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Defining Moments

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During a recent conference, I heard a lecture by Don Williams, a Vineyard pastor from California, in which he used the term defining moment. Since then I have seen the term used in a number of places. Don was referring to the point at which a person comes to know Christ as a defining moment in that person's life. Without question that is true, but as I thought about it I realized that there are many defining moments when the trajectory of a person's life dramatically changes. They may have been heading in one direction and then something happens that deflects them in another direction.

A trajectory is a curved course and a vector is a straight course that an object takes as it moves from one point to another. The vector of our body's life is really a trajectory that is traveled as we move from conception to death. Our bodies have a well defined trajectory, our souls and spirits tend to be vectored. The difference between our body's and soul's vector is that the body decays at death, but our soul and spirit being supernatural do not. The best way to visualize a trajectory is to think of an arrow shot from a bow. When it leaves the bow it has momentum that projects it upward and in the direction it was aimed. Then gravity and the resistance of the air impede its flight and it gradually slows and is pulled back to the ground by gravity. Our body has a similar trajectory. Our cells divide rapidly as we grow up to maturity. Unfortunately, after we mature they will only divide about 60 times to replace themselves when they are injured or die due to other causes. In our 40's this process is beginning to slow down so we begin to age. Our vascular system begins to clog up, and the various organs of our body have decreased function and in time they wear out. Then we die. Any number of my friends have traversed their trajectory now and have come to a point where there is no recovery and the body can no longer sustain itself.

Our souls and spirits are vectored in different areas. When we are children our lives are, to the greatest extent, vectored by our parents. We do essentially what they lead us to do. We dress the way they want us to dress, and eat the foods they want us to eat. When we reach the age of eight or nine we begin the process of separation and individuation. We begin to become an individual. We are a separate person, and in many ways begin to determine the trajectory of our life. If we have been trained up as we should go we will generally go in the right direction. If our home has been filled with love and has order, and we have been unconditionally loved we will usually direct our lives in the same direction our parents have gone. Of course, we may choose different vocations and different social support systems, but for the most part we will follow in their footsteps. By

the time we reach 18 or 19 years we will be pretty well running our lives ourselves.

If we inspect our life, though, we become aware that defining moments have a profound effect on the vectors of our life. In my life I realized that one of the early major defining moments had to do with my selecting a vocation. It happened this way. I had always been interested in science. I did all kinds of experiments when I was a kid using a book that had scientific projects for kids that were simple and done with readily available materials. At the same time I was raising chickens and breeding rabbits. I also had a big garden that I tended to supply my family with vegetables. There was always some left over that I sold. I was very interested in airplanes so I built many flying models, and in time I built them with miniature gasoline engines in them. I was entranced with aircraft of all kinds. I vividly remember the dirigible Akron flying over our house and wanting so much to fly in it. Without my parents' knowledge I took my first flight at age 12 in a Ford transport airplane with three motors. I decided right then that I was going to have a career in aviation. It happened because we had an airstrip near us and I saw the plane land there. I hopped on my bicycle and went over to see it. The pilot and I got in a conversation and he told me that if I would come back the next morning and pick up a sandwich sign and carry it around downtown till the late afternoon he would give me a ride over the town. I came back the next morning, rode downtown on my bike and did as he asked. At five o'clock I arrived to get my ride. I buckled myself in my seat, we took off and I knew without a doubt that I was going to spend the rest of my life doing something with airplanes. Later I decided that I was going to design airplanes so I planned my education with the goal of becoming an aeronautical engineer. After I had matriculated at Duke University in the school of engineering, for some inexplicable reason I suddenly had some misgivings about it.

My occupational defining moment came when I decided to go talk to a Christian friend of mine to resolve the conflict that I experienced. He had known me from age four and was my scientific godfather. He taught me to raise chickens and rabbits, to graft trees, to root various cuttings, and to grow a garden. He had been a professor of botany at one of our state universities and as a result I thought he could give me advice that was wise.

Now I had begun to think that I might want to be a physician, but I knew nothing about the profession. I had never been sick and remembered only having seen a physician one time when I was a child. Still I thought it might be the profession I should choose. After I had presented my case to him he said without hesitation, "I think you should be a physician." When I asked him why, he said that he had watched me grow up, and observed that I always had an intense interest in living things. He did not think that I would be happy sitting at a drawing board with a slide rule. He knew I loved intense interpersonal interaction, as well as outdoor activities and those would be missing. Since I respected his wisdom I made an instant decision. I would be a physician. I knew he was right.

