

A God-Called Man

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It has always been a matter of great importance to me to study upon the subject of how God calls a man for his use. As a Christian biographer, I have spent countless hours in deep meditation on what occurs when God calls a person and sets that person apart for his use. I often look for common denominators between men of God whom God has used in former times. When I conducted my laborious research on the life of George Whitfield, for instance, it was greatly useful to me personally to see how God built Whitfield from the ground up, so to speak, and that indeed is what God does with every one of us who desires to be used of him for his great glory: he builds us up from the ground up. And when I studied Bible characters such as Moses and Abraham and Joseph and David, I see common denominators between them which run like a heavenly thread throughout their lives as they serve their God. When God calls a man into his service and sets that man apart, you'd better be sure that God will never give up on that man. Yes, we can hinder God's activity and blessings in our lives through willful sin, we can suffer the consequences of those grievous sins but God will never give up on a man he has chosen to perform a specific task in his grand plan in the redemption of men.

My message this evening is entitled "A God-Called Man" and our text for our study tonight is Genesis 12. We will be in verses 1-8. Before I read our passage from the word of God, I want to state clearly and emphatically to those who wish to be more useful to God in their generation that God will issue you a call to join him in his work, it will be a clear call from heaven and unmistakable. I will relate to you of which I am speaking from my own personal experience with the Almighty. When God calls a man to preach, he will set that man on fire. I see that in the life of Moody, Edwards, Whitfield and Spurgeon. There are many capable pastors who could run a church and teach the Bible and keep it all together but there are few men, friends, who occupy our pulpits with a direct call of God on their life. That's the great difference between power in the pulpit and just personality.

I have been trained to preach by one of the greatest preachers who ever stood in the pulpit, the late Dr. Stephen F. Olford. I was in the first graduating class of his school of preachers. Dr. Olford commissioned me to preach but although I had graduated from his school of expository preaching and I had graduated from two different seminaries, I had yet to receive a genuine call on my life to preach. I cannot emphasize the importance of this enough. I fear there are many who occupy our pulpits today, they are good men with

sincere hearts with degrees and experience to back them but they have never, ever received a call from God to preach. Now, I might have a fight on my hands with that one but it's true, friends. How many preachers have you heard when they preached, you were confronted with eternity and there is a God consciousness which pervades the atmosphere?

Let me get back to my own story. I had preached, so to speak, in past times at various churches and conferences without a genuine call of God on my life to preach. The effects of my preaching were not worth mentioning. There was absolutely nothing which stood out from my attempts at preaching. People were pleased, yes, and appreciative for my efforts but with the exception of a couple of times, there was no great stir. Then one day when I was alone in my Bible, God gave me a specific call to preach. I was reading Luke's gospel in chapter 14; I will never forget it. It occurred on the 22nd of May one year, actually the anniversary of this very year today. I was reading the following verse which states,

“And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.”

I became quite startled and alarmed. God was speaking directly to me from his written word. He wanted me of all people to be his preacher. From that point on, my preaching took on a different dimension altogether.

I cannot stress the importance of a genuine call of God on a person's life. Oh, what heartache, friend, you will encounter if you try to serve in the ministry without a genuine call from God. Ministry is the most demanding work in the world for it can impact a person's eternal destiny for heaven or hell. Souls are at stake. Any other occupation may involve a number of different things but there is nothing in this world more important than reaching a person with the gospel of the Son of God. I feel sorry for the congregation whose pulpit committee selected their pastor based on his ability to grow a church because of his winning personality over a God-called man who has a prayer life that can move the heart of the Almighty and through whose preaching the Almighty can move the hearts of men. Surely, this aspect of a genuine call of God on a life can alter much in our churches today. We need more God-called men in our pulpits today, friends, not entertainers.

You may turn in your Bibles to Genesis 12. I will begin reading in verse 1.

“1 Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: 2 And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: 3 And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. 4 So Abram departed, as the LORD had spoken unto him; and Lot went with him: and Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran. 5 And Abram took Sarai his

wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran; and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came. 6 And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Sichem, unto the plain of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land. 7 And the LORD appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the LORD, who appeared unto him."

I will stop there. We see this man, Abraham, he's an old man in a childless marriage which I'm sure was a constant grievance to him throughout his life in a society of the day where children were looked upon as great blessings. Here is a man who hears from God; he does not question it, he believes God. He acts on the belief through faith. He steps out in faith, so to speak, and God looks at this man Abraham and is pleased. Abraham was called the friend of God. Abraham is a God-called man who was set apart to carry out a great purpose in the redemption of mankind. Jesus often referred to Abraham. When Jesus called Zacchaeus, he said, "This day is salvation come to this house, forsomuch as he also is a son of Abraham." Notice how God initiates the relationship between he and Abraham. Is that not so with us as well, friends, in our salvation? We love him because he first loved us.

