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Chapter One

Join the Plodders

You Don't Have to Move Fast.
You Just Have to Keep Moving.

My dad struggled in school. So much so that his academic woes became part of our family lore. Thankfully, he had a sense of humor about it.

“My sixth grade teacher liked me so much,” he’d say, “that she decided to keep me for an extra year!”

To be fair, my dad’s early life wasn’t exactly easy. For years, his eleven-member Mennonite family lived in a one-bedroom farmhouse on the Canadian prairies. It had no electricity, no running water. The children took a bath once a week . . . using the same bathwater. The biggest kid would go first, then the second biggest, right down to the smallest child. As the youngest in my family, hearing that story always made my skin crawl—and thank God for indoor plumbing.

They spoke low German at home, which meant when my dad started school, he had to learn a new language: English. After rising early to do farm chores, he walked to school (uphill both ways, of course) with a temporary limp he'd gotten from contracting polio as a toddler. Exhausted, he'd often drift off during class.

He eked through elementary school, passing on probation until he encountered that teacher who kept him for an extra year. In high school he found refuge in basketball and track, but his academic struggles continued. His lackluster performance in the classroom wasn't a concern, however. His parents assumed he would follow his father into carpentry or join his brother in the sheet metal business, neither of which would require him to attend college. But as a teenager, he felt called to the ministry. And after high school he enrolled in Bible college.

Unfortunately, his academic challenges followed him. He picked up Cs and Ds, despite studying for hours each night. After the first year, he received a letter from the administration department of the college. It advised him not to return.

He was devastated. "I fell on my bed and sobbed," he recalls. "I didn't know what to do." His parents had supported his decision to pursue his calling but even they started to waver. On a trip home, his dad suggested that maybe it was time for him to come home and work carpentry instead. But my dad couldn't shake the feeling that he was called to ministry. His denomination required that he get a degree from Bible school to get ordained. He had to graduate.

The next fall he walked onto campus determined to turn things around. Yet he still struggled to make good grades. That summer he experienced a strong sense of déjà vu when he found himself opening another letter from the college, saying the same thing. *Don't come back.*

Finally, in the last year, his grades improved. The change was in part thanks to the young American student that he'd married that summer (hi, Mom!). She took charge of his schedule, breaking each assignment into manageable parts and assigning it to a specific week on the calendar. She also taught him to study smart. "He was trying to memorize everything," she recalled. "But it helped him to focus on learning what was going to be on the tests."

He was also spurred along by a professor who believed in him. "Art, you're going to be a wonderful pastor because you love people so much," the professor told him. Slowly things turned around. He started doing better on tests. Essays came back with less red ink and more positive comments. He finished the year with an A- average, which lifted his cumulative GPA above the required 2.0.

He graduated.

As he walked down the aisle to receive his diploma, one of his professors shook his hand and confessed, "I honestly didn't think you'd make it."

A POWERFUL PRINCIPLE

I heard that story many times growing up. To be honest, it was always hard to square with the man my dad had become: a powerful preacher with an encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible. One thing that was easy to see is that the prediction of that encouraging professor had come true. My dad was a wonderful pastor. He loved people, and they loved him. Every church he led—from the tiny rural congregation to a large, prestigious church in the city—flourished. The guy who barely made it through Bible school ended up planting two churches, leading four, and starting

a soup kitchen that feeds thousands of people to this day. Along the way, he prayed with hundreds of people to accept Jesus. There are many people who trace the beginning of their spiritual journey to the influence of my dad. I'm one of them.

When I reflect on my dad's story, I'm grateful that he didn't give up on his calling. I think of all the people who wouldn't have heard about Jesus, wouldn't have been counseled, visited, or en-

couraged. I think of the thousands who wouldn't have been fed spiritually (and physically) had he not become a pastor. The world would have been worse off.

When I ask my dad how he overcame the barriers that would have scared most people away, he doesn't really have an answer. There was no dramatic moment in his story, no brilliant strategy to turn things

around. He just came back for classes every fall.

