

Praise for

Mondays with My Old Pastor

“Every now and then I come across a book I can’t get out of my head. *Mondays with My Old Pastor* is one of those books. I guarantee you’ll be thinking about it long after you put it down.”

— **Andy Andrews**

New York Times best-selling
author of *How Do You Kill 11
Million People?*; *The Noticer*; and
The Traveler’s Gift

“*Mondays with My Old Pastor* brings us face to face with the frequent disappointments of our Christian journey, while offering us a wonderful encounter between two pastors: one who has faithfully finished his career with perseverance, and another who is just beginning. The counsel of the elder strengthens the spirit of the young one as he sends him back on his way. It will probably do the same for those struggling with the same disappointments who read this captivating work of José Luis Navajo.”

— **Eugenio Orellana**

Founder and International
Director, Latin American
Association of Christian
Writers

"Mondays with My Old Pastor qualifies as a pastor peer support group all its own. Research bears out the experience of the book's narrator: approximately 10 percent of clergy are depressed at any given time, and all clergy are challenged to balance competing demands. This books passes on helpful wisdom and the comfort of shared experience."

— **Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell, PhD**
Research Director of the Duke
Clergy Health Initiative

"There are few books I read that make it to my favorite pile. But *Mondays with My Old Pastor* now sits among those books. There is so much wisdom to savor in its pages . . . so much important conversation in every chapter. It is for the discouraged minister, the questioning spiritual soldier, and every believer in between. The words from Jose Luis Navajo's old pastor's lips are Jesus-words, and I felt every one."

— **Lisa Whittle**
Author, Speaker, Advocate

Mondays
WITH
My Old Pastor

*Sometimes, all we need is a reminder from
someone who has walked before us*



José Luis Navajo



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Some of the stories in this book are legends or myths that are not true but are used to illustrate a point.

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To Querit

*Your smile lights up a thousand lights
during my discouraged times.*

To Miriam

*Every day you show us that adolescence also
has magical treasures that we as parents can
enjoy. Amazed at your maturity, I sometimes ask
myself, "Is she my daughter or my mother?"*

And to you, Gene

*Your unshakable love, closeness, and loyalty weave together
the threads that hold my comet of hope high in the sky.*



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I give my heartfelt thanks to Thomas Nelson and their excellent staff for believing in this humble work and for helping it come to life. My wish is that this child of paper and ink brings happiness and blessing to many lives.



Prologue

A few weeks ago, I celebrated my forty-sixth birthday. Despite the fact that I would have preferred not seeing so many candles on the cake, it was a nice day. There were surprises, hugs, and an abundance of sincere affection. What more could one ask for?

Nothing was missing, not even unwrapping a beautiful gift to discover that it contained *exactly what I needed!* Yet not even the joyful singing of “Happy Birthday,” which was sung out of tune and not in rhythm, thrilled me.

At the end of the day, while I was picking up the wrapping paper from the gifts and putting the leftover cake in the refrigerator, I couldn’t stop asking myself, “Why do I feel this way even on my birthday?”

Deep in some uncertain part of my soul persisted a strange exhaustion that was difficult to explain and hard to endure. I’m referring to something that is greater than mere tiredness. It has more to do with emotions rather than muscles. It is more related to the soul rather than the body.

I am an evangelical pastor, and for some time I had felt . . . how can I explain it? I can't seem to find the exact word to describe it.

Let down?

No, not at all.

Disillusioned?

No, not that either.

Tired?

Yes, I believe that's it . . . or something similar.

Please understand me; I'm not saying that I've taken the wrong road in life. If I were to be born all over again, if God were to give me the gift of another life, I would ask Him to let me make the same investment—the exact same one I have made with the years that He has given me up until now. That is not presumption. It's gratitude.

Many believe that being called by God to serve Him in ministry is the highest privilege and the noblest opportunity. I believe that as well.

Some say that in their whole life they never have had the thought of leaving Christian ministry to devote themselves to something else. I would love to claim that I belong to that elite group. I wish I could assure you that I have never felt overwhelmed by the desire to hang up my gloves, or throw in the towel, or whatever we call looking at the plow stuck in the furrow and longing for softer soil or greener fields. I wish I could assure you of that, but I wouldn't be honest if I did.

Thirty-five years ago, I was given the honor of digging my feet into the soil of this sacred work, and even until today, only two other passions captivate me more than God's work: the God of the work and my family.

