

CALL



God's Calling

SCRIPTURE FOCUS

“For I know the plans I have for you”—this is the LORD’s declaration—“plans for your welfare, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call to Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.” Jeremiah 29:11-13 (NASB italics added)



QUOTES

“Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about ‘man’s search for God.’ To me, as I then was, they might as well have talked about the mouse’s search for the cat.” C.S. Lewis in *Surprised by Joy*

“Where our deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet, we hear a further call.” Frederick Buechner



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

As a result of the readings, discussion and activities in this session, the candidate should be able to do the following:

- Understand what it means to be called by God – both the general calling and specific calling.
- Understand the biblical principles we express in the terms “God’s call” and “my calling from God.”
- Be able to communicate these concepts and principles to those whom we serve.
- Apply lessons and principles learned in our own lives.



CALL

GOD'S CALLING— GOD'S PURPOSE

Call or calling has many varied meanings ranging from the trivial and temporary to the life-changing and eternal. It can be a recorded call trying to sell an unwanted product or the treasured voice of a loved one. A call can be as inconsequential as the repetition of a known story or as significant as a lifesaving telephone call to 911.

The significance of this study is the One who is calling and the eternal consequences of the answer. These consequences indelibly mark the one who hears and accepts or rejects. Thousands of others are potentially affected by this response. Therefore, we move reverently into exploring something of this magnitude.

God calls people because of who He is and because of who we are. A loving God created us to live in faithful and responsive relationship with Him as heavenly father. We live with God-given freedom of choice, yet our very existence is ruled by God's authority and grace. The story in Genesis 3 describes how that first man and woman wanted to be equal with God. Tempted and deceived by Satan, they tried to eliminate the need for God and disobeyed Him.

Immediately the result of that sin became evident. The first thing we know about God after creation is found in Genesis 3:9. "But the Lord God *called* to the man. Where are you?"

We find this theme of calling people continues throughout Scripture until the very last chapter. Revelation 22:17 declares, "*The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.*"

REFLECT #1

1. What are some biblical examples of God calling people?
2. What have been your experiences with the calling of God in your life?
3. How have you seen God's calling in the lives of family and friends?

CASE STUDY – STAYING CAN COST MORE THAN GOING

A successful young couple with four children who owned a business had begun to feel God was calling them to cross-cultural ministry. An opportunity had emerged with a mission agency that exactly fit their successful professional experience in business.

On a Friday, the day of the deadline for the decision, the man called to say, "We could not sell our business so we decided that we just cannot go." However, at 2 am Saturday morning, the man called back, "If that position I turned down at 5 o'clock last night has not been filled, we would like to fill it."

The man went on to say, "When I hung up and told my wife that I had called to tell you we couldn't take it, she went to bed and went to sleep. She still felt that we should go. I couldn't sleep. I got out of bed and began pacing and arguing with God."

I said, "Lord, we just can't go, but I'll tell you what. I'll become active and try to make our church the most mission-minded church anywhere."

PANORAMA

The Lord asked, "What will you tell the church is your reason for not going to the mission field?"

"Well Lord, I probably couldn't satisfy the church anyway, but I'll tell you what, I'll really give myself to this young adult class that I'm teaching in Sunday school. I'll pour my life into them. They need more attention and help, and I'll just give myself without reservation to them."

The Lord replied, "And if some of them begin considering service to Me in a particular way, how will you counsel them?"

"Lord, maybe that's not what I ought to be doing. I've been neglecting my wife and four children. I'll just spend more time with them. I'll be a Christian husband and a Christian father and just pour my life into them so that they can serve You."

And again, the Lord questioned, "And how will you talk with them when they ask you about following My will?"

About 1:30 in the morning, a new realization crystallized for him. This fine young Christian businessman explained, "I came to realize that I had to go to this particular responsibility half-way around the world. I realized it was going to cost me more to stay home than it would cost me to go. If I stayed, it was going to cost me my Christian witness."

BIBLICAL CALLINGS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Throughout the Bible, there are many examples of God's call to His people. God called in many ways. His call came through prophets, priests, kings, ordinary people, and angels (who often appeared as contemporaries). He used earthquakes, a thunderous voice, a whisper, fire, clouds, a burning bush, six-winged angels, and a blinding light. A review of some of those calls will help us understand some of the ways in which God calls today.

Abram

In Genesis 12:1-3, we read a remarkable statement of God's call. He called Abram away from his own country and his own people to a land that was beyond his knowledge and awareness. This call included the promise that through him a great nation would arise. God would bless him and the nation for the purpose of blessing all of the peoples of the earth.

This clear call of God illustrates the eternal truth that God's blessings are rarely if ever, intended to be only for the initial recipient. Rather, God's blessings are given to us in order that through us He might touch as many others of His creatures as possible. Although His call to Abram resulted in the creation of His nation, the people of Israel, this was not His ultimate purpose.

We see from this that God's call is the means through which God intends to bless the peoples of the earth. It should be no surprise that the God of all peoples would call His servants to be His channel to reach all peoples. It is our human nature that causes us to desire to draw things in, to remain at home near family and the familiar. The divine nature is always reaching out to others and giving self away.

Joseph

There is no record of a specific call of God to Joseph. Yet, he was crucial in fulfilling God's calling of Israel and the coming of Christ. In reviewing this "non-calling," perhaps we will grasp another dimension of the way God moves in our lives to accomplish His purposes.

