



## **DEFINING CALLING**

### **Romans 8:28-30**

If you have a Bible—and I hope you do—I invite you to find Acts 13. We’re looking at some key terms and their definitions regarding our mission in the world as followers of Christ. This isn’t just for missionaries around the world, but it’s for every one of us. So far we’ve looked at terms like “gospel,” “evangelism,” “conversion,” and “disciple” —what it means to make disciples. Today we’re looking at the term “calling.” I think we’ll find there is a significant amount of confusion and curiosity when it comes to how God calls us to do different things, how He leads us in different ways.

In Acts 13, I hope we will get a feel for the mystery that surrounds the way God calls and leads and guides our lives. People often ask, “How do I know if God is calling me to be a missionary or to be a pastor? How do I know if God is calling me to be married Or married to this person? How do I know if God is calling me to be a parent?” The questions can go on and on. How do we know when the Spirit of God is leading us this way or that way?

Acts 13 gives us a picture of God calling Paul and Barnabas to leave the church in Antioch to become missionaries. Here is what we read:

*Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. <sup>2</sup> While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” <sup>3</sup> Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. <sup>4</sup> So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.*

This story makes us wonder, “How did that happen?” Clearly the word “calling” is in there. The Spirit called Barnabas and Saul to leave Antioch and to go elsewhere as missionaries. It says “*the Holy Spirit said,*” but how did He say this? When they were gathered together in worship, did they hear an audible voice, “*Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them*”? That would have made it pretty easy to discern. But even then, how do we know where He was calling them to go or what exactly He was calling them to do? Or if it wasn’t an audible voice, then what was it? Was it some kind of sense the people had—and did they all have the same sense, or just Barnabas and Saul? Did they say to the others, “I think this is what the Lord is calling us to do”? How did the group conclude that the Spirit was leading these men to go?

If we move ahead to Acts 16, we see another instance of the Spirit's leading. Paul is now on his second missionary journey. Beginning in verse six, we read this:

*<sup>6</sup> And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. <sup>7</sup> And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. <sup>8</sup> So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas.*

How were they forbidden by the Spirit of God to speak the word in Asia? How did He stop them from going there? And how did the Holy Spirit say, "No, not Bithynia"? Obviously, we know it wasn't just because there were challenges or obstacles in their way. Paul faced these pretty much everywhere he went and he still went to those places. So why not Bithynia and how did they hear this? Right after this, we read:

*<sup>9</sup> And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." <sup>10</sup> And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.*

This time, God made His calling to them clear through a vision. This was actually a huge turning point in their ministry in the book of Acts. Paul was headed toward India, but the Spirit of Jesus said, "No." Rather, Paul was sent in the opposite direction, toward western Europe and eventually toward Rome. But how did God call, lead and guide in this situation?

Moving forward a few more chapters, to Acts 20. Paul is spending some time with the pastors from Ephesus as he's on his way to Jerusalem. Listen to how he describes his journey, starting in verse 22:

*<sup>22</sup> And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, <sup>23</sup> except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. <sup>24</sup> But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.*

Paul tells them the reason he's headed to Jerusalem is because the Spirit has "constrained" him. How did that happen? Was it just a feeling he had? Was there another vision? Reading forward, we find that people are regularly trying to talk Paul out of going there, telling him if he goes there, he's going to face imprisonment. But this doesn't cause him to change his plan, because he has received the Spirit's leading.

These are only a few New Testament examples of how the Spirit of God leads, guides and calls people to do certain things at certain times in certain ways. But all of this leads back to our question: how do we know when the Spirit is calling us to do something? Is it just a feeling? If that's it, how do we

know when to trust it? We can get all kinds of feelings at different points. This issue of calling is huge for all of us, as we try to discern God's leading. "Am I called to be a missionary, like Paul and Barnabas? Is God calling me to go to some other place?" We have a whole process we walk people through to help them discern the answer to these questions.