But we would be doing little favor to those who are willing to take up the baton and relieve us in this race, if when we show them the path, we only emphasize the oases and forget to mention the deserts.

To be called by God is, beyond any doubt, the highest vocation to which someone can aspire. But serving Him implies entering a battle, and it is wise to remember that in a battle there are no soldiers without wounds. It is normal for discouragement to come at times, and it happened to me.

The pages that you are about to read were not written all at once but rather came about over time, by a process that led me through some very unique moments.

At times I was able to dip my pen in the “ink” of God’s heart, but at other times, the ink was blood that sprang from my own wounds. Some lines were edited by the light of a rainbow, while others were birthed from the roar of uncomfortable thoughts, some of which shouted, *It would be better if I devoted myself to something else. I don’t have a career; it was all a wild fancy, a false hope; this life isn’t for me.*

The pressure got so bad that one day I thought I was dying, and I had no choice but to see the doctor. I tried to explain to him the gibberish that was going on in my mind, which was causing serious ramifications in my soul and severe problems in my body. Since I didn’t know what was happening to me, I was guessing at what it all meant. The kind doctor listened to me with commendable patience, keeping his elbows on the table, his fingers locked together, and his head resting on both thumbs.

Finally, he looked at me with a frank smile, which made me

relax at times and made me uncomfortable other times. Then he shelled out his diagnosis: burnout.

Burnout? The one who runs nonstop soon drops? The one who fires off his twenty-year supply of ammunition in twenty days? The one who forces his horse to run so hard he wears him out?

I didn't know what he was talking about!

Things such as “grabbing more reins of the convenient” and “galloping bareback on several horses is complicated and makes it easy for them to get out of hand.” Crowding too many matters together on the journey puts an unbearable weight on a person.

He was so emphatic and persuasive that I had to admit that perhaps he was right.

When he had finished with his diagnosis, he stared at me again with his unchanging smile and gave me his orders: “I am prescribing mandatory rest for you,” he said, with the same ease as if he had prescribed an aspirin.

Thankfully, I have not had to experience what is known as forced labor, though I have a deep respect for those who have found themselves in that spot. But I can attest to the fact that “mandatory rest” isn't easy.

It wasn't the first time that my frail nature forced me to come to a stop—at times I have come to the conclusion that God has gifted me with bad health just so I can write. He knew full well that from that moment on I would be facing my fiercest enemy in my mind, because when the body slows down, the mind begins to race nonstop.

So I decided to quickly cut off that kind of thinking before I became a prisoner to it. Taking advantage of the mandatory rest,

I was able to come to a powerful conclusion: it is possible—I know now—to “cook” so feverishly for God that we end up kicking Him out of the kitchen. Yes, that’s possible, but it is absolutely unwise to do so.

A difficult yoke and a heavy weight do not fit the description Jesus gave of His commission; on the contrary, those two things can set us on such a steep uphill climb that it makes us feel like giving up.

Has that ever happened to you? Have you thought that at one time or another?

Don’t torment or judge yourself too harshly.

Welcome to the club.

A wise man once said, “You can’t keep the birds from flying over your head, but you can sure keep them from building a nest in your hair!” As I captured the reflections that sprang from my heart with one hand, and with the other hand scared away the ugly blackbirds that tried to build nests in the crevices of my mind, I wrote many pages of this book.

Would you like to travel through this journey with me? Together we will prove that as we hold on to God in this dark cave, we will always come out the other side; and we will emerge on higher ground, with a greater vision under a clearer and calmer sky.

I am confident in saying that at some point in your reading you will stop and realize that the darkest hour of the night is the one that comes just before the dawn, and that there is no winter—no matter how harsh and long it may seem—that doesn’t turn into a lush spring.

I am sure that before you reach the last page, you will have

proven that the deepest crises are often shortcuts to greater opportunities, and the blows you have received on God's anvil don't destroy but rather build up.

If you have come this far in your reading, I congratulate you, because now the really interesting part begins.

I want to introduce you to my old pastor so that together you and I can walk through the rooms of his humble, whitewashed home in the desert and find the powerful cross that is being lifted up among the dunes.

—José Luis Navajo

“Did you know, son, that when I was a little boy I used to spend hours listening to my father? Oh, how I remember the wisdom that came from his words! Listening to him, I could feel myself grow. He used to shake off the dusty archives of his memory to pass on to me beautiful thoughts and valuable lessons.”

