

Pastor's Progress

Learning from the dark moments
on my journey to the Celestial City.

by Gordon MacDonald

Gordon, you and Gail are going through one of the darkest moments you will ever face, and you have a choice: Will you deny the pain and run from it or will you embrace the pain and squeeze out of it everything God has for you?"

The man who spoke those words changed our lives.

His words echo the theology that often gets lost in the shadows of dark moments: God can play tricks on evil, if we let him, and pull from the darkness light and beauty.

Dark moments are not the exception, even in a life God blesses. I would not have said that in my youth. I considered pain and suffering in the life of a Christian minister as gross anomalies or the result of sin.

But I've come to see the dark moments of life as precious moments, times to ask, "Is this a moment God can speak to me?"

As I look over my almost sixty years, I feel like the traveler in *Pilgrim's Progress*: I can spot dark moments in which I've seen God at work in my life in a clear way. In each I heard a message in the midst of pain. I offer you six:

1.

Escape is never an answer

I quit my first job at 24.

I was a youth pastor on the south side of Denver and a senior at the University of Colorado. For the first fourteen months of my ministry, I was dearly loved. It seemed I could do no wrong. The senior pastor even offered me his pulpit on occasion, and everybody marveled that someone so young and without seminary training could preach so well.

Then for reasons I can't remember (or don't want to remember),

things soured. I went from "He can do no wrong" to "He can do no right." The teenagers stopped showing up and began criticizing the youth program.

One afternoon, while walking through the church, I noticed a crumbled ball of paper on the floor. Instinctively, I bent down, picked it up, and opened it. One teenager had written to another these words: "If MacDonald doesn't quit this youth-pastor job soon, this whole program is going to go up in smoke."

I saw in my mind my great future of serving the Lord go up in flames. Numb, I marched to my office, called Gail, who, being discouraged at the time, didn't persuade me otherwise, and typed a letter of resignation. Fifteen minutes after reading that crumpled note, I handed my letter of resignation to the senior pastor.

For the next nine months, I

worked in a trucking company to support my wife and newborn son, wondering if I'd ever get another shot at ministry. During those months I experienced what I call "a dark moment," the first of a series during the course of my life. Looking back, I can say my resignation was rather inconsequential, but I felt frightened at the time.

Many men will tell you that in their keenest moments of despair, they brooded about taking their life. I don't think they were suicidal so much as they just wanted to escape the pain. They wanted to lie down and not awake. Many people in ministry also fantasize about escaping when conflict or hard times

discovered that inside me was an internal relay that triggered a quitting response whenever the going got tough. I had to reset the relay. This dark moment taught me an important lesson about life and ministry: when the going gets rough, quitting is never the first option.

2. Conflict cannot be left unresolved

The word *hate* is a strong word; I don't use it easily. But if ever I experienced this feeling, I did so many years ago toward someone in a church I served. I can't reveal

I had to surrender to a much deeper and more mysterious God than I had known.



come. Consider Simon Peter, who after the resurrection went fishing. Or the apostle Paul who, in Second Corinthians, was so crushed that he despaired of life itself. I hear in the stories of Peter and Paul the message "I want to quit."

Looking back, I wish someone would have taken me aside and said, "Wait, Gordon, not so fast. Let's take three weeks to do what the U.S. Navy did when several planes crashed—a seventy-two hour 'stand-down.' Nothing flies. Let's evaluate every procedure.

What's gone on over the last three months? Let's get some of your critics to talk to you face to face."

But I had no advisers; I had to learn the lesson through quitting. I

much of the circumstances, but this individual made promises to me that weren't kept. Over the months, my resentment smoldered into hate.

My feelings about this person affected virtually every dimension of my life. I had no interest in praying. Every time this person came to mind, I fantasized about ways I could embarrass and humiliate this individual. My hate poisoned even my relationship with Gail. When she said, "You've got to talk to this person and make it right," I became irritated with her for telling me what I knew—but didn't have the guts to do. The root of bitterness descended deep in my soul and wrapped itself around my motiva-

tion for pastoral work.

