

A person wearing a dark hoodie and a yellow backpack is walking away from the camera down a paved road. The road has a white dashed line down the center. The background is a dense forest of trees, and the sky is a warm, golden-orange color, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is contemplative and hopeful.

CALLED BY **GOD**

EXPLORING OUR
IDENTITY IN CHRIST

DEREK TIDBALL

CALLED
BY
GOD

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Introduction

More than once in the New Testament Christians are described as ‘the called ones’ (Romans 1:1, 6, 7; 1 Corinthians 1:2, 24). It is plain that being called by God was not reserved for a special elite group of Christians but applied to every Christian. The call of God determined their identity in Christ. But what exactly does it mean to be called by God?

One of the greatest achievements of the Reformation was the rethinking of ‘the call’. During the Middle Ages it had been thought that vocation—the word comes from the Latin word for ‘to call’—was the province of priests and monks. Their spiritual work and contemplative lives were on a different plane from that of ordinary workers, like farmers, traders and servants. Religious professionals needed a call and had a vocation; the rest just had work. Martin Luther began to liberate the concept of the call from the monopoly hold of the clergy and re-envision all work, however ordinary, as significant in God’s sight and a calling from him. This holistic vision was much more in line with the teaching of scripture than the previous distorted views of vocation had been (see, for example, Colossians 3:18—4:1).

Reformation teaching on vocation had a great and lasting impact but did not produce a totally satisfactory result. Having escaped the confinement of the religious specialists, other particular occupations or professions came to be seen as vocations. These were still often deemed more worthy than mundane work, especially if they involved long hours, low pay and other elements of self-sacrifice. What is more, in the Protestant church, as well as the Roman Catholic Church, our language still suggests that those who become ministers, missionaries or full-time Christian workers are the ones we truly consider to have (and need) a call, as opposed to those who are accountants, engineers, shelf-stackers or builders. Nevertheless, though the Reformation may not have achieved a perfect result in this area, it was a giant leap forward.

Much current discussion is about work and, indeed, about viewing the whole of life as a calling, and rightly so.¹ I endorse the importance of such discussions. We have a long way to go still in casting the biblical vision that life in its totality, and one's work in particular, however apparently secular, is a calling from God. The curious thing in all this, however, is how little attention is paid to what the Bible sets out as the Christian's calling. On numerous occasions the New Testament, building on an Old Testament theme, says not only that Christians are 'the called ones' but also that they are called to this or called to that. The purpose of this book is to reflect on the major texts that articulate the biblical vision of what it means to be called by God, and so to explore our identity in Christ.

After an opening chapter, which lays an important foundation, the book is roughly organised around the phases of the Christian life from the initial calling heard in conversion to what the Salvation Army speaks of as 'being promoted to glory'. It's not as neat as that, of course, since many of the texts considered refer to simultaneous experiences in our journey as Christians. There is some inevitable overlap between the chapters but they are designed to stand alone. Each chapter concludes with a one- or two-sentence 'Key lesson' and a short list of questions for group discussion or personal consideration.

If you are looking for something to help you see your job as a vocation, there would be better books to read than this one. But if you want to anchor your understanding in what the Bible explicitly says about the Christian's calling, which inevitably has major implications for the whole of our lives, this may be the place to start. Without such an anchor it's too easy to drift in the sea of our own changing opinions. This will give us a solid fixed point on which to reflect on God's calling to us today.

I

Called... loved... kept

To those who have been called, who are loved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ.

JUDE 1

One of the most important foundations of the Christian life is that you are called to it. I know this is different from the popular idea of what happens when people become Christians. When we tell our stories we often say, 'I decided to follow Jesus' or 'I committed my life to Christ', or perhaps we talk of 'finding faith' with 'I' as the unspoken explorer who has made the discovery. We live in a culture of individualism where 'I' is in danger of becoming the subject of every sentence. But to be called is to respond to the initiative of another and, having done so, to commence a life which will be profoundly reshaped, in the company of others who have also responded to the call.

The New Testament spells out a number of dimensions to this calling that together give a comprehensive account of the Christian life. Here we begin with one of its most inclusive claims.