The honorable grandfather paused, moved by nostalgia, and then he finished: “What a pity that today old men are not so wise that you can learn by listening to us!”

The young man took the old man’s hands in his, and looking him in the eyes, he said, “That’s not it at all, Father. If we don’t spend time listening to you, it’s not because you’re less wise. Rather, it’s because we are much more foolish.”

The father cracked a smile that radiated pure love and then kissed his son’s cheek, just before hugging him.

*Wisdom is with aged men,
And with length of days, understanding.*

—JOB 12:12



Introduction

A Cross in the Desert

I stopped in front of the whitewashed house protected from the sun by a climbing vine. *So this is my old pastor's refuge?* I thought as I gazed at that humble building.

As I slowly walked the few feet that separated me from the door, two feelings—shyness and insecurity—equally overwhelmed me.

In an attempt to find the courage to knock on the door, I forced myself to remember the determination with which my old pastor had urged me to come and visit him.

“I don’t know . . .” I hesitantly had told him on the phone. “I wouldn’t want to bother you . . .”

“Don’t say another word. Come this Monday”—it was the third time that he insisted—“I really want to see you and give you a hug.”

Because of that, I was now standing in front of that blue door

studded with black nails. I couldn't get rid of the feeling that I was nothing more than a meddler who had only come to disturb the deserved rest of the old man who offered to bestow on me the gift of his time.

But the memory of the crippling circumstances that had brought me here was enough incentive for my hand to grab the bronze knocker in the center of the door that served to announce my arrival.

Let me give you a little background of my most recent turn of events:

I had dedicated my life in service to God, to which I gave myself completely. However, lately things had suffered some changes.

I had become discouraged.

Definitely and absolutely discouraged.

The feeling of knowing that I couldn't do anything, that I didn't know anything, and that I wasn't useful at all had completely overwhelmed me.

I was fulfilling—or, at least, I was trying to fulfill—my pastoral responsibilities in a small church in a tiny town. Everything about it was small. But that responsibility seemed so huge to me and, above all, so hard that it threatened to crush me.

One Sunday, after arriving home from church, I shut myself in my room and knelt with my elbows on the bed. Burying my face in my hands, I prayed and cried for a long time, but I felt as if it all was in vain. Even my prayer seemed useless to me. My words seemed to crash against the ceiling and then fall back down on me, turned into a shower of splinters that were being hammered into my hunched back.

After praying and crying, I remained on my knees waiting for something. But nothing happened.

The following day I caved in. I gave up—at least in my heart. I wanted to stop serving God because I felt morally bankrupt. I was unable to resist, so I sank into discouragement.

Everything happened right there, in that moment, one sunny Monday in the beginning of May.

Had I lost my faith?

I wasn't sure, but since I certainly had lost my love, I no longer had the same amount of desire as when I had started the race.

When I got on board the boat of service to God, I did it full of projects and dreams. That was nine years ago. It was a particularly long “pregnancy.” And the resulting birth produced triplets: discouragement, frustration, and disillusionment.

Consequently, the little boat I had excitedly climbed into was now filling up with water everywhere, while the raging sea of discouragement was threatening to swallow me up.

I started to examine each year of my life as a regrettable and senseless mistake. And I saw what time I still had left as a colorless void that I had no desire to spiral down into.

I've experienced crises at other times, but not so profound or so sudden.

It didn't take long for my wife, Mary, to pick up on my feelings. That's not strange. She is able to read my eyes and with one look x-ray my whole soul.

“What's going on with you, sweetheart?”

Her support is unconditional, and her faith in me is as well;

but not even a life jacket as amazing as hers seemed strong enough in the fierce sea that threatened to swallow me.

“Tell me,” she insisted. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said to her. I even tried to silence her lips with a kiss to stop the floodgate of sincere questions I didn’t know how to respond to.

“Nothing’s wrong. Don’t worry.”

Being respectful as she was, she would abide her time until she knew that the intense storm, which could not last long, had passed.

A few weeks like this went by: plunged in a tunnel of discouragement, fighting against the overwhelming feeling of being incapable of doing anything, of not knowing what to do, and not feeling useful. With each passing moment I even toyed with the possibility of leaving the ministry and devoting myself to something else.

I don’t have a calling, I thought. Everything is just a pipe dream, a false hope. This life is not for me.