There is no question that it was God's guidance. Even though I was not a Christian at the time, my mentor was and with godly wisdom gave me the advice that defined the moment. In retrospect there were other elements that entered into my recognizing that it was God's will. First of all we can know God's will from the Bible. Jesus told all of us to be healers and there was no question that I wanted to be that, so my decision was in line with the Bible. Second, it seemed right to me. I had no conflict about becoming a physician even though I did not like to handle vomitus and feces. (I still don't). Third, I had godly advice. The fourth criteria for knowing God's will was that the doors were open. When I went to the registrar's office to change my major they did not even blink. Finally it seemed like common sense to become a physician if I was interested in science. Medicine provides the best opportunity to get a broad scientific education that you can get. You will look at science with wide angle vision, not with tunnel vision.

There did, though, have to be an intellectual defining moment to bring my career to fruition. I had never had to study in school. Even though I was usually in advanced placement classes I still did not have to study any courses except math and Latin. As a result I never really learned to study. The outcome was that I did not do well at the university so I quit school in the middle of my sophomore year and went to work on a construction job. Even though I enjoyed some aspects of the jobs I had, I eventually ended up working under a man who was an ex-convict and bootlegger. He had murdered a man although he had received little time in prison for it. Needless to say his morals were not conventional. After I had worked with him for a while we came into conflict over a moral issue, and he threatened my life. Even though I "stood him down" I made a decision that I would not spend the rest of my life working with people like him. I realized that the only way out was to go back to school and work at learning. I did, and that confrontation became the intellectual defining moment in my life.

There were, of course, moments of doubt before I started to medical school, but a girl I grew up with dispelled those with a comment on my doubt. She said that I could go in any direction I wanted to scientifically with an MD degree. That was the final clincher. I have never looked back since then, and after 54 years of being a physician I have loved every moment of my career.

There were, though, many further defining moments in my vocational life. One came when I decided to go into psychiatry. It came about when I decided I did not want to be an obstetrician, a choice I made in medical school. I had become thoroughly disillusioned with obstetrics when I was an intern. I could not tolerate the hours. It seemed that babies always came at 2 to 4 AM and I could not stand the sleep loss. I thought about anesthesia, but doors did not open when I tested those waters. Without a job when I finished my internship, I was advised by one of my professors to take a temporary job in the state hospital. I had consulted him because I was so discouraged about not having career goals that I became quite depressed. After I took the job he made me his research assistant and

taught me about mental disease in a way that excited me. He also challenged me to begin doing research. I did, and that eventually became my motivation to stay in academic medicine. On top of that he loved me and began to lead me into a realization of my own mind. When a job came open with him in the child psychiatry clinic at Duke, I took it and have never looked back. He also helped me work under some of the best people I could work under in research and neuroscience to further my career.

Another defining moment occurs when we meet the person that is to be our mate. In our adolescence we think that we have met that person and sometimes we do; most of the time we do not meet that person. Instead we continue to search until the fullness of time has come and we have enough maturity for marriage to make a covenant that assures success. If we are Christians, God has the right mate for us, and we truly fall in love and get married. The defining moment in this circumstance may come at the time we first meet them or later when we come to the realization that we want to spend the rest of our life with them.

I had dated my future wife for over a year when she demanded that I stop dating another woman and date only her. She told me that we were through if I did not choose. It took me a week to decide, but when I did, I knew I had made the right decision. Our 53 years of happy marriage, five children and 15 grandchildren is proof that being forced to make that decision was a defining moment.

In spite of the fact that we have many defining moments, the most important one we can have comes when we make Jesus the Lord and Master of our life. It is a truism that we become a new person and are assured of eternal life. When I make such a statement, I remember the description of a convert who came to know the Lord at a Salvation Army service. He was described as having his skin unzipped and a new man installed inside. How many times have I seen this happen in my practice as a Christian? I cannot count them. Sometimes these moments come accidentally as it did for a man who sat beside me on a plane traveling from Chicago to Kansas City. I was going to attend an advanced seminar on evangelism given by the Billy Graham Association. I was sitting in my seat doing a Bible study entitled *How to Win Souls the Bible Way*. The man next to me appeared interested in what I was doing, but he did not make inquiry as to the nature of my effort. I finally grew tired, closed my book and Bible and relaxed. He seized the moment and asked me, "You doing a Bible study?" Without stopping he said, "You know I really like this religious stuff!"

I said. "Oh?" "

"Yeah," he said. "I have been going to a chair-is-matic seminar."

"What in the world is that?" I asked.

"I'm a Catholic you see, and I have been going to this meeting where we sing happy songs, hold our hands in the air and listen to the priest explain about the Holy Spirit."

"What did you get out of it?" I asked.

"Nothing. Some of the other people got baptized in the Holy Spirit, but I didn't. I wonder why?"

"Tell me," I said, "Do you know Jesus as your personal Savior?"

"No, do you need that?" he asked.

"It helps," I responded.

"How do you do that?"

