**Called**

Acts 9:1-22

Back in the day, before cell phones and Life 360 GPS location apps, it’s amazing we survived as kids, right? After school we would go to the park to play ball, ride bikes all over the neighborhood (without helmets) and just run around with our friends - sometimes goofing around with BB guns in the woods and getting held up by the police. Remember building ramps to jump off of with your BMX bike? Up north we had sledding hills and you would ride your bike down them. I only crashed hard one time. Major road rash. A miracle we made it to high school…

The point of this reminder is that our parents had **different methods for calling us home**. Sometimes it was a time of day - “Be home by 6.” Sometimes it was a bell that would ring for dinner. A lot of the time it was a shout from the porch - “Time for dinner!” Believe it or not, all of those systems worked pretty well.

When you heard Mom’s voice - or worse, Dad’s voice - ***you came running home***. Today we reflect on **how JESUS called us to our eternal home**. How did Jesus get your attention? How did He call YOUR name? What bell did He ring? We just heard the story of how Jesus called Saul the Pharisee. Let’s walk through ***the three parts of his calling*** and see how they apply to us.

The **background to this story** is the execution of Stephen - the first martyr of the early church. Saul was the Pharisee in charge of that killing. And it didn’t stop there.

“But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord… if he found any belonging to the Way… he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.” Acts 9:1-2

Saul became ***the greatest enemy of the church***. Listen to his testimony about himself in Acts 26:

“I not only locked up many of the saints in prison… but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues… I persecuted them even to foreign cities.” Acts 26:10-11

Saul was devoted to the Law of God. He was a Pharisee which meant he was one of the theological masters in the Jewish community. He felt like he was totally righteous in locking up and executing these “Christ-followers,” as blasphemers against the One True God. He was ***convinced Jesus was a false Messiah*** and therefore was the founder of a cult - a false prophet who was rightly executed and therefore his followers were guilty of the same crime and deserving of the same fate.

Saul was a dangerous enemy - a true zealot who gave himself completely to the task of wiping Christianity off the face of the map. He was purging Israel of this dangerous cancer. It was a messy, bloody business but in his mind it was a holy war and someone had to get their hands dirty. That’s our context. So we join Saul on horseback with a band of his fellow zealous Pharisees - basically ***a troop of BOUNTY HUNTERS*** from the old west with orders from the High Priest to seek out and lock up any Christians they could find in Damascus. Get the music from the Mandalorian in the background and a slow motion horseback sequence as Saul and his troopers ride into town…

“Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shown around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’” Acts 9:3-4

This is ***not your typical conversion story***. Saul would become an important leader in the early church, the writer of nearly half of the New Testament - the 13th Apostle, basically. There is a reason we get more details about Saul’s conversion than anyone else in the New Testament.

Most of us didn’t get a blinding flash of light. And if we are honest, I don’t think that’s what we want, is it? ***Anyone want to order up a lightning bolt?*** Do you want the **JONAH** treatment? Do you remember Jonah, the reluctant missionary? Actually the straight up rebellious prophet.

God sent him to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, the enemies of God’s people. Instead of obeying God and going on this mission to a lost pagan city, Jonah went the opposite way and sailed in the opposite direction. How did God call Jonah back? He sent a huge storm so the sailors threw Jonah overboard. Then God sent a huge fish to swallow Jonah whole.

There are some interesting similarities in Jonah’s story and Saul’s:

* Both were supposed to be ***servants of God***. Jonah was a prophet; Saul was a Pharisee, devoted to God’s Law.
* Both ***felt righteous*** in the approach they took, even though later it was clear they were directly disobeying God’s actual will.
* Both were ***dramatically confronted by God*** - with unusual acts of power to get their attention and turn them around.
* Both had ***3 day TIMEOUTS in the dark***. Jonah was in the belly of a fish; Saul was struck blind.
* Both went on to be ***mightily used by the Lord*** to lead many non-Jews to saving faith in God.