Tormented, I cried out loud to God one afternoon, "Give me relief from this. Help me to forgive."

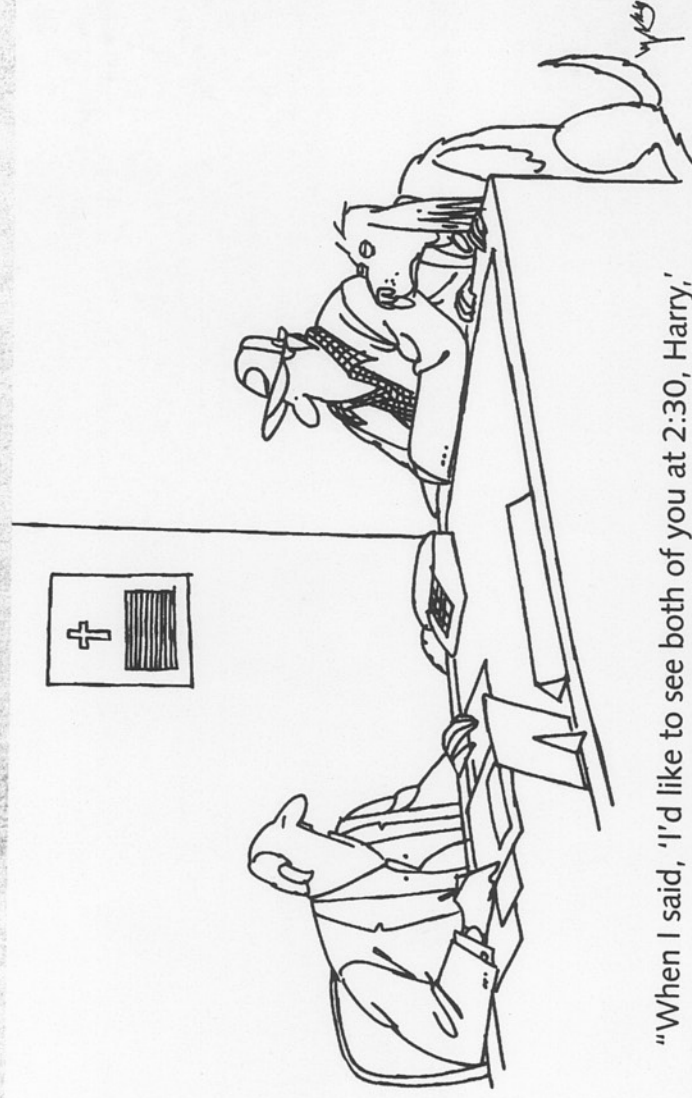
What followed during the next fifteen minutes can only be described as a mystical experience, the first in my life. It was a little like a vision, but I had a physical sensation of a hole being cut into my chest cavity. After the hole was cut, I felt something oozing out, like a thick molasses. The substance flowed and flowed. It was my hatred, which God was removing through surgery. After the flow had stopped, I felt as if I had lost fifty pounds; my hatred was gone.

I struggle to explain why God intervened so dramatically, but I learned from that dark moment never again to allow a relationship to stray that far off course. I learned that, like Paul and Barnabas, some people just can't work together, and that separation is better than hate, and that the engines of healing are forgiveness and grace.

3. Emotions must be attended to

Early in my pastoral career, I read *The Secular City* by Harvey Cox, a Harvard theologian. It was the first I'd read a book by an author who knew the fundamentalist mindset so well. Cox had grown up in fundamentalism, which in *The Secular City* he attacked and deconstructed. Reading the book tore open my belief systems.

