



STAGES *of* FAITH

Spiritual Guidance. Lifelong Transformation.

Last Man Standing

Did you know that the apostle John outlived Peter and Paul by more than thirty years? Peter was martyred in 65 A.D. and Paul in 67 A.D. John—the last living apostle—penned 1 John almost three decades later in the early 90s.¹



So, at this point in his life, what would this much respected godly pastor and church statesman write that would further the spiritual progress of believers, and deepen the life of faith?

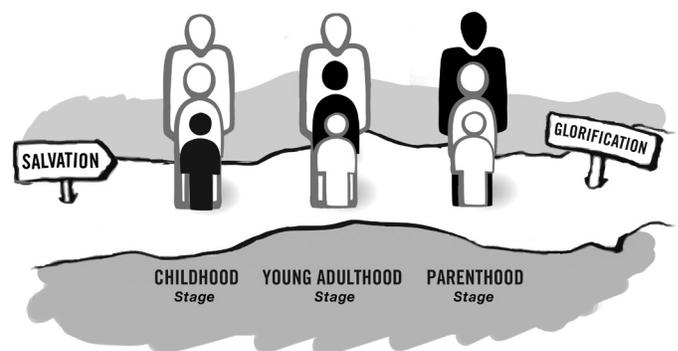
Looking at the Christian community and evaluating its overall spiritual health, John observed that some believers were floundering, and others were stuck, falling short of full-grown spiritual maturity. Some were well informed biblically but not deeply transformed. Clearly, some were more Christlike than others. No wonder John—guided by the Holy Spirit—described a believer’s lifelong journey of faith, with three different Stages of spiritual growth, including clear benchmarks – “Milestone” markers – that distinguish each Stage and taking into account what causes development to advance or to plateau.

Unique Qualifications

Consider the unique qualifications of the apostle John—an original follower of Christ, Jesus’ closest friend and confidant, the Beloved Disciple—when he wrote 1 John.

- As the last writer to contribute to the New Testament—approximately thirty years after the epistles of Peter and Paul—John’s audience was poised and hungry for whatever wisdom and encouragement he had for them. John was also the last living person to have walked with Jesus and learned directly from Him, so he offered a one-of-a-kind perspective that commanded his listeners’ attention.

- Living into his nineties (he died in 98 A.D.), John had been a loyal Christ-follower for almost seven decades. *Yes, you read that right!* No other writer could teach from that vantage point. Furthermore, John didn’t merely grow older; he grew to be more and more like Jesus. So anything John had to say about spiritual growth and about knowing God deeply would be important to hear and heed.
- The young church in Jerusalem responded to the resurrected Jesus’ command and took on His mission to make disciples and guide their spiritual growth. Before 70 A.D. and the destruction of Jerusalem, John relocated to Ephesus, from which he founded and gave spiritual oversight to multiple churches throughout Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Notably, he made disciples—he oversaw the spiritual development of believers—for the next thirty years and, through his writings, continues to do so today. This veteran pastor’s experience was vast, and his insights are invaluable.



Clearly, John was uniquely and imminently qualified to help believers—then and now—to better understand authentic spiritual growth, to experience that growth more fully, and then to skillfully guide others. God sovereignly provided John a remarkable platform and unparalleled opportunity to make a difference.

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Unparalleled Opportunity

In his first epistle—think of it as *An Apostle's Guide to Authentic Spiritual Growth*—John made a significant contribution to experiencing spiritual growth with his robust description of deep, ongoing transformation.

- John unpacked “**5 Aspects of Authentic Spiritual Growth**,” and each of these help his readers to understand more about John’s transformational journey from a “Son of Thunder” (Mark 3:17) to the “Apostle of Love.” John provided a trustworthy map for the church to follow at the end of the first century – and for our own ongoing spiritual growth today.²

Believers were doubtless eager to hear the last surviving apostle explain with clarity and authority how he grew and how they could grow too.

- The fourth aspect of spiritual growth is “**Progress Through Three Stages of Spiritual Growth.**” Don’t miss it! God revealed through John that the process of spiritual growth happens in three Stages—Childhood, Young Adulthood, and Parenthood—and he noted essential features – “Milestones” – that set apart each Stage.
- In 1 John 2:12-14, believers find clear direction and confidence for their own journey toward Christlikeness. Every follower of Christ can locate how far they have traveled and how far they have yet to go. They can also target specific obstacles that delay their progress and transformation.

Listeners would have connected deeply with John’s transparency and the healing impact of Jesus in his story.

I hope you accept John’s invitation to experience his rich and compelling vision of spiritual growth.

Don Willett

Endnotes:

1. Dates and events are based on D. A. Carson & Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).
2. For a full explanation of the model, see “5 Aspects of Authentic Spiritual Growth” in *Stages of Faith: 8 Milestones That Mark Your Journey* (for small group and personal use), and *The Path: How to Understand and Experience Authentic Spiritual Growth* (textbook), both by Don Willett.

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“It’s time for a change in the way we think about spiritual growth and the way we guide others in the faith. Stages of Faith research has developed an unprecedented way to think about spiritual growth and an innovative way to guide others.”

~ Don Willett, Ph.D.