“Why don’t you talk to your old pastor?” my wife suggested one night after I had answered her question with the same evasive answer as always.

“With my old pastor?”

“Yes.”

She smiled at me with her sweet expression that was a healing balm for my wounds. “Why don’t you go and talk to him?”

The term *old* was not used to refer to our pastor with disrespect, but with sincere affection and true admiration. In his golden years we never saw the wear and tear of his age, but rather the incalculable value of his experience.

He was a seasoned eighty-three years old—fifty-five of those

he had dedicated to pastoring the same church—and every day that had gone by had deposited in him another drop in the well of wisdom.

His life was a confirmation of Ingmar Bergman's reflection, when he said, "Old age is like climbing a large mountain. The higher you get, the more tired and breathless you become, but your sight becomes more free and the view more extensive and serene."

It had only been a few months since he had retired. He and his wife, Rachel, had decided to flee from all the noise and spend the last stretch of their journey in prayer and seclusion.

"We have served Him on the front line, and now we want to set ourselves apart with Him," he had said the day of their farewell. "For fifty-five years we have spoken to people about God. Now we long to speak to God about people."

"Why don't you give your old pastor a call?" Mary repeated, snapping me out of my daydreaming.

I did not answer, and she was fine with that. She knew that my silence was a promise that I would take her suggestion into consideration. And that's exactly what I did. I took her advice to bed with me and turned over a thousand times with it, until I finally fell asleep.

I almost never dream, but that night I dreamed.

I saw myself in the middle of a desert, languishing under scorching heat. My skin was on fire, and the sun's rays beat down like knives that tore open my reddened flesh. My lips were very dry and cracked. Exhausted, I fell to the ground.

With superhuman effort, I succeeded in standing up and managed to move forward a few inches before falling down again.

Finally, my legs refused to move, so I gave up and stretched out on the sand, convinced I was going to die.

Just when a deadly slumber started to engulf me, a refreshing shade covered me. The temperature dropped a few degrees, and even my hair stirred from a breeze that was as strange as it was invigorating. I felt revived. It felt like the soft embrace of a silk sheet after a hard day at work. Where did the shade come from? I raised my eyes and had to rub them to convince myself that what I was seeing wasn't a mirage: a large cross had been lifted up in that scorching land, placing itself between the sun and my fallen body.

Its shade stretched directly over me. An irresistible attraction drew me toward it, and I could see a human figure smiling at me from the foot of the cross. It was someone, kneeling, who was pointing at me with one hand, while with the other he was pointing toward the huge cross that had been lifted up in the heart of the desert. Digging my fingers into the sand, I succeeded in dragging myself a little closer.

I could only see a little bit, but enough to recognize the person who was calling to me. It was my old pastor! Renewed by the coolness that flowed from the shade of the cross, I felt something akin to peace. Suddenly, from within the cloud of almost total darkness I felt inside, his voice broke through. He said, "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength." A soft yet powerful voice; extraordinary but imbued with power. Totally unique.

With the echo of that voice in my mind and my pajama shirt stuck to my body, I woke up with a jolt. I had absolutely no

doubt: that dream confirmed that Mary's advice was wise and well-timed.

And that's why I was standing in front of the blue door of that simple whitewashed house.

Silence was the predominant music of this incredibly fertile but extremely unpopulated place. No other house could be seen anywhere nearby. That house had been built in the middle of nowhere. Its foundations had been laid out in total isolation, and it was protected by the most perfect peace. The stone floor and the walls were covered in flower petals—red, white, and pink—that fell down from the circular ledge that was full of flowerpots, and from the two balconies.

On both sides of the door sat two large tubs filled with roses, which I bent down to smell. They were pure white, and their petals held drops of water that looked like tiny crystals.

I took a few steps back to admire the simple but imposing structure of that house, and then I noticed one small detail: the chimney that rose up several feet, along with the outline of the tiled roof, cast a shadow that formed the exact shape of a cross.

I kept my eyes riveted on the scene for more than a minute. It was a perfect cross, made enormously long by the setting sun.

An identical cross to the one in my dream.

A cross in the desert . . .

From that moment on, one of the most dizzying and extraordinary periods I had ever experienced began.

For months I did not understand what was happening, and only now can I recount it with certain conviction, because the passage of time has caused me to understand that in every desert

there is a cross that brings restoration. It's only a question of looking for it and taking shelter in its shade.