He kept showing up.

Which brings me back to the core concept of this book. What does it mean to show up? Often it requires that you are physically present, like my dad turning up for class. But it's bigger than that. It's about moving through your life with a commitment to attend to the most important things. And it requires action. It means being willing to take that first scary step toward what you feel God is calling you to do. And then do it again.

As I thought about people who embody this approach to life, I realized they share at least two characteristics. They have deep faith. And they plod.

Showing up means being willing to take that first scary step toward what you feel God is calling you to do. And then do it again.

DEEP FAITH

The most essential factor to showing up? Deep faith.

Hebrews 11 is one of my favorite passages in all of Scripture. It's often called the "hall of faith," and it's not hard to see why. The chapter lists the exploits of biblical characters like Abel, Abraham, Noah, Moses, Joseph, and Rahab. Each is lauded for obeying God in the face of great difficulty. Abraham strikes out from his home when God calls him, "even though he did not know where he was going" (Heb. 11:8). Noah builds an entire ark before a drop of rain falls. Moses leaves the luxury of Pharaoh's palace to side with the enslaved Hebrews, choosing "to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time" (Heb. 11:25).

How did they take these extraordinary actions? "By faith." The words "by faith" appear twenty-one times in the passage. How do we know these Bible heroes acted by faith? Because many times they never saw the rewards for their righteous behavior. "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance," the writer of Hebrews explains (Heb. 11:13). Yet they pressed on, convinced that God saw their obedience and would reward them. If not in this life, then in the one to come (Heb. 11:16).

We call these people "heroes," but they were far from perfect. Dig into their stories. They were every bit as fallible as us. But they had an abiding faith in God. And it propelled them forward in the face of unimaginable adversity. Ultimately it wasn't their talents or toughness that made them prevail. They did it "by faith."

In the coming chapters we're going to look at what it means to show up in the most important areas of your life: for your family

and friends, for your community, and for yourself. But I want to state this truth upfront: *none of it works without faith*.

Without faith, it's easy to give up. If your only confidence is in your own strength and abilities, you'll throw in the towel the moment life throws a few punches at you. You might show up when things are good—when the weather is pleasant, and the sun is shining. But as soon as dark clouds appear and the winds of life start howling, you'll pack it in.

But when you're grounded in the unshakable promises of God, you can walk through the storm. You know that even if no one else sees what you're doing, God does. You endure hardship in the present because you believe God will reward you in the future. You keep walking because you know that, even when you stumble, God has promised to catch you.

My dad's persistence in pursuing his calling wasn't rooted in a belief in his abilities. It was anchored in confidence in the God who was calling him. He knew he didn't have the academic chops to make it through college, but he believed God was calling him to be a pastor, so he kept pushing ahead, kept showing up.

Living by faith isn't easy (we'll talk about that more in a coming chapter). But it frees you from the tyranny of your feelings and changing circumstances. It gives you a North Star to help guide you in darkness. You don't have to rely on in-the-moment calculations on whether doing the right thing will pay off; you know it will. You don't "grow weary of doing good" because you know that "at the proper time [you] will reap a harvest if [you] do not give up" (Gal. 6:9).

So, you stay on the path, sometimes running, sometimes crawling, but always moving forward—in faith.

“I CAN PLOD”

Another key to showing up? Plodding.

William Carey, the “father of modern missions,” accomplished more in one lifetime than most people could in ten. He helped translate the Bible into forty-four languages, ran an orphanage, founded a college, started a horticultural society, and worked tirelessly to end cruel practices in India, such as female infanticide. But according to Carey, the secret to his prodigious accomplishments could be boiled down to one rather dull skill.

“I can plod,” Carey wrote.