At that same time, during a two-week span, I conducted the funerals of two homeless people. In the southern Illinois town where I served, the funeral director asked for my services for \$30 a pop. In both cases, I walked into the funeral home to see a cheap, cloth-covered casket with an older man lying in state with all the marks of a hard life. Nobody showed for the



"When I said, 'I'd like to see both of you at 2:30, Harry,' I meant you and your wife."

first funeral. The only person who came for the second was a woman who looked almost as bad as the corpse. She had shared life with him on the streets. Her plight overwhelmed me as much as the person's for whom I was conducting the funeral. I was struck with the absolute meaninglessness of their lives.

Also during this time, I was extremely busy, physically exhausted, with no time for spiritual activity.

One Saturday morning at breakfast, Gail innocently said to me, "You haven't spent any time with the family this month." I burst into tears. The book I'd read, the two funerals, my over-busyness—all combined to unravel my emotions. I cried until noon, until I was exhausted. In the midst of my breakdown, I wondered, *Is this what it's like to go crazy?* I'd never had a moment when I couldn't control my feelings. Yet this was a Niagara of tears.

During this dark moment, I discovered that unresolved feelings do not flutter away in the wind. They deposit themselves in the strata of our souls and lie waiting to escape. They're all there: the resentments, the despair, the anxieties, the worries, the fears. When we're young, we have enough energy to keep them from geysering, but as the years accumulate, we lose our ability to push them underground.

I resolved to keep a record of my feelings. Journaling is not fail-safe, but it has forced me once a day to take inventory of the last twenty-four hours. It has helped me to tend to emotions rather than let them accumulate until they cause problems.

4. **Pain reduces us to our true size**

For the first time in my life, in my early thirties, I was experienc-

ing physical pain, a spate of migraine headaches that came close to unbearable. I worried they were caused by a brain tumor and feared I would live with pain the rest of my life.

This may sound unbelievable, but I could almost set my calendar and watch to the onset of the migraines: They came during the month of May of every even-numbered year. They generally hit about one o'clock in the morning every other night for about three weeks, and then they stopped. I had four sequences of these.

I finally went to a headache specialist. "Ninety percent of my patients remind me of you," he said. "They are young men, heads of organizations or wanting to be heads of organizations. They're not at peace with themselves; they've got some people in their lives with whom they have unresolved relationships."

He had never met me and didn't

know what I did for a living, but he described me perfectly. I knew exactly the unresolved relationships to which the doctor was referring. Let me just say that I don't advocate assigning blame to our parents for all that ails us. If they hurt us, it's likely their parents hurt them.

Families tend to pass on their politic from generation to generation. Each of us is living out the consequences of how our family related to one another. Also, I don't think that every pain is psychosomatic, but mine, it turned out, was.

Down through history, some of the greatest moments of kingdom

Some of the greatest moments of kingdom production have come from physical pain.

production have come during physical pain. Amy Carmichael, for example, was one of the greatest spirituality writers of the twentieth century, but everything she wrote was written on a bed of pain. The question then becomes, "What does God want to teach me while I'm in the theater of pain?" Pain humbles us, forcing us to recognize our reliance on others and God. It reduces us to our true size.

It was during this dark moment that Gail and I, ten years into our marriage, first learned to pray together. It was one way I worked through my unresolved relationships. Over the next nine months, Gail and I pursued God together in prayer, in more than just a perfunctory way, and it changed our lives. I discovered the importance of say-

ing to her, "I need you to pray for me," and that was something I had not done before. Years later, when Gail and I faced the blackest of my dark moments, the discipline of prayer we had learned during my physical pain was in place.

5. God cannot be boxed

About fourteen years ago, I was asked if I'd be willing to be a candidate for the presidency of a major Christian organization (not InterVarsity). I was advised by



wise people not to turn it down, since God, they said, may be calling me to leadership at a world level. I had grown up in a tradition where finding the will of God was the most important pursuit of the Christian life. My mother would say, "If God calls you to do something and you say no, you'll be miserable for the rest of your life." I took finding God's will seriously.