Sometimes we don't even have the strength to look for it . . . but the cross will find us, and we will prove that the hottest place will be transformed into a fertile garden.



The First Monday

Angels in the Desert

*Only God exists, only God knows, only God is able . . .
Only God is the true wise One.*

Fearful, taking one slow step after another, I reached the door of the house. And what I saw left me astonished.

Next to the right lintel, hanging from the facade, was a reddish stone shaped like a piece of parchment. On the stone were inscribed the words of the prophet: “In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength” (Isaiah 30:15).

The very same words that woke me up from my dream were now right in front of my eyes.

I could hardly believe it.

As I breathed in deeply the restful and fragrant air, I thought, *I can see that my old pastor and his wife have fulfilled their wish. They*

found a place to rest and trust. I knew, without a doubt, that they had turned this quietude into an altar and that sacred silence into worship.

When I arrived at my pastor's house to visit him the first of June, my intention was to have coffee together and let him know how I was feeling.

Just before I knocked on the door, I realized that it was Monday, like the first Monday of May, which was the day I had given up. Little did I also realize that this sunny Monday, the first day of June, would be the beginning of my restoration!

One more step and I would cross over that threshold, initiating a radical change in my life. A decisive time was about to commence.

The sun showered down from an unbelievably blue sky, and its heat cascaded over each side of the house. Not one leaf was moving when, slowly, I grabbed the sizzling bronze door-knocker and let it knock on the door two times.

With the soft sound of footsteps, it was kindhearted Rachel, my old pastor's constant and faithful companion, who opened the door for me. Surprised to see me, she spoke my name and let me know she was happy to see me. She greeted me with a kiss on each cheek and let me pass with a beaming smile as she said warmly, "Welcome!"

My old pastor was already approaching through the hallway. "Hello," he shouted, raising his arms and extending them toward me. "It brings me great joy to see you here in my house."

In the midst of that suffocating heat, a breeze of affection enveloped me. There was neither feigning nor pretense

in his happiness. His friendly hug conveyed the most sincere welcome.

I was already feeling better.

The warm reception by those two angels had an instantaneous therapeutic effect. I felt that even if the visit had ended right then, I still would have returned home comforted.

Looking at them, I became convinced that it is wrinkles of the spirit that make us old, not wrinkles on the face. I sensed in them two souls overflowing with youthfulness and authentic vitality. *What is it they have, I asked myself, that just their presence inspires encouragement?*

The inside of the house was just as simple as the outside suggested.

As soon as we entered, we gained access to a short entryway from which four doors opened. The one to the right led to a small kitchen that contained all the basics, including a door that opened to a porch with a table and four chairs.

I envisioned them sitting there, sipping their early-morning coffee and delighting in the vast nature that stretched out before them.

Above the sink was a large window covered with a lace curtain, but it did not block the view of the hundred-year-old oak tree that stretched its branches over the house as if wanting to provide shelter from the early summer sun.

The door in front of the kitchen led into a small but cozy parlor. Two rockers were turned toward a blackened fireplace, a sign of many winters spent enjoying its heat and intimacy.

Between the two rockers stood a low table on which rested a

Bible, whose well-worn cover bore the words *Large Print*. It was the one he was using lately, since his eyes had lost their keenness, even though the glow of his determination had never been extinguished.

Then I noticed one detail: a large cross was embossed on the cover of the Bible. From there my eyes jumped to the old log beams that rested above the home. They also formed a cross. Next I noticed that the wall shelves, filled with pictures and mementos, were designed precisely with the same shape. The same pattern occurred in the windowpanes of the large window, where two white wooden strips of wood between two panes of glass formed a cross.

My old pastor noticed what I had seen.

“Ah, you see it, don’t you?” he asked me with a smile. “The cross.”

“Yes, it’s everywhere. What does it mean?”

His smile at that moment was filled with more light than the purest late-afternoon sun on that cloudless day.

“My life has sprung forth from the shade of the cross. I have always lived protected by it, and I want the cross to be the ladder that lifts me up to His presence when my time comes.”

“What is it that you find in it?” I dared to ask him.

He only thought for a few seconds before answering. “I find Him,” he said, pointing upward with his index finger. “I find Him in the cross, nothing more, nothing less. What more can you ask for?”

I stared at a stairway in the corner of the living room that led upstairs, where the bedrooms were most certainly located. The third door in the hallway led to a small bathroom that was just as clean as the rest of the house.

