

# Called

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[ 0 : 00 ] You know, the word Christian is an interesting word because it has come to mean many different things over the years. The meaning has shifted.

And so you could pull ten people off the street and ask them all what a Christian is, and you're likely to get at least ten different answers.

To some people, a Christian is someone who occasionally goes to church, primarily Christmas Easter. To others, it's about doing good.

Being a Christian is somebody who is a good person, a nice person. They live the way Jesus wants us to live. Some associate the word Christian with an outdated traditional morality.

Others see the word Christian as primarily a political identity, a voting block. I remember talking to someone from a different culture who said he simply assumed that all Americans were Christians, that if you're born in the United States that you are by default a Christian.

[ 1 : 07 ] And so there's an ethnic or national association with the word Christian. Now, if you were to ask a biblically grounded, thoughtful Christian what this word means, as maybe many of you in this room might answer this way.

You would probably say that the word Christian refers to someone who has repented, they have believed the gospel, they've been baptized, and they're actively seeking to follow Jesus.

And that would be an accurate answer, absolutely. And yet, surprisingly, even though that's an accurate answer, that is probably not how the apostle Paul would have answered based on what he says in 1 Corinthians 1, verses 1 through 9, which we just heard read a little while ago.

In this passage, there's a word that recurs again and again and again as Paul is opening his letter to the Corinthian church. And in this passage, Paul would say that Christians are, by definition, people who have been called.

People who have been called. It's interesting because this is not something that we talk often about, and yet I think that if we lose sight of what this means, we actually lose a great deal of the hope that it offers, both to Christians and non-Christians alike.

[ 2 : 27 ] We lose a great deal of the hope that Christianity offers the world. And so, this morning, we're going to focus on this word, called.

And we recognize that even as we focus on this, we're doing so as a church, and even the Greek word for church, ekklesia, means the called ones, the called out ones.

So, this word runs through the very center of what it means to be a Christian. We're going to look at this word, called, in this passage. We're going to see three things, the truth that it conveys, the problem that it raises, and then the hope that it offers.

The truth that it conveys, the problem that it raises, and the hope that it offers. Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, all of Your words.

We thank You for Your Spirit. We thank You for Your presence. We pray that now You would speak to us. As we open Your written words, we pray that we would hear Your Word in us, speaking to our minds, speaking to our hearts, speaking into our lives.

[ 3 : 33 ] We pray to hear the voice of the One who loves us the most. We pray that You would bless us with Your presence, that You would minister to us, Lord. And we pray that as we leave here, we would do so having received what You intend for us to receive as we open Your Word together, Lord.

We pray this in Your Son's holy name. Amen. So, the word called, first the truth that it conveys. Paul refers to Christians in general as people who have been called to be saints, called to be saints.

The word saints essentially just means holy or set apart for God's purposes. So, throughout the Bible, anything that is set apart for God's purposes is called holy, and when that applies to people, we call those people saints.

And if you read the rest of 1 Corinthians, you see that God's purpose for Christians, the reason He sets them apart, is that we would manifest God's character in the world, that we would be a counterculture for the common good, that we would be a kind of community where you see things like sex and money and power being used in ways that radically depart from the way the surrounding culture might use them, using these things in ways that reflect the glory of Christ, the goodness, truth, and beauty of God.

And so, that theme runs throughout 1 Corinthians, and obviously, you know, really through much of the Bible. And there's a lot more that we could say about that. The role of Christians is saints making God's glory known in the world.

[ 5 : 11 ] We could say a lot more about that. But as I said, I want to focus on the first part of that statement, the idea of calling. What does that mean, that we are people, those of us who are Christians, we are people who have been called?

You know, we read and we heard a moment ago in the gospel reading, we saw an account of some of the first disciples being called. And it's easy to imagine what this means if you're living in the first century and you physically see Jesus walk by, and He turns and He looks at you and He says, Jeff, follow me.

Right? That's a very easy thing to understand what that kind of calling would mean. But I'm assuming that most of us in this room have not heard the audible voice of Jesus say, come, follow me.

So, what does it mean for those of us living in this time and place? Well, let me ask you this. For all of you here who consider yourself to be a Christian, how did you become a Christian?

What were the events that led up to you taking that label on yourself? Some people may point back to a book that they read or an argument that they heard, a talk that was given that convinced them of the truth of the gospel.

[ 6 : 27 ] Other people might describe an emotional experience they had where you felt the presence of God in your life in a new way, and you gave yourself to Christ.

Some people might simply say, you know, I grew up in a Christian household, and as far back as I can remember, I have always been a Christian. There was never a moment that I can remember when I wasn't a Christian, and we pray that for our kids in this church that they would never know a day apart from Christ.

So, we might get different answers to the question of how did you become a Christian, but the point is, and the point we're going to follow out is, regardless of how you might answer that question, those answers are only partly true.

