

## The Upward Call

### Called from Bondage

I want to talk about two things today. Two things that I think are closely connected.

**The first is about calling.** Paul talks about “**the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.**”

We all know about calls, and not just the kind we get on the telephone. Our children call for our attention. Our spouses, friends or families may call on us for help and support. We are called to the tasks that our jobs set out for us. A firefighter’s pager goes off in the middle of dinner and he or she is called to a fire. We are called in many different directions in life. Some calls are more pressing or significant than others. Moses was called by God to go to Pharaoh to deliver God’s message. The people of Israel were called by God out of bondage in Egypt.

I want us to think about our **sense of call and how we respond.** Do I get snappy when my children are calling for attention because my attention is being focused on my phone? Do I grumble when my wife or family ask me to help? Do I grudgingly respond to the duties of a job I must do? Do I drag my feet when I am called to a fire, or do I jump up and sprint? We know that Moses protested at first when he was called. We know how the Israelites responded when they were called. **How do we respond to the various calls in our lives?**

**The second thing I want to talk about is spiritual bondage,** or rather, how our liberation from bondage happens through a voluntary binding of our selves to a higher purpose —i.e. responding to God’s call.

### Paul In Prison

I find it amazing that although Paul writes from prison, his letter does not sound like it comes from one who is bound behind walls of stone. He writes like a free man. He writes of being made **one of Jesus’ own; of gaining Christ, and being found in him.**

Paul even writes, **“what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole praetorian guard...(Phil.1:12-13).** He sees his imprisonment in a positive way, as a service, as a call to advance the good news of the Gospel to his jailers. Paul’s words are not the words of an imprisoned man, but the words of a free soul.

How many times do we hear ourselves or others say, “I can’t do this” or “its impossible for me to do that”? In our everyday lives we sometimes don’t sound or act like free people. And we’re not. I think of us more like the people of Israel who, even though they were out of bondage in Egypt, were still far from being able to trust Yahweh. They were spared the plagues. They were led through the parted waters of the Red Sea. They were fed on mana and wild birds. They drank water from the rock. And yet, after all these miracles, they still did not trust God.

**How many miracles are we surrounded by each moment, each day? How often do we forget to put our trust in the Creator?**

In this way, we are, in a sense, where the Israelites were, in the wilderness of doubt and disconnection. The bondage of the body is altogether different from bondage of the mind and spirit. I for one can identify with being locked into a certain way of thinking or not being able to let go of an attachment to a person or thing which is harmful. Bondage of the spirit and mind can be as strong and destructive as any physical bondage.

### **A Houses of Bondage**

In Exodus 20 we read:

**“God spoke all these words, saying,  
“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. (Exodus20:1-2)**

The theme of bondage is an important one for us today. And there is a paradox here. A paradox is, “a seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition that when investigated or explained may prove to be well founded or true.”

**And the paradox is this: we receive freedom from spiritual bondage only by binding ourselves to God.**

## **Exodus**

The book of Exodus details a process of liberation through a binding to God, and a reliance on God alone. It details a journey of a breaking away from a narrow trust in human affairs, to one of trusting God.

God offers the people the Ten Commandments not so much to constrain them as to offer them liberty within the context of covenant, or agreement. We enter this covenant voluntarily. It is an agreement that involves us and God. The first four commandments orient us in our correct relationship with God. The ones that follow orient us towards the correct relationships with each other. Who wants to live in a world where lying, theft, murder, adultery and covetousness are not just acceptable, but sanctioned by the culture? I doubt anyone would enjoy that. We'd all feel trapped in a deceitful, murderous chaos. The rule of the commandments offers us freedom through our willing choice to adopt a moral sense of conscience and healthy attitude towards God and each other.

The Exodus process begins a long journey for the Israelites. This a journey towards God is still unfolding for all of us. The problem is that although we have been given what Paul terms an "upward call," there are many opposing "downward calls" that pull us away from the covenant with God. The upward call being the freeing of spirit in our binding ourselves to God, whereas the downward call binds us in body, mind and spirit to cultural norms, false hope in human and material saviors, and lies of all sorts.

### **The Downward Call**

We look at our culture and we see that we are a people pulled in so many directions with distractions of all sorts and confused and sometimes diabolical messages. I'm not just talking about the old temptations to do the things the Ten Commandments warned us against. Today, new temptations abound. For example our phones and screens are a constant distraction and enticement to buy things and buy into the culture. Voices on the news amplify stories that often tempt us to hate our neighbors.

The world's currents have a strong undertow that threaten to pull us out into a sea of chaos and tribalism and idol worship. Our personal covenant with God is like Noah's Ark amid the swirling vortex of the world's many demands.

**What are the things in your life that draw you away from the upward call?  
What are the things that draw you away from peace and love and bind you to  
distractions and to feelings of hatred and resentment?**

### **The Upward Call**

The word “religion” comes from the Latin word “*religare*” which means, “to bind.” Religion is a binding agent. It draws us together in agreement, or covenant. We might say that human beings are naturally worshipful creatures. If we are not worshipping God, then we will certainly worship something else. The average American spends several hours a day in front of a television or some other screen for entertainment. Few churches in all of history could boast of such religious devotion. The distractions and temptations of our culture, the domination system, all work to bind us to worldly things, to divert us from the higher calling. It takes a lot of effort and awareness to listen to the upward call and discern it from the rest of the noise. But it is possible.

From within a Rumanian prison, Richard Wurmbrand turned his cell from a house of bondage into a house of worship. He did this through a deep and binding faith in God's love. He received the upward call and did not lose sight of it. (See Richard Wurmbrand's book “Tortured for Christ.”)

### **How are we being called and how are we responding?**

I believe we are all called to be sons and daughters of the almighty living God. We tend to be weak when it comes to resisting the ways of the world, often because we are distracted, overtired and unaware of what is happening. We need to be reminded to bind ourselves to God through the guidance of God's law, which is based in love. The binding of ourselves through our faith, through voluntary service to God is the highest call. Paul writes to the people of his day, and to us today about how crucial this is. Our love and service to our families and friends, our community, nation and the earth, all fall within the context of the upward call to love and be faithful to God.

Like a tree's roots hold fast to the earth as it's branches reach towards heaven, so we too need to hold fast to our covenant with God and reach for the highest calling - to love God and one another as ourselves.

Let us pray,

Dear Lord, Open our heart and minds to receive your upward call. Bind us to you that we may be reminded at all times of your love and faithfulness to us.

Make us vessels of your love. In Jesus' name, Amen.