

Obeying God's Call

DAVE BAST

Mother Teresa of Calcutta was one of the most inspiring spiritual figures of the 20th Century. Her work as one of the Sisters of Mercy, and particularly the clinic she founded in Calcutta, India, have long been seen as living testimony to the grace of God; but here is the thing, it was only after she died that we learned an arresting truth. Mother Teresa heard God's call in her life loud and clear when she was a young woman. God told her what she had to do with her life, and of course, she did so; but after that, Mother Teresa revealed in her letters left behind after her death that she never heard clearly from God ever again—not even once. It was as though the phone line had gone dead on the other end; but her experience is not unique. It raises the question we will consider today on *Groundwork*: How do we faithfully obey God's call in the face of divine silence, obstacles, or other frustrations? Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, we have been doing this series of programs—a four-part series—this is the final one—on the idea of God's call. Can we hear it? Can we understand it and discern it? Are we willing to obey it; and will we now, today, especially we want to think as we reflect on those...all of those ideas...but also will we continue to obey it even if it is a tough go?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are very happy to be joined in the studio today, Dave, by the president of Words of Hope, Jon Ogenorth, who is joining us. So Jon, welcome to the program.

JON OGENORTH

Thanks for having me.

DAVE BAST

One of the special reasons, Jon, we wanted you to participate in this program...not just because Words of Hope is one of the sponsors of *Groundwork*, along with ReFrame Media, but because you have written a set of reflections on the idea of God's call, and especially focusing on the life of Moses in the Bible.

JON OGENORTH

That's right. That particular section of Exodus has been a very important piece of my own journey in coming to discerning God's call in my life. I mean, we would all love to have the burning bush experience, where God sort of lays out exactly what to do; but when you look at the journey that Moses went on, there were a lot of other pieces to his call, or to the confirmation of that call; and I think even if we don't have that Mother Teresa type moment, God uses a lot of things that help us, and in Moses' case what is so wonderful is we have sort of a blow-by-blow account of his call into this mission, and we see it lived out more than with any other character. So many of the Bible characters who are called, we just...we don't know. I mean, Elijah, for example, in I Kings 17 just shows up: Now, Elijah the Tishbite...from Tishba in Gilead...

DAVE BAST

Now, where did he come from? He wasn't even an Israelite.

JON OPGENORTH

Right!

SCOTT HOEZEE

What I think what is interesting...in the previous program, Jon and Dave, we looked at this five-round argument that Moses has with God, and finding every excuse in the book to get out from underneath God's call; but Jon, I think one thing you have emphasized is that Moses was more equipped for that call than he knew. He pretended like he had nothing to bring to the table, but I think your point is that God had been equipping him for 80 years already...

JON OPGENORTH

Exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

To actually make him ready.

JON OPGENORTH

Yes; think about what God needed. He needed somebody who was from the Jewish people; so, a slave to lead the slaves out; and he needed somebody who could talk to Pharaoh and speak God's truth to the injustice of this great and mighty king; and so, in those 80 years, God was at work preparing him; and I really do think if we will look at our lives and see the story that the Holy Spirit has been weaving in our journeys, we can pick up clues for how God is leading us to do the next thing; and those same clues can help us to overcome those obstacles and those hesitations and those times when it seems like God doesn't speak, for example.

DAVE BAST

So, what is the clue in Moses' case in your mind?

JON OPGENORTH

Well, in my own case...so, very personally, this story was used when I was installed as a pastor in Orange City, Iowa. I spent 18 years in Orange City, and one of my great life mentors is a professor named Dr. Charles Van Engen. Chuck was a professor of Missiology at Fuller Seminary, and it just so happened that the week of my installation, he was in Orange City, sadly, for the funeral of his mother, but he agreed to preach at my installation; and he, like you, went through this five-fold thing, but there was one little text—one little verse—that stuck out. Moses, of course, is saying: God, it's not going to work. They are not going to believe that you sent me. Pharaoh is not going to believe it. God has already revealed his name; and then God simply says to Moses: What is that in your hand? And the answer, of course is: A staff. And then the signs happen as a result of that staff, and if you trace the story of Moses, you see that staff shows up everywhere. It is made mention that he brings it back to Egypt. It is made mention that he uses it when they part the Red Sea...

Dave Bast/

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, right; yes. Water from the rock, sure.