Jonah and Saul had dramatic calling interventions. I think we can all be thankful that most of the time God uses more subtle and gentle ways of calling us. But the pattern is the same. Three consistent steps in the ways God calls us. First:

1. Jesus **Confronts** your sins against Him

And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, **why are you persecuting me**?’” Acts 9:3-4

A blinding light. Knocked to the ground. Struck blind. A voice from heaven. And ***Jesus Himself spoke directly to Saul*** - “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

On the one hand this may seem like a harsh intervention - as it was with Jonah. But hear **how personal this calling is**. Jesus singled out this particular man and called him by name - “Saul, Saul.”

Do you remember ***when Jesus called YOU by name?*** Hopefully it didn’t take a lightning bolt or a giant storm or sudden illness to get your attention. Hopefully the still, small voice of Jesus was enough to hear him calling you to Himself. One of the most common ways Jesus calls people personally is through other PEOPLE. For me it was my parents who told me about Jesus. The same for Kristin and for many of you. Some of you had a roommate or Christian friend. Some of you met a Christian girl who forced you to come to church. Whatever the means Jesus used, it was Jesus HIMSELF who was calling you.

And think of the privilege we all have that ***Jesus still calls people to Himself THROUGH US!*** You and I have the responsibility and joy to reach out to people and call them by name - get to know them personally and through us Jesus will call them to Himself.

But notice the way Jesus called Saul. “Why are you persecuting ME?” This is a crucial point. When Jesus calls us, He doesn’t call us because we are so amazing and wonderful. He doesn’t choose the best and the brightest, the nicest and sweetest people and say “those are the ones I want.” **Jesus ONLY calls sinners**. And He calls us to REPENT.

Because the truth is that all of us are sinners - and ***all the sins we commit are actually against Jesus***. Saul was dragging Christians off to prison and having them executed. Each of those Christians had a name and a family - they were sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, husbands, wives, parents, grandparents. But Jesus said that Saul’s sins against Jesus’ followers were sins against HIM. Believers are ONE WITH JESUS by faith. We are presented in Scripture as his brothers and sisters in the family of God, as living stones in the temple He is building, as His bride and as members of His body. ***Whatever people do against Christians they do against Jesus.*** He takes it very personally.

Listen to **Matthew 25**, a vivid portrayal of the final judgment. On the last day every human soul will stand before King Jesus and receive their final, eternal verdict. That judgment will be based on what they DID. It is a sobering text. For those who belong to him by faith, as Jesus evaluates how we loved and served and cared for one another he will say:

1. Jesus **Confronts** your sins against Him

“Truly, I say to you, as you did it to the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.” Matthew 25:40

By contrast, for those who have not committed to Jesus in faith, he will pronounce his final judgment:

1. Jesus **Confronts** your sins against Him

“Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” Matthew 25:46

***Jesus takes our sins very personally***. Every time we hurt someone it hurts Jesus. Every time we love and bless someone, it blesses Jesus. When Jesus calls you to Himself He confronts your sin - and very clearly shows you that all of your sins have ultimately been against Him.

* A **disrespectful word** to your parents, is a sin against Jesus.
* An **unkind word** to your spouse - or simply neglecting to love your husband or wife well, is a sin against Jesus.
* Failure to do your best on **an assignment** is a sin against Jesus.
* **Ignoring the needs** of a neighbor is a sin against Jesus.

Everything we do to harm another person or fail to lovingly serve another person is ultimately a sin against Jesus. You cannot come to Jesus in faith until He confronts you on this. “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting **ME**?”

Jesus says that to all of us. Fill in your name and hear Jesus saying to you, ***“Why are you neglecting me?*** Why are you loving and serving yourself? What you have done against others you have done against me.”

Until you realize that Jesus is confronting your sins against HIM you cannot take a step closer to Him. First Jesus confronts our sins against Him. The second part of our calling is when Jesus commands us to surrender completely to Him.

2. Jesus **Commands** your total surrender to Him

“Suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground… he said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’” Acts 9:3-4

Saul had no confusion about what was happening. ***Saul understood power and authority.*** Saul was in a position of great authority, commissioned by the High Priest himself. But suddenly Saul was confronted by someone with far greater authority than him and clearly greater power than the high priest. This was the voice of God from heaven. This was **Mount Sinai power** and glory shining directly on him. This was the finger of God striking him blind - him who supposedly saw the Law of God and the will of God so clearly. This was the voice of God from heaven.