They're only partly true. No one can be convinced intellectually to convert if it's only based on intellectual argument.

Nobody can be converted through intellectual arguments alone. That's not to say that there aren't compelling arguments for the truth of Christianity. There are many compelling arguments for the truth of Christianity.

[ 7 : 38 ] There's a wealth of historical evidence. There are documents, artifacts. We have eyewitness accounts of Jesus, the events of the Gospels, the crucifixion, the resurrection. Many, many of the, you know, the most brilliant minds throughout history have been Christians.

But it's impossible to prove that Christianity is true. You know, there's no perfect argument for Christianity that one can lay out. Then again, there's really no perfect argument that can prove anything.

That's philosophy 101. We can't ever really completely perfectly prove that anything is true. Because even if your logic is sound, how do we know that our cognitive faculties can be trusted?

Likewise, no one can be converted through emotional experiences alone. That's not to say that Christianity doesn't have an emotional dimension to it. And experiencing the presence of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit is absolutely an essential aspect of the Christian life.

But the problem with relying only on our experiences is that they are sometimes unreliable and they are easily manipulated. Right? And so, if you go into a community where people believe that if we fire people up enough, they will convince, give themselves to Christ, you can do as much or more damage than you do good in the kingdom.

[ 9 : 03 ] Because at some point, you begin to become an emotionally manipulative community. And some of us have grown up in cultures like that. And even for those of us who grew up in Christian families, no one can be converted through living in a Christian family alone.

Now, we're going to come back to this. The formative power of Christian parents is undeniable. But it takes more than that for a child to come to genuine faith in Jesus.

The truth is, if you are sitting here this morning and you are a Christian, the reason is that your faith is the result of the fact that Jesus at some point in your life has called you to follow Him.

He has called you to follow Him. You may not ever remember hearing His voice in your ears, but Jesus has called you through the intellectual arguments that may have convinced you.

He's called you through the emotional experiences that captivated you and stayed with you. He has called you through the parents and the teachers and the coaches and the mentors and maybe even the pastors who raised you.

[ 10 : 17 ] He has called you through all of these things. So, the question, how did you become a Christian? Is it because you at some point in your life chose God?

Or is it because God chose and called out to you? And the answer is yes. It takes both. Right? The reason that I at some point in my life called out to Jesus is because at some point in my life Jesus called out to me.

That's why I even had the inclination to call out to Him. God works through all of the various circumstances of our lives to call people to follow Him.

And we see evidence of that when they choose to follow Him. We see numerous examples of this in Scripture. We see people like Lydia coming to faith through essentially what is a women's Bible study by today's standards.

She is sort of... Paul reasons her into the faith. We see a woman who's possessed by a demon, powerfully delivered. Right? We see a Philippian jailer who is just a man focused on duty and getting the job done, converted through an act of mercy where he's about to take his own life because Paul has gotten out of prison and Paul shows him mercy and he ends up coming to faith.

[ 11 : 38 ] Right? I see it in my own life. If somebody were to ask me how I came to faith, I grew up with one parent who was a Christian and one wasn't. And we went to church sometimes. And then I left the faith.

And then I started talking to a guy in my senior year of college who wanted to read the Bible with me. And I read a Josh McDowell book and I read a couple of other books that he gave me.

And at some point I prayed and gave my life to Jesus. But was that really me doing that just in my own... No. It was God all along through all of those different aspects of my life calling me to Himself.

Right? Now, even as I talk about this, we have to acknowledge that there's this truth in there that has conveyed this idea of God's sovereign role in our coming to follow Him. But that also raises problems.

You know, if we're honest and we think about the implications, this begins to raise objections. And so, at this point, we need to recognize that. Some react strongly to the idea that God would do this.

[ 12 : 39 ] You know, this brings up the whole predestination versus free will debate. And maybe some of you are familiar with that. Maybe for some of you, this is the first time you've ever heard mention of it. But if you really look at what the Bible has to say about God's calling, you can't simply break it down into predestination or free will.

The simplistic view of predestination amounts to a kind of fatalism. You know, God determines our destiny. You know, you're born and your destiny is set.

And that's because God has chosen to determine your destiny. And what that essentially means is your choices don't matter. You do whatever you're going to do, but, you know, your fate has been set by God.

You will become a Christian. And then the free will view, the simplistic version of that, says the opposite. It says, actually, God determines our destiny because of our choices.

It's a kind of determinism. Choices are all that matter. It is all on us. Right? So the simplistic view of predestination says, your choices don't matter.

[ 13 : 48 ] God's already got it sorted out. You're either in or you're out. We'll just have to wait and see. But the simplistic view of free will says, it all hinges on you. It all hinges on us. We've got to do what we can to convince you, to convert you, because otherwise you have no hope.

The Bible, I would suggest, offers a far more nuanced view than either of these simplistic views. It offers a far more expansive view of God's sovereignty.