JON OPGENORTH

And the water comes from the rock. His hands are raised up to see the battle that is taking place; and Chuck said this to me. He said: Jon, as you follow God's call, God doesn't expect you to use anything more than what you have in your hand, but he does expect you to use what *is* in your hand; and in our journey there are times when we just need to look at ourselves. What has God given me? You know, there is a little boy with five loaves and two fish...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

JON OPGENORTH

And there are five thousand people to feed. I don't know how to use it, but this is what is in my hand. How many times in our journeys don't we have those moments where the task is too large, and yet God says: Bring what you have. Bring it to me; surrender; and I will multiply it for what is needed.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, that is fascinating.

DAVE BAST

Which doesn't mean that it is going to be easy...

JON OPGENORTH

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

And again, if you just think of the life of Moses, the kind of stuff that he ran into.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, well, indeed; and you were mentioning about the staff...another place it comes up is when God tells Moses to speak to the rock and he whacks it with the staff because he is so angry, because indeed, Moses was obedient to the call. God had equipped him, it turned out, for what he needed to do, right? He had been equipping Moses all along; but that didn't make it easy. I mean, Pharaoh was no picnic to deal with. He kept hardening and re-hardening his heart. They went how many rounds, even with the ten plagues and so forth. God gave Moses those signs, and then the Egyptian magicians repeated them. It was like, why didn't you keep them from doing that, God?

DAVE BAST

Yes, what do you make of that? I don't know.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And of course, the people of Israel themselves, once they got out of Egypt, they were no picnic either. They were a hard people to lead.

JON OPGENORTH

And it is those moments where you go back and say: Okay, I know that God was with me in these other pieces. That keeps us going, and yet, it is also helpful for all of us to know even the great Bible characters who followed God and did miraculous signs and wonders had their doubts and frustrations and anger. Elijah, after the great battle on Mount Carmel, is: God, where are you in all of this?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

I'm the only one left... I guess we all have a tendency to think that things go better with God—you know, the old Coke slogan. So, if we are faithful, if we believe in God, if we are trusting him, if we are serving him, if we are obeying him, well life is going to be pretty happy; we are going to feel satisfied and encouraged and excited. It is wonderful what that happens, and there are certainly times; but again, all you have to do is go back to the stories and you see that sometimes things are actually worse when you follow the call, right?

JON OPGENORTH

Exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, the question that we will want to take up next is how do you stay obedient over the long haul when there are these obstacles—when there is opposition to you, as Moses himself had? How do we go on? We will think about that in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are joined by a special guest, Rev. Jon Opgenorth from Words of Hope, and we are talking about the idea of calling again; it is the last program in our series, and especially today we are focusing on how you kind of hang in there and stay the course. So, once again, Jon, thanks for joining us.

JON OPGENORTH

It's great to be here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, how do we go on? A good person to think about in this regard in terms of following a very important and dramatic call is the Apostle Paul, who was faithful to his call, even as Moses was. We talked about that in the previous segment; but boy, it wasn't easy; and the famous passage many of us know from II Corinthians 11, where Paul writes this:

²⁴Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵Three times I was beaten with rods; once I received a stoning; three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea. ²⁶On frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; ²⁷in toil and in hardship, through many a sleepless night; hungry and thirsty; often without food; cold and naked—²⁸and besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. ²⁹Who is weak, am I not weak? Who is made to stumble, am I not indignant? ³⁰If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. ³¹The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, blessed be he forever, knows that I do not lie.

DAVE BAST

So you want to be an apostle, is what we might call that passage. There is another passage, too, in I Corinthians Chapter 4, where Paul likens himself and his fellow apostles to the prisoners at the end of a Roman procession on their way to be killed in the arena, and he concludes that with saying: We are the scum of the earth, we are the garbage of the world. I think Eugene Peterson translates that last phrase: We are the world's potato peelings. That was what it was like for him to be... You know, Paul did not know they were going to name churches and cities after him someday. He endured this rather brutal life for the sake of his calling.

JON OPGENORTH

And in seminary most people are not signing up for this tour of duty, you know.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, the passage is almost...how many times does he say the word *danger*...over and over and over. I mean, it is a grim, grim litany. So, what kept him going? There is another passage in Acts 26, where Paul gives a little hint of what helped him to endure this incredible hardship.

