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# Hearing God's Call in a Noisy World

RON HIGHFIELD

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## THE EXTRAORDINARY CALLING

*The Old Man and Woman.* He and his wife were already old. They had no children, but they lived comfortably in a wealthy city among their kin. They planned no heroic adventures, and fully expected to live out their lives among their friends, plying the trades they had been taught as children. But everything changed when the Lord spoke to Abram: "Leave your country, your people, and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing" (Gen 12.1). So, Abram and his wife Sarai sold the house, said goodbye to family and friends, packed the animals and headed southeast—not knowing what lay ahead.

*The Fugitive Shepherd.* As he tended his father-in-law's sheep, he saw a strange sight. A bush flamed up. And even more bizarre, it continued to burn much longer than he expected. As he approached the wonder, a voice came from the flames: "Moses! Moses! I am the God of your fathers, and I've seen my people's suffering. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt." Moses thought there must be some mistake. Surely you mean some other "Moses." After offering flimsy excuse after excuse—only to hear them refuted by the Lord—Moses obeyed. He stood before one of the most powerful kings on earth and demanded: "Thus says the Lord, 'Let my people go!'" (Exod 5.1). It took a while, but the king did let them go.

*The Aristocrat.* This man was born into an aristocratic Jerusalem family in the eighth century B.C. What his profession was, we don't know, but his life took a different turn the day he saw a vision of the Lord, sitting on his throne, surrounded by heavenly beings saying to one another: "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty, the whole earth is full of his glory." Isaiah cried, "Woe is me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live in a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." Then an angel flew to him with a red hot coal and put it to his mouth to cleanse his sin. Again the Lord spoke: "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us? Who will turn this people from their sinful ways?" Isaiah responded, "Here am I. Send me!" (Isa 6.3–8). Thus began the forty-year ministry of the great prophet Isaiah!

*The Teenager.* She was a teenager engaged to be married. And like every other engaged girl she was busy preparing for the wedding and for her life as a wife and mother. Then she turned around to see an angel, who said to her: "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you . . . you will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High." This won't happen in the natural way; it will be a miracle, the angel explained. And Mary said: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1.26–38). So, Mary became the mother of the Savior of the world.

*The Persecutor.* This man was a scholar, a zealous teacher of God's law—and a persecutor of Christians. He was on his way to Damascus to seek out and arrest some of Jesus' disciples. As he approached the city

gates, he was blinded by a light from heaven, and then a piercing voice spoke: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” begged Paul. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do” (Acts 9.4–6). In the meantime, Jesus appeared to Ananias. He said about Paul, “This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name” (Acts 9.15–16). Ananias relayed the Lord’s message to Saul, who became Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

#### FIVE MARKS OF THE DIVINE CALL

These great callings have at least five characteristics in common.

1. *The divine call interrupts the ordinary course of life.* When God calls, nothing remains the same.

Abraham and Sarah had to start all over, and Paul had to change from persecutor to preacher.

2. *The divine call demands an immediate decision for obedience.* When God calls, neutrality no longer remains an option. For Mary, the choice was clear. And Isaiah could not refuse the heavenly vision: “Here am I. Send me.”

3. *The divine call changes your identity and assigns you a new life task.* God’s call transformed Mary from an obscure teenage girl into the mother of our Lord. The exiled shepherd Moses became the liberator and lawgiver of God’s people.

4. *The divine call assigns a hard and almost impossible mission.* God called Abraham to found a people and Moses to liberate a nation. He called Isaiah to turn a whole nation back toward God and Paul to preach the gospel to the whole Roman Empire. And he called Mary to bear and protect the Savior of the world! These were difficult assignments!

5. *The divine call demands faithful execution of the mission it gives.* Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously said that “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”<sup>1</sup> An old Greek proverb says, “Call no one alive happy.” Likewise, to be faithful at all is to be faithful unto death. In one of the best books ever written by one of the greatest authors ever to write, Søren Kierkegaard said: “A man may have had money, and when it is gone, when he no longer has money, it nevertheless remains absolutely true and certain that he has had money. But if one ceases to love, he *has never been* loving at all.”<sup>2</sup> In the same way, to become unfaithful is never to have been faithful!

What a countercultural message! We don’t want hardship and obedience! We crave comfort and convenience. Our definition of adversity is driving up to Starbucks only to discover it has already closed! We act as if the greatest threat in life were boredom. The closest many people get to a religious pilgrimage is a weekend trip to Las Vegas. And what would we do without our iPhones and iPods and now our iPads! Could we give them up even for one day without going insane?

#### ON THE OTHER HAND . . .

There is something missing in our culture, and many people feel its absence, even when they can’t give it a name. I would call it “greatness” or the “heroic.” Don’t you long for a call from above—a clear and dramatic mandate like those of Isaiah and Paul? Doesn’t something in you want to be a part of something great? Something that changes the world, something worth sacrificing for! Don’t you feel an impulse to say to God: “Here am I. Send me!” or “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said!”?

But few of us experience such a dramatic call, so we may begin to think we have no calling at all . . . that God has given us no great deed to do. We settle in to live ordinary lives and become part of the herd of humanity. As we get older, we drift into the soft worldliness of middle-class life where our eyes are fixed on the task at hand and our ears are occupied with the hum of daily life. We can’t see the light streaming down from heaven or hear the whisper of the eternal.

