

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



SERMON SERIES:

# HOW DO I HEAR A CALL?

JOHN 10:3-4

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

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This is the second 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, intellect, and experience, that communicate: “These are your roles in my mission.”**

Also, if there is a theme for this series it would be this phrase: **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.** Today we begin to talk about how we can discern or discover that God-given mission, our call. Today we begin to talk about how we can hear God’s voice.

Brownie Hamilton, a member of our church, read something in our monthly newsletter that really interested her. The Richmond Baptist Association (of which our church is a member) was putting together a mission trip to China. The contact information for the coordinator of the trip, a lady named Ruth, was listed. (Ruth is a member of another church.)

Brownie called Ruth that afternoon, introduced herself, and asked, “How can I get my name on the list for that mission trip to China?” Ruth responded with a question: “May I ask how you got my name?”

Brownie answered, “The Spirit.”

Ruth thought to herself, “Oh, my, I’ve got someone on the phone who thinks the Holy Spirit gave her my name!”

Brownie did, indeed, get Ruth’s name from the Spirit. As it turned out, however, the matter was not quite as mystical as Ruth imagined—the *Spirit* is the name of our church’s newsletter.

Don’t you wish the *Holy* Spirit would communicate as clearly as the church newsletter? Although it is not as clear as black and white print, He does speak.

*The sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them...his sheep follow him because they know his voice* (John 10:3-4).

It isn’t easy, at least for me, to discern the voice of God’s Spirit. We have to strain to hear. But His sheep listen for, and recognize, His voice. And He leads them.

I believe there are tools we can use that facilitate our hearing God’s voice—hearing aids, if you will. Next week I’m going to offer a tool for the discerning of God’s call. That tool is a COMPASS. I’ll talk about it in detail next week, but here, briefly, is what that compass is:

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. (If we aren’t careful, we can justify or rationalize anything in our minds. 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? Your God-given strengths?

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

Those answers help you know how you should be serving.)

S – Sensible Decision Making. (When we enter the quest to hear God’s call, we can’t leave our brains at the door.)

All that being said, we have some things we need to cover before we get to next week. **And here are some important keys for discerning God’s call.**

#### **A PERSONAL, GROWING, REAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.**

Henry Blackaby stated: “The key to knowing God’s voice is not a formula. It is not a method we can follow. Rather, knowing God’s voice comes from an intimate love relationship with God.” If you want to know God’s plan for you, then cultivate your relationship with Him. And there is no way to do that other than the spiritual disciplines which we mention around here so often—a lifestyle of solitude, prayer, Bible study, worship, on a regular, disciplined basis.

#### **A DEEP SENSE OF RIGHTNESS**

God’s voice comes as a profound impression that we are being prompted toward a decision. Deep in our spirits there comes an “oughtness”—a deep sense of rightness—if God is directing our steps.

For me, God’s voice sounds like a quiet, confident, unwavering “yes” in my gut. “Gut feelings,” however, need confirmation. Dan McBride sang, “This must be the will of the Lord because it seems so right to me.” Is that how we determine the will of the Lord? A feeling? Well, we need more than that, and I will take all my time next Sunday talking about some confirmations that we can look for. Yet there is nothing that can take the place of a mystical, deep sense of rightness.

#### **LISTENING FOR THE VOICE OF GOD THROUGH SCRIPTURE**

Our daughter, Brennan, was sad when we first told her that a move to Richmond was likely. (She was a fourteen-year-old with a boyfriend.) Then, two mornings later, she announced, “Last night I was reading in my quiet time the story of Job—how God told him to leave his people and his country and go to a new place...”

“Might that have been Abraham?” I asked.

“Whoever,” Brennan said.

Then she told Keri and me, “I thought maybe that story was a sign that we should go to Virginia.”

Now *that’s* cool. God does speak through the examples and principles of Scripture.

#### **CIRCUMSTANCES? YES, BUT BE CAREFUL...**

From time to time I hear people say, “It must be the will of God, for everything has just fallen into place.” I get a little nervous when I hear that. Obstacles are not necessarily indications that God is in opposition to what is happening. Likewise, the absence of obstacles is not necessarily a sign of God’s blessing or approval.

Warren Wiersbe noted that if Jonah had followed only the circumstances, the “open doors,” he might well have concluded that God was calling him *away from* Ninevah. After all, everything seemed to fall into place! When he got to the docks at Joppa the ship was right there waiting for him! He just happened to have enough money for a ticket! And he had such a peace about things that he was able to sleep during a storm! Wiersbe concluded, “It’s possible to be out of the will of God and still have circumstances appear to be working on your behalf.”

Let me offer a fresh example of how circumstances can be misleading. Over the past three years we have done a lot of talking and planning and praying about a multi-site ministry. There arose a consensus among church leaders that we should launch another site, and the church voted to do that. But six months before our target launch date, circumstances were not encouraging. We couldn’t find a site! We couldn’t find anywhere to meet! We couldn’t find a building to lease that had the right square footage except in places where the price was way out of our range. Our

request to use James River High School was turned down. Circumstances seemed to say that we weren't supposed to be doing this.

But there was a deep sense of rightness among our leaders—the belief that we were doing the right thing—so we pressed on. And then things began to happen. We found a marvelous site pastor in John Sawyer. We have a great part-time staff in Brent Jones and Becky Kaiser. A lot of great folks, strong leaders, have emerged who say they have been called to be part of a launch team. And James River High School reversed their decision and said we could come! Besides that, the new person in charge of the facility is a Christian and a member of Crestwood Presbyterian Church, a church in two locations, so he totally “gets” the multi-site idea and wants to help us succeed!