Plodding is a boring word. Even saying it is dull. And the definition isn’t much better. “Slow, continuous, and not exciting,” is how the Cambridge dictionary puts it.¹ “To move, progress, or develop at a slow but constant and deliberate pace,” another dictionary explains.²

Plodding is slow, laborious. It doesn’t sound very sexy. But here’s the key to plodding’s power: it’s *continuous* and *constant*. Plodders don’t move fast—but they keep moving.

Carey personified this. We marvel at what he achieved. But if you could zoom in on any given day of Carey’s life, it probably wouldn’t look that exciting. You might see him sitting in a study with ink-stained hands, translating the Bible, word by word, into Sanskrit. Or catch a glimpse of him peeling potatoes for the hungry children at his orphanage. You might spot him setting up chairs for the open-air services he held to preach, even though it would be more than six years before he saw one convert. You’d see a plodder.

Carey did remarkable things, but not because he had remarkable talent. It was because, as he said, he could plod.

“I can persevere in any definite pursuit,” he wrote. “To this I owe everything.”³

In my early twenties I tried to be a financial adviser. To motivate myself I spent hours dreaming about everything I planned to accomplish. I even made a “dream board” filled with all the fun things I was going to purchase once I experienced success. As I recall, it had a picture of a fancy car and a shot of a beach to represent the Hawaiian vacation I was going to take. I loved dreaming! You know what I didn’t like? Getting on the phone and calling prospective clients. That was hard and scary. It was far more fun to dream. It’s no surprise that my stint as a financial adviser lasted less than two years.

In contrast, I recently read about a young man working in the same industry who took a different approach. Trent Dyrsmid was only twenty-three years old when he was hired as a stockbroker, but he experienced success quickly. He attributed his success to

an odd habit. Each day he would put two jars on his desk. One was empty, the other had 120 paper clips in it. Every time he made a sales call, he would transfer one paper clip to the empty jar—and wouldn’t stop until he transferred all 120 paper clips. Within no time, Dyrsmid was bringing \$5 million dollars into the firm.⁴

Plodding isn’t glamorous. But all those little steps add up. And God uses them in amazing ways.

Why did Trent succeed where I failed? Well, dreaming is fun. More fun than making calls and moving paper clips. But doing hard, boring work is what brings results. Plodding means being more of a paper clip person and

less of a “dream board” one. And it applies to more than your career. It affects every area of life.

What is a plodder? Just someone who shows up. Over and over again. Plodding isn’t glamorous. But all those little steps add up. And God uses them in amazing ways.

My dad was a plodder. I always used to see the academic challenges he faced early in life as an impediment to his calling. Now I believe they fueled it. Those challenges steeled his resolve and shaped his unique approach to ministry.

When he took his first church, he made a goal of visiting every house of the small town and surrounding area. And that’s exactly what he did. He’d knock on doors and ask people if they needed prayer. Some turned him away, but most were receptive. He was invited into nice houses and served fresh apple pie. Or waved into filthy dwellings overrun with cats. But he got to pray with strangers. Listen to their problems. Help with household chores. Tell them about Jesus.

One time, he knocked on the door of a farmhouse, but no one was home. As he walked back to his 1969 station wagon, he spotted smoke drifting up from behind the house. The fence had caught fire and the flames were moving toward the barn. He sprinted toward the fence and used the water from a feeding trough to douse the flames. When the farmer learned about what he’d done, a friendship was born. The farmer and his wife came to church and decided to follow Jesus. I reflected on that story recently when I had lunch with the son of those farmers, now a missionary pilot in Africa.

My dad’s visitation strategy paid off, and the church swelled to twice its former size. More and more people in that small

farming community started following Jesus, even some of the ones who had originally turned my dad away at the door.

If my dad's life had been easy, I doubt he would have knocked on every door in town. If school had been a breeze, he might not have pushed past his natural shyness to visit suspicious strangers. But he was used to doing hard things. Those early obstacles strengthened him and taught him not to give up.

