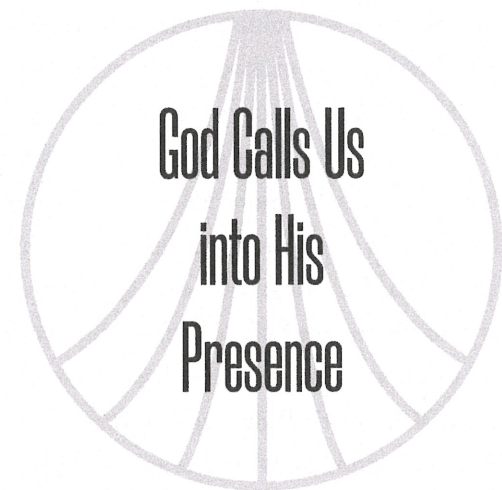


CHAPTER 3

CALLING



GOD COULD HAVE LEFT US in our sin and separation when we rebelled against Him in the Garden and were removed from His presence. We would have never known the glory of His nearness again. But that was not His plan. God has a glorious agenda, and He means to accomplish it.

In the next chapter of this unfolding story, we witness God's relentless pursuit as He calls us back to Himself and the garden of His presence. Each call, in each way, convinces us that His presence is our greatest need and our presence is His great desire.

Through myriad ways, He continually invites us to return to Him. He has done this through creation's voice and the call of prophets, priests, and kings. Angels are used to call us back to God's presence, as well as symbols and covenants. God encounters men and women in unforgettable places, heightening the intensity of His invitation. Most importantly, He woos us through the written Word and the Word made flesh. The only way anyone would know about God's pursuing heart is through the unending ways He calls us.

As the hymn says, "Jesus is tenderly calling [us] home."²²

Creation

When you walk outside on a starlit night and look up, what happens to you? If you have eyes to see, you will probably think about the vastness of the heavens. *Where do they end? Who holds them in place? Who could create such unimaginable glory?*

²²Fanny Crosby, "Jesus Is Tenderly Calling You Home," 1883.

In these moments, creation is talking to you.

The heavens are telling of the glory of God;
And the expanse is declaring the work of His hands.
Day to day pours forth speech,
And night to night reveals knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
Their voice is not heard.
Their line has gone out through all the earth,
And their utterances to the end of the world.²³

Creation is designed to call us into God's presence. When we look up into the limitlessness of the heavens or look down into the complexity of the DNA in a human cell, we are awestruck with Him. We realize He made everything, including us.

The more we understand how creation operates, the more we realize that it is governed by His hand and guarded by His presence. And as His creatures, we learn that we will find *our* highest purpose and joy when we are near Him. Like the rest of creation, we cannot function properly without Him. This is why the letter of James tells us, "Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you."²⁴

Voices

Throughout human history, God has commissioned voices to call us to return to Him. "Choose for yourselves today whom you will serve," Joshua cried.²⁵ Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Jeremiah, Isaiah—every major and minor prophet was sent by God to invite His people to come

²³Psalm 19:1–4

²⁴James 4:8

²⁵Joshua 24: 15

home. "Return to Me," God said through one prophet, "that I may return to you."²⁶ The Old Testament is the record of a relentless calling to stubborn people from a merciful Father.

But the prophets—and even the angels—were not the only voices. Believing fathers and mothers who walk with God, who have His word in their hearts, are to train their children to draw near to God.

These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up."²⁷

Wise are the parents who discover how to live in God's presence personally and then create a home where Christ is pleased to dwell. The best training would be for children to not only know *about* God but to *experience* God and learn how to live daily in His nearness.

Scripture

If these voices were not sufficient, God took extraordinary measures to write and preserve sixty-six books, His written word, the Bible. It is the God-breathed record of the history of man's waywardness and God's pursuit. It contains the literal words of God's call to us to return to Him.

We see the beautiful stories of men like David who lived with conscious awareness of God's nearness. The record of His life calls us to the Father.

²⁶Zechariah 1:3

²⁷Deuteronomy 6:6–7

I have said to the LORD, "You are my Lord;
 I have no good besides You."
 I have set the LORD continually before me ...
 You will make known to me the path of life;
 In Your presence is fullness of joy;
 In Your right hand there are pleasures forever.²⁸

We read of the peace and power this brought and the tragedy of evil kings who paid no attention to God. The contrast is vivid.

Through direct commands, overwhelming promises (over 7,000 of them), and the stories of men and women who lived with or without His presence, God calls us closer to Himself on every page of Scripture.

But there is something more we must understand: the Scriptures are literally alive.

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.²⁹

The Bible is not a stagnant history book, merely telling us how other men and women experienced the presence of God. When we read the Word, in the power of His Spirit, we encounter His living presence. Just as you are present when you speak, so God is present in His word.

²⁸ Psalm 16:2,8,11

²⁹ Hebrews 4:12-13

We can hear Him on every page, if we have ears to hear, inviting us into His presence. We should approach the Word of God with the understanding that it is designed to lead us into direct and real communion with the Author.

Pictures

God has also given us stunning visuals that speak of Him. The Tabernacle in the wilderness (which would be more formalized later as the Temple in Jerusalem) was a powerful and lasting picture of God's presence. The progressive rooms of these sacred structures showed how sinful men must come through the sacrifice of blood to be cleansed and prepared to enter the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies ... into the very presence of God.

