

Need leaders?
They could be right in front of you...



SERMON SERIES:

COURAGE FOR GOOD LIVING & GOOD DYING
JOSHUA 1:9

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



COURAGE FOR GOOD LIVING & GOOD DYING

JOSHUA 1:9

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

Moses had died and God had called Joshua to a difficult job. Following Moses and leading the Israelites would be a tough combination. But God said to him, “Be strong and courageous, for you are a super guy with a winning smile. And besides, this leadership thing is easy; it’s a piece of manna.”

No, of course that’s not what God said. Rather, God said, “Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9). God commissioned Joshua: “Be strong and courageous for in every decision you make and every change you initiate and every conflict that erupts...I will be before you, behind you, and beside you.”

The courage of the call is not self-confidence. And it is not audacity, bravado, or machismo. Real courage is a decision—a decision made sometimes by people who are shaking in their boots—that God who calls us won’t leave us.

This is the fourth Sunday in our series on “The Call.” Remember the definition of “call” with which I’m working: **Call is the ongoing promptings of God’s Spirit, confirmed through Scripture, the faith community, intellect, and experience, that communicate: “These are your roles in my mission.”**

Also, our theme for this series is: **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.** Last week we talked about a tool for the discerning of God’s call—a LIFE COMPASS:

C – Constancy (Is this something that is a constant, recurring thing for you?)

O – Observation by Others (I believe it is easiest to discern the promptings of God’s Spirit as we seek the input of others.)

M – Motives (Are our motives pure enough not to distort the voice of God’s Spirit?)

P – Peculiar Passions. (What are those things that turn you on that others find completely uninteresting?)

A – Aptitudes (What are your spiritual gifts? Your natural abilities?)

S – Seasoning (How long have you been a faithful follower of Jesus? How much experience have you had?)

S – Sensible Decision Making

Today we move from the idea of understanding, or discerning, God’s call to the idea of living out that call. Truth is, call-following is not without its challenges. Nothing of any significance ever is. In 2007 Virginia is going to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the establishment of Jamestown colony. Four centuries ago mariners with knots in their stomachs, courage in their hearts, a new world in their vision, and compasses in their hands, set out across stormy seas toward uncharted land. It was quite the adventure. But it was not an adventure for the squeamish.

Following God’s call is an adventure, too. But not an adventure for the squeamish. Strong characters, hearty constitutions, and a lot of courage are required.

Oswald Sanders wrote:

*More failure comes from an excess of caution than from bold experiments with new ideas... “The frontiers of the kingdom of God were never advanced by men and women of caution.”*¹

Doing something that you really feel like God has led you to do is often a little bit scary. Following a divine call can be daunting. If there is one thing required for call-following, it is **courage**.

Some specific reasons why courage is required...

1. You will have to live by faith.

Poet and priest James Kavanaugh went to work for three months with Mother Theresa in Calcutta. Kavanaugh was trying to figure out how to spend the rest of his life. In his first conversation with Mother Theresa, she asked him, "What can I do for you?" "I want you to pray for me," he answered.

"What do you want me to pray for," she asked. And he voiced his deep desire—that which had brought him all the way from the U.S.: "Pray that I have clarity."

Mother Theresa was firm: "No, I will not do that." He asked why not, and she answered, "Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of." "But you always seem to have clarity," he told her. She laughed. "I have never had clarity; what I have always had is trust. So I pray that you will trust God."

This compass that I keep talking about is a tool to help us discern the will of God, but no tool takes all the mystery out of a finite human trying to understand the ways and mind of infinite God. You never will have complete clarity. Oh, we can know enough to follow God's call; at the forks in life's road we can know which direction to follow. But we never will have complete clarity, and for many of us that is an awfully unsettling thing. Call-following will require you and me to live, largely, by faith. The best we can do is the best we know how to follow the promptings of God's Spirit.

Courage is required to follow a call, because you will have to walk by faith. And there is another reason...

2. You will get in over your head.

Once two men were sitting on the front porch of the General Store. One was a large, strapping, muscular fellow. The other was a thin little guy.

They were talking about bear hunting. The little guy said to the big guy, "If I was as big as you, I'd go out there and get me a big ol' bear."

The big fellow answered simply, "There's plenty o' little bears in the woods."

If you are new at this call-following, and worried that you will get in over your head, you might want to start with the little bears. There are bears that you can wrestle in these woods. You don't have to start with the grizzlies. You can take on a cub or two until you get the hang of it. That's what Paul was talking about when he wrote, in 1 Timothy 3, that new believers should not take on certain responsibilities until they have some experience under their belts

Yet there are, quite frankly, a lot of big bears that need wrestling. The bottom line is that eventually you will find yourself in a tussle with one of them. It's not a matter of "what if" you get in over your head. You *will* get in over your head. You will find yourself in various situations for which you feel underqualified. I'm in a group of about thirty pastors from across the country who meet once a year. Last year the pastor of a large church in Texas confessed, "I've got a job I don't know how to do!" We all laughed, because we could identify.

That's not a bad thing, however. There is a lot to learn about relying on God when we feel like we aren't up to the task to which we've been called. God reminded Paul that God's strength is made perfect in our weakness. Fighting a bear that's bigger than we are, however, requires courage.

Courage is required, for you will have to walk by faith, and because you will get in over your head. Furthermore...