Jude gives the most astonishing and unexpected beginning to his little and often-neglected letter, which we find tucked away at the back of our Bibles. The heart of the letter (vv. 3–16) is fierce in its denunciation of those who were destroying the church of his day. He tells us he had wanted to write a more positive letter, rejoicing in the salvation they shared. Yet the danger was such that he had to set that aside in order to warn the church to expel the ungodly people who had infiltrated it and were perverting the grace of God, just as we would want to destroy cancer cells that were fatally invading our body. He pronounces sure and certain judgement on them, in the most graphic of terms.

Perhaps it is precisely because of the harshness of his tone and the seriousness of his warning that his letter begins (and will end) so positively. His opening words radiate pastoral assurance. His readers are far from being a perfect church, yet the main body of members, as opposed to the infiltrators, can be assured that they are ‘called... loved... and kept’ (v. 1), three great words which define the Christian life. Furthermore, he wants them to know ‘mercy, peace and love’, not just a little but ‘in abundance’ (v. 2).

Great words. What do they mean?

Called

A word full of assurance

My hold on God is variable and often uncertain. It wouldn’t be true to say it changes as often as the weather, but it is woefully affected by circumstances, moods and commitments. There are times when God feels so close and his blessing so real that he is almost tangible. At other times, especially when the challenges mount and when failure is experienced, my grip on him loosens. How great it is to know then that what really counts is not my grip on God but his calling of me.

God, ‘who does not change like shifting shadows’ (James 1:17) and isn’t subject to the fluctuations we humans suffer, has issued the call. God, who never suffers from partial or imperfect knowledge, knew all there was to know about me, yet still called me into his family and service. God, who knows the end from the beginning, has elected me—that’s inherent in his call—to be his servant. I may not think I qualify. I may not believe I am mature, gifted, good, stable, knowledgeable, zealous or wise enough, but it did not prevent him from calling.

As Alec Motyer once wrote:

Salvation would be a miserably unsure thing had it no other foundation than that I chose Christ. The human will blows hot and blows cold, is firm and unstable by fits and starts; it can offer no security of tenure. But the will of God is the ground of salvation.²

There can be no surer ground on which to stand than that the all-knowing and all-powerful God has called us to be his own.

Called for a purpose

From the beginning, God has been a calling God. Adam and Eve were given the special calling to act as God's representatives on earth, ruling as wise stewards over the natural creation and propagating the human race (Genesis 1:28). Sadly, their desire to become 'like God' himself (3:4) fatally infected their original calling and from then on Adam and Eve were estranged from God with lasting consequences for their heirs. Hence, on the evening of the day on which they disobeyed God, he called Adam asking, 'Where are you?' (3:9).

In spite of this disastrous start, God did not give up calling. He continued to seek people who could both become his friends and serve him as his agents of blessing in the world. Outstanding in the long line of calls is the call he gave to Abraham: 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you' (Genesis 12:1). It was courageous, or foolhardy, of Abraham to accept the call. I'm pretty sure I would have wanted to know more about the destination before I agreed to pack! Perhaps it was the sense of purpose that was inherent in the call that inspired Abraham to up sticks and go. The call—or election, by another name—was never intended for Abraham's private enjoyment or personal prosperity but was for the benefit of all peoples. It was so that he would be the father of a great nation through whom 'all peoples on earth will be blessed' (12:2–3). Now that's a calling! It's no small mission but is global in its reach. Just as with Adam and Eve, God's calling was for Abraham to be an instrument in his hand to bless others.

12 CALLED BY GOD

The children of Israel, on whom Abraham's election collectively devolved, occasionally fulfilled their calling well but, sadly, more often than not failed to live in accordance with their vocation. They presumed it meant that God would give them preferential treatment and bless them as a nation, providing them with protection and prosperity, irrespective of how they lived. So they frequently took liberties and lived in a way that offended the God who longed to care for them. Instead of being a channel of God's blessing to others they tried to keep it to themselves. The idea of calling and election became thoroughly distorted in their minds.