But God must try this man, Abraham, through various trials. We see in our 12th chapter here, in verse 10, that there comes a famine in the land and Abraham went down into Egypt and then he fails the test and falters in his faith by denying his wife and pretending she was his sister. I love what Matthew Henry, the great Bible commentator, says of this incident,

"The grace Abram was most eminent for was faith; and yet he thus fell through unbelief and distrust of the divine Providence, even after God appeared to him twice. Alas! What will become of the willows, when the cedars are thus shaken?"

So we see God initiate a relationship with this man Abraham, God speaks to him in a call on his life regarding a divine purpose which would be carried out through that life. And as we study the book of Genesis, we see how God builds this man Abraham, how he tests him. God sets him apart for a unique purpose and gives Abraham an opportunity to demonstrate his faith by offering his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice. Abraham's faith is tried and he passes that test of faith by his obedience to the command of God to offer up his son, Isaac. Now notice, friends, how Abraham exercises both obedience and faith. Is that not our Christian walk? Obedience and faith on a daily basis. God will test our faith, try our obedience; he will place us in adversity to purge us of our dross and things which hinder him. He will place us in trials and great difficulties to prune us for further usefulness and further fruitfulness. Oh, the ways of God are in the deep.

But take notice of what God tells Abraham in answer to offering up Isaac. I will read us from Genesis 22:16-18 which states,

“16 By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: 17 That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; 18 And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.”

I wonder, friends, how many opportunities we have missed in our lives by not obeying God; how many blessings have been withheld from our families from our lack of faith and our lack of obedience. Let me ask you, friend: can God say of you “thou hadst obeyed my voice”? What a challenge this man Abraham is to us today.

Now, there were several aspects to this matter of how God calls a person and sets them apart which I now wish to dwell upon. You may wish to write these down as they are taken from my own personal experience. God has seemed pleased to place me in various trials during my life. Some of my trials have been at times overwhelming. The recent death of my wife has been one of those times. There are certain seasons, friends, when all you can do is stand on his word and lean on him. But I can say this, that through the midst of my suffering and adversity, I saw the hand of God time and time again as he carried out his promises to me. He is faithful even when I am not. How can a willow stand amidst such storms of life?

It is only by his grace that I am even here to speak with you this evening. I'm surprised I'm still alive. I recall a certain year in my life where I was in a deep depression. Things were so bad. I was up in the middle of the night and I felt as if I was dying. My breathing was heavy and I could not sleep. I went into my study and sat at my desk before my open Bible. I was under my juniper tree. I told the Lord I was ready to come home to be with him. I can recall what he told me to this day. It was about 3 a.m. in the wee hours of the morning and a voice spoke to my heart. It said, “You understand what an investment is, do you not?” I nodded. The voice then said, “I have an investment in you and I will receive the dividends from my investment.” Well, when I heard that, I suddenly felt better and went back to bed. Like Charles Wesley, I can say, “I am immortal until my work is done.”

Let me now go over these aspects of how God calls a person into usefulness to him. Here they are; you may wish to jot them down, friends. 1. He will speak through his written word. His voice will be clearly heard through his word. You may have been over a passage of Scripture time and time again and it was impersonal before but now suddenly, it comes alive and it drives a dagger into your heart or it's a bright light shining upon the page. This may occur while you are meditating on a certain passage or it may occur while you are listening to the preached word. Either way, God will speak clearly to you personally through his word and it will be confirmed by his Spirit. It will be unquestionably his voice spoken to you directly. When Moses was keeping his father-in-law's flock and he saw the bush burn with fire, he turned to approach it and the text in Exodus reads, “And when the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I.” When

God called Samuel, the text in 1 Samuel reads, “And the LORD came, and stood, and called as at other times, Samuel, Samuel. Then Samuel answered, Speak; for thy servant heareth.” When God calls you, friend, you will know it. His voice will be unmistakable. When I was doing my research on my biography on J. Sidlow Baxter, I soon learned that God often spoke to Dr. Baxter by saying, “Sid, Sid.” A God-called man will recognize his call.

2. When God calls a person, there is often a prolonged time of development. Moses spent 40 years in Egypt before he fled to the backside of Midian in the desert. And it took God 40 years to get Egypt out of Moses before God could use Moses. Listen friends, it took God 20 years before he could use me. I was so full of myself; I was not yet ready to preach the Christ who emptied himself. God took me through a long period of development. First God gifts a person with abilities and then God develops those abilities to bring him glory. We have to be made dependable to God by being made willing to be expendable. There is a cross in the middle of service to the King; the self live must go the way of the cross. One must be placed into the school of Christ and the lessons learned there will be gained through much difficulty so when God calls a man, he then takes time to develop him for usefulness to him.

3. There will then be a time of testing. The man will be tried time and time again to see if obedience and faith is exercised. Many failures, many disappointments, will be encountered. The slower the learner, the longer the process of trial. Some are more resistant to the will of God in their lives, others are more pliable. God does not use the same means with everyone; each man needs different instruction from the Master Teacher. The testing will come in different seasons of life and through various means but the end purpose is to discover our hearts, learn our weaknesses and learn to lean only upon Christ Jesus. A self-reliant man will never do a ministry; he must be a God-reliant man to be a God-called man.