As the process moved along, I learned that other leaders were being considered for the position. While I had agreed to submit my name as a candidate, Gail and I did not expect much to come of it. The other candidates, in my estimation, had far superior qualifications.

But then the headhunter called, asking if he could come to Boston to visit us. Our hopes spiked. We

knew the former president had destroyed his marriage because of the job, so Gail and I remained wary. But we slowly warmed to the idea, and since we had a long vacation coming from the church, we decided to seclude ourselves for five weeks in our New Hampshire home to pray. Neither Gail nor I has ever asked God for omens or signs to determine future direction, but during these weeks, the dots seemed to line up. The books we read, the conversations we held, the prayers we prayed, the voice of God we heard in our souls—everything pointed to my getting this position. We felt God was saying, "This is going to happen."

As the search process reached its zenith, the final two candidates—I was one—were asked by the organization's board to come for a final interview. Gail and I met with the board on Friday morning and then flew back to Boston. Gail told me, "They're going to ask you to be the next president." That surprised me, because Gail is not prone to such pronouncements.

On Saturday, knowing the decision would be made Sunday afternoon, I told the staff at Grace Chapel, "I'd like to meet with you Sunday night after church." I didn't tell them why, but I planned to announce my resignation to them, for by then the chairman of the board of the organization was to have called me with the decision.

Sunday afternoon came and went, but the phone did not ring, so by the time the staff gathered that evening at our place, I was in agony. I didn't know what to do. Finally, I told them, "I need to tell you why you are here. It's a story that, as of right now, doesn't have an ending."

So for twenty-five minutes, Gail and I told them about what had unfolded the past four months, how we felt God was leading us in

Sunday mornings have been more relaxed since Pastor Wembley discovered that the range of his lapel mike extends to his house.



this new direction, though we still hadn't heard the final decision.

Everybody was in a state of shock. No sooner had we finished, then the phone rang. It was the chairman of the board of this organization. The other candidate had been chosen.

I stumbled into the living room to tell the staff the news. I said stonically, "You've been with Gail and me on many occasions when God has said yes. Now you'll get to see how we handle things when God says no."

After the staff left, I canceled the church elders meeting I had scheduled for the next morning (I had planned to resign), canceled my plane reservations to meet with what I thought would be my new board, and went to bed. The next

morning, I was back at work at 8:00 A.M., as if nothing happened.

Ten days later the full force of what happened crushed me. I submerged into the depths of disillusionment. At a subterranean level, I told God, "You've made a perfect fool out of me. You drew me to the finish line and said, 'I'm sorry.' I no longer know your language. You speak a different language than I've been trained to understand." I was questioning God, something I had never really done. I doubted whether it was possible to hear God speak.

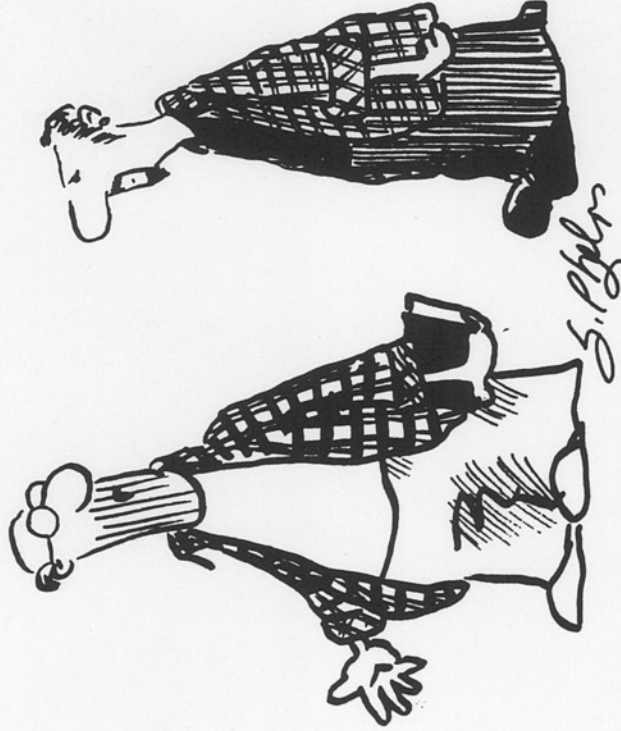
During this period, I resigned from Grace Chapel out of exhaustion, disillusionment, and bewilderment. By candidating for that position, I had lost trust with the leaders of Grace Chapel. That was