But it's not just for missionaries. This question applies to every follower of Christ regarding the major decisions in our lives. We want to be obedient to the Spirit's leading. So as disciples of Jesus who are making disciples of Jesus, how do we understand calling biblically? At [www.radical.net](http://www.radical.net) we have a document that fleshes out what I'm going to describe, using a lot more Scripture and footnotes.

But today we'll think about calling in four different categories. Our normal thoughts go to questions regarding ordinary matters of life such as jobs or families—and this is important. But long before we get to this kind of decision, Scripture speaks of calling in some foundational ways that impact these and other decisions. If we jump too quickly to the specifics, we can miss what God wants us to understand about calling.

## **The call to salvation.**

The first category we see in Scripture regarding calling is the call to salvation. We've talked a lot about this in previous messages, but we must never forget that biblical calling always puts salvation first and foremost. In other words, our calling is accomplished biblically by God's gracious act by which He draws us to become disciples of Jesus and members of His church. In the overwhelming majority of times callings are mentioned in Scripture, they're referring to our call to receive salvation by grace through faith in Christ, thereby becoming part of His church.

We see the subject of calling throughout 1 Corinthians 1. As we read various verses, watch for the words "calling" or "chose":

*<sup>1</sup> Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, <sup>2</sup> To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours...*

*<sup>9</sup> God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord...*

*<sup>22</sup> For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God...*

*<sup>26</sup> For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.*

So over and over again we see descriptions of how God draws people to Himself. It's the same word used in Romans 8:28, a verse we often quote: *"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."* That's the whole picture of what it means to be a Christian—we are called according to His purpose. The details come in the next two verses: *"For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified."*

Calling is described as a picture of salvation in these verses and all over Scripture:

- Isaiah 41 and 43
- Matthew 4 and 9
- Mark 2:14
- Acts 2:39
- Galatians 1:15
- Ephesians 1:18 and 4:1-16
- 1 Thessalonians 4:7
- 2 Thessalonians 1:1,11-12
- 2 Timothy 1:9
- 2 Peter 1:3-11
- Jude 1-2

We could go on and on. The Bible everywhere talks about calling in terms of salvation. How does that happen? Think about all we've talked about in previous messages in this series. The call to salvation comes through the proclamation of God's Word in the power of His Spirit. That's evangelism. Evangelism is the means by which the message of the gospel is made known and brings about conversion, which is repentance and belief in Christ.

Let's think about this in our own lives. How did God call us to Himself? He sent somebody, or many people, to us who proclaimed the message of the gospel of salvation. He used their proclamation in our hearts to call us to Himself. Or think about how God is calling more people to Himself through you and me as we proclaim the gospel through the power of His Word and Spirit. Calling is first and foremost a call to salvation.

Accompanying that call to salvation is the call to freedom in Christ:

- *"For you were called to freedom, brothers"* (Galatians 5:13).
- We are also called to holiness in Christ: *"For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness"* (1 Thessalonians 4:7).
- We are called to suffering in Christ: *"But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called"* (1 Peter 2:20-21).

Our call to Christ is also a call to freedom, joy, holiness and suffering.

Here's the glorious truth upon which we can bank our lives forever. This call to salvation forms the unshakeable foundation of a disciple's primary identity, now and forever. That's what Romans 8:28-30 tells us: *"Those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified."* It's a done deal. Those who have been called will be glorified. When you have received the call to salvation in Christ, your identity is secure for all of eternity. This is so important because we must always be careful to root our identity in our call to salvation, rather than in a calling to any particular task or job. Those callings are real, but they're not intended to be our identity. Ten, twenty, thirty years from now, we may not be in that place. But ten billion years from now, we'll still be in Christ. So this is the unshakeable foundation for our identity forever.