Now he had just thrown me the perfect line to lead him to his defining moment in Christ, so I explained the plan of salvation to him.

"What do we do now?" he asked.

"We pray."

Then in a loud voice that attracted the attention of the people around us on the plane he said, "LET'S PRAY!"

We did and he had his defining moment. He was so excited that he decided to do all his work in Kansas City in one day and get back to Chicago to a chair-is-matic follow-up meeting where he was certain he would be baptized in the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual defining moments come in many circumstances. They may come in moments of despair, in an evangelical crusade, while reading the Bible, spontaneously, when someone witnesses to them and in many other circumstances, but no matter what the circumstances, what they experience is life changing. They become a new person. They find they have a happy mood. They perceive truths that they have not perceived before. They feel clean inside and out and they see the world as much brighter and more beautiful. In addition, they suddenly find that certain behaviors that they did not like before are changed to more socially acceptable ones. They are more altruistic. Finally they want to associate with persons who have the same love, joy, peace and values they have. They do, therefore, go to church because they think that is where they will find others like themselves. Sometimes they go to dead churches where they are sometimes ignored. Love is what most of them are looking for and if they do not get it they will go away and reject the church. It has been said that you should never put a new born baby to a dead mother's breast. It will starve to death. In

the same way if the church does not have a discipleship program they will starve or be stunted in their growth. In a dead church you cannot encounter Christ either. Encountering Him is a must for a continuing relationship.

Let me say further that our spiritual defining moment has other more important consequences. It brings eternal life. One important aspect of our world view is our futurology. I have often quoted Julian Marias who said that we live in the present through the past in anticipation of the future. It is this anticipation of the future that determines our futurology. If a person does not know Jesus they suspect that their lives will end with their death. If they have a limited knowledge of Christianity they may even suspect they can go to hell. These suspicions are disquieting since almost everyone wants to go to heaven.

But Jesus said that if we believe in Him we will have eternal life. Salvation brings about a major change in our world view. We now can understand that there is a supernatural dimension beyond the one we live in, so we know that the promise of eternal life is assured and that there is a place for us to go to live with Him.

I once interviewed ten patients who were dying of cancer. They knew they were dying and responded to the certainty of the end of their life. Those who were born again Christians were much less anxious about the future than those who were not born again. Some of those who lacked faith were panicked about the future.

It is interesting that our spiritual defining moment can come at anytime in our life. It may occur at any age from five to the moments before our death. I once made the statement that God did not save many people after 65. During the next month I saw over 10 people who were older than 65 come to know Him. One of them was my 79 year old mother. That taught me a lesson. I should have known it because the scripture says that all things are possible with God. Mother had always been religious and thought she was a Christian in good standing. There was no doubt that she was a church member in good standing. She belonged to the women's groups, she went to church regularly, was in a Sunday school class, and associated with other church members. At home she was different. She acted like a pagan. She was always angry, "bad mouthed" people and demonstrated few, if any, fruits of the Spirit. One evening when my wife and I were visiting her, our conversation focused on what it is like to be a real Christian. She claimed she was, but when I asked her if she had ever given her life to Christ and made him Lord and Master of her life, she could not answer truthfully that she was. I said, "Then you are not a Christian." She appealed to my wife asking her if she thought she was one. Elizabeth told her she was not. She then got angry and attacked me verbally for a brief time, but eventually wound down and got quiet. I asked her if she would like to become a real Christian instead of a nominal one. After much hesitation she said she would. We then explained the plan of salvation to her and asked her to repeat a prayer with us. She did and was saved.

Mother's salvation was the culmination of my father's prayers for her. My dad always knelt beside his bed at night and prayed for 15-20 minutes. When I became a Christian I asked what he was praying for. He said it was not what, it was who. I then asked him who he was praying for. He told me that he had been praying for me, my brother, and my mother. My brother came to Christ after 42 years of prayer; I came after 44 years and mother after 59 years. Perseverance in prayer is essential in some cases if those that we want to know Christ are to have a defining moment.

I have to say I was overjoyed that mother eventually had her spiritual defining moment ten years before she died. She loved my father who preceded her in death and I know that they are rejoicing together in the Kingdom of God. My brother has joined them too and I will some day. The defining moment of our salvation has eternal consequences and is, therefore, the most important one of our life.

Knowing this, it is imperative that we have a passion for souls. We must not let people merrily dance off to hell when we could be the person who could keep them from going there. It is our job to be witnesses for Christ. Most people in our modern world are without God, without Christ and without hope. They will tell us that they have problems if we ask them about themselves, about their families or about their jobs. It has been said that most people have a problem, live with a problem or are a problem. Since Jesus is the answer to most people's problems we should lovingly offer him as the answer if we discern that he is the answer. If we are not moved to offer Him we still can pray with or for them.