Only one more door remained, which my old pastor was pointing toward.

“I will bring you both some coffee right away,” Rachel promised as she headed toward the kitchen.

That room was his office.

Two things caught my attention immediately: the huge floor-to-ceiling bookshelf that covered an entire wall, into which were crowded hundreds of books; and the large window that was to the right of his study desk. That large window provided an enchanting view. The countryside stretched out as far as the eye could see, and now, in full spring, the grass looked like a succulent carpet that covered the ground in a brilliant, almost phosphorescent, green.

Looking at the bookshelf crammed with books, I remembered the advice my old pastor had given me once: “You should read a lot, especially the Bible, but also seek to soak yourself with wisdom from others. A good book will make you grow. They are like mines,” he had said to me, as he fondly caressed the book in his hands. “Mines full of riches. Each chapter is a like a showcase that is hiding treasures, waiting for someone to discover them.”

I glanced at the book spines, trying to make out the titles.

“One thousand seven hundred and twelve,” he told me.

“Excuse me?”

“One thousand seven hundred and twelve books, in alphabetical order and annotated in hand-penned lists.” He smiled. “You know that I have always been a compulsive reader.”

“And an extremely organized person,” I acknowledged. “And for sure, many of us were infected with your passion for reading.”

He sat down in a wing-back chair that was facing the large

window. I surmised that this must be his favorite spot. To his side stood a low table with a lamp.

I thought of the idyllic times my old pastor must have spent sitting in that chair, gazing through the window during the day and contemplating the wide-open green landscape . . . and worshipping in the glimmering light of the lamp at night.

“Thank you for granting me a few minutes of your time,” I told him somewhat timidly, taking a seat in front of him.

“You’re thanking me?” he said, smiling more with his eyes than his mouth. “I’m the one who should be thankful. Since I’ve been retired I have plenty of time, and I haven’t had many occasions to enjoy some visits. You see, these days I have much to share, but no one who wants to hear it. I’ve bored Rachel from listening to my stories over and over again. She is such a saint!”

He laughed hard just in saying it.

She arrived right then carrying a tray, filling the room with the delicious aroma of coffee, accompanied by a fresh-baked cake.

My old pastor looked at her with a smile, in which I noticed more gratitude than words could convey, and she winked at him as if she still were a teenager.

I was spellbound as I witnessed that tender moment of love between those two lives that afternoon. I gathered that living in the shade of the cross preserves not only one’s personal life but also one’s marriage.

“So you have some stories to tell,” I said to him after his wife had left the room.

“A lot,” he told me. “And I think they’re very good. Would you like to hear them?”

"It would be a pleasure," I said to him sincerely. I had a deep respect for my old pastor, and I felt myself growing just by being near him. How much more would I grow by listening to him?

For a moment I thought about telling him the dream I had had, which was the reason for this meeting, but I decided against it since I didn't want to influence the direction of our conversation.

"You know," he told me, "this morning I was remembering the exact time when I received my calling to serve God."

He lifted the coffee cup to his lips, but he stopped it just a few inches from his mouth, finishing his sentence: "I'm still moved just remembering it."

"How old were you?" I asked him.

"I'm not sure."

He took a sip of the steamy drink, placed the cup on the small plate, and lightly scratched his head, as if trying to stir his memory.

"Maybe when I was fifteen . . . I'm not sure. What I do remember perfectly is the powerful message that my pastor preached that day."

"So you liked it, then?"

"A lot, but it was something else that got my heart excited."

"Oh! And what was that?"

"The sure feeling that someday I would also be preaching that powerful message."

His eyes focused on the window, as if reading from the vast countryside the next part of his story.

"The end of that service was the beginning of my new life. I remained seated, with my head resting on the back of the seat

in front of me, praying and crying—overwhelmed with emotion. Then I noticed a hand resting on my shoulder. It was my pastor's.

“You've felt it, right?’ he asked me warmly with an equally affirmative tone. ‘You've felt your call. Haven't you?’

“I nodded my head yes, not knowing what else to say. I wanted to explain to him that such a calling seemed crazy to me. That God would choose me seemed like a mistake or a bad joke. Me, who was unable to even talk in front of three people, chosen by God to talk to a crowd?”

He made an attempt to laugh, then finished: “Mistake or a bad joke, I realized that I didn't have any other option.”

