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Chapter One

CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

Wherever God's finger points, His hand will clear a way.

—L. B. C. COWMAN

Why would anyone answer a call that promises pain with stark certainty? What kind of strategy would use the promise of pain and suffering as its primary recruiting method?

The phone rings. I glance over. I don't recognize the number. Should I pick up and hope it's the call I've been waiting my whole life for, or do I let it go to voice mail?

The most compelling reason to answer any call is directly related to the importance of the one calling. It's no wonder that most telemarketers don't identify themselves on caller ID.

Now go back with me about two thousand years ago to a small seaside town in Galilee. It's a regular day and fishermen are doing their usual thing: fishing. A man by the name of Jesus approaches a cluster of fishermen. Here's how it played out according to Matthew 4:18–20:

While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

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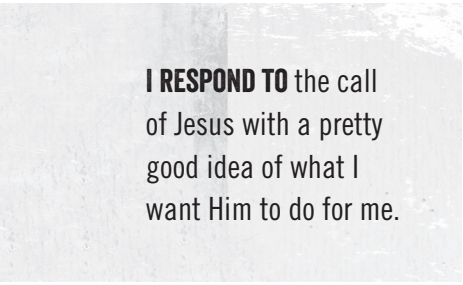
How could two words—*follow me*—so radically change the lives of two grown men with stable fishing careers and comfortable, secure lives? Jesus' command was simple. Follow me. In return, He made a promise. "I will make you fishers of men."

Did Peter and Andrew initially misunderstand the call? Were they hoping that Jesus would turn their local fishing gig into a worldwide multimillion-dollar operation? Did they dream of a reality fishing show and national fame? It's hard to tell, but one thing is certain. Peter and Andrew were forever changed in that moment.

I often wonder if Peter and Andrew knew what lay ahead for them in the years to come. I wonder what Peter and Andrew would have done had they been warned that this same Jesus would one day die on a cross, and that eventually Peter himself would be killed upside down on the same kind of cross?

I find myself very much like Peter and Andrew. I respond to the call of Jesus with a pretty good idea of what I want Him to do for me. While I dream of worldly comforts and temporary solutions to my earthly problems, Christ's vision for my life far exceeds the one that I have for my own. His main focus is fixed on what He wants to do in me. It is His grace that keeps us from knowing all that lies ahead for us lest we turn and run while we still can.

I like Os Guinness's definition of calling. He says that



I RESPOND TO the call of Jesus with a pretty good idea of what I want Him to do for me.

“calling is the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion and dynamism lived out as a response to his summons and service.”¹

For Peter and Andrew, the call came on just another day while they went about their usual business of gathering fish. God often chooses ordinary life as the setting to call us to Himself. From that point on, their purpose in life became single-mindedly focused on the only one who mattered: Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

They went where He told them to go. They did what He told them to do. They listened when He spoke. And they were in for the ride of their lives.

Their lives became about Christ and for Christ, even though they knew little of Christ yet. Did they understand the full meaning of repentance from sin yet? Did they see the depth of their own sinfulness and their desperate need for a Savior yet? We may never know, but what we do know is that Peter and Andrew had responded to the call of Christ though they knew little of the stripping process that was to come.

Are you still looking for your purpose in life?

Everyone everywhere wants to know why. Why am I here? Why was I born?

People spend years trying to figure it out. They read books in the hopes of understanding the answer. They argue about it, they pontificate about it, they dream about it. It should come as no surprise to us that Rick Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Life* became one of the bestselling books of all time. People simply want to know what the purpose of their life is.

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The answer doesn't always come in the same way for everyone, but the answer is always the same. Peter and Andrew understood it one morning in Galilee when Jesus of Nazareth beckoned them to come follow Him.

I understood it one evening in Wisconsin when Christ's call got ahold of my life. I wasn't called to join a church, or a movement. The Savior Himself had called me, and turning back was never even an option. I was called to follow the One who had given me everything, and I was ready to give Him everything in return. I took a leap of faith and expected Christ to catch me. His arms were more than ready. They were held wide open for me on the cross. All I had to do was believe.

