

The Path of the Disciple: The Weight of the Call

Meditation on Genesis 11:31-32, Genesis 12:1-9 and Matthew 9:9-13

Opening story

Have you ever been late for the gate at the airport? You know, when the screens have a red sign which flashes FINAL CALL. Or maybe you have heard your name being announced by loud speaker, "Would passenger Wagner please make your way to Gate 17 immediately. This is your final boarding call." Actually, I've never had my name announced by loud speaker, but I have had to run to get to the Gate in time. Once, we even confused our departure and arrival timings, and got to the airport with only a few minutes to spare. I can tell you, seeing the 'final call' sign gets your heart racing!

Passage Intro

Our theme today is 'calling'. And we have two Bible passages which look at two instances of God calling people. God called Abram and Sarai to go to a new land. And Jesus called Matthew to become his disciple.

Dear sisters and brothers, God calls each of us to follow him. As Christians, we are disciples of Christ. But what does it mean to be a disciple? What does it mean to be called?

Background of Rabbis and their disciples¹

Let me first tell you about the ancient Jewish custom of Rabbis and their disciples.

At the time of our gospel reading, boys and girls aged 5/6 would learn the Torah – by age 10 they should be able to recite by heart the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures (that's Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy!). Some would then finish their schooling and return home, join the family business or become an apprentice.

Only the best ones (probably just boys) would carry on learning the scriptures until age 12, which included memorising the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures. Then most of them would finish their schooling, return home, join the family business or become an apprentice.

Only the best of the best would carry on. They would then find a Rabbi, a Jewish religious teacher, and ask to become their disciple. The Rabbi would test them, to see if they had the potential to be that Rabbi's disciple.

So the best of the best of the best would become disciples and follow an honoured Rabbi, literally going wherever the Rabbi went, serving the Rabbi, learning from the Rabbi, imitating the Rabbi — with the aim that these disciples would embody the teachings of the Rabbi, doing what the Rabbi did, becoming like the Rabbi, and eventually making new disciples.

¹ Information inspired by Rob Bell's Nooma video "Dust" (2004), and supported by Gracin & Budiselić (2019), KAIROS: Evangelical Journal of Theology / Vol. XIII No. 2, pp. 205-222 <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/333538>

Context of Matthew's calling

This is the context that we find ourselves in as we read about the calling of Matthew. Here is Matthew, sitting at the tax booth, hated by his fellow Jews for being a collaborator with the Roman colonial forces, and viewed as being ceremonially unclean for being in contact with Gentiles. Matthew was obviously not one of the best of the best from Torah school; the locals even called him a 'sinner'.

And a Rabbi called Jesus comes along and calls him to become his disciple. Matthew is absolutely unqualified to become a Rabbi's disciple. For Matthew, the tax collector, to become a disciple of anyone was absolutely unthinkable. But Jesus called to him: 'Follow me', and Matthew instinctively did.

Matthew got up and followed Jesus, his Rabbi. As a tax collector, Matthew may have had wealth, a comfortable home. But what Jesus offered him was worth much more. Life as Jesus' disciple would become much less comfortable for Matthew, but he was called; he was deemed to be able to do what the Rabbi did. And do you know what, Matthew and his fellow disciples would go on to change the world!

Abram's call

Abram's call was equally world changing. God promised to make his name great, and Abraham (as he was later renamed) became the father of faith for Jews, Christians and Muslims around the world.

But what I find fascinating about Abram's call, is that it actually started a generation back with his father, Terah. It was Terah who first felt a call to leave his homeland of Ur and go with Abram, Sarai and Lot to Canaan.

Abram was part of this calling, this journey to go to Canaan. From early adulthood his life had been shaped by his father's sense of God-directed purpose. Maybe he heard his father talk about his dream of living in Canaan when they were resting around the camp fire. But along the way, Terah and the family settled in Haran. We don't know why Terah didn't continue the journey to Canaan.

So Abram and Sarai and their nephew Lot got used to a settled way of life again. They accumulated possessions; they enjoyed the comforts of their growing wealth. But God wasn't done with them. The journey was only half completed.

This time, God called Abram directly. Abram was called to leave the security and comfort of the settled life he had grown used to, and to go to an unknown land that God would show him. And Abram instinctively did.

Abram became a part of God's salvation story. Abram was blessed and became a blessing to others. It wasn't immediate, but moving step by step, stage by stage, in obedience and faith, Abram followed God.

Conclusion

So, what can we learn from Abram, Sarai and Matthew? God's call is for everyone. You don't need to be academically or theologically qualified; you don't need to be the best of the best. You are called because God wants you to be part of his dream for the world, and because he believes you can do what Jesus did.

God's call to you may be as clear as if someone walked past you and said 'follow me', or it may be a background sense of purpose that you picked up from stories shared around a camp fire.

I wonder, where are you on this journey?

Maybe you are hearing God's call for the first time. Are you ready to join Jesus on the move? Are you ready to get up and follow him? Are you prepared to leave behind some of the comforts you are used to in order to change the world? Are you excited to be blessed and to be a blessing to others? Are you willing to walk this path with others and share the journey with fellow travellers? Because when you are a disciple, you are never alone.

Or maybe you heard God's call in the past, but you haven't responded yet. Don't wait for the 'final call'! There is an adventure of faith waiting for you now.

Or maybe you have been a disciple for a while, and you have grown in faith and trust along the way. Are you still inspired by the call not to settle but to keep on moving with the Lord? Be encouraged that God sees your every small act of kindness, every hard-fought decision to forgive, every courageous prayer.

Or maybe you struggle to hear any sense of call at all. Well, God's call to you is here, in the Word, calling you to follow Jesus, and to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. Remember, Abram journeyed stage by stage towards a promised blessing which he didn't see fulfilled for a long time. This is faith in action.

Dear sisters and brothers, each of us is called by God. We are called to go, to follow, to walk with Jesus. So let's keep marching in God's light, let's keep living in God's love, let's keep moving in God's power. Amen