Yet God did not give up. He kept calling: shepherds, like Moses, to rescue them (Exodus 3:1–4:17); judges, like Gideon, to deliver them (Judges 6); priests, like Samuel, to guide them (1 Samuel 3); kings, like David, to rule them (1 Samuel 16:1–13); and above all prophets—many prophets—to call them to repentance and a new way of living (Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 1:4–19; Ezekiel 1–3; Amos 7:14–15).

It would be a mistake to think that God only called individual people, and an even greater mistake to think he only called exceptional people to act on his behalf in the world. His specific call may have focused on Joshua, Deborah, Isaiah or Huldah at a particular time, but Israel as a whole had received the call. As mentioned, the whole nation, not just a few representative leaders, had been called to be 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exodus 19:6). It was a vocation they rarely understood, but one which was re-envisioned by the prophet Isaiah. Through him God reminded Israel:

*I took you from the ends of the earth,
from its furthest corners I called you,
I said, 'You are my servant';
I have chosen you and have not rejected you.*

ISAIAH 41:9

*I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles.*

ISAIAH 42:6

*Listen to me, Jacob,
Israel, whom I have called:
I am he;
I am the first and I am the last.*

ISAIAH 48:12

*Listen to me, you islands;
hear this, you distant nations:
before I was born the Lord called me;
from my mother's womb he has spoken my name...
He said to me, 'You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will display my splendour.'*

ISAIAH 49:1, 3 (ALL EMPHASES MINE)

It is against this background that Jude addresses his readers, and through them us, as those who are called. Jesus, of course, called the Twelve to be his apostles (Mark 3:13–19) and many others to follow him (for example, Matthew 9:9; 22:14). But Jude's concern is not with outstanding individuals but with the church as a whole, which has a long and distinguished pedigree as those who are called to serve God in the world by being his special and holy (more of that later) people and the means by which the gospel would bless the world. The calling of Israel has now been entrusted to the followers of Jesus Christ.

Calling implies responsibility and privilege

Calling, then, gives a sense of purpose and significance in life. We have a mission to fulfil. It prevents us from drifting through with no particular direction or destination in mind.

Although we speak in general conversation of being ‘called’ less than we did, we still speak of people as ‘called to the bar’ (that is, the legal, not the alcoholic, one) or being ‘called up’ into the armed services—a distant memory in the UK, perhaps, but a present experience for many young people in other countries. And while the managerialism of the present culture may have diluted the sense of vocation, the law, the armed forces, medicine and the police, among others, are still vocations that have the implications of calling about them.

These callings confer special rights and responsibilities that are denied ordinary people. Barristers who are called to the bar have a right of audience before judges in the higher courts which ordinary mortals do not have. Their training and testing has qualified them to practise law in a specialised way, and to wear the symbolic dress of gown and wig appropriate to their office. Being called up to fight in a war also involves rigorous training and with it the right to bear arms in the Queen’s name as well as to wear the appropriate uniform. Without that, bearing arms would usually be a criminal offence. After years of training and the swearing of the Hippocratic oath, doctors are able to examine patients, dispense medicines, stick needles in people and authorise treatments which others would be in trouble for if they did. Nurses equally serve in a vocation, although many might feel the element of self-sacrifice and service outweighs any privileges their qualification entails. Police officers are called to swear an oath that they will uphold the Queen’s law, with the result that they are held in some respect, if not awe (even if they feel this has been somewhat eroded in recent days), and given powers denied to members of the public. Each vocation involves observing certain ethical standards. Calling involves both responsibilities and rights.

Think in more everyday terms. When we receive an invitation to a wedding we are effectively being called to it. People go to great lengths to enjoy the privilege of being a guest. The date is kept free, a present is bought, the hair is done, and a new outfit is bought to wear, all so they have the privilege of being a guest. The invitation (call) confers responsibilities (not to turn up dressed like a tramp and to bring a

present with you) and the right to attend the reception and eat the wedding breakfast (as it is oddly called).

How much more seriously we should take our calling to be Christians! And how much greater are the privileges that we enjoy. Our calling as Christians confers the responsibility of following Christ obediently, serving the living God in the world he has made and participating in the fulfilling of his purposes for it. It confers the right of being sons and daughters in his family and of being those who have been chosen to have access to his very presence and to know him.