DAVE BAST

So, this is a passage where Paul is now a prisoner, and he is appearing before the king, Agrippa, and the Roman governor, and he has just repeated the story of his conversion on the road to Damascus, where he saw

the Lord Jesus and was not only instantly converted to become a Christian, but was told to become an apostle, too. So Paul says:

¹⁹“After that, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance. ²¹For this reason, the Jews seized me in the Temple and tried to kill me. ²²To this day I have had help from God, and so I stand here testifying to both small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would take place, ²³that the Messiah must suffer, and that by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the gentiles.” ²⁴And while he was making this defense, Festus exclaimed, “You are out of your mind, Paul. Too much learning is driving you insane.”

So, there is another vignette from the life of an apostle—of a preacher—a missionary.

SCOTT HOEZEE

People thought he was crazy for doing what he did. The key line in this one...Act 26:22 that you just read, Dave...how did Paul go on? Well, he said: To this day I have had help from God; and there it is. There is the explanation for what keeps him going.

DAVE BAST

So that is the key. God does help us when we face difficulties or frustrations in obeying our calling and carrying it out, but how does that work, Jon? I mean, in real life terms or practical examples?

JON OPGENORTH

Yes, sometimes it is just really hard to know: Did I do the right thing? Or did I misunderstand it? I wonder if Mother Teresa ever felt like: Did I miss something? Where is God in this? And you know, in scripture there is a lot of different ways...sometimes it is that still small voice that Elijah had, where he just kind of sensed that God was there and God spoke to him. For me, a lot of times it has been looking at the past signs of what God has done in my life. Remembering that his providence and mercy and grace were there; and that is why journaling is so important when those kinds of things happen, I think, to remind us.

DAVE BAST

Yes; like piling the rocks...

JON OPGENORTH

Yes...

DAVE BAST

That we see along the way.

JON OPGENORTH

The standing stones that say: Oh, yeah; I remember that time. You know, Psalm 86:17 has this little phrase...this little request: Show us a sign of your favor. And for me sometimes seeing that sign of favor is just being reminded as the sun comes up so is God faithful. His mercies are new every morning. It might be simply a note that someone sends to us, or an encouraging word along the way. We cannot really discount those small signs of God's providence; signs that he is still leading us; but it is hard. There are those times. Paul I think had to have questioned: Why did you bring me to this point, God?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and I was thinking too, Jon, when you were mentioning a moment ago...I was thinking of another psalm, Psalm 42, where the psalmist says: God, you are gone; you are off duty; I cannot find you; I cannot find you; but the turn in the psalm is: Therefore I will remember you; and then he mentions Mount Mizar and a few places in the past where God came through for him. Sometimes it is that memory of the past; and you mentioned Mother Teresa. That original clear, clear call in her life sustained her the whole time. She would remember that even during decades of divine silence.

DAVE BAST

She toughed it out; and I think another thing, too, from the story of Moses: There is Aaron; Aaron was with him the whole way. He had a brother...

JON OPGENORTH

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And I think that Lord often provides us with brothers and sisters...maybe not literally physical ones, but...

JON OPGENORTH

Well, and Paul himself in the letters often refers to dear brothers in the faith who cared for him while he was in prison; and so he had the encouragement of...

DAVE BAST

Or the people with him, you know...

JON OPGENORTH

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

It was always a group thing. It wasn't just Paul, it was Paul and Timothy; Paul and Sylvanus...

JON OPGENORTH

Silas in the Philippian jail, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we look for God's presence in our lives, sometimes through remembering past times, sometimes through the encouragement of a friend, the ministry of our partners in ministry...lots and lots of different ways by which we have what Paul says from this: I have always had help from God; and that is what keeps us all going; and it actually kept Jesus Christ himself going. As we close out this program and series, we will think about Jesus' obedience to his call next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, along with our guest today, Jon Opgenorth; and let's...in this final segment of this program and of this series, let's dig right into scripture and listen to these words from Hebrews 5. They are actually quite striking words. Hebrews 5:7:

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered. ⁹And once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him. ¹⁰And was designated by God to be a high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

DAVE BAST

That is such an interesting passage, isn't it? And kind of jarring for many of us, because I think most of us start with the assumption of Jesus' divinity. He really was the Son of God. You cannot be a Christian without believing that. And then to hear about tears and cries and learning obedience...it is a little bit unusual for

many of us.