He picked up the cup again and riveted his eyes on mine as he continued his story. “My pastor placed his hand on my chin, making me raise my gaze so he could talk to me eye to eye: ‘If He is calling you, tell Him yes,’ he said almost in a whisper.” My old pastor was whispering now as he told the story. “‘But I will never be able to serve Him,’ I complained.

“‘God does not call the equipped; rather, He equips those He calls. Do you understand?’ my pastor told me, pointing to the cross that hung over the altar. ‘It's all you need. Life doesn't start when you're twenty, or when you're forty. Life starts at Calvary. And that's where fruitful service begins as well. Let the cross be so present in you that it becomes your way of life and your rest.’ It was a healing affirmation that would go with me the rest of my life.”

His story complete, my old pastor quickly finished his coffee and placed the cup on its plate. And then he leaned back in his chair.

“When we talked on the phone the other day, you didn't give

me many details about the reason for your visit,” he said, “but something tells me that you’re facing the uncomfortable feelings that have plagued me my whole life.”

“You too—?”

He didn’t let me finish my question.

“Son.”

I loved that he used that endearing term when he talked to me.

“From the time I could remember, I’ve always had the question: Will I help someone someday? Will I respond to such a high calling in a worthy manner?”

I found myself nodding in agreement. Even I couldn’t have expressed my own feelings better.

“Yes,” he went on. “I wasn’t sure almost about anything, except that what I could do wouldn’t help to change anybody’s life. But then I discovered that this kind of questioning is crucial, because my doubts about my own competence forced me to draw near to God in search of resources, and there”—he pointed to some worn cushions that were lying on the floor—“is where my feelings are set in order. God’s presence fills me inside with peace, and although I fall down undone at times, I always get up renewed.”

The volume of his voice increased several levels.

“Transformed, victorious . . . and, most of all, renewed.”

I could sense that his words were even renewing me.

“It’s on our knees before Him where we find balance. When you’re tempted to think you lack courage, look at the cross.”

He stretched his hand toward the whole bookshelf, and I noticed that even the book stand was filled with that holy symbol,

printed on the spines of the books, in pictures that hung on the wall, and in Bible verses written down.

“Look at the cross,” he insisted. “That’s how valuable you are to God.”

I decided to be honest with my old pastor. “What’s happening to me,” I admitted, “is that I think that I lack the talent to fulfill the responsibilities that are expected of me. Anyone could do the same things that I do . . . and they would do them a lot better.”

He watched me with a smile that conveyed understanding and empathy. “I’m remembering an old story. Would you like me to tell it to you?”

“Go right ahead,” I told him.

He got comfortable in his chair, clasped his fingers together, and let his hands rest on his lap, and then he began:

The man entered the wise man’s room very distressed. “I’m here, teacher,” he said, “because I feel so numb that I don’t have the desire to do anything. I’m told that I’m no longer useful, that I do everything wrong, that I’m clumsy and very dumb. How can I improve? What can I do so they value me more?”

Without looking at him, the teacher said to him, “I’m so sorry, son. I can’t help you, since I have to solve my own problem first. Perhaps later . . .” He paused for a moment and then added, “If you want to help me, I could take care of this matter of mine, and then after that I could perhaps help you.”

“Of . . . of course, teacher,” the young man stuttered, feeling once again that he wasn’t worth anything and his needs were always being put off.

“Well . . .” the teacher continued. He took off a ring he had on the little finger of his left hand and, giving it to the young man, said, “Take the horse that’s outside there and ride to the market. I need to sell this ring because I have to pay a debt. You need to get the best price possible, and don’t accept anything less than a gold coin. Go now, and return with a gold coin as fast as you can.” The young man took the ring and left. As soon as he arrived at the market, he began to offer the ring to the merchants, who looked at it with interest until the young man said what he was asking for it.

When he mentioned the price of a gold coin, some laughed, others turned away, and only one old man was kind enough to take the time to explain to the young man that a gold coin was much too valuable to pay him in exchange for the ring. In an attempt to help, someone offered him a silver coin and a copper vessel, but the young man had instructions not to accept anything except a gold coin and to refuse any other offer. After offering the ring to everyone he came across in the market, over a hundred people, and feeling dejected by his failure, he mounted his horse and returned. How he wished he had a gold coin to give to his teacher and free him from his debt, so that he could finally receive his teacher’s wisdom and help.