Calling involves change

When a doctor, nurse, soldier, police officer or barrister is called, we know that they will give themselves in service to others in particular ways and abide by their profession's ethical code. Their calling impacts on their lifestyle, whether it means they belong to rather elite professional clubs, learn to play golf, condemn themselves to shift work, leave their families behind for months at a time to serve overseas, place themselves in danger in the line of duty, or learn to marshal persuasive arguments at short notice and think on their feet. They may not take to the appropriate lifestyle all at once. People sometimes take time to grow into their professional roles, for good or ill, but changes will occur. This may also be true of our learning to inhabit a Christian lifestyle. But what changes are involved? What movement might we expect for a person who is 'called' in this most fundamental of all senses?

Our calling involves a movement...

- from self to Christ
- from sin to holiness
- from pleasure-seeking to service
- from indifference to love
- from ignorance to truth
- from doubt to trust
- from impurity to purity

- from darkness to light
- from sadness to joy
- from fear to peace
- from alienation from God to friendship with him.³

Calling requires a response

Like many, I've often sat at an airport waiting for my flight to be called. You keep an eye on the departure board and an ear cocked for the announcements. Since security measures require us to arrive so early at airports these days, we're normally very grateful when the call eventually comes. If we've been delayed our thankfulness is multiplied. No one in their right mind would hear the call and carry on sitting there without getting up to go to the departure gate. That would be stupid.

So it is with the call of God. We must respond to his initiative if the call is to be of any value to us. We do so through faith and by becoming people who daily follow Christ. Jesus himself warned that 'many are invited, but few are chosen' (Matthew 22:14).⁴ The choice of God is only confirmed when one makes a response and accepts the invitation. Calling is not something we fall into; it is something we consciously accept.

What a privilege to be among those who are called. How foolish it would be to ignore the call.

Loved

The second great word Jude uses to describe his readers, and so us, is 'loved', although he expresses it somewhat curiously. They are loved, he says, not *by* God the Father, as we might expect, but rather '*in* God the Father'. Why does he say, somewhat awkwardly to our minds, '*in* God the Father'? Let's hold the question and work slowly towards it as we contemplate the love God has for us.

It speaks of a personal calling

I was born at a fortunate time. A baby boomer, I entered a world that was being transformed and afforded many comforts hitherto unknown. Among the advantages was that I was just too young to be called up for National Service. After World War II all 17- to 21-year-olds in the UK had been required to enlist for two years preparing to fight in war, and then to remain on the reserved list for some years afterwards as well. They were called up to fight for the King.⁵ When the time came, an envelope would drop through the letterbox ordering its recipient to report for training. In all, some two million young men were called up. Although the order was issued in the name of the King, the order was an impersonal one. His Majesty did not sit in Buckingham Palace, poring over the names of those he was to conscript, nor did he know any personal details about them. The choice was systematically impersonal. Today, it would be even more impersonal since a computer would select the names, as if they were the winners of a lottery. Even the names today would have been substituted by a set of complicated numbers, devoid of humanity.

Yet when the Lord God, king of the universe, calls people into his service he does so because of love. With deceptive simplicity, John in his first letter twice says, 'God is love' (1 John 4:8, 16). This does not say everything we need to know about God. There is a lot more he has revealed to us about his nature than this. And there is certainly no excuse for reversing the sentence and saying that if God is love then any 'love is God'. In our corrupt human natures our love is always tainted and we may well focus it on evil or selfish objects. Nonetheless, to say that God is love gets very close to defining what is the essence of his character, and to the true nature and heart of God himself.

So, when he calls, he calls because he loves. That call rescues us from all manner of darkness, into lives of significance and relationship, as subsequent chapters will explore, all because he loves us. As he called Peter, James, John, Matthew, Mary, Joanna and others personally to follow him, so he personally, by name, calls us to follow because of love.

