

MARK LABBERTON



CALLED

THE CRISIS AND PROMISE
OF FOLLOWING JESUS TODAY



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Called* by Mark Labberton
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Published by InterVarsity Press,
Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com

CONTENTS

Prologue	5
<i>A Life Abundant</i>	
1 Called to Flourish	11
2 A Lost Church in a Lost World	25
3 The Primary Call	41
4 Relocating	50
<i>Where Are We Called?</i>	
5 Reorienting.	67
<i>How Are We Called?</i>	
6 Refocusing	79
<i>To Whom and to What Are We Called?</i>	
7 The Way of the Beloved.	98
8 The Way of Wisdom.	116
9 The Way of Suffering	124
10 So, What Does God Call Me to Do?.	135
Epilogue	161
<i>First Things—Salt and Light</i>	
Acknowledgments	173
Notes	175

CALLED TO FLOURISH



While on a long flight, I finished listening to my favorite pieces by John Coltrane, then opened some music I had recently downloaded but not yet heard. It was a recording of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* played by Joshua Bell and the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields. The piece, intense and passionate, has been very important to me over the years. I hadn't noticed that this recording included a short video excerpt of Bell and the orchestra during a recording session, playing an especially dramatic passage. When I opened the file, the video suddenly began to play.

Surprised, I was at once so fully captured and moved by what I saw and heard that it was like I fell into a trance. When it finished, I was breathless. I immediately wanted to ask the flight attendant whether I could use the microphone

so I could tell everyone that my life had just been changed. In those three short minutes, I watched and heard what human flourishing means.

On the video, all the musicians, dressed in street clothes that reflected their individual backgrounds and personalities, added their particular instrument and part to the symphonic whole. Each was essential. Each was doing in that moment something very few others could do but that he or she did exceptionally well. Bell, one of the finest violinists in the world, conducted the whole, while also brilliantly playing his exquisite part of Vivaldi's piece. The flourishing was in both the parts and the whole, the individuals and the community.

I have just watched this short piece again, as I've done so many times since that moment on the plane. Each viewing stuns me with wonder at the human imagination that created the piece; the artistic skill, gifts, emotions and discipline that made playing it possible; the community in diversity that made room for each person to be so significant and needed; and the brilliance and leadership of Bell as he both conducted and played.

This is an expression of human flourishing, which is always about the one and the many, about the realization and expression of what is life giving and creative, of what is unique and what is common, of what is passionate and meaningful.

These features of human flourishing are found across cultures and time. They're formal and informal, public and private, common and exceptional. This flourishing happens at home, within families, on the athletic field, in business meetings, in classrooms, in communities of care, in the midst of joy but also of pain, in the context of poverty but also of wealth, in whatever the language or medium or context in which it occurs.

The God made known in Scripture and incarnate in Jesus Christ desires flourishing people in a flourishing world. This is God's intent and commitment, and God created humans to flourish by collaborating with him in that endeavor. Sadly, the narrative of the Bible includes how God's divine desire is subverted by the very human beings God created as partners to reflect God's image and steward creation. Even more, however, it tells the long story of how God relentlessly pursues us in faithfulness and love. God shares with us, out of the flourishing communion of Father, Son and Spirit, the overflow that is our hope and salvation.

You and I are to be the tangible evidence of God's intent for and pursuit of the world today. You and I. Together. The church. This is our calling as followers of Jesus. We are to fulfill the calling of all humanity and thus point to the true purpose of human life. The Word made flesh in Jesus Christ should show through us. We are meant to be primary evi-

dence of the flourishing love, grace and truth in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

This is why Jesus says his disciples are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. The unique and authoritative witness of the New Testament centers on Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection, and then in the gift of the Holy Spirit. As the Son returns to the Father, he hands the unfolding ministry of the kingdom of God to the people of God (Matthew 28; John 21).

Though the kingdom is God's work by the Spirit, we are not spiritual mannequins—a form without life. We are meant to be active, willful, fruit-bearing agents of that kingdom. The Spirit enables us to live both as ourselves (in honesty and humility) and beyond ourselves (in love and sacrifice). All of this is far from plain in our world. This is why revelation is needed and why our living enactment of that revelation is part of God's purpose.

A BIBLICAL CALL

Call is a word that has many associations, so let's be clear what it means here.