**When Jesus calls you it is not a negotiation**. There are no terms to work out. Jesus will accept nothing less than total, unconditional surrender. Jesus is the All Glorious King - and He is worthy of nothing less than our full devotion and allegiance.

**Many people have tried giving Jesus terms.** “Jesus, I’ll follow you IF you give me this or that…” Jesus is not a vending machine. He hears our prayers and is gracious and merciful to answer as many as he does. But Jesus will not be ordered around. That’s not how the relationship works - it’s exactly backwards, in fact. And Jesus is supremely patient, giving us time to realize that He is the One in charge and we are not.

***There was no negotiation*** there outside of Damascus. Saul was on the ground, blind. Jesus remained on His throne in heaven. Saul rightly addressed the heavenly voice as “Lord.” **The word “Lord”** in Greek can mean anything from “boss” to “God,” but here it almost certainly means “God,” because Saul knew how God presented Himself. Saul knew the Old Testament better than anyone. He knew that God appeared in blinding, overwhelming light. He had read about the glory of the Lord filling the temple and the terrifying presence of God on Mount Sinai. He knew that no one could see God and live - so being struck blind, Saul knew, was a mercy that preserved his life.

Suddenly the man who was riding all over the region as if he was in charge of everything was on his face before God. And that is precisely where God wants us. Jesus commands your total surrender to Him.

2. Jesus **Commands** your total surrender to Him

“Rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” Acts 9:6

That was it. More instructions would come in 3 days through a Christian named Ananias. For three days Saul simply had to wait on the Lord - in total darkness. For those three days Saul neither ate nor drank - this was a total fast. Total fasts - from both food and water - are very rare. And three days is the longest the human body can go without water before you die. ***So this total fast is a sign of Saul’s total surrender to Jesus.*** Or at least the beginning of it. Jesus explains to Ananias what is coming for Saul.

2. Jesus **Commands** your total surrender to Him

“He is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles… I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” Acts 9:15-16

The one who caused so much suffering for those who bore the name of Jesus would himself ***suffer more than anyone*** for the sake of that Name. And, amazingly, Paul would later come to rejoice in that suffering because in it he experienced a fellowship with **Jesus, the ultimate suffering servant**!

We don’t like to think about suffering, but pause here over these words and consider **how much have YOU had to suffer for the sake of Jesus’ name?** How much has Jesus called you to sacrifice in service to Him? How have you given up your comforts, your desires? How have you surrendered your will to the will of God?

Christian history is filled with heroes who have suffered deeply for the name of Jesus. Missionaries like William Carey, Hudson Taylor and Adoniram Judson - just to name a few. ***All suffered terrible losses*** in the death of children and wives. All embraced this suffering as something God had given to them for their good, for their growth and for the advance of the gospel.

If you want an inspiring book, read ***A Camaraderie of Confidence*** by John Piper. He weaves into that book the stories of George Mueller, Hudson Taylor and Charles Spurgeon. Two pastors and a missionary they both supported. All three suffered major challenges in life but were united in their confidence in the sovereign goodness of God to them.

<https://www.crossway.org/articles/did-you-know-that-charles-spurgeon-struggled-with-depression/>

We can imagine, even if not truly appreciate, the losses that missionaries in places like 18th century China or India might experience. But consider **Charles Spurgeon**. Arguably the most famous and gifted preacher of all time, Spurgeon was afflicted almost his entire life with depression and chronic pain.

Early in his ministry, when he was just 22, while preaching to a full music hall of thousands gathered, **a foolish teenager shouted “fire”** and the ensuing panic caused the death of seven people and the serious injury of 28 others. Spurgeon never fully recovered from that tragedy.

Barely ten years later Spurgeon developed kidney problems, along with gout, rheumatism and other ailments that caused him ***regular and often severe pain*** for the rest of his life.

“Knowing by most painful experience what deep depression of spirit means, being visited therewith at seasons by no means few or far between, I thought it might be consolatory to some of my brethren if I gave my thoughts thereon, that younger men might not fancy that some strange thing had happened to them when they became for a season possessed by melancholy; and that sadder men might know that one upon whom the sun has shone right joyously did not always walk in the light.” Charles Spurgeon

Charles Spurgeon, the silver-tongued preacher who saw so many respond to the gospel and whose chapel was almost always overflowing, was ***afflicted with depression and pain***. Before you give in to envy another person always remember how little you know of their actual life. I am very tempted to envy the success and fame of Charles Spurgeon but knowing the details of his suffering makes me very reluctant to trade places with him.