Joseph was spiritually sensitive to God's revelation. At seventeen years of age, he received revelations from God (Genesis 37:1-11). In his immaturity, he did not communicate very diplomatically with his family! It is never recorded that God called Joseph to go to Egypt. Vindictive jealous brothers sold him to foreigners. The record does not reveal their feelings as their father grieved for his favorite son.

When Joseph was thirty (Genesis 41:46), he became second to Pharaoh in ruling Egypt. It would have been difficult for him to recognize God's calling in his brothers' betrayal, his enslavement, false accusations, imprisonment, and the neglect of his freed fellow prisoner. There is the affirmation that he was known for his devotion to his God. But finally, about 12 or 13 years after his original vision, he realized that God had been working in and through all of these things to accomplish His purposes. Surely there is a model here for committed Christians who are sent by government or business to places they would not have chosen.

Moses

In Exodus 3 and 4, we read that the God of eternity is aware of the anguish and suffering of His people who are enslaved. God heard the cry of His people and called out Moses to do something about their condition. The call to Moses was to go as God's representative. This reveals the incredible reality that He calls us to go in His place!

However, Moses like so many of us began immediately to make excuses for why he should not do it. So first of all, he said, "I'm not qualified to do it." But God never calls us to do something that He doesn't equip us to do. Then Moses worried that they would not recognize that he truly represented God. So, God provided some signs as proof. Then he indicated that he couldn't speak well enough, and so God provided his brother, Aaron. Moses' situation also shows that God will provide the resources we need if we are obedient to His call.

Isaiah

The life of the prophet Isaiah is another classic example of how God calls His people. The context reveals to us that Isaiah has experienced the loss of King Uzziah. Perhaps losses like this make us more open to listening to God. Another important lesson from the way God called Isaiah is the fact that he was in the temple worshipping. In order to know what God wants us to do there is the requirement of closeness to Him and a regular worship experience privately as well as publicly.

Immediately after worship, after awareness of sin, after turning from sin, God's call came and Isaiah was ready to respond. Isaiah 6:8-9 says, *"And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then I said, 'Here I am! Send me.' And he said, 'Go, and say to this people.'"*

The rest of the story is that God told Isaiah that He was sending him knowing that the people would not respond immediately. They would reject his message for a long time. But, ultimately and finally because of his faithfulness, God promised results would come. We need

PANORAMA

to understand from the example of Isaiah's call that God's call does not always guarantee numerical success, public acceptance, or worldly acclaim, but only the satisfaction of being obedient.

Jeremiah

God's call to the Prophet Jeremiah gives us additional insight into God's call to service. In Jeremiah 1:4-5, 10, we read the following:

"Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations...See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.'"

God's call to Jeremiah shows us God is not unaware or unprepared. This call was not an afterthought. It was not stimulated by circumstances God had not expected. It was not determined by Jeremiah. God declared that even before Jeremiah had been conceived and certainly before he was born, He already had appointed him as a prophet to the peoples of the world.

Jonah

One of the fascinating, disturbing, and revealing experiences of God's call to His people is the entire book of the prophet Jonah. The book opens with God's call to Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh to preach because of its wickedness.

Immediately, Jonah tried to go as far in the other direction as he could. From a human standpoint that is understandable. The Assyrians, sworn enemies of the Israelites, were known as brutal warriors and conquerors. Jonah's prejudice and hatred toward these idol worshipers who had mistreated his people is clearly stated in his writing.

As we come to the end of his book, Jonah reveals what his values really are. Reluctantly he has preached in Nineveh to the enemy, and the whole population has repented. Jonah cries out in anger. This is exactly what he feared would happen.

We need to examine our attitude toward people of other races and other cultures. Sometimes there is a reluctance to obey God's call because of our own personal and ethnic pride. It is harder for some to properly understand the innate value of every human life, regardless of race, ethnicity, location, or condition. It is only through grace that we can truly understand that God loves those who hate us. He even loves those who murderously persecute Christians as much as He loves us.

BIBLICAL CALLINGS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Twelve Apostles

As recorded in Mark 3:13-19 and Luke 6:12-16, many were responding to Jesus. Some went with Him on various ministries. In Luke's record, Jesus spent all night in prayer and then He named twelve whom He called His Apostles. (*Apostle* means *messenger or sent one* – today the terms *missionary* or *cross-cultural witness* are comparable).

However, there are some who are confused about how these disciples were called. There are

CALL

those who go to the passages in Matthew 4:18-22, Luke 5:11, or Mark 1:16-20 to assume that Jesus simply walked by James and John, Peter and Andrew, called them and with that almost casual encounter, they became His followers.

We need to go back to John 1:35-51, in the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. John the Baptist was declaring that Jesus was, in fact, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. John then encouraged two of his followers, John and Andrew, and they began to follow Jesus. Andrew immediately sought his brother Simon Peter. Just a little later, Jesus called Philip, who sought out Nathaniel. Apparently, these, along with others, had already begun to believe in Jesus. Perhaps they had listened to Him, gone out to hear Him or had encounters with Him at various times.

Then He calls James and John and Peter to follow Him after getting into their boats and persuading them to cast their nets again despite their protests of a failed all-night fishing effort. The story of their amazing catch ends with Jesus challenging them to turn away from their business and become fishers of men.

This is important to understand. Throughout the experience of those whom God calls, there is usually a time of preparation, background, exposure, and understanding until the moment of actual decision.