It speaks of a gracious calling

The love which accompanies and motivates God's calling on our lives is *agape* love—love of the deepest kind. Grasping the nature of this love, C.S. Lewis wrote, 'Divine Love is Gift-love.'⁶ That's exactly in line with John's understanding of *agape*: 'This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us' (1 John 3:16). God's love for us is more than affection, much more than emotion, and certainly nothing like the warm fuzzy feeling we mistake on occasions for falling in love. It is a love that involves active and costly self-giving, seen supremely in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

Furthermore, we begin to appreciate the depth of this love when we realise that this is love for the undeserving, for those who have no claim upon it, for those who have no rights over it and who can certainly never repay it adequately. The culture of New Testament times was one that saw relationships in terms of reciprocal exchange. You only invited someone to dinner when it was to your advantage to do so, when having them as your guest would make you look good, or when you could expect a better invitation in return. You did not give to those who could not pay you back. Your love was expended only after careful calculations had been made. How extraordinary, then, is the love of God for us. How totally countercultural.

His call is marinated in grace. We were not called because we were good, qualified, talented, indispensable to God (how absurd to think in those terms) or had the right connections (even more absurd if we think we have more connections than the creator of the universe!). No, it is a calling of grace, of undeserved love. Paul certainly knew this to be true in his own case. He explained to the Galatians, who thought they could earn God's forgiveness by their own efforts, that God set him apart from birth 'and called me by his grace' (Galatians 1:15). He never got over the wonder of his calling, remarking, late in life, to Timothy that given his previous history as a blasphemer and persecutor, his appointment to Christ's service was a sign that 'the grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly' (1 Timothy 1:14).

The grace of God extends not just to the initial calling to be a Christian and servant of the living God but to the whole of the Christian life. Jude's readers were under enormous pressure from within the congregation because erroneous and divisive teachers threatened to undermine everything the church had taught up to that point. No doubt the congregation would have been small, so families and friends were all caught up in the controversy. The personal dimensions of it would have been painful, especially for those who wanted to remain true to apostolic teaching. What they needed to know above all else was that they were loved by God. The doctrinal perverts with whom they struggled certainly didn't love them. But it wasn't the love or the opinion of the heretics that counted. God loved them and that outweighed everything else. God's love was sufficient to protect them and keep them going in the fiercest of storms.

It speaks of a planned calling

We are moving towards the question of why Jude says that they were loved '*in* God the Father', though we haven't got there yet. '*In*' points to something deep and interior. It hints that this love of God is no superficial or hastily thought-up reaction to people's need but a reflection of God's eternal nature and long-established plan. The calling arises from within the heart of God, who, in Paul's words, 'chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will' (Ephesians 1:4-5). God's love arises from the depths of his being.

It speaks of an intimate calling

It's probably John who sheds most light on what it means to be 'loved *in* God the Father'. Having said, as mentioned, 'God is love', he immediately adds, 'Whoever lives *in* love lives *in* God, and God *in* them' (1 John 4:16). John writes several times about being, remaining or living '*in*' God (1 John 2:24; 3:24; 4:13). John had witnessed the complete oneness Jesus and his Father enjoyed, recalling the way Jesus described it himself:

'Father, just as you are *in* me and I am *in* you' (John 17:21). That, said Jesus, was to be the pattern of his relationship with his disciples. It was to be a triad of intimate relationship: 'I *in* them and you *in* me' (John 17:23, all emphases mine).

Being 'loved *in* God the Father' means 'that those whom God loves are taken into the intimate fellowship of God's love, embraced and enfolded by his love'.⁷ It points to the indwelling of the believer in God in a secure, deep and continuous closeness that nothing in life (or the church) can threaten or destroy. God takes the initiative in loving us in Christ as he has loved his only Son.

Kept

Once more Jude's words contain a surprise. We might presume that Jude would have wanted to boost the confidence of his readers by saying that whatever their troubles they were being kept *by* Jesus Christ. It would have been a perfectly legitimate point to make and one that was pastorally apt. However, he does not say they, or we, are kept *by* Jesus Christ but rather 'kept *for* Jesus Christ'.