A couple years ago I was pastoring a church. I loved doing it and would have loved it for the 40 years. But the Lord called me to a different role, no longer pastoring a church in the same way. It's a good thing my identity was not found in being the pastor of that particular church. I wouldn't have known what to do once that had ended. In the same way, my identity now is not in the role I have in the International Mission Board. We need to root our identity in the fact that God has called us to Himself and that before we're anything else, are children of His. We have a security that is more important than anything this world could offer us. Salvation is where we have to start in our understanding of calling.

### **The call to mission.**

Our initial call to salvation includes a second calling—the call to mission. As we've discussed already in this series, every person who responds to God's call to be a disciple of Jesus receives Christ's command to make disciples of Jesus. Disciple-making is the God-given, Spirit-empowered duty of every disciple, regardless of his or her station, location or vocation. It doesn't matter who we are—we've been called to mission in Christ. In this way, every disciple plays an integral part in the eternal purpose of God to glorify His name through disciples made in every nation.

We've already talked about this quite extensively in the last two messages, but the call to mission is not just for a select few people. I told the story about how Dr. Rankin helped me realize that just because I'm passionate about the spread of the gospel to the nations doesn't make me a missionary. It's actually what it means to be a Christian. Now that I'm leading the IMB, people will come up to me and say, "I'm so passionate about the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth. I know there's so much need, so I think I should be a missionary." I'll say, "What you've told me actually doesn't make you a missionary—it makes you a Christian. And that makes me really glad, because being passionate about the spread of the gospel is what it means to be a follower of Christ."

We've got to get this picture out of our heads that's so prevalent in the church that mission is a compartmentalized program for a select few people who are called to that, but the rest of us aren't. That's

not true. It's not biblical. Every one of us who has been called to salvation in Christ has been called to mission for Christ. We've been called to make disciples of the nations. So the question is not are we called, but rather where do we do this and how do we do this. When we understand this, it affects the way we understand other aspects of calling. We're called to salvation, then flowing from that we are called to mission.

### **The call to station.**

Our third category of calling may be the one we think about least, but if you realize what Scripture teaches, I think it makes total sense. I'm using the term "call to station." When we're in Christ, on mission, God calls us to specific stations in and through which we exalt Him on mission.

One example would be family. As Christians, we're called to be faithful sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, for the spread of God's gospel and the display of God's glory. Or Scripture speaks of a divine call to singleness for the sake of mission, either for a period of time or for the entirety of one's life. Other calls to specific stations would be Christ's call to meaningful membership in a church, or His call to responsible citizenship in our community and country.

Think about my life as an example. There's a very real sense in which God has called me to be a son to my mom, and to my dad who has passed away now. I have three siblings and I'm called to be their brother in our family. He's called me to be a husband, to care for and lead and provide for my wife. He's called me to be the father of four children. Then God has called me to be a member of a local church, as well a citizen of the United States. All of these are stations to which He's called me.

Connecting this with the other two categories, I can say that because of my call to salvation, I'm called to honor Christ in every one of these stations—to live, love and lead in each of these stations in light of my identity in Christ and in light of my call to mission. I am to be a godly son and brother and husband and dad and church member and citizen, living in a way that reflects the character of Christ for the spread of the gospel of Christ. I am to display God's glory through all those stations. Ephesians 5 makes it clear that in my calling as a husband, I'm to love and care for my wife in a way that shows the love of Christ for His church. That's an example of how my call to Christ and to mission impacts my understanding of my call to station.

Think about how this looks in your life. Do you have similar stations? It might be family, but it also might be singleness as Paul emphasizes in 1 Corinthians 7. He speaks of a clear call from God to singleness for the sake of mission—either temporarily or for all of one's life. We all have calls to various stations and we need to think about how we can be faithful sons and daughters, brothers and sisters,

husbands and wives, mothers and fathers—before we even get to our specific jobs or other decisions in our lives.

Scripture obviously makes these things a priority. Paul tells Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:8, *“If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”* There are responsibilities and obligations that accompany these callings.