Saul of Tarsus

The call of Saul is one of the most well-known in Scripture. There are several significant elements related to the call of this one who was surpassed only by Jesus as the greatest missionary and the greatest theologian of all time. Saul was not in the temple like Isaiah worshipping God. He was on his way to Damascus to imprison and kill Christians. However, there was a startling, abrupt, total change of direction when the brightness of Christ's light and the power of His voice slammed Saul into the sands of the desert. There in blindness, he heard the voice of Christ.

*THERE IS NOT A SPIRITUAL
VACCINATION THAT GIVES US
IMMUNITY TO SUFFERING.*

This event is recorded in Acts 9:1-19, Acts 22:1-22, and Acts 26:12-23. One of the things this reveals to us is the significance of God's call to individuals. The New Testament covers everything we need to know from the birth of Christ to the end of the world. Yet it is done in

remarkable brevity. Not many things are repeated. This experience of God's call to Saul is recorded three different times. I'm convinced that this means there is a significance here that we need to understand.

Often this experience on the road to Damascus is interpreted as only a conversion. However, that was not the total experience. Not only is it a call to salvation, it is also Saul's call to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth. In the recounting of this in Acts 26, as Paul stands before King Agrippa, Paul says this experience was given him that he might preach the message of Jesus Christ to all the peoples of the world, Jews and non-Jews, to rescue them from sin and darkness and the power of Satan.

It is also instructive to remember that in Acts 9:13-16, the Lord also tells Ananias to tell Paul how much he will suffer as a result of this call. It is important for those of us who seek to

PANORAMA

understand and to obey the call of God to realize that there is not a spiritual vaccination that gives us immunity to suffering.

Another lesson from his calling is found in Acts 13:1-3. The Holy Spirit designates Paul and Barnabas as those whom He has called to send forth to proclaim the Gospel beyond the local church. The church simply affirmed and released them to fulfill what God called them to do. In Acts 14:27 we read that they reported back to the church all God had done during their missionary trip. From this, we see that the context out of which Paul was called was the local congregation. We do not find details about how that congregation was involved either in strategy or in support as Paul was faithful to God's calling. We do understand that there was a spiritual bonding that caused Paul to feel responsible to report back to this group from which he had been sent, giving them details of what God had done as a result of their affirming his calling.

This underscores for us the initiative and strategic planning that individuals who are called have to work out in light of circumstances and conditions. It also underscores spiritual unity. The whole body of Christ is responsible for sending out those whom God calls. It further underscores that reporting back to the churches that affirmed the sending out has significance and importance.

REFLECT #2

1. What are the differences in Old and New Testament callings?
2. What are the similarities in these different callings?
3. Which one is most meaningful for you and why?

GOD'S THREE CALLINGS

The recognition that God's likeness has been programmed into the spiritual DNA of all people has been a constant emphasis throughout Scripture as well as in the lives of Christians of all ages. In this section, we deal with three kinds of calls from God.

1. God's Calling to All People

God has called everyone in the world to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ (John 3:16-18; Matthew 18:14; 1 Timothy 2:3-6; 2 Peter 3:9). This simple truth is in many ways the most important truth of all – God is calling everybody to repentance and salvation.

2. God's General Calling for His Followers

However, beyond this call to all people to salvation, there is a general call to all Christians detailed in many ways in Scripture. God calls all His disciples to...

- love and worship Him (Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Matthew 22:37).
- love others as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:39).
- live holy lives (1 Peter 1:15-16).
- fellowship with other Christians (Acts 2:42; Hebrews 10:25).
- take the good news of Jesus to every person in the world (Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 24:44-48; John 20:21; Acts 1:8).
- use spiritual gifts for the benefit of His body the Church (1 Timothy 4:14).
- submit to human authority for His sake (1 Peter 2:13-14).

CALL

- use our material possessions as His managers (Romans 12:13; 1 Timothy 6:17-19).
- do and say all things as His representatives (1 Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:17).
- submit to each other, particularly husbands and wives (Ephesians 5:21).

These are but a few representative indications of God's general call to His followers.

3. God's Individual Calling for Every Believer

Many people find it hard to believe and accept that God has a specific plan for each of us. Some want to think that God simply created us and turned us loose to determine our own destiny. However, a review of many individuals mentioned in biblical times indicates that God did, in fact, call them to a kind of service that He wanted them to perform. This was very explicit in New Testament times. In Galatians 2:7-10, Paul indicates that his calling was to the Gentiles but Peter had been commissioned by the Spirit of God to reach the Jewish people. Not only do we have the biblical record, but Christian history defines for us how different individuals were called by God to serve in many different ways.

It is important to understand the nature of the individual calling. God leads us to understand the direction He wants us to go. Sometimes He indicates the specific vocations, but sometimes He just points in a general direction. It is not necessary, perhaps it's not even possible, to know the details of where that calling will lead or the ultimate outcome. God's call to us individually does not provide us a detailed, day-by-day diary in which we can read ahead and know what will happen at a certain time or go to the end of the book and find out all that took place as we fulfilled the calling. Rather, it is a leading of the Spirit to accept a daily life of obedience. Even the kind of ministry will often vary.