4. Trial and adversity makes the man. I remember Stephen Olford sharing a story with me as I was sitting with him in his study one day. He said a pastor friend of his invited him to go and hear a young preacher who was making a lot of noise within Southern Baptist circles so this pastor and Dr. Olford got in a car and traveled to hear this young man preach. On the drive home, the pastor asked Stephen Olford what he thought of the young preacher. Dr. Olford replied, “Yes, he is a very fine preacher indeed but he hasn't suffered enough.” When I heard Dr. Olford relate that story to me, at the time I did not understand it but now I do. Some of the best preachers I know have been great sufferers. I was sitting in Adrian Rogers' office with him one day and I looked him in the eye and I said, “Dr. Rogers, tell me what was the turning point in your ministry?” He looked down at the ground and then after a pause he looked thoughtfully at me and replied, “It was after the death of my baby boy.” When I studied David Brainerd, Spurgeon, Whitfield, I see a common thread which runs throughout their lives and that thread is great suffering. The divine pruning knife in the Master's hand cuts deep but it cuts with a specific purpose of producing more fruit. Few want to yield to that divine pruning knife, friends.

I recall preaching to a group of pastors one evening on this very subject of the divine pruning knife and God seemed to bless the message that evening for there was a great solemnity in the air while I preached from John 15. When I was through, an elderly saint approached me and hugged me and he said, "I have been a pastor for 50 years, I want you to know, but tonight I'm going home and when I get there I'm going to kneel by my bed and I'm going to ask God to get out his pruning knife on me and my ministry." But few want that pain, friends, but usefulness and suffering go hand-in-hand.

I remember a story about Helen Roseveare which has stayed with me. She was a missionary to the Congo who was greatly used of God. When she was young, she was a member of a church that Graham Scroggie was the pastor. She went forward one night in a call to service. Graham Scroggie, in his wisdom, took her Bible and in the margin he wrote "Philippians 3:10" and then he looked her in the eye and told her, "You have done this already. You know him. I pray that some day you will come to the place of privilege of knowing the fellowship of his sufferings." Twenty years later in 1966, Helen Roseveare was serving as a missionary in Africa in the middle of the uprising in the Congo and she was brutally beaten with a rubber hose and kicked by her attackers. At one point, the pain was so intense and too hard to endure. She almost couldn't take it but she remembered the words of Graham Scroggie years ago regarding knowing the fellowship of his sufferings and this helped her through that ordeal. I am not intimating that to be used of God you must suffer for him but you must be prepared to suffer if he calls you to that fellowship of his sufferings.

So this matter of being a God-called man or a God-called woman is serious business, friends. It comes with great accountability and deep responsibility. If your prayer is, "God, use me," be prepared for the answer to that prayer. It may come in ways you never imagine. Finally, a God-called man must be a holy man of God. You cannot live a life of inconsistency and remain there and expect to have God smile upon you. In Amos it states, "Can two walk together unless they be agreed?" God is holy and he hates sin. If you have not mastered sin in your life then your usefulness to God will be minimized. All the men I know who were greatly used of God were holy men of God: a Sidlow Baxter, Adrian Rogers, Stephen Olford, Leonard Ravenhill were each holy men who walked closely with their God.

I recall a story related by Manley Beasley about Stephen Olford. Dr. Olford was to preach in a Dallas area church and the pastor of the church asked a young intern to go and pick up Dr. Olford from the airport. The young man asked to see a photograph of Stephen Olford for he did not know what he looked like. The pastor replied, "No need for that. Just go to the airport terminal and watch the passengers as they deplane and look for a man who has God all over him. That will be Stephen Olford." The young man went to the airport and carefully observed the passengers as they appeared from the corridor and as soon as Stephen Olford emerged with his coat thrown over his arm and briefcase in hand, he knew it was him because of his holy countenance.

Listen friends, when God calls a man he will make that man wholly sold-out to him in service and holy unto him with his life. There may be bumps along the way and straying

footsteps and mud puddles but the Good Shepherd will always go fetch us, always clean us up. He'll clean up his straying sheep and sanctify them for more faithful service in the future. The Christian life is a life like Abraham of obedience and faith continually fleshed out in our mortal frames. I like the old hymn, "Trust and Obey,"

"Trust and obey,
For there is no other way.
To be happy in Jesus,
And to trust and obey."

And it's true, friends. It's true.

Well, I hope these observations have been of some help to you as you seek God's best for you with your life. Remember this: when God issues a call, he will see it through to completion and when God makes a promise to us through his word, you can be sure, friend, God keeps his promises. You can count on him to get you through every obstacle in life for his grace is sufficient. It's sufficient for every hurt. It's sufficient for every pain. It's sufficient for every trial. And it's sufficient for every adversity in life. And his grace is sufficient for the completion of his call on your life, friend. Pray that the Lord of the harvest will send more God-called men and women into the harvest field. In the mid-1800s, it was a time of missionary enterprise both in America and Great Britain but, my, has the gold dimmed. Pray for God to raise up God-called preachers to reach this generation with the gospel of the Son of God. This is the greatest need in our land today.