Returning to my life, right now I’m called to be the president of the IMB. But as important as that is, or as significant as my calling to be a pastor was, my calling to be a husband and father is even more important. I can’t let myself be so consumed in the first station that I’m not faithful to my family. After all, my IMB calling might change. But as long as my wife and children are alive—that calling doesn’t change. So they’re not eternal in the sense of my identity in Christ. We know marriage is a temporary institution in this world. At the same time, as long as I’m in this world, when it comes to my wife, Heather, it’s ’til death do us part.

This also plays out in the reality of membership in the church. It’s clear throughout Scripture that God has called every follower of Christ—whether here or on the other side of the world—to be meaningful members of a local church, where we’re submitting to biblical leadership and growing in gracious accountability with a local body of believers. Biblically, we can’t grow in Christ or give our lives to making disciples unless it happens in the context of a covenant community in the body of Christ.

It might seem a little strange to think of citizenship as a calling, but this is a picture we see in New Testament. The followers in that day wrestled with how they should live out their faith in the Roman Empire. The emperor was obviously not supreme, but Paul gives very practical instruction on how to honor, obey, respect and submit to the civic leaders—to the extent to which Christian conviction allows—as part of one’s submission to Christ. There are responsibilities that go with citizenship, as followers of Christ on mission in the world, in that particular station.

These three categories of calling are foundational, before we even get to the fourth category where our minds so often go: how is God leading me this way or that way? We’re called to mission in the world and to these stations—so then, based on that, we get to the fourth category of calling.

### **The call to service.**

Let me put this on the table and then we’ll think about it together. Once the foundational callings are laid, our call to service is God’s gracious act by which He directs certain disciples to make disciples in certain ways at certain times among certain people in certain locations through certain vocations. The call to service—contrary especially to the first and second callings—may be fluid. It may operate at varying levels and open to varying assignments from God. What must be constant in our lives, though, is

faithfulness to God's call to service, no matter the cost, until He calls us to a different service. How do we know what these calls are? They are discerned, not just individually, but as members of the church on mission in the world, through Spirit-led, Word-driven, prayer-saturated examination of our desires, gifts, abilities and opportunities.

Let's unpack this now. First, our call to service is God's gracious act by which He directs disciples to make disciples. That's a given—all of us are called to mission. The question is, how are we to do this—in what way, at what time, among what people, in what location? It's what we read about in Acts 13, 16, 20, where God was saying to Paul, "I want you to make disciples outside of Antioch. Then I want you to go somewhere else." Paul starts on a second missionary journey, and God says, "No, I don't want you to go there or there. I want you to go here. Go to Macedonia and make disciples there." That's fluid. As Paul is being obedient in Christ to mission, faithful in the station he is in, he serves in different ways at different times.

This is where this calling looks different in all of our lives. Do you know that the word "vocation" actually comes from *vocatio*, which is Latin for calling? Scripture talks about the value of working in different ways. In Acts 16:14-15 is an account of Lydia, who sold purple goods. In Acts 18 we read about Aquila and Priscilla, who were tentmakers. Romans 16:3-15 provides a list of 26 different people, most of whom had all kinds of different jobs.

If I can make a confession coming from my time as a pastor—and I didn't mean to do this—I implicitly did not affirm the grace of God and wisdom of God in the way He called people to different tasks, all of which was valuable before Him and equally honoring to Him. Someone might be working in a cubicle doing an accounting job, crunching numbers all day long. Somebody else might be a missionary on the other side of the world. Both are bringing glory to God in the exact same way to the extent they are being obedient to His calling in their life, trusting He has called them to those places.

We have a tendency to value certain types of work over other types of work, therefore valuing certain callings over others. We might even think, "I'm not called to do something really significant in the Kingdom, but only to do this over here. I'm not called to be a missionary. I'm just called to have a job back in the States." And we would think that to be a lesser calling. But that's a lie without any support in Scripture. After all, what if everybody in the world was a pastor or a missionary? Sure, we'd know how to teach the Bible and shepherd the church and go into other countries, but we wouldn't know how to do anything else.