*...YOU HAVE TO BE WILLING TO
FOLLOW HIM A STEP AT A TIME...*

MY CALL FROM GOD

When God's call came first in my own life, I made a general commitment saying, "Lord, I'll do whatever You want me to do." As I went forward in the church to share with the pastor, I told him that I didn't know what it was but I just knew God wanted me to do something to give my life in service to Him. Dr. Frank Weedon very wisely counseled, "You do not have to know what it is, you have to be willing to follow Him a step at a time." I thought it was to be in youth ministry because at that point the most significant person in my life was a youth minister. Then I had the chance to preach and felt a call to preach, and later a call to be an evangelist. Then the opportunity came to be a pastor of a church. That was fulfilling and challenging. Then I was invited to teach at a Baptist school and found that I loved and enjoyed teaching.

But, over and beyond and through all of that, the experience of serving as a summer missionary on the island of San Andres, in Colombia, South America, had planted the seed of awareness that many people in the world were lost without Christ. There was a haunting feeling of unfairness that those of us in the United States had so many opportunities and those in the rest of the world had so few.

The day came when a decision was crystallized. I was in seminary and had been learning more about the unmet spiritual needs of the world and the small minority of Christian workers who went beyond the United States to serve. I was increasingly burdened with the conviction that

Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation and people needed to know that. So more and more I was considering that God might be calling me, in spite of my feelings of unworthiness and my limitations, to go to areas of the world where I might be the first representative of Christ they'd ever known. One day in Chapel at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, as Dr. Jack McGorman preached, I had an intense inner turmoil. Finally, I said silently to the Lord, "I'm going to start walking toward the preacher and if that's not right, do something to stop me." The moment I moved my left foot toward the aisle, there flooded through my whole being the assurance, affirmation, and certainty that this was what God wanted me to do. There was inner conviction. There was a sense of His personal leadership. This was a clear understanding that God was calling me to be His representative in a cross-cultural sharing of the Gospel.

There were some unresolved problems. I had no idea where in this whole world it would be. The girl I was dating (and the one I thought God might be leading me to marry) had not had that same calling. At that moment, however, in spite of unresolved problems I just knew this was His calling. Later it would become clear to me that the preaching, the teaching, the pastoring, the evangelism, and the youth ministry all would be a part of that calling. None of those earlier impressions were wrong, they were just incomplete. Later that young lady received her calling and together we would be led to the many different places involving many different ways of serving in cross-cultural ministry.

The Importance of a Personal Call

There is nothing more important in cross-cultural work than the assurance of God's calling. Certainly, there are many other qualifications such as relative stability of personality, appropriate education, good physical health, applicable experience, and deep spiritual relationship with the Lord. *Churches or organizations enabling the going of those who are "called" seek to assist them to discern God's calling and fulfill God's leadership.* They can provide information and describe opportunities. It is crucial however that the individual/couple/family understands and is obedient to God's calling for the place and kind of ministry. When circumstances become difficult (and they will) and personal or family problems intensify (and they will), the only thing that will keep a person/couple/family serving is the assurance of God's personal calling.

REFLECT #3

1. What are God's three callings?
2. How did you experience God's first calling?
3. How are you sharing this calling with others?
4. How are you experiencing God's second calling?
5. How is your community experiencing this calling?
6. How are you experiencing God's third calling?
7. Who has helped you understand and implement that calling?

HOW TO RECOGNIZE GOD'S CALLING

The foundation upon which everything else is built is the assurance that God does have a plan for each of us. The entire 139th Psalm describes an awesome reality of the intimate, detailed knowledge God has about each one of us. Before he was put together in his mother's womb, the Psalmist was inspired to say that all his days were written in God's book. He declares that before the words are on his lips, God knows about them. God knows every one of our

thoughts and our inmost being. He affirms that there is no way to get away from God's presence in Heaven or Hell and certainly not on earth. He declares that God calls each of us to serve Him in the ways that He created us to serve. And then he cries out for cleansing from anything that can distract from this calling of God.

Acceptance Precedes Understanding His Call

In order to understand and respond to the call of God, we need also to recognize there are many ways that God helps us. In John 7:17 Jesus says, *"If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority."*

God asks us, "Are you willing to respond positively to the calling that I have for you?" Often our response is, "God, tell me what it is and then I'll decide. I may need to improve on it a little bit. I may need to delay it or change it. But lay it out before me, God, and we can negotiate." But with the Almighty God, Who loves us more than we love ourselves, Whose wisdom is beyond our comprehension, Whose only desire is for our good and His glory; it is different.

God says, "If you are first willing to be obedient, then I can tell you My calling." To know God's call, we need to simply come to God to say, "Yes to your call — what is it?"

God Calls through Other Believers

We find help in the counsel of mature believers. One of the truths of the New Testament is that the Spirit used the writers of the New Testament to provide counsel to others. The story of the epistles define how Paul, John, or Peter counseled with others concerning God's call in their lives.

One of the great preachers of the past generation from England, Charles H. Spurgeon, was really made aware of his call from God by the prayer meeting crowd around him who recognized what God was doing in his life. My first inkling that God might be calling me came from the youth minister who asked me if I recognized what she had recognized, that God was, in fact, calling me.

Sometimes God uses someone, either privately or in a public worship service, to convey His sense of call. One such experience happened to a college student who had been a summer missionary to Taiwan. He was at a student conference in New Mexico. He was struggling with whether God was calling him to spend his career in cross-cultural ministry. That afternoon he prayed asking the Lord for a sign to confirm that calling. He asked that the conference speaker mention Taiwan. Since mission work was being done in at least a hundred countries at that time, he had a hundred to one shot that he could "escape". However, I felt led to open my conference message with the statement, "Go with me tonight to Taiwan, where Carl Hunker serves."