The heart of God's call is this: that we receive and live the love of God for us and for the world. This is the meaning of the two great commandments, that we are made to love the

Lord our God with all we are and our neighbors as ourselves. The Bible as a whole, and Jesus in particular, reveals what such a life looks like. Our call is loving communion with God and God's world. It encompasses our identity, our community and our activity.

Who are we? We are God's chosen people, members of a community set apart for God's purposes:

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:1-3)

We are people who live in the abundance of God's love and grace, poured out in Jesus Christ:

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of

Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:16-19)

Why are we here? We are here to love God and to love our neighbor:

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:36-40)

We are here to live in the world as agents of God’s love in Jesus Christ:

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:13-16)

God's call encompasses the foundational purposes of our lives and also guidance for life's concrete work and activity. Calling isn't just a category for those who pursue some form of recognized ministry; it's about God's desire for all of our lives as ambassadors of God's kingdom. This is our primary call. This primary call for *all* of us leads naturally and secondarily to God's call for *each* of us.

NOT PRIMARILY A BURNING BUSH

Only once does God's call come from a burning bush. Only once does God speak, even to Isaiah, "on a throne, high and lofty" (Isaiah 6:1). God's primary call is for us to belong to and live for the flourishing of God's purposes in the world. At the same time, God may also call in ways that include direction in relation to such things as jobs, gifts, relationships and more. So, God's call encompasses the foundational purposes of our lives and sometimes provides guidance for our concrete work and activity.

As a result, people ask many questions about how their lives relate to the world. What are our lives in this world about? What are we to make of being human? Why are we here? Is there a reason we are alive, and, if so, how do we know what that is? These questions can be brought on by beauty and joy but also by the daunting facts of our own lives or of the world around us. We look around in doubt, in pain, in

suffering. These are human questions asked throughout history by those inside and outside the church.

Today, in a staggeringly complex and diverse world, the overarching biblical narrative that includes creation, fall, redemption and fulfillment has frequently been rejected and denied. The issues seem too many and the evidence too little for them. The secular, street-level view seems the most reliable: humanity is here on its own.

Are we alone in the universe? No god, just us? Do we simply face an empty universe, live a mere biochemical existence, experience what we call pain or joy, and then die? Do we see a world with exquisite natural beauty and think of it as mere materiality with no greater meaning? Do we look upon billions of people who suffer daily at the hands of bullies and tyrants and weigh it only in terms of social consequence or utility? Do we find in apparent acts of self-sacrificing love only the evidence of instinctive, evolutionary social welfare?

And we also ask, “Is there hope?” Is there any reason to think that the trajectory of human suffering and injustice or social entropy can actually be stopped or reversed? Is there hope that the world of poverty, violence and injustice will change? Is there hope that our own personal life issues might actually give way to new life, that our downward spiral can be reversed?

These questions may sound philosophical, but they're personal and practical. In real words and real deeds, God's people are sent as God's reassuring response to these questions. But that can be evident only if we live honestly and fully before God and our neighbor.

WHY CALL MATTERS

If the narrative character of Scripture conveys anything to us, it underlines that God is not a deity of ideas and forms so much as the God of love and relationship. The weight of God's faithful pursuit of creation, of Israel and of the world is conveyed through the story of God speaking, promising, pursuing, calling, engaging, revealing, sustaining, comforting and redeeming. These are tales of grace demonstrated and truth performed. And the verbs above should be our guiding cue regarding call.

The first and second commandments taught by Jesus—to love God and love our neighbor—are our calling. They guide the enactment of life as God intends it to be lived. We find our lives by losing them in these particular ways. We lose our lives, and gain them too, in the *action* of laying them down in worship and love.

The people of God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, are meant to be the hope of the world, the model for all humanity and the apologetic—the living defense of the faith—that God is present and that God's loving purposes will come to pass.

This is the vision and the intent as Jesus portrays it.

Here is the crisis: we've been made and redeemed for this calling, but it slides through our fingers. Jesus' followers live with all the tensions and ambiguities that others do. We see as clearly as others do that often love is as much or even more evident in the lives of unchurched friends or colleagues as it is in those in the church. We say we are following Jesus, but what we actually offer is buildings, programs, music, classes, token work projects and budget appeals.

Our calling has become encrusted, buried under layers that lack significant evidence of life. Viral cat videos seem to touch our humanity and longing more than many church services do. I have felt caught in this vortex. The temptation in the church is to bring in more clowns and light the sparklers, but the real solution is what the Bible declares is our calling: to live out genuine love that shows up in the face of real need.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

At one point, I was involved in a long process of getting clarity from the IRS about a particularly technical and complicated aspect of my taxes. After several months of correspondence and legal advice, the day finally came to begin the talks in person. Those who knew the IRS suggested this would take many months, probably longer, to get settled.