The point here is that ***Jesus remains Lord no matter what we are going through***. And He continues to command our total surrender. That is how we begin our relationship with Him and how we continue it to the end of time. Jesus is always and only Lord and we live in joyful surrender and submission to Him. Here is how Spurgeon expressed it:

2. Jesus **Commands** your total surrender to Him

“When the gold knows why and wherefore it is in the fire . . . [it] will thank the Refiner for putting it into the crucible, and will find a sweet satisfaction even in the flames.” Charles Spurgeon

When Jesus calls you He first confronts your sins against Him. Then He commands your total surrender - knocking you to your knees, whether figuratively or literally. Finally, the third step in our calling is:

3. Jesus **Commissions** you to serve Him

“I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to… the Gentiles… to open their eyes…” Acts 26:16-17

***Paul was God’s chosen instrument***. The most radical Jew in Israel in the first century was sent by God to GENTILES. The one who was hunting down Christians was sent out to hunt down godless pagans, barbarian tree-worshipers, sun and moon-worshipers. I wonder how much of Paul’s suffering Jesus talked about was physical and how much was emotional and psychological from simply being forced to associate with unclean, uncircumcised, non-Law-keeping, non-Kosher eating Gentiles…

Of course, Paul was absolutely brilliant. He used his exceptional mind and leadership against the church but then turned 180 degrees and used everything he had in service to Jesus and the building of His church. Listen to how Paul describes his response.

3. Jesus **Commissions** you to serve Him

“I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus... and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles.” Acts 26:19-20

Jesus called Saul to become a missionary and church planter. All of us are called to be witnesses to Jesus in one way or another. But **Jesus commissions His followers to all kinds of assignments** according to His perfect will and His manifold grace.

Notice the ***two other players at work*** in this story and how they illustrate that surrender to Jesus, obedience to Him, doesn’t stop after conversion. Our relationship with Jesus is always and eternally one of surrender, submission, obedience and service. He is Lord. We are His servants. There was a follower of Jesus in Damascus named Ananias and the Lord Jesus appeared to Ananias in a vision, saying:

3. Jesus **Commissions** you to serve Him

“Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul.” Acts 9:11

**Ananias** was not excited about this assignment. He read the news. He knew this guy Saul was Enemy #1 of the church. He almost certainly knew Christians who had been thrown in prison or even killed by Saul. So Ananias objected to the assignment, but Jesus persisted and Ananias went.

But notice the other detail in this verse. There was ***another man***, named **Judas**, who was called to serve Saul even before Ananias did. Judas on Straight Street in Damascus. We don’t know anything else about this guy. Not even sure he was a believer, though that seems likely to me. Maybe he was a friend of one of the Pharisees and bounty hunters with Saul. Whoever he was, he got nominated to host Saul for three days before Ananias showed up.

Granted, Saul didn’t eat or drink so it wasn’t a burden in food preparation. But it was still an imposition.

Jesus commissions believers to **all kinds of assignments**.

* Some of us are preachers and **evangelists like Paul** became.
* Some of you are gifted with **hospitality, like Judas** and taking people in off the street.
* Some of you are gifted with **healing, like Ananias**, and God keeps bringing you broken people to minister to.
* Some of you are gifted with **encouragement like Barnabas** and God brings you obnoxious, intimidating people like Saul who need some training and lots of patience.
* Some of you are gifted with **service** like Stephen and the other deacons we met in Acts 6.

Whatever Jesus commissions you to do - however He calls you to serve, we all ***submit to Jesus as Lord and King***.

That is how Jesus calls us. He confronts our sins against Him - and all of our sins are ultimately against Him. Jesus commands us to surrender completely to Him, because He is the One True King, the Lord and ruler over all things. Finally, Jesus commissions us to serve Him. Verse 15 sums it up beautifully.

“Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” Acts 9:15-16

The Lord Jesus has called you. You are here today because He has called you and continues to call you home. You hear His voice. You know what He wants from you. Let’s pray and recommit ourselves in service to our King!