On the other end of the spectrum is the person who is fearful to expose himself or herself to certain aspects of God's call. On one such occasion, I was talking with a Ph.D. student at a seminary. As a missions emphasis chapel service was about to begin, I invited him to go with me to chapel. He replied, "No, I've been here nearly six years and I've never been to a mission's day chapel service yet." I asked, "Are you afraid that God might call you?" Rather sheepishly he admitted that he was indeed afraid.

God Calls through Spiritual Gifting

Another element that must be considered in discovering God's call is spiritual gifting. In I Corinthians 12:27-31 and Ephesians 4:11-16, there are two listings of spiritual gifts. The apostle or cross-cultural worker (i.e. missionary) is mentioned in both lists. To have one of the gifts does not mean that all other gifts are excluded. An apostle may also be an evangelist, pastor, teacher, healer, or miracle worker. However, apostolic gifting is essential to this ministry, and other gifting will vary.

Sometimes the proclamation is made that every Christian is a missionary (cross-cultural worker). God does call all of us to be His witnesses. But teaching about spiritual gifting does not support the concept that every believer is a "sent forth one." I believe all Christians are equipped to bear witness but being a cross-cultural witness requires a calling and a gifting that not all Christians have.

God Calls through Common Sense

There are some other practical ways to seek to find God's call in our lives. All of the input can be used to list advantages and disadvantages of what appears to be God's call. Does one seem more the thing to do as these options are compared and contrasted? This cannot be the only measure but it can be part of discerning God's call.

God's Call Requires Regular Attention

Understanding and following God's call is a daily exercise. Certainly, there are those days when some decisions that we make are more significant than others. Such decisions as whom we will marry, our place and kind of education, or our employment all have significant consequences. Therefore, it is important to understand that we must be sensitive, every day, to the call of God in our lives. Study of His word, praying and seeking the Holy Spirit's leadership must be consistent and constant. This will help us to make those decisions that support His ultimate call and prepare us to understand and accept it.

REFLECT #4

1. What are the different ways God calls?
2. How have other believers helped you understand God's call?
3. What are your spiritual gifts? How is this tied to your calling?
4. How are you paying attention to your calling?

HINDRANCES TO ACCEPTING GOD'S CALL

We were made in God's image and God wants us to be as He is. God has been working since before our creation to enable us to hear and respond as He calls us back to Himself to participate in what He is doing. With the tremendous privilege and opportunity that this provides, why in the world is it so difficult to hear and accept God's call? We are going to look at some of the basic hindrances as defined in Scripture and verified in our own experiences.

Self

The Bible reveals to us that the sacred entrusting to us of God's image is one of the greatest blessings and has the potential of being one of the greatest curses. It seems that this God-likeness is such that inevitably there is the desire to achieve equality with God through self-

efforts. In Luke 9:23-37, we find a startling statement. Jesus declares that if anyone wants to follow Him, we must die to our self daily.

In Romans 7, Paul describes wanting to do certain things but not doing them, and not wanting to do certain things but doing them. In Galatians 2:20, Paul declares that he has been crucified, he is dead, and yet, he still lives but it is no longer he, but Christ living in him. This basic concept of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ is essential if we're going to hear and understand and accept His call in our lives.

Personal Comfort

As Jesus teaches, some express interest in becoming His followers. In Luke 9 and Matthew 8 we see different responses. The first man said, "I'll go with you wherever you're going." Jesus essentially responds "Friend, I don't have a place of my own." And although the details are rather sketchy, it appears that this man did not follow.

Through the years, this matter of our own creature comforts has entered into our willingness to consider, much less accept, God's call to cross-cultural witness. Inevitably there is the question about appropriate housing, proper sanitation, medical care, diseases, transportation, food, living conditions, and so on. It is certainly not my intention to belittle the significance of these concerns.

From somewhere in my reading, I obtained an insight that I passed on to many missionaries through the years. That insight is: *When you get to the mission field, it will be the gnats and not the elephants that will do you in.* Usually, when big crises come, missionaries can rise to the occasion, but the inconvenience of the weather, the insects, the lack of sanitation, the unreliable electricity, or the other daily problems that constantly nag can begin to erode the sense of call. These daily things can result in more cross-cultural workers leaving their places of service than major conflicts ever have.

Family

In the Luke 9 passage as well as in Matthew 8, a second man came and heard Jesus' call and responded that he had to first go and bury his father (the original language shows that his father is still alive, so who knows how long this will be). But Jesus responded, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the Kingdom of God." Jesus appears to be saying that those who have not been born spiritually and do not grasp the importance of the spiritual Kingdom can take care of the less important things. But if you have truly entered the Kingdom of God, the responsibilities of expanding that Kingdom take priority over any other social, religious, or family responsibility.

There's no question that the concept of family responsibility continues to be one of the biggest hindrances in cross-cultural services. On one hand, the individual doesn't want to leave family or friends. God certainly understands this tension when He calls a person to a kingdom task. But God of all people sees a vision that is humanity-wide and eternity-long, and He expects those who are born into His Kingdom to respond to that greater vision.