1984. My world had fallen apart.

I can say this only now, with more than a decade of distance from those dark moments, but I had to surrender to a much deeper and more mysterious God than I had known up to that moment. I had to surrender all of my prejudices and preconditions of knowing God. That takes time. God wasn't in a hurry with Moses (I often wonder what was on his mind for forty years in the desert), and God certainly wasn't in a hurry with me.

In retrospect, I can say that if the board of that organization had picked me, I would have failed. I wasn't mature enough. The job required characteristics I don't have. Even so, there's a memory of those days that has stayed with me:

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"Actually, I'm not trying to relate. I overslept."

Don't expect everything to be cozy with God, for he is a big God and his ways are beyond us.

6. Enthusiasm is a choice

My fifth dark moment no doubt contributed to my sixth. Most dark benchmarks have the potential of destroying one's life. And in the blackness of the earlier one, I made a choice that led to moral failure, which resulted in the loss of my life's work.

After I resigned as president of InterVarsity, Gail and I moved to our New Hampshire home for almost two years. One Sunday morning, sitting on the edge of our bed, I flipped the television to Robert Schuller, who said, "Today I'm going to talk about enthusiasm."

What else do you talk about? I growled to myself.

But as I listened to Schuller, I realized how unenthusiastic I had become. I had lost my zest for life. Schuller said enthusiasm was a choice, not the result of good circumstances around us. It was the energy created when God is in us.

As Schuller's words sank in, I asked God, "Is it possible for me to get my enthusiasm and vision back once I've lost it?"

Unshaven, I walked into the living room, with my worn-out bathrobe and hair standing on end, and said to Gail, "I have an apology to make."

"What's that?"

"It occurred to me this morning that for the past couple of years, if there has been any enthusiasm in my life, it has been coming from you. I'm telling you before God

that this morning, I've resolved to become an enthusiastic man again. You'll see it."

I dedicated the next several days to beginning my quest, and the enduring question that emerged was "If God allows me to live for thirty-five more years, what kind of man do I want to be in my seventies and eighties?"

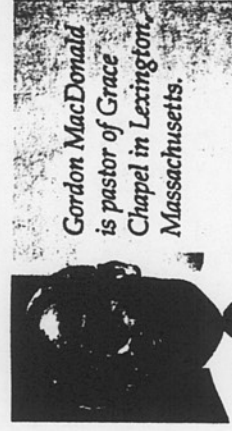
I remember saying to God, "Whether I return to ministry again is not important. What's important is that I live my life for the next thirty years before you in integrity and enthusiasm."

About the same time Gail and I stumbled across a line from Oswald Chambers: "If God allows you to be stripped of the exterior portions of your life, he means for you to cultivate the interior." After reading that, we made a decision to pray consciously for our friends. Today, rarely do we get up in the morning and not pray for the friends we've been given.

My quest for enthusiasm, my decision to be an old man with integrity, and our decision to pray for our friends—these became the steps out of failure. They laid a track for our future.

Perhaps the darkest moment taught me that even my worst moment had latent within it the hope of liberation. I'd been given a fresh opportunity to reframe my faith in Christ, to renew my marriage, and to discover my real friends.

When I add up all the dark moments of my life, I see in every one that God had a message for me. I can now say as Pilgrim did as he crossed the river: "I've touched the bottom, and it is sound." ❀



*Gordon MacDonald
is pastor of Grace
Chapel in Lexington,
Massachusetts.*