I went to the IRS office in Oakland. I waited. And I waited. Eventually I was escorted through a warren of cubicles to the one where I was to meet the agent who would assist me. Alone in the bowels of a large IRS office—without hope. Yes, I think that captures it.

The agent there listened to my case, took all the relevant paperwork and excused herself to consult with someone else.

I waited ten minutes. Then fifteen minutes. Twenty minutes. Thirty . . . forty . . . forty-five minutes. No one checked in. As far as I could tell, the agent had disappeared. No apparent sign of life—just a cubicle in the void.

Suddenly, the agent was back. She handed me a sheet and said simply, “There, it’s all done. It’s settled.”

I honestly did not know what she meant. I assumed she was saying that she had taken the first step. What she meant was that the whole process was settled. She turned the paper over and revealed the nine signatures she had acquired all the way up the IRS ladder so the case was now closed, and closed in my favor.

There, in the midst of a warren of bureaucratic anonymity and powerlessness, I encountered a person who became my advocate, who heard my appeal and who took the initiative to do on my behalf what I could never have done for myself. She met me at a moment of isolation and fear and sent me out with resolution when I had anticipated nothing but delay.

For me, this has been a parable of what the body of Christ can be in the world. We are to be those who, in the vastness of the universe and in a context of human powerlessness, show up as advocates who represent and incarnate the presence of God, who is the hope of the world.

We can, of course, choose instead to be bureaucrats. Show up and shuffle paper, stand in the shadows, engage very little, have low expectations, put in our time, make sure we get paid all we deserve, watch out for our own interests, demonstrate form without life. In some systems, even this is more than we might be able to do. At the Oakland IRS office, there was a system, but there was a person in the system who was ready to be an advocate. I don't know why, but she did it. And it changed everything for me.

Not every day in our work involves being able to make such a practical difference or to reach such resolution. Likewise, we aren't all meant to be a Joshua Bell and play at St. Martin in the Fields. But we are meant to have a vital role in the company of God's people, who find life by living our call to love and follow Jesus Christ and to love our neighbors as ourselves. As stunningly powerful as Bell's playing is to hear, so life giving is the love we discover as we follow Jesus.

This is the glorious promise of our calling—for us and for the world: to live life abundantly. In Jesus' terms, that means

being a people who live in deep, loving communion with the God of the universe, where life has been given away in love so a broken world can flourish.

But instead the church does the polka in a hip-hop world. Perhaps quaint, but clearly disconnected. Teenagers and young adults wander off in disregard, taking their real issues of life, relationships, work and sexuality, and finding some other place and some other community to call home. Others who suffer, such as those confused in their work, anxious for their children or finding the world a weighty burden, wander around for help but have little sense the church is a place to turn. People of all ages who are weary of rhetoric, skeptical of formulas and skeptical of certainty, long for true communion and hope—ingredients for a flourishing life.

The gospel and the church are not the same. But, for many, they are indistinguishable. When God's people fail to live our call, the church buries the gospel. That's where we are. That's the crisis we must face.

PRACTICE

Hearing and living God's call typically develops over time in community. With that in mind, each chapter will include some ways to cultivate that kind of life and practice. These are offered without any intention of implying that a call is auto-

matic, uniform or forced. The process is more likely nuanced and unexpected. But as with spiritual disciplines, God honors our intentionality, and hopefully these practices are invitations into deliberately seeking, reflecting, discerning and practicing God's call—individually and with others.

Where do you experience human flourishing? Music? Art? People? Athletics? Education? Choose a creative medium to help you reflect on flourishing.

- Make a “flourishing collage” using photos, art, words or another medium. Find photos that remind you of contexts other than your own in need of flourishing.
- Assemble a “flourishing playlist.” Which songs help you experience flourishing and which remind you of the long road of answering that call? What global or countercultural music could remind you of other areas of the world longing for flourishing?
- Write a list of the areas in your life that are flourishing and another of the areas that are not.

For additional individual and corporate practices, please visit fuller.edu/called to find a six-session study guide, videos and church-based resources. Or to have a conversation with others who are grappling with the issues raised in *Called*, use the hashtag #CALLEDtofollow or follow Mark on Twitter at MLabberton.

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