The secret to plodding is patience. "I'm struck by how often the life of faith is described as a 'walk,'" writes pastor Luke Simmons. "It's steady plodding, one step at a time. And sometimes the win for the day is just that you kept walking."⁵ It's a point echoed by my friend Daniel Darling. In writing about the story of Noah, he observed, "We look at the big boat, but the way Noah trusted God was by picking up his hammer every morning and hammering in another nail."⁶

When you're a plodder, you likely won't see dramatic breakthroughs every day. You must be okay with incremental progress, with small and sporadic victories. You must make peace with frustrations and setbacks and delays. We're often wrong about obstacles. They're blessings, not burdens. When you're committed to plodding, you look back on them and see how they ended up helping you along.

Earlier I mentioned how William Carey translated the Bible into forty-four languages. The translations were almost lost to history when the building where they were stored burned to the ground. But Carey went right back to work, painstakingly reproducing each translation. Ultimately, he concluded that "out of catastrophe God had brought permanent enrichment."⁷

My colleague Catherine Parks writes biographies about great Christians of the past. But after immersing herself in scores of

these stories, she told me that she's struck by how ordinary these people were. "We think of them as giants, these spiritual superheroes. But they were just doing the next thing in front of them. They were scared, just like we are. But they were faithful."

SEE THE WORK BEGIN

La Sagrada Família in Barcelona is one of the most spectacular buildings on earth. Designed by nineteenth-century architect Antoni Gaudí, it attracts more than five million tourists each year. La Sagrada Família looks completely different from other European churches. Gaudí put a modern twist on Gothic architecture to create a structure with an intricate style and unique design. The lines of the Spanish basilica are smooth and twisting, which reflects Gaudí's commitment to natural design. As the architect once observed, "There are no straight lines or sharp corners in nature."⁸

Sadly, I haven't visited La Sagrada Família. My brother traveled to the famous church recently and texted me pictures. I almost couldn't believe they were real. Inside, treelike pillars stretch up to the church's kaleidoscopic ceiling where brilliant colors pour through stained-glass windows. Outside, massive, ornate spires stretch more than five hundred feet into the sky. The decorative exterior makes the whole structure look a little spooky, like a massive, melting sandcastle. Art critic Rainer Zerbst said "it is probably impossible to find a church building anything like it in the entire history of art."⁹

I was even more intrigued by the structure when I read about its history. Gaudí spent the last forty-three years of his life working on the church. A dedicated Christian, he saw the project as

his life's mission and filled the house of worship with façades depicting biblical scenes. As construction of the church dragged on, many became impatient. Yet Gaudí was unwilling to rush his magnum opus. When asked why the church was taking so long to complete, Gaudí responded, "My client is not in a hurry."¹⁰

Construction on La Sagrada Família started in 1882. It is still being built, more than 140 years later. But Gaudí's grand vision impacts millions, beautifully bearing witness to the glory of the God he served.

You might be thinking that you're no Gaudí. Or William Carey. Don't worry. Neither am I. But there's no telling what God can do through humble servants who keep showing up, who aren't too proud to plod. When you first start plodding, not much happens. The early results are modest, but that's okay. Don't get discouraged. Remember, like Gaudí, you are working for an audience of One. And He is not in a hurry.

In the book of Zechariah, God relays a message through His prophet: "Do not despise these small beginnings, for the LORD rejoices to see the work begin" (Zech. 4:10 NLT). The beginnings in question referred to the foundation of the unfinished temple that God assured Zechariah would be rebuilt.

I believe the principle applies to our lives as well. God doesn't sit back with folded arms, waiting for us to reach perfection. He "rejoices to see the work begin." And He doesn't demand it happen all at once. He only asks you to take the next step.

REFLECT

Does the idea of plodding appeal to you? What obstacles prevent you from plodding?

What does “walking by faith” mean to you? How might your life change if you rooted your confidence in God’s abilities and not your own?

This chapter defined showing up as “being willing to take that first scary step toward what you feel God is calling you to do.” Is there something you feel God is calling you to do that you’ve been reluctant to pursue? If so, what’s the “first scary step” you need to take?