Suppose we were all salesmen and saleswomen. We wouldn't have any products to sell in the first place. Or if we were all police officers, we would be safe, but we'd also be hungry. If we were all lawyers, well, we'd all be in trouble. So it's a good thing God calls people to different vocations in different ways. We need each other—every single one of us. In much the same way as the body of Christ

has different parts, all of which are important, God has created us all to work in different ways in the world.

An author on a theology of work gives us this picture:

Look at the chair you're lounging in. Could you have made it for yourself? How would you get the wood—go and fell a tree? But only after first making the tools for that and putting together some kind of vehicle to haul the wood, and constructing a mill to do the lumber, and the roads to drive on from place to place. In short, it would take you a lifetime or two to make one chair. If we worked, not 40, but a 140 hours per week, we couldn't make for ourselves even a fraction of all the goods and services we now call our own.

Our paycheck turns out to buy us the use of far more than we could possibly make for ourselves in the time it takes for us to earn the check. Work yields far more in return for our efforts than our particular jobs put in. Imagine that everyone were to quit working right now. What happens? Civilized life quickly melts away. Food vanishes from the shelves. Gas dries up at the pumps. Streets are no longer patrolled; fires burn themselves out. Communication, transportation services end. Utilities go dead. Those who survive at all are soon huddled around campfires, sleeping in caves, clothed in the raw animal hides. The difference between a wilderness and culture is simply work.

[Adapted from Work: The Meaning of Your Life, by Lester DeKoster]

So as you can see, all vocations have significance in God's design. As Christians in the church, we must never set up some false dichotomy or artificial distinction between some whose work is more noble than others. Pastors aren't more noble than bankers. Missionaries aren't more noble than telemarketers. William Tyndale said, "If we look externally, there is a difference between washing dishes and preaching the Word of God. But as touching to please God, there's no difference at all." That's a biblical view of work. When done to honor the Lord, there's no difference between preaching and washing the dishes.

Do I really believe that preaching and washing the dishes are just as important to the glory of God? I absolutely do. Can you imagine if housecleaning wasn't done? Before long there would be germs all over the house, viruses and infections threatening to make people sick—or even kill them. So that's fundamentally important. One writer concludes, "Simple physical labor is God's work no less than the formulation of theological truth."

Now that we're 500 years after the Reformation, this helps us understand why Martin Luther was so passionate about all work being equally pleasing and honoring to God—not just church and missionary work. For Luther, it all went back to his recovery of the gospel—the reality that we're justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. If our work, especially our religious work, earned us particular favor before God, then it only makes sense that the clergy—the popes and the priests—were the people whose work was the most noble and who had the most favor before God. Everybody else was second

class. But Luther realized that if salvation is based solely on faith in the finished work of Christ, then there's no work we can do to increase our status before God. He wrote this:

It's pure invention that popes, bishops, priests and monks are called to a spiritual estate, while princes, lords, artisans and farmers are called to a temporal estate. This is indeed a piece of deceit and hypocrisy, and no one need be intimidated by it. And that for this reason: all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate and there's no difference among them, except that of vocation. We are all consecrated priests. We are all a royal priesthood (2 Peter 2:9). A cobbler, a smith, a farmer—each has the work and office of his trade, yet they're all alike consecrated priests. And everyone by means of his own work or office must benefit and serve every other.

There's so much more we could say, but the reason I wanted to emphasize this is because I want to make sure when we think about calling that we don't just think about it in terms of religious callings. Yes, those are important, but just as significant is God's calling to work in other ways. All vocation is a picture of God calling us to glorify Himself through a particular vocation. Any work done to His glory brings Him great honor, regardless of where we are. This is part of His sovereignty, as He calls and leads and guides us in different ways. Our responsibility is to follow His calling, glorifying and serving Him in the place where He has called us.