Kept for the special day

Leading up to Christmas, temptation abounds. The fridge is filled with the most delicious variety of food and the presents are colourfully wrapped under the tree. Plead as one might with one's wife or mother to be allowed to eat the treat or open the parcels a few days before Christmas, the answer is usually a very robust 'No, you can't touch them. They're being kept for Christmas Day.' When Christmas Day arrives, salivating in anticipation gives way to tasting in reality. The presents, whose wrappings may have only hinted at what was inside, will have passed their 'feel-by' date and so are opened to reveal their contents.

In like manner, the Christian is being kept for the day when Christ will

come again. Present experience gives only a glimpse of what's to come. New Testament writers often illustrate this in terms of inheritance. Peter, for example, writes of the inheritance which is 'kept in heaven for you' and which as a result can 'never perish spoil or fade' (1 Peter 1:4; see also Ephesians 1:14; Colossians 1:12; 3:24; Hebrews 9:15). Like any earthly legacy, it is being kept safe until the day arrives when the beneficiary can rightfully receive it. On 'the day of Christ Jesus' (Philippians 1:6) Christians will at long last enter into the fullness of their salvation.

But the thought is two-sided, not one-sided. We will enter fully into our inheritance, but Christ himself will also enter into the joy of his work finally being brought to its culmination. New Testament writers thought of this in terms of the arrival of the wedding day when the bride would be revealed in all her glory, to the great joy of the bridegroom. Paul, not without some trepidation (1 Thessalonians 2:17–19), looked forward to the day when 'a radiant church' would be presented to Christ 'without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless' (Ephesians 5:27; see also 2 Corinthians 11:2). John equally dreamed of the wedding celebration to come:

*Let us rejoice and be glad
and give him glory!
For the wedding of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready.
Fine linen, bright and clean,
was given her to wear.
(Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God's holy people.)*

REVELATION 19:7–8

Kept until the special day

In reality, the gap between being kept *for* Jesus Christ and being kept *by* Jesus Christ is not as great as it would seem. The eye does not settle on the distant horizon without passing through the intermediate territory. Keeping the food and presents for Christmas Day necessarily involves

making sure they're protected in the meantime. Being kept *for* the day of Christ Jesus necessarily involves being kept *by* Jesus Christ for that day.

Challenges, failures and discouragements are sure to come. But, 'The Lord makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand' (Psalm 37:23–24). Our safe perseverance in the Christian life depends not on our successes, our achievements, or even our progression, but ultimately on his gracious keeping power.

Such a confident assertion of our security does not permit us to be complacent about our Christian life, since it is our 'union with Christ [that] is the ground of our safety and preservation'.⁸ Rather, such assurance serves as the greatest of incentives to us to live out our calling more faithfully.

Puritan preachers were great doctors of the soul, always careful to apply the teaching of the truth they expounded. So when Thomas Manton commented on these verses he spoke of the way (to paraphrase) they bring comfort when people are in trouble and God seems to hide his face; when they face temptation and are in hard conflict with doubt and sin; when they face danger and opposition seems tangible; when discouragement comes and the cards seem stacked against them; and when death comes and the final enemy is faced.⁹ Kept... kept... kept.

Jude wants to lift his readers' eyes away from their present battles so they can focus on their future destination. It may seem a long way off, just as arriving at a holiday destination does to the child in the car who constantly bugs his parent with the question, 'Are we there yet?' The parent will, of course, truthfully answer no, yet also build hope as confidently as they can, sure that, short of a breakdown, a traffic accident, a tornado or whatever, they will get there. The Christian can be even more confident because of the keeping power of Christ.

If you had to choose three words to describe yourself, which three

would you choose? Tall, dark and handsome, perhaps? Loud, fun and untidy? Shy, quiet and studious? Fit, lean and mean? Rich, flamboyant and carefree? How about 'called... loved... and kept'? These are the three most important words concerning our identity in Christ.

Key lesson

Discover your identity in the Christ who calls, loves and keeps you, not in success, position, material possessions or your own passing moods.

Questions

1. If you had to sum up your life in three words, which words would you choose?
2. How conscious are you of the call of God on your life? How important is the call to you?
3. Think about the circumstances when you have especially felt loved and kept by God. Did you express thanks to God at the time? Did you testify to God's grace to others? And how did the experience shape your ordinary day-to-day living in Christ?