JON OPGENORTH

And he could have saved himself from death if he wanted to. He could have called down the angels to help him in that moment, and exercise that power, but he chose the path of suffering that brought peace for many other people, especially us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is interesting, too, you know...you can spark some interesting debates in the Church sometimes. It is hard to bring Jesus' divinity and humanity together; and so, you sort of think: Well, when Jesus was in school, did he *really* have to learn math or did he already know high-level, you know, Einsteinian physics? Well, now we think that as a real human being he did. He had to learn how to do things, how to tie his sandals; he had to learn how to...and here, on a far more important matter, the author to the Hebrews says: He learned obedience through the school of hard knocks; that Jesus had this call on his life, that awareness of his Father's will, but he got it done through a series of learning through suffering; and if that is true of Jesus, I can imagine we'd think it would certainly be true of us.

DAVE BAST

Yes; a servant is not above his master—his or her master. It is one of the most difficult ideas in the Bible, I think. You know, we talk about wanting to grow more like Jesus and wanting to progress, and God often says: Okay, but you know what that is going to cost you, because the best way to learn is by suffering.

JON OPGENORTH

And that is what I have found so intriguing about the work that we are engaged in around the world is, I feel very ill equipped compared to our brothers and sisters who serve Christ in some of the hardest places on earth. The things that they have to endure and go through are simply beyond what any of us in North America would possibly imagine having to deal with in our own countries; and that piece is sort of striking to me when I read about Jesus and his suffering, much of the rest of the Church...the leaders are not surprised by suffering, and are somewhat surprised when I ask them about what it is like to go through suffering. Almost like: What do you mean? You are not suffering for Christ? In Iran, sometimes they don't trust the preacher until the preacher has been in jail for a while to sort of prove their stripes.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I remember years ago a Chinese church leader telling me about the basic course of instruction they had for new Christians, and he said: Well, we teach them about Bible study and we teach them about prayer and we teach them about how to go to jail; and you know, how to handle that...

JON OPGENORTH

Just matter-of-factly.

DAVE BAST

Very matter of fact, and I thought: Oh, Lord have mercy.

JON OPGENORTH

Read your Bible, pray...

DAVE BAST

Lord, have mercy on me, yes.

JON OPGENORTH

Go to jail!

SCOTT HOEZEE

As you said a minute ago, Dave, the disciple is not greater than the master, and the master suffered terribly in his life. We don't often think about that, but how it probably was for Jesus; constantly painful to be in a fallen world, constantly painful to be aware of everything around him that was fractured and broken in a way that we ordinary human beings usually aren't, because being the Son of God, Jesus knew exactly how life was supposed to be in the creation he helped fashion; and so, there was a lifelong suffering. The cross was kind of the capper. We always think he suffered on the cross and they whipped him. That was the capper. There had been suffering all along.

DAVE BAST

Let's think a little bit more about that phrase: He learned obedience through what he suffered. Usually we think of learning as acquiring knowledge, but that is not really the...I think the direction of that phrase here, is it? Rather, it is you learn obedience, you sort of practice obedience. You just have to plow through.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that sort of reminds me of C. S. Lewis. You know, we learn how to do things by forcing ourselves to do them when the circumstances are hard; and apparently, again, so striking that even Jesus, and therefore the salvation that Jesus achieved—the salvation that we are going to be celebrating into all eternity—came through a process for Jesus of learning obedience through suffering, being perfected by that. That is where the Church has come from; and indeed, maybe that is why we should not be surprised when we suffer. Maybe we ought to be a little surprised that we *don't* more in some parts of the world.

DAVE BAST

But he...as we mentioned in the great passage from Hebrews 12...he endured the cross, despising the shame, for the joy that was set before him.

JON OPGENORTH

There was going to be joy at the end; and in some ways, we talked about earlier how our past shapes us and helps us to endure, but so does that picture of that future. Jesus does endure the cross for the joy that is before him, and he knew that his suffering would bring us peace; maybe in some ways as we walk through our own journeys, to be able to have a picture of the end in mind so that we won't ourselves lose heart, as Hebrews 12 will say.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think as we conclude this series on when God calls, the cross is our best reminder that fulfilling our calling is never easy, but God is faithful. He will do it. Thanks be to God for giving us the help we need to do the things to which he calls us.

DAVE BAST

And thank you, Jon Opgenorth, for joining our conversation today; and thank you for listening and digging deeper into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast and Scott Hoezee, and we hope that you will join us again next time as we dig deeply into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to let us know what scripture passages or topics you would like to hear discussed on *Groundwork*.

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