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SERMON SERIES:

THE CALL: A GOD-GIVEN MISSION

ACTS 17:26; 13:36

WRITTEN BY TRAVIS COLLINS, BON AIR BAPTIST CHURCH, RICHMOND, VA



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Today we begin another series. For the next five weeks we will talk about “The Call.” I begin this series with a few specific people in mind...

While we sit here, a gentleman sits in a Starbucks somewhere contemplating life. On Friday he walked out of his office carrying a cardboard box full of family pictures and other items previously found in the drawers of his mahogany desk—another casualty of downsizing. Over his overpriced, but very good, Grande Breakfast Blend he ponders his future...and wonders if God can help.

Last night, after she finally got the kids to bed, a lady down the street from you sat, alone, rubbing her temples. She is wrestling with a recent invitation to return to the law firm she enjoyed so much before her children were born. She wishes she knew what God wants her to do. (Truthfully, she wishes God would just tell her what to do and spare her the agony of deciding.)

Last Friday a college student left a summer school class with a headache. The professor had said that human beings are merely coincidental fallout from an accidental cosmic explosion a few billion years ago and there isn't a lot of real meaning to our existence. It threw her for a loop. The pat answers and clichés she heard growing up in church just don't cut it now. She longs to know, if there is a God, does she have a place in His plan?

I have good news for the guy at Starbucks and the lady rubbing her temples and the college student...and for anyone here who wonders why in the world we are here and/or why we are here in the world. **We can know, and live out, the purposes for which we were created. Each of us has a God-given mission—a call—and we can fulfill it.**

Acts 17:26 declares, **“From one man God made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth, and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.”** And Acts 13:36 tells us, **“When David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep.”** We learn from those two texts a couple of truths that are of great importance here. **One, you aren't living where you are and when you are by accident. Two, it is possible for humans like you and me to fulfill God's purposes for us during the fleeting time allotted to us on this earth.**

Some of us have found our purpose, our mission in life. We are living what our Creator created us do to and we know it. The waters are not always smooth, but we feel the wind of the Spirit in our sails. Others of us are still searching. Some of us—too many of us—are, to quote the late Senator from Alabama Howell Heflin “wanderin' aimlessle without a goooal!” So how does one find his or her God-given “gooool”? A Christ-follower might ask it this way: “How do I find God's will for my life?”

I remember being disappointed when, as a fairly new pastor, I decided to preach my first sermon on finding God's will. I looked in my concordance under “will of God” and expected to find an abundance of passages that would enable my flock to decipher God's blueprint for each of their lives.

Blueprint passages, however, were conspicuously missing.

However, what I *did* find is a lot about God's will for—His mission to—the world. I saw His desires for the world, such as...

His desire that everyone be reconciled to Him through faith in His Son, Jesus.

His desire that people who are suffering be comforted, and those who are hungry be fed.

His desire that those who have much would share with those who have little.

His desire that all people be treated justly, regardless of their station in life.

His desire that people understand the value of moral boundaries.

His desire that people embrace His grace—His unconditional, undeserved, unlimited love.

I also found in Scripture stories of lots of people—rather ordinary folks, most of them—who found their place in God's mission. I didn't find much about "God's will for their lives." And I'm not sure they would even have considered that concept, as we generally think of it. I did see God direct their paths and prepare them for specific tasks within His plan.

In other words, the Bible doesn't talk a lot about "God's will for our lives." It *does* talk a lot about people finding their place within God's mission.

Here is another way to look at it. It's still baseball season. (It's been a good week, by the way. The Braves are on the upswing and the Yankees are still trailing the Red Sox.) Well, back to God's plan for us: a new baseball player is not likely to ask the coach, "Coach, what is your personalized plan for me?" The baseball player is more likely to ask, "May I play a position on your team?"

You have a part to play on this team. You don't have to watch from the bleachers. You don't have to sit on the bench. You have a place on God's team, and your place in His game plan is your **call**.

Call is the ongoing promptings of God's Spirit, confirmed through Scripture, intellect, and experience, that communicate: *These are your roles in my mission.*

That definition needs an explanation. First, call is ongoing. Call is not a one-time experience at a youth retreat. God's call unfolds throughout our lives.

Second, call is a "prompting." Prompting is an intentionally vague word, for I believe a call is a mystical, spiritual impression that God is communicating with us.

Third, there are ways to confirm those mysterious "promptings," and we'll talk more about those things over the next few weeks.

Finally, God's purposes for us always fit within His "big picture." Remember: God is the star of this drama, not us.

There are actually four levels, or "kinds," of call.

1. The call into a relationship with God through Jesus.

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life (Revelation 22:17).

The first call you hear (or have heard) is God's call into relationship with Him through faith in Jesus. If you have not yet responded to that call, I pray you will be open to that, for that is the first step in finding your place in God's plan.

2. Corporate call—God's call to a body of people.

3. The call to a way of life, including lifestyle and vocation.

Because our vocations are so important to us, let's concentrate on that for a moment.

Life is too short for you and me to work merely for a paycheck. If you are considering new employment, I highly recommend the book by Richard N. Bolles, *What Color Is Your Parachute?* A Christian, Bolles embraces the concept of a divine call when it comes to one's vocation, and the epilogue, "How to Find Your Mission in Life," is worth the price of the book. Bolles writes, concerning your vocation, that your mission is...

- a) to exercise that Talent which you particularly came to Earth to use—your greatest gift, which you most delight to use,
- b) in the place(s) or setting(s) which God has caused to appeal to you the most,
- c) and for those purposes which God most needs to have done in the world.

