

ReStart Week 7: The Call - Acts 16:1-10

David Bawks - Pathway Community Church (April 18, 2021)

Good morning Pathway! How are we doing today? Over the last couple months we've been doing a series called Restart to learn some lessons from Acts for our ministry plans and goals. Last week we looked at overcoming spiritual opposition, and the experience of Saul and Barnabas in Cyprus. I shared how we need to be focused on sending more than seating, and how living out the gospel requires us to be bold and firm. Today we are moving a few chapters down to Acts 16, verses 1 – 10.

16 Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek. 2 The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. 3 Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. 4 As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. 5 So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

6 Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. 7 When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. 8 So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. 9 During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Paul and his companions are now on their second missionary journey. As we saw two weeks ago, Paul had received a call from God to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. Right before this in Acts 15, we have the very important Jerusalem council where the church met to decide how to include Gentiles into their faith, and what requirements they needed the Gentiles to keep. Paul played a key role in that and now we see him going from town to town, sharing the decision and encouraging the new churches that have been established.

One of Paul's companions on this trip is **Timothy**, who is of mixed parentage, with a Jewish mother and Greek father. He would become an important leader in the early church and receive two significant letters from Paul that we have in the New Testament. Both he and Silas are going with Paul on this missionary journey.

Starting in verse 6, we see something interesting happening. We're told that Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, because they had been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. We are told again in verse 7 that when they tried to enter Bithynia, the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them

to. We don't know exactly how this was communicated, but it was very clear to them that God did not want them to take that direction.

Why would God not want them to preach the gospel in a particular place? The major city of Ephesus was in Asia, and Timothy would go on to become a major leader in the church there. Clearly God wanted Ephesus to be reached for the gospel, and for the church there to be encouraged. But sometimes it is not the right time, even for something good. We must be sensitive to God's prompting and leading on these matters, and willing to wait if God is saying no.

Have you ever had a similar experienced where you wanted to do something but felt God saying no? How did that turn out?

There are many reasons why God might say no to our desires. In this instance, the reason that the Spirit of God said no was because of another opportunity that was coming. After the Spirit stops them from going where they wanted to, Paul sees a vision of a man from Macedonia standing and begging, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

Macedonia had become the dominant world power under their leaders Philip and then Alexander the Great, and had since become a Roman province. After seeing the vision, they got ready to go there immediately, because they understood that God wanted them to preach the gospel there.

This incident is called the **Macedonian Call**, and has become in some circles the main model for how a missionary is called by God. There are some missions organizations that require you to demonstrate a call to missions, based largely on this passage. My focus today is on this topic of calling, how we are called, who is called, and what this means for us in our daily Christian life.

Let's begin a **basic definition**. To call someone means to summon or converse with them, usually with a loud voice or from a distance. You also call someone by their name, and parents have the responsibility to designate what their children are called.

Calling is a common theme throughout the Bible. In the **Old Testament**, calling is used in a number of different ways. First, there is the calling of **individuals** to fulfill a particular mandate. Examples of this include Abraham who was called by God to leave his homeland and move to a different country. There is Jacob who was called to father a new nation for God and Moses who was called to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt. There are other heroes of faith in the OT who God called to fulfill particular tasks.

We also see the idea of **corporate** calling as with the nation of Israel. In Deut 28:8-9, God promised to establish Israel as his holy people if they kept his commands. This way, everyone on earth would see that they belonged to God. This corporate call for the nation of Israel is reiterated many times by the prophets in the OT, reminding the people that they ALL belong to God as a nation, not just as individuals. "But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend, I took you from the ends of

the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, 'You are my servant'; I have chosen you and have not rejected you. 10 So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God" (Isa 41:8-10, NIV).

A different kind of calling we see in the O.T. is where people called out to God. We see a lot of this kind of calling in the book of Job and in the Psalms. For example, "In the day of my trouble I will call to you, for you will answer me" (Ps 86:7).

Moving to the New Testament, calling is usually used in a corporate sense referring to different aspects of salvation. All those who make up the body of Christ are called out of darkness into light, to be holy, and to serve God faithfully. We are called into the fellowship of Christ in 1 Corinthians 1:9, and all those called Sons of God are called to obedience.

Calling is also used on a **personal level**. James and John were personally called by Christ. Paul identified himself as called to be an apostle in several locations, and defends his apostolic identity in all of his letters except 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Looking at all these various functions, Os Guinness summarizes the use of calling in the Bible as "**a central and dynamic theme that becomes a metaphor for the life of faith itself**" (The Call, 31).

As I've mentioned before, one responsibility we have in studying Scripture is determining whether a particular passage is **descriptive or prescriptive**. Earlier I mentioned how some missions organizations insist on a particular "calling" incident based on our passage for today. In this model of missions, only those who have had a special experience of calling are qualified to do certain kinds of mission or ministry. But simply because Paul and his companions received a call this way, does not mean that we must or will receive a call in a similar way. The idea that each Christian has their own special calling is actually not scriptural. Sometimes God chooses to reveal a special assignment to particular people but it doesn't mean that those who don't get one aren't called by God.

What's your experience with following God's call? Have there been times when you felt unsure of God's call for your life? One problem with the idea of everyone having a special calling is the fear that we might miss it. In certain circles that kind of thinking has produced a lot of anxious Christians who are always trying to find God's call as if it was something hidden and out of reach.