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R.H. Fuller (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 99.

2. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2009), 282.



Or, we get impatient and take matters into our own hands. We rush out presumptuously and, with romantic zeal, attempt to do something dramatic and heroic—but without the certainty of God's call. This is a great temptation for the young. You want to change the world and do something that matters. So, you take a mission trip to Africa, you spend a Saturday feeding the homeless, you become a vegan. Or you adopt a cause, such as saving the environment or promoting world peace or seeking social justice. Or you get active in politics: you go green or red or blue. Of course, there is nothing wrong with zeal, and there is nothing evil in these causes. But please beware: do not mistake the apparent goodness or popularity of a cause for God's command. Test it by the five marks of God's call. The divine call:

1. Interrupts the ordinary course of life
2. Demands an immediate decision for obedience
3. Changes your identity and assigns you a new life task
4. Assigns a hard and almost impossible mission
5. Demands faithful execution of the mission it gives

Now let's think about the call that touches all of us: the call to become a Christian, that is, a real Christian.

#### THE CHRISTIAN CALLING

I want to remind you that even if you've not heard God's voice from the burning bush or seen a heavenly vision or turned around to confront an angel or been blinded by the heavenly light—nevertheless, you have been called! For Christianity *is* a calling. The New Testament makes this very clear: we've been called to belong to Jesus (Rom 1.6); called according to his purpose (Rom 8.28); called to be holy (1 Cor 1.2); called into fellowship with Jesus (1 Cor 1.9). Moreover: "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received" (Eph. 4.1); "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet. 2.9); and "Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess" (Heb. 3.1).

Just like Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Mary and Paul, you and I are called by God. And our call possesses the same five marks as did theirs! God calls us to live by faith and not by sight. We are called out of the ordinary course of life to live before God, with inward awareness of his presence and determination for obedience. Just as they were summoned, we are called by God to a new identity, a new understanding of who we are and where we are going and the way to get there.

Just like he did for those heroes of faith, God has given us a new life task. No longer should we think that our work is to succeed in the eyes of the world, to seek pleasure and things, to achieve wealth and security and recognition. No! *Our life task is to become a Christian*. Yes, it's just that simple, just that clear—to conform inwardly and outwardly to the image of Jesus. Your primary work is to chisel and sculpt your own soul, to sand and polish it until it shines with the reflected glory of God.

Your work is to pray and study and contemplate; it is to practice and confess and repent. Our assignment is to wake up, watch and pray so that we can remain constantly aware of God's presence and of our identity and calling. Our mission is just as clear as Isaiah's or Paul's or Mary's: to change—to rid ourselves of selfishness, greed, fear and pride; to cast off thoughtlessness, indulgence, envy and lust.

Do you want to do something great? Do you want to do something really hard—something that demands everything—something that matters? Then take seriously God's call to be a Christian! And if you do that . . . you may just look up one day and see God, high and lifted up, or hear a voice from heaven, or turn to around to have an angel call you to some great task.

## THE EXTRAORDINARY IN THE ORDINARY CALLING

Now I want to look at God's call from a third angle. It would be a great mistake to limit God's call to a religious or a narrowly moral sphere. It is true that God calls all of us to become better people, and he calls some to become ministers and missionaries. But the divine call is more radical than that. It encompasses everything, every dimension of life:

“So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matt 6.31–34).

And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col 3.17).

God's call extends to every sphere of our lives and every precinct of our being—to our work and play, our friendships and our solitude, our study and our leisure. Everything must serve God. God's call to *us* is just as radical and demanding as was his call to Abraham, Mary and Paul. And just as exciting!

Are you a student concerned about finding a career, or a post-college professional building a resume? Are you mid-career? Or, are you in retirement? Married or single? Whatever your status, you are called to discover the extraordinary in the ordinary activities of life. In your schoolwork, in teaching, at the office, at home and in the fields, God calls us to maintain awareness of him in the little things. Do you have a term paper to write? Or accounts to balance? Are you playing tennis with a friend or listening to music alone? Are you taking the kids to soccer practice? God calls us to connect and order everything we do and say and think to him. This connection fills our activities with meaning and makes all of life exciting!

In this way, the ordinary things of life become extraordinary, and even holy. Students, dedicate your studies to God, don't cheat or goof off. This is your work: do it in the name of Jesus. Christians—take care of your bodies. Use them for God's service. If you have a house or other wealth, use it to advance God's kingdom. If you teach or practice law or lay carpet or keep the grounds or fix potholes—do it in Jesus' name, and do it well. In all your relationships—with friends and enemies, in your car or at the grocery store—don't let an undisciplined word fall from your lips. Bring all your words and thoughts and deeds into God's service.

But you might be thinking: this is hard. I would have to change radically! Yes it is, and yes you would. But that's the nature of the call. For, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”<sup>3</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Can you hear it? Can you hear God's call above the noise of the world? Can you hear him calling you to become a Christian—a real Christian? Can you hear him calling you out of the way of the world to obedience and hardship and self-discipline? Can you hear him calling you into a new identity, a new life task, a life in which you are aware of God in everything you do and every word you speak? I hope you do . . . because he is.

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3. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 99.