If we were sitting here, a few weeks away from launch, and we had no place, no staff, and no volunteers, we probably would be right in saying we need to rethink our decision. So circumstances are not to be ignored. But “open doors” and “closed doors” should be weighed alongside other indications.

God does not always orchestrate everything according to our calendar or strategy. Things don't always go according to plan. Circumstances, when considered alongside other indications, can be helpful in discerning God's voice; but everything doesn't fall perfectly into place—even when God is calling.

**Here now are three common myths regarding God's call.**

**Myth One: God only calls people who are (1) young; and (2) have unblemished pasts; and (3) have impressive resumes.**

**TRUTH: The call comes to unlikely people.**

Moses is an example of an unlikely callee. He was not young, he did not have an unblemished past, and he did not have an impressive resume. He was a middle-aged fugitive sheep farmer working for his father-in-law.

**First, if we are not careful, we will assume that if God is going to call someone to a unique role He will do so while the individual is a teenager, or maybe in college.** When God called Moses from the burning bush, however, he was middle aged—eighty years old (granted, people lived longer then).

Now it is true that teenagers and young adults should be particularly careful to listen to God, for you are making decisions that you will live with for the rest of your life. Yet, we cannot assume that if we are past the age of twenty-two God won't call us to anything that would require a life change for us.

Increasingly, followers of Jesus seem open to a refreshing call from God in their thirties and fifties and seventies. Some call this the “second journey.” People are resigning, retiring, retooling, retraining, refocusing, regrouping, and receiving a fresh word from the Almighty. They are catching their second wind—and it is the wind of God's Spirit. Are you open to a fresh word from God about your life—a “second journey”?

**Second, we sometimes assume that God calls people with perfect pasts and unblemished records.** Moses, though, was a killer who had left Egypt to escape punishment. That ought to give some encouragement to those of you who think God couldn't call you because of your past.

I *know* God calls unworthy people, for I *am* one. God is grace-ful; don't be disheartened by the regret of past decisions.

**Third, God uses people who might not make the cut if someone else were doing the hiring.** Moses himself knew that he was not the guy that most would have picked to lead the Exodus. When it comes to a call, God seems to *prefer* unworthy people. Look at these words from Scripture.

*Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. (1 Corinthians 1:26-29).*

So don't think that God only calls people who are young, who have unblemished pasts, and have impressive resumes.

**Myth Two: In each situation, there is only one decision I can make and still be in God's will.**

**TRUTH: There might be more than one decision that you can make and still fulfill your purpose in God's plan.**

I don't think the will of God for one's life is limited to that *one* job or that *one* place I could be or that *one* role in God's Kingdom that I could fulfill. My understanding of "God's will" is that He wants me to long for the fulfillment of His purposes for humankind, and to find where I fit into that picture. And there might be more than one "slot" where I could "fit."

Let's consider a possible scenario. A deeply devoted, twenty-two-year-old follower of Jesus is graduating with a B.S. in nursing. She has four job offers. Is there only *one* that is in God's will for her? Maybe. Maybe not.

Certainly she is going to pray and ask for God's direction. She is going to consult those whose counsel she trusts. And she is going to ask the following questions about those potential places of employment:

*Is there one place that seems to fit my skills best?*

*Is there one place where the needs are greatest?*

*Is there one place where I will be able to reach my God-given potential?*

*Are my motives appropriate for a follower of Jesus? In other words, is this decision about how best I can serve God and humankind, or is this purely about what's in it for me?*

I believe God gives us the freedom to make choices. I believe that as long as her motives are Christ-like and her intentions are pure—as long as she does the best she can do, and what she chooses is consistent with God's mission and His character—God will be delighted with whichever decision she makes.

**Myth Three: If I blow it once, I've blown it forever.**

**TRUTH: The God who calls is full of grace.**

Sharron sensed a clear call to be a missionary to Africa during a spiritual retreat in college. Soon after that, however, she met a handsome, charming, baseball player who stole her heart and, in a sense, stole her call. The two were married and now, two decades and two kids later, Sharron squirms while the guest speaker in her church—a missionary from Africa—pleads with people to join him and his colleagues in international mission service. "Don't just pray and pay," he says, "Be willing to go!" Sharron's mind goes back to that college retreat during which she told her campus minister that she was called to be a missionary to Africa.

So has Sharron blown it completely? Has God turned His back on her? Certainly not.

God meets us where we are and invites us to walk with Him from that point—even those who have blown a call to missions. God caught up with Jonah in the belly of a big fish, and with John Mark back in Jerusalem after he'd left Paul and Barnabas high and dry in Pamphylia. God has accomplished some wonderful things through people who missed, or even abandoned, their original calls.

Sharron can serve as a short-term volunteer overseas, in a Christian homeless ministry, or in helping her church start a new congregation. She won't see those as chances to make up for a mistake; she will see them as opportunities to join God on mission *now*, regardless of the past.

When (not *if*) we make an honest mistake in judgment, God does not write us off. God's grace is amazing, even when our judgment is amazingly bad. That takes the pressure off...when hearing the voice of the Shepherd is not as easy as reading *The Spirit*.