Have you responded to God's call in your life? His call is available to anyone who will answer it. Paul affirms it in Romans 10:13: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." John asserts it in Revelation 3:20: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me."

It happened to Paul on the road to Damascus on a warm, sunny, Middle Eastern day. It happened to the Ethiopian eunuch in a carriage on the road to Gaza while reading Isaiah (Acts 8:26–39). And it can happen to you right now. This is a call you can't afford to miss. Will you open the door of your heart and invite the Savior in, or will you ignore His call and let it go to voice mail? This is the most important call of your life.

Maybe you're still having a hard time hearing His call. Let me tell you my favorite story in the Bible of God calling someone to Himself.

HERE I AM?

You may or may not be familiar with the story of Samuel. His mother's name was Hannah. She was a nice lady married to an interesting man named Elkanah. Elkanah had two wives, but he preferred Hannah. They were God-fearing people who worshiped God and went to church on a regular basis. But Hannah had a problem. She couldn't have children. This is a big deal anytime, but it was a really big deal back in Bible days. One year when the family went up to worship, Hannah was so distressed about her childlessness and became so moved in prayer that the priest thought she was drunk.

It's hard to believe that anyone can pray this fervently, but Hannah did. That year, God heard her prayer, and she became pregnant. She had a son.

The boy's name was Samuel.

If anyone was wired to hear God's call in his life, it should have been Samuel. He was a miracle boy. He grew up in God's house. He was prayed over. He was well-trained by a priest. But when the day came and God called him, Samuel didn't even recognize God's voice.

It was nighttime. Eli, Samuel's mentor, was already asleep. Samuel was lying down in his corner thinking about the events of the day when he heard his name. Here's what happened in 1 Samuel 3: "Then The Lord called Samuel, and he said 'Here I am!' and ran to Eli and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.' But he said, 'I did not call; lie down again.' So he went and lay down" (vv. 4–5).

To Eli, it sounded like Samuel was a kid trying to get out of going to sleep. This happened three times in a row. By the third time, Eli finally got a clue:

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And the Lord called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord for your servant hears.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. And the Lord came and stood, calling as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant hears." (vv. 8–10)

Thus was born one of the greatest prophets of the entire Old Testament. Little did Samuel know in that moment that he would someday anoint not only the first king of Israel, Saul, but also the greatest king of Israel, a kid named David. Little did Samuel know what the future would hold for him. Little did he foresee the trials that would come and the stripping that would follow.

Do you, like Samuel, find it hard to recognize God's voice in your life? Has it been awhile since you've heard God speak?

A DIFFERENT KIND OF CALL

Let me give you four characteristics of God's call from the story of Samuel:

1. It's personal.

God didn't just yell out any name. He called Samuel personally. He used his name. You can almost sense the Lord cupping His hand over Samuel's ear and whispering the name. *Samuel. Samuel.* There's nothing quite like being called by your name, is there? You could be in a crowd full of people, but the minute someone calls you by name, your ears

perk up, your hope builds up. For a moment, you feel known. You feel loved. That's how God's call comes to us.

2. It's persistent.

I can be quite dense and so focused on my life that I miss most calls the first time they come through. Once in a while, when I finally look at my phone, I'll see six missed calls from someone I love. That's what I call persistence. It's also a sign that there's a call I can't afford to miss. God called Samuel's name three different times. You get a sense that God would have kept calling until Samuel finally would have answered. God's love is that persistent.

3. It's patient.

When I miss several calls by the same person and I finally call back, I typically get an annoyed response on the other line: "Where have you been? Why didn't you answer?" For a moment, I almost regret calling back. God's call is nothing like that. He is patient and long-suffering, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). He is patient in His persistence, and it is this loving and steadfast patience that finally got a deep hold on Samuel's heart, causing him to respond. Has God's call gotten ahold of your heart yet? God is patiently waiting for you to answer.