However, another facet of this is equally significant. Not only is the individual torn by decisions that will impact the family, but loved ones often become a hindrance to a person hearing and following God's call. Frequently, family members who are active as deacons or

leaders in churches or active in mission activities and mission studies suddenly change their minds when God calls one of their own family members into service.

Material Possessions

One of the clear teachings of Scripture is that a significant hindrance to hearing and obeying the call of God is the clash with the value placed on material possessions. One of the clearest illustrations is found in Mark 10:17-31, where the person we call a rich young ruler came to Jesus. Of course, it has often been repeated that riches in themselves are not evil. However, Jesus knew that material riches were the priority of the man's life and declared that he could not keep them in the first place. It is my conviction that one of the very hindrances in obeying God's call is the cultural conditioning that many of us, particularly from richer countries, have received. We have accepted that material wealth is the sign of success, and we've allowed that to be the criterion within our churches as well.

I'll never forget the young doctor who had served overseas and had come back to Johns Hopkins. His fellow doctors, noting his skill and ability, raised serious questions as to why he would go back to Africa. "Why," they declared, "you could be successful and make a lot of money here." When he replied that he made more money and was paid better than any of them, their incredulity was unbounded. His explanation described the only difference—he got paid in spiritual coinage.

Flawed Faith and Fear

The Bible seems to be clear and our experiences certainly illustrate that when our faith is flawed or immature, it is sometimes difficult to accept or understand the call of God. 2 Timothy 1:7 declares that we have not been given a spirit of fear, but a spirit of love and power and self-discipline. Paul expresses that in the context of reminding Timothy about how God's call has come to him. Paul has been an instrument in helping Timothy understand that call. Paul goes on to describe his own call and to indicate the sufferings as well as the responsibilities he has been given. In this context, I think it is very clear that when we allow fear to erode our faith or dominate it, we are not in a position to understand or accept the call of God. That fear is frequently manifested as we confront the unknown.

1 John 4:18 says perfect love casts out fear. I'm convinced that one of the unspoken and maybe unrecognized hindrances to accepting God's call to cross-cultural ministry has to do with fear within our hearts that may not even be known. Sometimes that fear has to do with our ability to function in an alien environment. Sometimes that fear has to do with accepting and identifying with people of other cultures, races, and languages. It could be called prejudice. I think that's one reason John was inspired to write that God's love will remove that kind of fear.

On one occasion, I was detailing to a young couple an opportunity in cross-cultural ministry that had tremendous potential. I was very excited about the opportunity. Both the husband and wife were gifted and qualified, and I explained enough detail to stimulate their excitement. Then I paused with the expectation that they would say, "Man, when can we go?" I was totally stunned by their response. The young man asked, "But isn't it dangerous there? ... I do not believe God expects me to take my wife and four children into a dangerous place to serve Him."

I was stunned. Where did he get his concept about what God expects? Did he get it from the

CALL

Father who sent His Son and withheld His legions of angels as His Son suffered and died in a dangerous world? Did he get this impression from the early apostles who were beheaded and imprisoned and persecuted and killed? Did he get this impression from the martyrs through the centuries as they suffered for the Lord Jesus Christ? Or did he get this concept from an American culture that places higher priority on personal security and material prosperity than on spiritual obedience?

REFLECT #5

1. What are five hindrances to God's calling?
2. Which hindrance do you struggle with the most?
3. How will you address allowing God to overcome this hindrance in your life?
4. Have you accepted God's call no matter what it is?

EXAMPLES FOR US

Augustine

One famous example of somebody who responded to God's call is Augustine (354 to 430). Augustine had a devout Christian mother but lived an immoral life. As he was searching for meaning, God led Augustine to read Romans 13:13-14, in which Paul urged Christians "to put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts." Augustine knew that these words were for him. In *Confessions*, he describes his feelings at that moment: "At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled." (Book VIII, xii, 29) Soon he was baptized and later become bishop of Hippo and one of the greatest theologians in the history of the Church.

Augustine describes how God puts His calling in our hearts. In *Confessions*, Book I, chapter 1, he speaks of man: "Still he desires to praise thee, this man who is only a small part of the creation. Thou hast prompted him that he should delight to praise thee. For thou hast made us for thyself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in thee."

The Lost in Laos

On one occasion, I went with a colleague to visit some Laotian priests in training. About a dozen of the brightest minds in this Buddhist training center gathered around the table. At their invitation, I began telling them about our belief in Jesus Christ, the God-Man who had come to earth to reveal to us who God really is.

I'll never forget the pathos as one of the brightest of them looked to me and said, "We call out for God. But we can't find Him." Then he pointed to the river and said, "It is as if God is on the other side of the Mekong. We don't have a boat. We can't swim. We know God is there but we can't find God. Can you help us find God?" I answered them that God was offering them a bridge to salvation, but I don't know if that seed ever grew.

The Found in Indonesia

While my family was serving as missionaries to Indonesia, one of our best friends was a man named Mr. Joseph. In chapel one day, he told the story of his father. His father had spiritual inclinations, and when he was twenty he left his village in order to find the truth about spiritual reality. For the next twenty years, he searched out religious leaders and teachers.

Then he returned to his home village. During his absence, a small church building had been built. Over the doorway in the ancient Javanese script, which is similar to Sanskrit, he saw the words, "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever."

