The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 4:28–29.

She comes to an awareness of God through awe — yet still does not fully know who Jesus is. This unnamed woman is squarely on the path and surely not far from Salvation.



The Great Need of This Stage

The great need in Stage 1 is the gospel spoken by someone who cares enough to say it. Not an argument won. A person who tells the truth out of compassion and stays for the answer.

Stage Steps

Those in Stage 1 are moving from being aware that God exists to a ready decision to place their faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ that results in salvation. Because each of us should have a clear next step toward Jesus, Stage 1 has five steps to help you navigate your next steps towards Jesus. When we are open to God and are willing to take the next step toward a relationship with God, we can be led to faith in Jesus Christ through the gospel⁴, the good news of all that God is doing through Jesus Christ.

- 1.1 - Awareness of the Existence of a Higher Power - Openness
- 1.2 - Awareness of Yahweh as The Only True God
- 1.3 - Awareness of An Available Relationship With Yahweh
- 1.4 - Awareness of The Problem of Sin And The Person and Work of Jesus
- 1.5 - Awareness of the Need to Be Saved – Faith

⁴We believe the gospel to be the whole good news of all that God has done through Christ Jesus our King in his person and work. The gospel is the announcement of God's Kingdom ushered in by Jesus' birth, life, atoning death on a cross, and resurrection. We believe the gospel is deeply personal as evidenced in God reconciling sinners to himself through faith in Jesus Christ. We also believe the gospel is cosmic; displayed through God's promise to restore all of creation to its original glorious intent. The gospel is good news to those who repent and believe on Jesus. It is bad news to those desiring another way to be with God. This good news announcement calls the people of God into the work of God; taking this King, Kingdom, and Cross announcement to everyone everywhere as Kingdom representatives here and now.

1.1 - Awareness of The Existence of a Higher Power [Openness]

You are aware and conscious of a Higher Power. Although you aren't sure who that is or what that means, you are convinced one exists.

1.2 - Awareness of Yahweh as The Only True God

You understand that Yahweh, the God of the Old and New Testament and the Author of life in the world, is the Only True God. You have come to the awareness that not only is there a God, but the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the only God. While you may not know how to connect to him or worship him, they are Aware of his importance.

1.3 - Awareness of an Available Relationship With Yahweh

You are aware that God can be known and He desires a personal relationship with you. You are beginning to understand what God is like, what he expects from you, and how you are to live before him. You are aware, or at least sense, that Yahweh is involved in the details of your life and may be open to exploring what that means more fully.

1.4 - Awareness of the Problem of Sin and The Person and Work of Jesus Christ

You are aware of past regrettable behaviors [thoughts, words, deeds] and sense sorrow over them. You understand that sin is a problem within humanity and the world. You are aware of Jesus Christ and the core tenets of the gospel (or *kerygma*⁵): the birth, life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. While you may not be fully aware of how Jesus' atoning death and sacrifice is in relation to your sin, you are aware of the problem of sin and Jesus's remedy for it. You are likely wrestling with the implications of the relationship between sin and Jesus but have not made a decision to trust Jesus yet.

1.5 - Awareness of the Need to Be Saved [Saving Faith]

You are aware that your sin demands punishment. You are aware that God must punish sin but instead of punishing you He has already punished Jesus Christ, his son, on the cross. You have decided to confess and repent of your sin and trust in the finished work of Christ. Your Faith, no matter how small and tremulous, blooms in this stage. Here, you have assurance of your salvation by becoming aware that you didn't save yourself — Jesus did. And because Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, saved you by grace through faith it is Jesus' work that saves you.

"Being" Milestones Of Stage 1

We believe the Gospel speaks into every aspect of our lives and we desire God to have a voice in each domain we possess. Each of us live in 5 interwoven domains: spiritual, relational, emotional, intellectual, and physical (see Chapter 2 for expanded explanation). Transformational Discipleship is not just about the soul being saved, but our whole person being conformed into the image of Jesus.

⁵kerygma - The core essence of the gospel. The kerygma, or kernel, of the gospel is most popularly understood as the life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. While this is not the gospel in full, it is the gospel in miniature. See footnote 5 for further definition of "Gospel".

Within Stage 1 there is a milestone for each domain. These milestones exist as tools to ensure that our whole lives and our whole persons are formed so that we begin to look and act like Jesus.

Stage 1 Domain Milestones

Spiritual - Awareness of God and Openness to Faith resulting in Salvation.

Relational - Awareness of the need for like-minded community.

Emotional - Awareness of an inner emotional world and openness to God speaking into it.

Intellectual - Curious exploration of God including in the scriptures.

Physical - Awareness of and openness to one's body and its relationship to God.

Exercise: On A Scale of 1-10, what score would you give yourself for each of these domains? What lesson from the life and ministry of Jesus will help you take a step toward holistic health?

Spiritual -

Relational -

Emotional -

Intellectual -

Physical -

"Feeling" Milestones of Stage 1

1. How would you explain the gospel to a 6 year old? To a 60 year old?

-
2. What expectations do you think God has for how his children should live?
-

3. What are good sources for you to have your spiritual questions answered?

4. Should Christians do good in and to the world? If so, how?

Taking Your Next Step

There are two critical steps to take next if you are in stage 1:

Find a Jesus-focused Friend

Each person in Stage 1 needs a Christ-minded friend who will lovingly and patiently lead you to the truth of Jesus Christ. Regardless of what step you are on, find someone who is spiritually ahead of you by a few steps and build relationship with them.

Read The Bible and Pray

Developing a rhythm of spending time with Jesus and prayer is essential for anyone in this stage. Take some time and develop a daily rhythm of bible reading and prayer. This will not and should not be perfect. It is a place to start.

Growth Step: Trust Christ and Find a Jesus-Focused Friend

Awareness becomes faith when a person stops considering Jesus and starts trusting him. That is the step, and no amount of information substitutes for it. What makes it possible is almost always a person — someone close enough to be trusted, who will tell you the truth and stay for the answer. Find that person, or let them find you, and keep company with them while you decide.

Owning Your Growth

My Jesus-Focused Friend Is:_____.

I Plan To Start Reading The Bible ____x's a week.

I Plan To Intentionally Pray_____.

Questions For Stage 1 Analysis

1. How and when did you first recognize God in your life?

2. When did you become aware that Yahweh was the only true God?

3. When and How did you enter into relationship with God through Jesus Christ?

Resources

- The Jesus Storybook Bible - Sally Lloyd Jones
- The Gospel - Ray Ortlund
- Christian Beliefs: Twenty Basics Every Christian Should Know - Wayne Grudem
- Start Here: Beginning A Relationship With Jesus - David Dwight, Nicole Unice
- Now That's A Good Question - R.C. Sproul