4. It's powerful.

Once heeded, God's call is so powerful that nothing ever stays the same again. For Peter and Andrew, it meant throwing in their nets and following a carpenter named Jesus. For Samuel, it meant becoming the man who would confront his

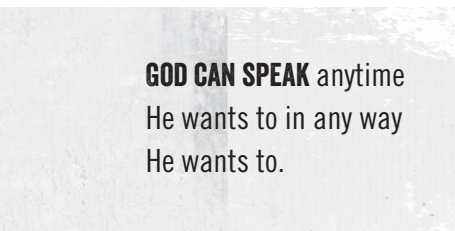
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mentor, Eli, of the coming judgment on Eli's family because of their sinfulness. The moment you respond to God's call is the moment you will experience His powerful presence in your life, transforming you into Christ's likeness.

A CAVEAT

People often tell me that they regularly hear God audibly speak in their lives. I have a confession to make: I've never heard God speak audibly in my life. For years I used to think something was very wrong with me. I wondered why God would withhold His voice from my life. Was it something I did? Was it something I said?

Turns out that nothing is really wrong with me at all.



GOD CAN SPEAK anytime
He wants to in any way
He wants to.

If you've wondered whether you've missed God's call because you've never heard Him speak, you need to hear what I'm about to say: God's primary method of speaking to us today is through His Word.

Listen to Romans 10:14–15, 17:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" . . . So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

Let's get one thing straight: God can speak anytime He wants to in any way He wants to. He's God, after all. But according to this passage in Romans, He speaks to us primarily through His Word. God often uses other people to help us hear His Word. This happened to Samuel through Eli. It happened to the Ethiopian eunuch through Philip. It happened to the early church through the preaching of Peter and Paul.

It happened to me through people like my own mother who shared Christ with me as a child. It happened to me later on in my life through the preacher on that warm summer night at camp.

And for some of you hearing this stuff for the first time, it's happening to you right now through me. God is calling to you to Himself through His Word as I've explained it to you. You have just received the most important call of your life. What will you do with it? Will you respond to Jesus Christ who has given His life for you? Will you accept His invitation to set you free from your sin? Will you take a leap of faith and yield yourself to Him, trusting Him to save you?

In Romans 10:9–10, Paul tells us that “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”

You may be wondering, *Saved from what?* The answer is well explained in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Christian, the hero of the story, has just received “the call.” He knows his life is missing something, but he does not know which direction to go. He runs into Evangelist, and the following conversation takes place:

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Evangelist asked, "If this is your condition, why are you standing here?"

[Christian] replied, "Because I don't know where to go."

The Evangelist gave him a letter in which was written: "Flee from the coming wrath."

The man therefore read it and, looking very carefully upon Evangelist, asked, "Where must I flee?"

Then, pointing with his finger over a very wide field, Evangelist said, "Do you see that Narrow Gate over there?"

"No," replied the man.

Then the other asked, "Do you see that shining light there?"

"I think I do," answered the man.

Then Evangelist said, "Keep that light in your eye and go up directly toward it. Then you will see the Gate. When you knock on the Gate, you'll be told what you must do."

So in my dream I saw the man begin to run. He had not run far from his own door before his wife and children, having seen it, began to cry after him to return. But the

man put his fingers in his ears and ran on, crying, "Life! Life! Eternal Life!" So, not turning to look behind him, he fled toward the middle of the plain.²

THE MINUTE we hit the wilderness, we panic and want to bolt.

Saved from wrath for eternal life. For the man or woman who has heard God's call and accepted it, these words bring fullness of joy and satisfaction that nothing can compare to.

All right. So you've answered God's call for salvation, but

does it end there? Is this all there is for the Christian?

Though most Christians intuitively understand the kind of life-altering call of Jesus Christ, many get stuck and never move beyond the practical application of what this call means. It's the reason why so many followers of Jesus Christ today seem to be wasting their lives instead of using them for God's glory.