The calls to salvation and mission are intended to play out in our lives in many different ways. I think of those of you who are doing consulting or banking or teaching. Others of you may travel with your jobs or work out of your homes. But assuming your work is not immoral, you can trust that God has called you to that place of service. In Colossians 3:23-24 and 1 Corinthians 10:31, we're told to serve Christ, work for the King, doing all we do for His glory. Let's live out our identity in Christ and our call to mission through the workplace in which we find ourselves, making disciples, yet also being faithful in our families, our churches and our communities.

We need to remember that our call to service may be fluid, functioning at varying levels in varying assignments from God. Our vocations can be fluid, our locations can be fluid—but our call to salvation and mission are unchanging. The constant in our life, however, is our determination to be faithful to God's callings, no matter the cost, until He calls us to a different service. But how do we know when He's leading us to a different vocation or location? Calls are discerned and affirmed not just individually, but as members of the church on mission in the world.

This is one of the things I love about Acts 13. The Spirit called Paul and Barnabas to a mission, but He also affirmed this in the church around them. In Acts 20, the church was wrestling together about whether Paul should go to Jerusalem. Our call to station includes the reality that we must be members of a local church. God has not called us to make decisions like this in isolation. We have brothers and sisters around us who help us think through our decisions. As we spelled it out in our original definition, we're

to find God's call through "Spirit-led, Word-driven, prayer-saturated examination of our desires, gifts, abilities and opportunities." That means we're to spend time in God's Word. We're to pray, "Lord, lead, guide and direct me," trusting His Spirit to do that in the context of community. And finally, we're to consider our desires, our giftings, our training and experience, and the opportunities that are presenting themselves to us.

Once again, let me put this through the lens of my own story. Almost three years ago I was pastoring a local church and loving my work. I was on a trip in the mountains of Asia when the Lord started doing a work in my heart. I could sense that maybe He was preparing me for something different. As Paul expressed in Romans 15, I was feeling a narrowing ambition to see Christ preached where He's not been named before. As I walked through village after village, I saw people who had never heard the name of Jesus.

My thought was maybe God was leading us to move to this part of Asia, so I began to think through all the questions my wife would ask me at home about that kind of move. I also began to ask questions of the men who lived in that country, and as I returned home, I thought maybe that was God's next step for us. I shared my thoughts with Heather, then we started praying about the possibility. Along the way, the former president of the IMB stepped down, saying he was praying for somebody to take over his role.

So I'm praying about whether I was to continue pastoring The Church at Brook Hills or move to Asia, the IMB called me to ask, "Would you be willing to consider being our replacement president?" Which meant I now had three things on my table to pray about. I said, "Lord, I'll gladly do any of these, or if You want to put a fourth out there, that's fine. I just want to follow Your will." I shared these questions with the church around me, especially the elders in my own church, asking them to pray with me. I sought counsel from close friends, asking them to help me discern God's will.

I also looked at my desires, my gifts and abilities, and these opportunities. As I stayed in the Word and in prayer and fasting, over the course of several months I came to a conclusion, first in my own heart, "I think the Lord may be leading me to go to the IMB." My wife started to sense the same thing. So we prayed, "Lord, make this clear to the elders in our church." And the same day I wrote in my journal, "I think the Lord may be leading me to go to the IMB," that elder emailed me to say, "Much as I don't want to say this, I think the Lord may be leading you to go there."

Then there was the whole IMB team, who were praying about who would be their next leader, and they were actually talking to several people as possible candidates. So I realized that even if I thought God was leading me there and my church agreed with that, still they had to confirm it as well. But they approached me to say, "We think the Lord is leading you to take this role." It was a six-month process of what I trust was a Spirit-led, Word-driven, prayer-focused examination of this disciple's desires, gifts,

abilities and opportunities that led me to the painful decision at that point to say, “I believe the Lord is leading me to leave this church to go into this role.”