And that's true whether you are a plumber, professor, pastor, or pig farmer—there ought to be a sense of God-given mission about your vocation.

Here is a quick side-bar: Would you consider vocational ministry? Over the last few years Bon Air Baptist Church has called several senior staff members from mid-career, from within our congregation, and from secular jobs. Obviously, they aren't as saintly as those of us who took the more conventional route, but they are outstanding ministers.

There are countless Christians following God's mission through their secular jobs. Just don't rule out the possibility that God is calling you to a ministry vocation.

Whether it is in a secular or ministry vocation, I hope you will find your calling. Yesterday at Starbucks my receipt read, "Love what you do. Talk to a manager about working at Starbucks." Well, I'd re-word that a bit. I'd say, "Love what you do. Talk to the manager of the universe, and find your place in His mission."

4. Call to specific acts.

God speaks in Isaiah 48:14-15: "I, God, love this man Cyrus, and I'm using him to do what I want with Babylon. I, yes I, have spoken. I've called him. I've brought him here. He'll be successful" (From *The Message*). God brought Cyrus to the throne of Persia in order to defeat the Babylonians. That was God's "call" for Cyrus. That is an example of God's call to a specific act. Here are a couple of contemporary examples...

Jennifer sits down in the company cafeteria with a plate of steamed vegetables, her Weight Watchers candy bar, and a diet soda. As she sits down a young lady from two cubicles down sits down across from her. Jennifer's slim coworker has a cheeseburger, fries, a milkshake to wash it down, and two donuts for dessert. Jennifer quickly calculates her coworker's calories and moans at the injustices of life.

Soon the young lady is pouring out her heart to Jennifer: she just found out she is pregnant. She is scared, and contemplating an abortion. There is an instant connection between the two. Jennifer finds herself offering insights that appear genuinely helpful to her frightened, young coworker. Jennifer is able to comfort her, and they agree to meet for lunch the next day.

On her way back upstairs, Jennifer senses a spiritual stirring within her. She remembers the words of the lady who spoke at church on the previous Sunday about the crisis pregnancy center. While she listened to the director of that center make her plea for volunteers, Jennifer had felt the same stirring she felt in the cafeteria listening to the young lady pour out her heart.

And by the time she closes her eyes that night she has spoken with the crisis pregnancy center's director and Jennifer knows it: she has been called by God to volunteer at the crisis pregnancy center. It was no accident that the lady from the center and her pregnant co-worker entered her life in the same week; Jennifer has found one of her primary roles in God's mission.

Of course God's call is not always so dramatic. God might call you, for example, to speak a particular word to your neighbor. Maybe you both have taken the trash can to the road at the same time and you meet there in the street. After exchanging comments about the weather, your heart races a bit. You sense somehow that God wants you to say something. You know your neighbor's not a church-goer, and you don't want to offend him, but believing God's Spirit is behind this, you blurt out: "Hey, I go up on Monday mornings and pray with some folks at the church. Is there anything I can pray about for you?" Your neighbor gets an inquisitive look on his face. "Funny you should ask," he says. "I could use some prayers for my family." You have responded to God's call, and fulfilled your role, in that particular moment, in God's mission.

Let me return to the lessons we learned from our two texts: One, you aren't living where you are and when you are by accident. Two, it is possible for humans like you and me to fulfill God's purposes for us during the fleeting time

allotted to us on this earth. We are going to spend the next few weeks talking about how we discern and follow God's calling in our lives. And today we begin by grasping one principle...

It begins with surrender.

Two of my experiences as a missionary in Nigeria were with “Babalawos”—“medicine men” as we might call them. One is about a young man who brought a duffle bag full of his “juju” (black magic) to the seminary students and me out in a village after an evangelistic service. The other experience involved an older man.

A Nigerian pastor and I, together with a couple of young adults from the church, sat one Sunday afternoon on the dirt floor of a mud house and spoke with an elderly Babalawo. We spoke of Jesus as the Lord and King and as greater than all other powers. This was not the first time the medicine man had heard this; the Christians in the village had been praying for him and speaking to him of Jesus. He had been attending worship services at the church, and God's Spirit obviously had been working in his heart.

That Sunday afternoon, after we had talked for a while, the man expressed his desire to follow Jesus completely. Thrilled that we had been honored to reap the harvest for which so many had worked, we prayed with him.

Following the prayer the Babalawo instructed the young people to gather all his juju—his powders, potions, and paraphernalia—into a big bag. “You can do whatever you want with those things,” he said. He was through with them.

When they finished, the old man—completely unprompted—began to sing a song that he had heard at church:

Mo fi gbogbo re. Mo fi gbogbo re.

Fun o Olugbala mi ni; Mo fi won sile.

It was one of the most surreal experiences I can remember. He was singing in Yoruba the hymn he'd often heard the Christians sing at church: *I surrender all. All to Thee my Blessed Savior. I surrender all.* It was quite an unusual and moving experience. In many ways he had just placed his life in a bag; he had trusted the true God enough that he offered his life to Him as His gift.

That is what it means for you and me to follow that call—to trust God enough to surrender our lives to Him as best we understand how to do that.

Warren Wiersbe said: “*God still gives His best to those who let Him write the contract.*” Would you be willing to let God write the contract? Today I have to speak to your will—your willingness to let God call you. You won't find your mission, your purpose, your call, until you trust your Creator enough to let Him write the contract.