Worse yet, many followers of Jesus Christ abandon ship at the merest sign of difficulty that creeps up along the narrow road of faith. Throughout the gospels, Christ warns the Christian of the difficult road ahead. Take these examples for instance:

- ◆ "For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." Matthew 7:14.
- ◆ "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it." Luke 9:23–24.
- ◆ "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." John 16:33.

Though we're given ample warning of the difficult road ahead, most of us cower in fear at the earliest signs of discomfort.

We're a lot like the Israelites after they were called out of Egypt. We don't have trouble leaving Egypt, the land of slavery and defeat, but the minute we hit the wilderness, we panic and want to bolt.

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Their life was bad. Their days were long. All they wanted was to be freed from the bondage of slavery. They would have done anything to be free. They cried about it. They prayed about it. They sang about it. They waited hundreds of years for it.

Until one day, God saved them. He did it powerfully. He did it magnificently. He did it faithfully and lovingly through His servant Moses. You may have seen the movie with Charlton Heston in it. Or maybe you haven't.

It may surprise you, but instead of delivering them out of their slavery into a forty-year vacation, God led the Israelites straight out of Egypt into the wilderness. Yikes. What kind of God does that?

To say that the Israelites did not expect the wilderness is an understatement. The wilderness would strip the Israelites of everything, but it was God's perfect and purposed plan for His people. In Exodus 13:17–18, God gives us His perspective on it:

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, "Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt." But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle.

The Israelites should have seen it coming. But instead, they turned to complaining and fear. They turned to impatience and idolatry. We'll talk about them some more in

the chapters to come. But more than anything, the Israelites missed two very critical facts.

The first was that the wilderness was part of God's call and plan. The wilderness was meant to make the Israelites stronger. It was meant to make them leaner, and better able to fight the battles that God had for them. The wilderness was a time of preparation and a time of purification. The wilderness was the perfect place for the Israelites to become God's people. *The second fact that the Israelites missed was that God was with them every step of the way through the wilderness.* For the Israelites, God's presence was obvious through a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

God's plan is the same for His children today. He starts by calling us to Himself. The rest of our life is a journey to become more like Him. It is a journey toward a deeper knowledge of Him and a closer walk with Him. It is a journey into life. If you're a seasoned Christian, you're probably familiar with the word *sanctification* that God uses for this process.

I like the word *stripping*. I like it because admittedly, the wilderness does not always feel like a perfect place. It's often a place of pain, and a place of endurance, and a place of doubt. How could the loving Savior who called us out of Egypt re-

ally mean for us to last in the oppressive heat and dangers of the wilderness? Could this really be part of His plan for us?

If you're like me, you've probably wondered why the wilderness is necessary. If you're like me, you've probably been

ADMITTEDLY, THE
wilderness does not
always feel like the
perfect place.

STRIPPED

tempted to escape. If you're like me, you've wished for a pillar of fire to guide you when the night is dark. The irony is that just like the Israelites we have been given a pillar, but we have lost sight of it more often than we can imagine. Our pillar of fire is God's Word. He is our presence in the darkest wilderness. He is our guide when the storms come as they most certainly will. Throughout the next chapters, I'm going to walk you through the stripping process that every single Christian must go through in response to God's call. I'm going to spend some time talking about how to survive the stripping process. I'm also going to help you move past the pain of being stripped and find joy in the midst of the wilderness.

Many Christians have a life verse. I happen to have one too. It's Philippians 1:6. It goes like this: "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." This verse is a summary of what this book is about. God is up to something. He who called us is faithful and will complete the work He's started. God's promise to us is that no matter how painful the road we're on may seem, the end is sure and secure.

Look, I've answered many calls in my life: the call to personal purity, the call to full-time ministry, the call to start a blog and to write a book and to lead the women's ministry at my church. Each season in my life has been unique in its own right, but none can compare to the most important call in my life that undergirds all others: the call to follow Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.