3. You will face criticism.

Robert E. Lee once declared, "We've made a terrible mistake! We've placed all our worst generals in the fields, and we've got all our best generals in the newspaper offices!" That's not a slam on newspaper people; but it is a good reminder that anyone who does anything significant is likely to be criticized by someone sitting on the sideline.

If you are "in the fields," even the fields of ministry, criticism will come. If you attempt anything significant, you will be criticized. Jesus himself warned that something is wrong when all people speak well of you. Criticism, therefore, should be accepted as a cost of call-following.

Our effectiveness in following our call will depend largely on how we respond to that criticism. On the one hand, we can't dismiss criticism. On the other hand, we can't allow ourselves to be devastated by criticism either. Effective call-followers take their medicine when they need to, yet they don't swallow every bitter pill that someone tries to stuff down their throats.

The effective call-follower develops a tender heart, a tough hide, a clear mind, and a discerning ear. If you are without any one of the four you are like a car running with one flat tire. I know of no way to develop that crucial combination of characteristics besides a close relationship with God.

Courage is required of call-followers, for we have to walk by faith, we will get in over our heads, and we will be criticized.

But it's worth it...for call-following makes for good living and good dying.

1. Life's greatest joy comes in actively living out our calls.

Someone wrote:

*There was a very **cautious** man
Who never laughed or played.
He **never risked**, he never tried
He never sang or prayed.
And when he one day passed away,
His insurance was denied.
For since he never really lived,
They claimed he never died!⁹*

If you are *too* cautious, you can't really live! I don't want to suggest irrational, irresponsible, impulsive, imprudent decisions. And I recognize that there is a fine line between courage and craziness. Nevertheless, I would challenge you to courageously pursue your good dreams.

Remember: One of the elements of God's call to a specific task is a passion for that task. (*For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose*, Philippians 2:13). Your dream might just be your call! Check out your dream by your COMPASS, and if your COMPASS confirms that yours is a God-given dream, then follow it courageously. It would be downright sinful to bury a dream that God has entrusted to you.

C. S. Lewis, in *Surprised By Joy*, suggested that joy is not found when it is sought, so much as it is a "byproduct whose very existence presupposes that you desire not it but something other and outer." Joy is the almost unexpected consequence of meaningful pursuits. Joy is found in giving ourselves for purposes that are greater than ourselves and that have everlasting consequences. Joy is found in the fulfilling of our God-given mission, our call.

Call-following makes for good living. Call-following also makes for good dying.

2. The end of a courageous journey is sweet.

There are two ways to finish life's journey: with regret or joy. How sad it would be to come to the end of our journey and hear God whisper, *While you were doing all these things, I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer* (Jeremiah 7:13).

Yet if we are following our God-given calls, then there will be a great sense of fulfillment at the end of our journeys. Would it not be deeply satisfying to come to the end of the line on earth and look back with a sense that we had done all we were called to do, when and where we were called to do it? Paul, for example, set out for Jerusalem, knowing that it probably would mean his demise. His friends warned him not to go, but he said, *None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus* (Acts 20:24, Amplified Bible).

Paul wanted to follow his call (he referred to it as his "ministry") so that he could finish his course with joy.

And then there was Jesus. It was late on a Thursday night. A matter of probably a couple of hours later Jesus would be betrayed in the garden by Judas, arrested, and led away to be mocked and then crucified. Jesus knew that the end was near, and a few fateful hours before his crucifixion, Jesus began to pray. John recorded his prayer:

Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.

Then, Hebrews 12:2 says, that Jesus...*for the joy set before him endured the cross.*” Amid the sorrow of carrying our sin and the agony of the cross, Jesus experienced joy. Jesus came to the end of the journey with joy. How? His prayer explains it: He took out his “call” and looked at it, and said, “You know, I’ve done what I came to do.”

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark and their team of thirty-three men had walked for nineteen months—over a year-and-a-half, crossing 4,000 miles. President Thomas Jefferson had sent them on a journey of exploration to the west coast. Their journey had afforded spectacular views of God’s creation, but it had been tough. Mountains, river rapids, hostile encounters with Indians, hot days and cold nights, more varmints than vittles.

Can you imagine what it was like when Lewis & Clark reached the Pacific? On November 7, 1805, at camp near Pillar Rock, Captain Clark wrote in his journal:

*Great joy in camp we are in View of the Ocian, this great Pacific Ocean which we been So long anxious to See. and the roreing or noise made by the waves breakeing on the rocky Shores (as I Suppose) may be heard distictly. **Ocian in View! O! the joy.***

They had reached the end of a long, glorious, and difficult journey. O, the joy! They had done what they’d been sent by the President to do!

Several old hymns speak of the end of life’s journey using the metaphor of crossing the Jordan River. One says, “On Jordan’s stormy banks I stand and cast a wishful eye.” When you stand on the banks of Jordan, on the verge of eternity, how will that be for you? If God grants you the knowledge that your journey’s end is approaching, will there be regrets? Or will there be joy at having completed the work you were created to do? Will you be able to say, as Paul did, “I’ve completed my course with joy?”

Our decision today will help determine what it will be like when we stand on the banks of Jordan. For call-following not only makes for good living. It makes for good dying too.

(Endnotes)

¹ J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1967), pp. 127-128.

² In John C. Maxwell, *Developing the Leader Within You* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993), p.191.