He was furious. His studies had convinced him that nothing was constant. He sought out the young pastor and said, "You must take down that sign because you are misleading the people. That sign is a lie." The young pastor, although intimidated, stood by his convictions. He said, "Sir, I cannot take the sign down because it comes from my holy book." They agreed they would study the Bible together. Mr. Joseph's father said to the pastor, "When I convince you the Bible is not true, will you take that sign down?" The young pastor agreed.

Mr. Joseph went on to explain, "After studying together, my father said that after twenty years of searching, God found me." Immediately after chapel I rushed to Mr. Joseph and said, "I must have misunderstood you. I thought you said after twenty years of searching, God found my father. I'm sure you meant to say that your father found God." Mr. Joseph replied, "Oh no. My father said that after twenty years of searching, God found me."

This kind of spiritual experience is repeated again and again. The story of religion is the story of man calling out to find the true God. The story of the Christian faith is the story of God's search for us.

James Gilmour

(from *The Missionary Call* by Oswald J. Smith)

How was James Gilmour called, and why did he go to the Mongols? This is how he puts it:

"Is the Kingdom a harvest field? Then I thought it reasonable that I should seek to work where the work was most abundant and the workers fewest. Laborers say they are overtaxed at home; what, then, must be the case abroad, where there are wide-stretching plains already white to harvest with scarcely here and there a solitary reaper?"

"To me, the soul of an Indian seemed as precious as the soul of an Englishman, and the Gospel as much for the Chinese as for the European; and the band of missionaries was few compared with the company of ministers at home, it seemed to me clearly to be my duty to go abroad. But I go out as a missionary, not that I may follow the dictates of common sense, but that I may obey that command of Christ, 'Go into all the world and preach.'"

Charles T. Studd

(from *The Missionary Call* by Oswald J. Smith)

What was Charles T. Studd's reason for going? Studd gave away a fortune—\$145,000. He could have lived at home in great luxury, but he chose rather to give away all that he had and go to China as a missionary. Why? Strange as it may seem, it was the statement of an atheist that started him on his way. It so gripped him when he read it that he felt he must leave all and follow Jesus Christ. Here it is:

"Did I firmly believe, as millions say they do, that the knowledge and practice of religion in this life influences destiny in another, religion would mean to me everything. I would cast away earthly enjoyment as dross, earthly cares as follies, and earthly thoughts and feelings as

CALL

vanity. Religion would be my first waking thought and my last image before sleep sank me into unconsciousness. I would labor in its cause alone. I would take thought for the morrow of Eternity only. I would esteem one soul gained for Heaven worth a life of suffering. Earthly consequences should never stay my hand, nor seal my lips. Earth, its joys and griefs, would occupy no moment in my thoughts. I would strive to look upon Eternity alone, and on the immortal Souls around me, soon to be everlastingly happy or everlastingly miserable. I would go forth to the world and preach to it in season and out of season, and my text would be, "What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

Jacob DeShazer

(A modern-day contrast to Jonah)

Jacob DeShazer was a bombardier in the Doolittle raid in Tokyo on April 18, 1942. He, like Jonah, knew who his national enemies were. Corporal DeShazer, a native of Oregon, son of a Church of God minister, was captured along with his four other crewmen. Corporal DeShazer suffered starvation, torture, and solitary confinement during forty months of brutality at the hands of the Japanese. DeShazer tells how he kept begging for a Bible and finally after three years, he was given a Bible.

DeShazer declared that his spiritual eyes were opened and as he read his Bible he found the bitter hatred for the Japanese being changed to loving pity. He realized they didn't know Jesus. They didn't understand forgiveness. He read Jesus' words of forgiveness from the cross and His assertion that they didn't know what they were doing. He realized that without Christ in their heart there was no power to stop the cruelty. God's call to take the gospel to his enemies was initiated in that prison cell.

In 1948, DeShazer returned to Tokyo as a missionary. He had instant popularity and was given many public forums. Many came to know Christ. Jacob DeShazer spent thirty years in Japan, sharing the love of Christ among those who were his enemies, whom he had hated. He is just one of many who volunteered to become missionaries to go back to Germany, Italy or Japan, to share the gospel with those who had been their enemies.

KINGDOM CITIZENS

One of the greatest needs of Christians today is to rediscover the reality of Kingdom citizenship. Most churches and individual believers think, act, pray, give and worship as though the local congregation equals the Kingdom of God.

John 3:16 declares that the love of God is for the entire cosmos. The model prayer (Matthew 6:10) urges praying that the Kingdom will be a reality on earth. Jesus set the example by leaving His home in order that those created in His image could come back home. He sought to burn His conviction and compassion into all of His followers by His last words. (Cf. Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 24; 44-49; John 20:21; Acts 1:8). In John 20:21 He made it crystal clear. He is sending every believer to go with the same power and purpose as His.

We need to recognize that at least a fourth of the world has virtually no Christian witness. Part of the reason that it does not have a witness is because we have too long mainly relied on seminary-trained people to go as full-time career missionaries. The New Testament describes

PANORAMA

the fact that as the Christians were scattered, the Gospel was spread. I'm convinced that God is calling many among us today who are qualified in professions such as medicine, computer science, engineering, agriculture, printing, teaching English, international diplomacy, or whatever is needed or wanted throughout the world. And individuals who are open to the call of God and recognize the potential that God has given them to use their vocational and professional skills as a legitimate means of earning a living and of gaining the respect of the community have a great opportunity to be a cross-cultural witness in this day and age.