These symbols remind us—then and now—of how we are to live. We are to enter His presence by trusting, not in our own merits, but the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. We come through the veil that was torn, inviting us in to enjoy Him. The Temple shows us this. The continual burning of incense before the altar reminds us that we are to talk to Him morning and evening and all day in between.

Covenants and Promises

God invited people to join Him and then sealed this invitation with multiple promises and covenants. He has always had purposes for His covenant people, purposes most fully realized when we are with Him and He with us.

The summary of all God's covenants with man is profound, summed up in three realities. Every covenant, in its simplest form, said this:

1. I will be your God.
2. You will be my people.
3. I will dwell among you.³⁰

The covenants and promises God made were extraordinary and undeserved. Some were dependent upon His people's obedience; others were not. Each one was a call from God to be with Him. The covenants were all designed to pull us back into His presence.

Places

God also meets us in places. This began in the Garden, a place where we could be with Him and He with us.

As you scan the Bible and human history, it is remarkable to notice the places where God has chosen to meet people. God met Abraham under the heavens, using the stars as an object lesson of His faithfulness. Jacob, Abraham's grandson, would also meet God under the heavens, wrestling with Him through the night as he learned that he could not continue without God's presence.

Joseph heard God's call while in dark places: a deep well and a dismal prison, to name a few. The rejection of his own family and betrayal by close friends did not deter Joseph because he had God with him and knew that what others meant for evil, God meant for good. God's presence was sufficient.

Moses received his call at the burning bush, realizing that, although he had failed, God was not through with Him. In fact, his failing had been part of his preparation to bring him to the end of himself. The lonely wilderness ground where God trained Moses for forty years was

³⁰Duvall and Hays, *God's Relational Presence*, Baker Academic, pg. 44.

soon to be the path of his people's deliverance. When faced with his brokenness, Moses saw God as the great I AM who would be with him in a monumental task that would move God's kingdom forward.

Later, the massive band of Hebrews that Moses was leading turned from God and worshiped a golden calf. When Moses interceded on the side of Mount Sinai, pleading for God not to leave His people, God promised, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."³¹

Moses' successor, Joshua, was fearful when the task fell to him to lead the people into the Promised Land. But again, God spoke on the east side of the Jordan, assuring Him of His presence.

"No man will be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you."³²

David encountered the Good Shepherd on the hillsides of Israel and the valley of Elah as he battled an adversary that no one else would face. He was a man after God's own heart and was uniquely used to show us the beauty of a Presence-centered life.

Daniel did not stand alone in the lion's den, nor were his friends abandoned in the fiery furnace. Stephen was in God's very presence, looking into the heavens when he was being stoned. Christ interrupted Paul on the road to Damascus and ushered him into a Presence-centered life that would change the world. Even in a dark prison cell and under the threat of persecution, Paul experienced the presence of God.

Christian history is the long story of God's presence with His people in all kinds of places. He was at the stake with John Hus as he was

³¹Exodus 33:14

³²Joshua 1:5

being burned for his faith, with Corrie ten Boom in a Nazi concentration camp, with Hudson Taylor in China, and George Mueller in Bristol. The theme and glory of the ages is that God is *with us*. His presence gives us all that we need in any situation, and it is His great delight to join His children right where they are.

Scholars say that the phrase "Fear not!" is the most common command in the Bible, mentioned over 300 times. And what is the reason that a believer need not fear?

The LORD of hosts is with us;
The God of Jacob is our stronghold.³³

Like a fearful child who has been picked up into the arms of his strong, sufficient father, we need not fear. We have His presence! And He has met His people in a thousand memorable places to call them back to Himself.

The Son, the Spirit, and the Body of Christ

We will see more about this later, but the most significant calls come directly from the lips of the Son of God who came to talk to us in person. "Come unto Me ... Follow Me!" He said repeatedly. Jesus promised that after His leaving, the Father would send us His Spirit to live in us and "teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you."³⁴

Further, the Lord established the church, which would be His body that would move through the world, calling people to come to Him. It was Christ speaking through the church that called us all to Himself through hearing the good news of what He did and would

³³Psalm 46:11

³⁴John 14:26

do if we would turn to Him in faith. As believers, think of how often you have been called back into fellowship with Christ because of the admonitions and encouragements, even the reproof of some loving member of the church. Even the silent witness of a humble believer, walking with God, convinces us of God's care and calls us back to Him.

So then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as God is pleading through us. We beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.³⁵

God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.³⁶

The Son, through His Spirit and His Spirit-filled body, the church, is calling us constantly into the presence of the Father. It is His unceasing invitation.

His Call to You

We have all "sinned and fall short of the glory of God." None of us deserve an invitation back into the garden of His presence. But think back over your life. How has God called you? What voices, places, and pictures has He used? What people has He used? Where have you received His promises in the night or in times of darkness or need? How has He taken His Word and Spirit and invited you home, over and over again? Think of the constancy of this call and His perseverance ... and give thanks! His joy is for you to return to Him.

Thank Him right now for His grace. And if you have never, by faith, trusted in Him as your Savior and Lord, perhaps even your reading of

³⁵2 Corinthians 5:20

³⁶1 Corinthians 1:9

this today is an indication of His continued pursuit of you. He's calling now. Why would you not respond to this gracious invitation?

*Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling,
Calling for you and for me;
See, on the portal He's waiting and watching,
Watching for you and for me.
Come home, come home,
Ye who are weary come home;
Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling;
Calling, O sinner, come home!³⁷*

³⁷Will T. Thompson, "Softly and Tenderly," 1880.

CHAPTER 4 DWELLING

