

READY? OR NOT?

An Introduction

“Do we believe in a personal God who uses broken, limited, and overwhelmed people to do his will on earth? Do we believe in the God of ‘mustard seed’ faith, who does great things through what appear to be insignificant means? Do we believe Paul’s words to the Corinthians, that God chooses ‘the foolish things of the world to shame the wise ... the weak things of the world to shame the strong ... the lowly things of this world and the despised things ... to nullify the things that are’ (1 Corinthians 1:27–28)? The sense of being overwhelmed has reduced many Christians to functional agnostics. We have personal faith, but we do not see God’s purposes for us. We live our lives saying, in effect, ‘I believe in God, but I have no idea of how he wants to work through me.’ If you see yourself as small, insignificant, or overwhelmed, take courage: you are exactly the humble kind of person that God wants to use mightily in the world.”¹

This is a study about God’s “call” on our lives as Christians. But what does a calling look like? Who gets to experience a calling and what do we mean when we speak of a calling? We tend to think calling is something special, reserved for missionaries, pastors, Moses, and Billy Graham—not for ordinary folks like us. Os Guinness, in his book *The Call*, writes, “...calling is the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with special devotion and dynamism lived out as a response to his summons and service.”² These words sound true and right, but they also seem to imply a more dynamic relationship with our creator than many of us experience on a daily basis. However, as surprising as it may be, God *does* have a call for each of us. *Every* Christian is an integral part of the Body of Christ and an important participant in what God is doing here on earth.

Guinness continues, “Answering the call of our creator is the ultimate ‘why’ for living, the highest source of purpose in human existence.”³ If this is true, then you would do well to anticipate and be on the lookout for God’s calling in your life. You might even be surprised at the joy you will experience by following this call. Let’s begin by looking at a few characteristics of “call.”

Calling doesn't have to refer to a one-time decision; often it implies a journey. The first call Jesus issues to the disciples is, "Follow me" (John 1:43). We are first called as Christians, persons who have been called by God to accept Jesus as savior. Through this calling, we enter into a relationship with God; this is our *primary calling*. As part of our primary calling, God also "calls" each of us into specific ministries, vocations, relationships, and actions. We have the privilege of participating in the work of the Kingdom of God right here, right now, right where we live. Each of these callings is considered secondary in relation to our primary calling as Christians, which is our relationship with God through the saving work of Jesus Christ. Whereas the primary call is the same for all Christians, secondary calls vary from person to person.

On our journey with God, our call may be to step *into* something new, or to step *out of* something we're currently doing. We may be called to *continue* following Jesus faithfully in the direction we're already headed, or to *change* our direction entirely. Some people may feel called to a particular vocation, such as teacher or physician, for their entire lives. At times we may sense a call to take a specific action, such as reaching out to a friend in need or to someone who has not accepted Christ, or to heal a broken relationship. A person may experience more than one call at a time; for example, a woman may feel called to be a pharmacist, a wife, and mother, while at the same time befriending a new neighbor who is lonely.

In all of these examples, it is God who is taking the initiative, acting as the "caller," leaving us in the role of "callee." Our task, then, is to hear the voice of God, perhaps in the midst of other competing voices, and choose to respond. God's calling provides direction and brings focus and meaning to our lives. When God calls us, we are invited to participate in something bigger than ourselves. "Call" is never just about us or our lives; calling is about finding your place in what God is doing in the world and connecting your story to God's. The poet Luci Shaw describes this calling as a "widening of the imagination."⁴ Call implies that we want something more from life than to live by our own agenda. It implies that we're looking for what God has for us, that we're open to it. Os Guinness says, "The truth is not that God is finding us a place for our gifts but that God has created us and our gifts for a place of his choosing—and we will only be ourselves when we are finally there."⁵

In this study we will look at two individuals who were called by God. We will see the evidence that God cares how people like you and me live; he cares about what we do. An understanding of "call" helps us see that God has plans specific enough to include each

of us. At some level we all ask the questions, “Does my life have purpose and meaning? How can I know I have made a difference?” When we believe that we are part of God’s bigger plan, and that we have a unique place within that plan, these questions are answered for us. In the calling God gives us, we become caught up in the purposes and plans of the God of the universe.

God’s call to various individuals may come in very different ways.⁶ In this study we’ll look at two people who could hardly have been more different.⁷ Jonah’s call was professional. As a prophet, it was Jonah’s job to listen to God, to do what God commanded, and to relay to others what God was calling them to do. In the book of Jonah, we are told directly that “the word of the LORD came to Jonah” (Jonah 1:1). Ruth, on the other hand, is an unlikely person to be called by God. She is an outsider, not one of God’s “chosen” people; not a Jew. In the book of Ruth, we are never told that Ruth hears directly from God. Her calling comes primarily through a person, her mother-in-law Naomi, and through her circumstances.

Ruth’s and Jonah’s calls also differ in scope. Initially Ruth’s story seems small, focusing on one refugee woman, Naomi, and her daughter-in-law. But, as we’ll discover, Ruth’s story becomes part of a much bigger story through her descendants. Jonah’s call seems on a grand scale at first: God’s concern for a “great city.” Though their stories seem different, Jonah and Ruth are both called to play an important part in God’s greater story. God’s future plans are entrusted into the hands of these ordinary people. As you study their stories, it is our prayer that you will begin to see God’s call within your story as well.

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Authors

NOTES

1. Paul Borthwick, *Six Dangerous Questions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 98.
2. Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 4.
3. Guinness, 4.
4. Luci Shaw, *The Crime of Living Cautiously* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 52.
5. Guinness, 47.
6. “Calling” has a corporate sense in scripture as well. See, for example, the book of Ephesians, in which the call to the church to be a holy temple is so eloquently expressed.
7. This study is too short to explore “call” in depth. Think of it instead as a “slice” of “call” on a slide under a microscope, a look at what “call” meant to two people at a specific point in their lives.