I took time to read about calling and to study all the times that the concept of calling came up in the Bible and my view is that on one level, we do not need to worry about "finding" God's call. It's not a secret! The call is obvious! Scripture is full of explanations of our corporate calling, and in all the stories of specific callings, there is never the slightest doubt that I could find. Moses was not left in the dark as to what his mission was, and neither was Paul. Calling should not be considered a True/False test, with each decision being a question and then at the end of your life you find out your score.

For most of my life, I desired to be a missionary, and I wrestled with the question of calling. Some of my friends in college said they had clear calls to missions, and I did not have a dramatic experience. Not having a clear-cut call to ministry is what ended my first

relationship. My girlfriend at that time said she was called to go to China, and although I said I felt called to missions, and was very willing to go with her, she broke up with me because I did not have my own individual call to China. That seemed rather unfair, and my view of 'missionary calling' became quite negative.

I had another conversation about this with another friend who said that in her experience, almost no one has a special divine spoken "call", the way it is described in this passage of someone asking Paul to come, but in her experience they more or less come up with an experience so that they can fit that missionary expectation. And if you do ask many missionaries about this, many of them do not have one unique experience that stands out, although there are some who do.

I have come to believe that to assert that a specific calling is necessary for missions work, but not to enter other fields, is a misapplication of the biblical text. Nowhere does God specify that a "missionary" must be called. This is an artificial, man-imposed requirement based off a few instances in the Bible where God provided specific direction. This is a blessing to be sought but does not become a special category, or much less a prerequisite for following the commandment to go and make disciples.

So, what does this mean for us? How does it apply to our lives as we seek to follow and please God? I have two main thoughts:

- **We are called first to be, then to do.**

The Bible does have much to say about calling, however, and thankfully, most of it is quite clear. Drawing from the overall biblical narrative, I contend that we are primarily called **to be**, not to do. Calling is primarily about who you are, not about what you do. All those who make up the body of Christ are called out of darkness into light, to be holy, and to serve God faithfully. We are called into the fellowship of Christ in 1 Corinthians 1:9, and all those called Sons of God are called to obedience.

Being sent, a "missionary," is about being a person who is attuned to God and carrying out God's mission in the world. It is about aligning our desires with God's desires, and living for the joy He has promised to bestow upon us.

In the word of Os Guinness: "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 a special devotion and dynamism lived out as a response to his summons and service" (*The Call*, 4).

If you are worried about finding your one true calling, and this is proving to be an area of fear and confusion, I would encourage you to focus on the basics of our relationship with God, and what He has called you to become.

Our work and vocation is a major part of our identity, and a very significant part of our lives. But we also need to always be on guard that our core identity and personal sense of value and worth is not based primarily on our job title or position. For one thing, that can easily change. Our value and worth comes fundamentally from our position as children of

God, and that does not change regardless of our career, or if we are unemployed, or still figuring out the best job that suits our unique passions and abilities. We've seen that we are primarily called to be, not to do.

- **Obey what you know.**

As I said before, God's call for us is not a secret at all. He has revealed throughout the Bible what He desires of us and from us, as we surveyed. As we wait to hear from God directly and through others, we must be actively calling upon God, seeking Him as the Israelites of old who would call on the name of the Lord. Eph 4:1 talks about living a life **worthy of the calling we have received**. And what is that calling? It is living in humility, gentleness, patience and love—and to make our calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:10). We are all called to be faithful, holy and obedient followers of God no matter where we choose to serve Him. As we consider what it means to live in obedience, ask this question:

Who is calling out for help today?

As we focus on obeying what God has revealed to us in Scripture and on becoming his ambassadors in the world, then we will find our calling everywhere. Our mission field is wherever God puts us each day. Paul, Silas and Timothy went to Macedonia because of Paul's vision of a man asking for help. This passage in Acts was a part of the process of Nairobi Chapel sending BG and I here to California. Pastor Oscar and the elder board of Nairobi Chapel decided through meeting with the leaders of Growing Healthy Churches that there was a cry for help in the Bay Area, and a cry for more laborers to come to serve in this region.

You and I don't need a special vision to see people who are asking for our help in different ways. I think of the plight of refugees crossing by boat into Europe by the thousands, with many of them dying on the way. I think of those fleeing Venezuela or Myanmar. I think of unaccompanied children crossing through the deserts of northern Mexico. These are people in need of help! Those examples are removed from our immediately vicinity, but many others of our friends and neighbors are also crying out for help.

They are in need of our care, and in need of the gospel. There are neighbors, friends, and colleagues who are hurting around us who need to know that they are not alone; that God loves them and that we are here to support them.

I believe there may also be some of you listening to this message right now, here or online, who are hearing this as a call from God asking you to step up to serve him. That may mean giving up your job and house here to travel overseas to an area in desperate need of the gospel. There are still so many people who have never once heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. That may mean quitting your job and stepping into something new here that God has prepared for you. That may mean stepping into pastoral ministry, or leadership development.

My challenge for you this week is to ask yourself these two questions:

1. What is God calling me to be today?
2. Who around me is calling out for help?

Let us be consistent in obedience to God's calling, and faithful in responding to the call of those who are in need of our help. Please pray with me as we close.