I look back at that experience and I think it might have been nice if I had just had a vision at the beginning of that six months. I could have gone to bed one night, had a dream, and in that dream the Lord would have told me what to do. That seems as though it would have been a much easier way to receive a calling. But He didn't do that and I'm honestly glad He didn't. What He did was so much better. Even though a vision was an option for Him—He did that in Paul's life—He allowed us to walk through this whole six-month process, seeking Him every day for clear guidance. Fasting, studying the Word, asking for guidance, having conversations with His church—through all of this I grew to love the Lord far more when it was over than I did when the process began.

So I realized the whole point was not just getting an answer to my question, but it was to gain a deeper knowledge of God and a deeper relationship with Him. That's the beauty of calling, specifically a calling to service. When we're seeking to discern His leading in these times, ultimately what He does is strengthen our call to salvation, reminding us that He holds us in the palm of His hands. He will lead and guide and direct us according to His good and sovereign plan. Wherever we are, we are on missions to be making disciples. We do this as faithful sons, daughters, husbands, wives, moms and dad, singles—whatever it looks like in our lives. May God lead and guide and direct us clearly.

That's the overflow from my life. Here's what I want to encourage you with. When you think about being called to service in different ways, I would give you three words: surrender, abide and rest.

First, when it comes to service, just surrender. You're in Christ, called to mission. Put a blank check on the table and say to God, “Wherever You lead me, I'll go. Whatever You want me to do, I'll do it. No strings attached; here's a blank check for You to fill out. Lead and guide me, my family, to whatever You want us to do. We'll do it.” This is what it means to be a Christian. We're to live in that kind of surrender. If you start by putting conditions upon obedience to God, then you're missing the whole point of what it means to be in Christ, much less to follow His call to service. We must be open to whatever He may lead us to do. So start with surrender.

Second, abide. As you're surrendered to Him, abide in Him. Day after day after day, be in His Word, in prayer, seeking Him, obeying Him, making disciples right where He's put you. Not always thinking, “Well, is the Lord calling me to do this or that?” Start by being faithful right where you are, then trust that He will lead and guide you. My dad used to say, “When you don't know what to do, do the things you know to do.” When you don't know where God's leading, obey what you know He's already led you to do.

So surrender, abide, then third, rest. I'm convinced that when we're surrendered to Christ and we're abiding in Him—seeking Him every day, walking in step with His Spirit—He's not going to lead

or guide us off the path. He's going to keep us on His path. We can rest in the fact that He is directing us. *"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths"* (Proverbs 3:5-6).

We have a good Father Who desires His will to be accomplished in our lives more than we do. He desires this so much so that He's put His very Spirit inside us to lead and guide and direct us. He doesn't just tell us where to go—His Spirit directs our thinking and our desires. So rest in Him. Rest because you know our Father in heaven, in His sovereignty, will lead us according to His good will, for our good and ultimately for the His glory.

When you put it all together, God's call to salvation, mission, station and then service brings strength and comfort, enabling us to persevere, especially in the middle of whatever you're facing in life. Whether you're discouraged or doubting, undergoing trials and pressures or even persecution—know that you are in Christ on mission in the world, in the stations to which He has called you. In whatever areas of service and through whatever difficulties may arise, you can know He is working all these things together for the good of those who love Him and who have been called according to His purpose.

Let's pray.

God, we thank You for the way You call us to Yourself through Christ. Thank You for the way You called each of us to be Your sons or daughters and for the security we find in You. We pray that You would help us to live out that security in obedience to Your calling to mission, to the specific station into which You've put us. Then please help us to discern the leading of Your Spirit as we seek You and abide in You. Lead, guide and direct our steps in a way that is good for us, is good for the spread of the gospel and ultimately is glorifying to Your name. Thank You for the way You lead, guide and call us. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

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