It is my conviction that God is calling many, many more than have ever heard and responded. I think it is incumbent on all of us and on every church to sound this call with clarity and conviction and to urge all of our members to be open and responsive as God continues to call.

SELF-AWARENESS, SURVIVAL, AND SOLUTION

- What is God's calling in your life? How will you seek to live out that calling?
- Are you a kingdom Citizen? Do you think in terms of being God's servant in His greater purposes instead of your own desires?
- Are you allowing/seeking for your spiritual family/community to be part of discerning and following God's call? Or, are you being an individualist?
- Are you willing to go anywhere and do anything for God? Even the opposite of what you think you want to do?
- If you think you are called to go internationally, what if God told you to stay in your home country? If you think you are called to stay in your home country, what if God called you to go internationally?
- What are the hindrances you have to obeying God's call? Make a list and pray through it with trusted colleagues and advisors.

SESSION HIGHLIGHTS

God calls all people to repentance, to belief, to life in Jesus Christ. That is a call that goes out from the heart of God through His people in every age. In my experience with people of other religions, I've become convinced that this is one of the distinctives of the Christian faith. In all religions, people seek God, call out for God, cry out for release from their sin, and yearn for direction for their lives. Only in the Christian faith is there a God who calls us.

As believers, our primary focus will be on God's call to those of us who are followers of Jesus Christ. There is a general call to all Christians to live lives worthy of our calling, to live spiritually focused lives, to live lives in obedience to the demands and standards of a disciple of Jesus Christ.

In addition to that general call the Bible reveals that after our salvation, God has a plan for each of our lives. There is an individual call to each of us. In Ephesians 2:8-10, we are given one of the clearest definitions in all of Scripture of how we are saved. It is an undeserved gift from God that we receive with the act of our faith. It does not depend on any good works that we might do.

CALL

And then that very significant, but often neglected, verse: “For we are God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us.” (Ephesians 2:10) That word workmanship could be translated masterpiece. But the clear statement is that God created us in order that we might do something in this world that He has defined for us in advance. And that’s my understanding of God’s individual call to each of His children. Our goal in life is to get that right.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES ~ BEFORE YOU GO

The following activities will help you to actively and intentionally prepare to serve God more effectively.

Imagine

If you are called to go cross-culturally, begin imagining: *this means that with my family I will go to another country. I will learn another language. I’ll be teaching and preaching and witnessing with people of other races. I will be out of my previous comfort zone.* Does this feel right? (Not “are you nervous or afraid”, but does it feel right?)

Or imagine, “No, I’m not going, I’m going to stay here and pastor a church, or I’m going to stay here in my business, or I’m going to continue doing what I am doing as far into the future as I can imagine.” Does this projection bring strong affirmation or intense uneasiness?

Lifestyle

How are you living and/or changing your lifestyle to be able to go anywhere and do anything for God? Be realistic and concrete in your answers.

Formation

What are you willing to change to be able to go anywhere and do anything for God?

Stretch Life-on-Life

As you have been studying this lesson together, what will your group do to apply the lessons learned? How will you help each other discern and obey God’s call?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR CALL

How Can I Know God is Calling Me to Pursue Long-Term Missions?
(<http://www.askamissionary.com/question/16>)

Ask a Missionary—Eight missionaries provide their insights into the “missionary call.”

Pirollo, Neal. *I Think God Wants Me to be a Missionary*. St. Paul: Emmaus Road Intl, 2005.

Prompted by the high attrition rate of missionaries who do not first “count the cost” of cross-cultural ministry, Neal Pirollo offers this book to help candidates look closely at scores of issues that should be clarified long before they say, “Good-bye.” In an easy-to-read style of dialogue, four young people represent thousands of people who are making that statement: I think God wants me to be a missionary!

PANORAMA

Spiritual Gift Analysis (<https://gifts.churchgrowth.org/spiritual-gifts-survey/>)

Guinness, Os. *The Call*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003.

The book is about our calling to God's purpose in life. Guinness has done a lot of research and produces a thoughtful and philosophical book.

Hoke, Steve and Bill Taylor. *Send Me! Your Journey to the Nations*. New York: World Evangelical Fellowship Movement, 1999.

"We suggest you begin by considering where you are in your walk with God, your understanding of yourself and missions. Think about the bigger picture in a lifetime calling to mission."

Collins, Travis. *Directionally Challenged: How to Find and Follow God's Course for Your Life*. Birmingham: New Hope, 2007.

Travis is a former missionary and current pastor of Bon Air Baptist Church. The book is rather folksy, with personal illustrations.

Warren, Rick. *Purpose Driven Life*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013.

Stott, John. *Why I am a Christian*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003.

The first Chapter, "Hound of Heaven," is helpful.

Aikman, David. *Great Souls: Six Who Changed the Century*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002.

Farnham, Suzanne G., Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, and Susan M. Ward. *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*. New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2011.

Nee, Watchman. *The Normal Christian Life*. Somerville: Bottom of the Hill Publishing, 2017.

Russell, A. J. *God Calling*. New York: Berkley Books, 2006.

Chambers, Oswald. *My Utmost for His Highest*. Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 2010.

AUTHOR

Dr. R. Keith Parks is a former missionary to Indonesia, Area Director to Southeast Asia, past President of the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board and retired Coordinator of Global Missions for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

God's Calling. Copyright © 2008 by Keith Parks. All rights reserved. Published with author's permission by Restore Hope 2008.