He entered the room and said, “Teacher, I’m sorry. I couldn’t get the price you asked me to get. I might have been able to get two or three silver coins. But I don’t think that I could have deceived anyone about the true value of the ring.”

“What you’ve just said is very important, my young friend,” the teacher said, smiling. “We first must know the true value of the ring. Go get back on your horse and go and see the jeweler. Who

would know better than him? Tell him that you want to sell the ring and ask him how much he'll give you for it. But no matter what he offers you, don't sell it to him. Return here with my ring."

The young man got back on his horse and rode off again. The jeweler examined the ring in the light of his oil lamp. He looked at it with his magnifying glass, weighed it, and then told him, "Tell your teacher, young man, that if he wants to sell it right now, I can't give him any more than fifty-eight gold coins for his ring."

"Fifty-eight gold coins?" the young man exclaimed.

"Yes," replied the jeweler. "I know that with some time, we could get about seventy coins, but if the sale is urgent . . ."

The young man galloped back excitedly to his teacher's house to tell him what had just happened.

"Sit down," his teacher said after listening to him. "You are like that ring: a unique and precious jewel. And as such, only an expert can determine your value. Why are you going through life hoping that someone will discover your true value?"

As I pondered this story, my old pastor looked at me intensely. He pointed to the cross.

"He did it for you . . . That's how valuable you are to God. Trust the Expert," he said as he pointed upward. "His opinion is the only one that should matter to you. He knows what your true worth is."

I nodded in agreement, deciding to come prepared for my next visit with a notebook and pencil to take notes.

"It's true that sometimes God allows us to experience the bitter taste of apparent failure," he pointed out, "because many

of our failures are more apparent than real. But even this is helpful, because that feeling forces us to grab hold of the compass of prayer and understand the enormous truth that only God exists, only God knows, only God is able.”

“What a phrase!” I said, repeating it. “Only God exists, only God knows, only God is able.”

Socrates summed it up very simply when they tried to credit him with gifted wisdom because they believed he deserved it. The Greek philosopher looked at the crowd that was applauding his wisdom, then pointed toward heaven and said, “Only God is the true wise One.”

The day was coming to an end when I closed the blue door behind me.

The high cloud banks in the sky were orange, crisscrossed by even darker clouds, through which shone the purest blue.

Faraway barking reminded me that off in the distance life went on, although not as quiet or beautiful as this place, where the moon—the lady of the night—and the jasmine flowers began to stir up their cloying and warm aroma.

As I passed by the rosebush, a red flower caught my attention; it had bloomed among the white ones. I leaned over to smell it, surprised that the same stalk could produce flowers with such different colors. It had a distinct aroma, much more intense than its accompanying white ones.

I walked for a while through that empty countryside; it did not seem threatening to me but rather incredibly beautiful. It was completely silent, tainted only by the greeting of the first insects of the night.

I opened up my arms, raising them toward heaven, and the fading light behind me projected a cross in front of me, which my shadow had made.

The solitude seemed like heaven's waiting room to me.

I worshipped as I walked. First in silence, then with a whisper, but finally my heart exploded with a "Hallelujah!" that silenced even the insects.

Even the dog off in the distance stopped barking.

Tears and worship blended together until I finally arrived home.

"How did it go, dear?" my wife, Mary, asked, looking at me worried when she saw my red and swollen eyes.

I didn't say anything to her. I just hugged her for a long time. Then I pushed her away a little to look at her. Her beautiful countenance danced in my tears.

"Fine, my love," I said and hugged her again. "It went very well."

A little later, Mary, feeling much more peaceful, was resting. My calmness was now hers, and that night she slept with a peace she had not experienced lately because my anxiety had stolen it from her.

It would be morning for her soon. Her office opened at eight o'clock sharp.

I took a little longer to go to bed. I had a lot to think about.

Overcome with joy, I leaned out the window. The moon, round and a brilliant white, turned the night sky into a dome of light, and a perfumed mist rose from the garden below.

Only God exists, only God knows, only God is able . . . Only God is the true wise One.

I repeated it many times, until every one of my senses was filled with that powerful message.

I began to cry again from the amazing peace and happiness that flowed through me. And through my tears the light of the moon was reflected, taking on the shape of a brilliant cross laid out on an immense nocturnal canvas.

Night was deepening, and the temperature was falling.

Finally, something deep inside was beginning to wake up.