Why is it that some Christians hear God's call better than others do?

Let's consider the prophet Habakkuk for the answer.

Habakkuk was a prophet who lived in a time when things weren't looking very good. The culture was bad. The people had deviated from God's ways. No one seemed to know what to do or how to fix it. Habakkuk was pretty depressed about it. He couldn't figure out why God wouldn't just do something and fix it. He was so depressed that he prayed. Unbelievably, God answered. Here's how the conversation went.

"I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint. And the Lord answered me: 'Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it' " (Habakkuk 2:1-2).

We live in a day of vision-seeking and vision-claiming. There are hundreds if not thousands of books on how to develop vision in your life and where to get more vision. God has a way of keeping things simple in life. You want answers in your life? Easy. Just ask Him for answers. The answers are in His Word. They have been written on tablets and saved through the ages for you.

If you're a Christian without a sense of purpose in your life, perhaps it's because you've never asked God what He wants to do with your life. Perhaps you've never hungered to know His plan for you. According to Ephesians 2:10, God created you for good works that He's prepared before for you to do before the world began!

WHAT KEEPS YOU FROM HEARING THE CALL

Besides not asking God for His will for your life, I believe there are four major obstacles to hearing God's call in your life.

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1. *You are distracted by lesser things.*

We're living in a time of cultural ADHD. The options for our distraction are limitless and time consuming. You can lump any amount of entertainment options in this category of lesser things. It used to be simply the television, but we now can proudly add the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, video games, Netflix, Hulu, Apple TV, and on and on the list goes. No matter how good your intentions are, until you actively unplug the distractions in our life and simplify things, you will find that hearing God's voice will remain one of the greatest challenges of your life.

2. *You are divided by other relationships.*

The most well-meaning people in your life can stand in the way of God's call for you. It takes a deep sense of conviction to maintain a vertical focus when those closest to you try to dissuade you from pursuing God's call for your life. No matter your background and upbringing, chances are that your life is consumed by other relationships, some good, some not so good, that are keeping you from clearly hearing God's voice. Listening to God's voice in your life is a solo sport. It demands your full attention and devotion.

3. *You are discouraged by Satan's ploys.*

Satan takes great joy in discouraging Christ's followers. He does it through tempting you to sin. He does it through discouragement and doubt. He does it daily. He does it deceptively. But he does it as you allow him to. God has already overcome Satan and given us victory over him, but until you open your eyes and recognize Christ's victory in your life,

you will remain pummeled by Satan's ploys. I pray the next chapters will give you the ammunition you need to win the battle against him.

4. *You are deceived by your pride.*

I have dedicated a whole chapter to discussing pride and how it keeps us from the abundant life in Christ. God is committed to stripping us of our pride until we are fully dependent on Him. I've had to learn this lesson the hard way, and I hope my own experience will encourage you to humbly turn to the Lord in absolute surrender and complete yieldedness.

Sometimes when I'm in the middle of a conversation, the cell phone reception gets fuzzy. When that happens to me, I'll walk around the room looking for a better location, and I'll ask the obvious question: "Can you hear me now?"

If you're having a hard time connecting with the Lord, it's not because He's not calling. Perhaps you simply need to get more familiar with His voice. It may be time for you to change your location, and like Samuel, answer the Lord with these words: "Speak Lord, for your servant hears."

When you do, you'd better believe He's going to answer. But be careful. The answer may not be quite what you're expecting. The answer to God's call is usually the beginning of the road to being stripped of all you find comfortable and safe.

GOD IS COMMITTED
to stripping us of our
pride until we are fully
dependent on Him.

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Whether your calling today is to be the best mom you can be to your toddlers, or to glorify God as a single professional in the midst of a bustling city, or whether your calling today is in full-time ministry, I hope you're ready to hang on for dear life as you enjoy the ride in pursuit of the Savior.

You're going to find Him worth every bit of pain you feel in the process.