It says that God has such precise control over history. He's so intimately and personally involved in our lives that He is able to determine our destiny, not despite our choices, not because of our choices, but through our choices, through the circumstances of our lives.

He's able to work through the choices that we make. He's able to weave history toward His redemptive end. And if you think about that, this is extremely good news.

This is extremely good news. What if we did live in a world of total free will? What if you make the wrong choice at a crucial moment in your life?

[ 15 : 02 ] You're driving along, and I remember growing up before I was a Christian, and I remember my friend taking me to this play that you're probably familiar with where there's a family driving along, and they get into an accident, and then some of the family goes to heaven, and the other family, because they hadn't made the right choice in the right moment, they go down to hell, and the family is separated, and they're screaming and reaching out for each other, and it haunts me to this day, nightmare territory to this day.

And I remember thinking, well, you know, if I don't make the right choice in the right moment, then I'm done, no hope, right? And so that's what inspires plays to be written and performed like that, is this idea that it all comes down to us making the right choice in the right moment.

But what if in that moment I'm in a bad mood? What if in that moment I, you know, I'm feeling sick? I'm not really thinking about my ultimate destiny. Well, then it's too late. Bam! Car wreck.

That's cruel, right? What if conversion did depend on intellectual arguments alone? What if we had to be convinced to believe the gospel intellectually?

Well, that would exclude people who are unintelligent. That would exclude people maybe who are illiterate. It would exclude people who have cognitive disabilities. It would exclude people with severe mental illness.

[ 16 : 24 ] Right? How would we have any hope of salvation if our faith in Jesus depended on our ability to engage in rational discourse and we're not able to do that?

That would be barbaric to say only people who can fully apprehend and understand the theology of the gospel have a fighting chance of getting in.

That's barbaric. What if conversion did depend solely on emotional experience? Well, what if you've never had an experience like that? Could you ever have any certainty that you belong to God?

People who just by nature, by their wiring, just don't tend to have lots of deep emotional experiences, at least that they're aware of. Right? And you kind of look back 20, 30 years of being a Christian, you've never really had that emotional high that other people talk about.

And I know people who are like that who say, how do I know? How do I know? How do I know? I've never really felt it. How do I know? That's just as bad. What if conversion did depend on growing up in a Christian family or culture?

[ 17 : 27 ] Well, that would mean that if you're born in the wrong house or in the wrong zip code, well, you're out of luck. You're out of luck. That's awful. Right?

So, the way God works, and the way I believe this actually is represented in Scripture, our choices matter to our destiny, but they don't master our destiny.

Right? They matter. God uses them. He works through them, but they can never become master of our destiny. We will never be in a position where because we made the wrong choice, God's hands are tied.

Right? Even if we make all the wrong choices, God can still work in and through those choices for our own good. That's why, contextually, whenever predestination comes up in the Bible, it's always meant to encourage believers.

People say, well, who's in? Well, who's out? Well, how does it all work out? Frankly, the Bible never says anything about that. When it comes to predestination, it is always brought up in the context of encouraging believers.

[ 18 : 33 ] Paul is trying to say, you need to know that you're beloved. You need to know that even though it doesn't seem like it, God's kingdom is unfolding and you're a part of it. You need to know that even if you don't fully intellectually understand it, if you're not feeling it, if you feel lots of despair, you need to know that it doesn't hinge on that.

It hinges on the fact that God wants you to belong to Him. That your faith is cosmically and eternally significant. He's wanting us to know that at the end of the day, that thing that all human beings want to hear, that somebody out there whose opinion matters looks at me and says, you matter, that that has happened to you.

The God of the universe has called you to be His own. He wants you to be His child. It's always that tone of encouragement that undergirds this topic.

We've turned it into a kind of debate that I believe, frankly, it was never meant to be. So on that note, I just want to look finally, thirdly, at some of the ways this actually offers hope no matter where we find ourselves this morning, spiritually.

I want to offer four ways this gives us hope. Number one, I believe that this offers hope to Christians who feel discouraged about the church. Now, I know that's not of you, but other Christians feel very discouraged about the church.

[ 19 : 59 ] If you know anything about the Corinthians, you know that they are profoundly immature in their faith. Instead of sharing their possessions, they're suing each other. Instead of eating together, they're hoarding wine. They're getting drunk at the Lord's table. Instead of living communal life, they're having communal sex. Their church is rife with injustice and division of every kind. And yet, Paul opens his letter. If you're Paul, how would you open your letter?

I can't believe all the things that I'm hearing about what you guys are doing, you know, but that's not what he says. He opens his letter with an extended prayer of thanksgiving over them.

Why? For what? For the fact that despite their immaturity, Jesus continues to lavish them with His blessings. He's given them abundant grace and forgiveness of sin. He's blessed them with the Holy Spirit, the very presence of God, and all of the spiritual gifts that come with the Holy Spirit. Now, that was a huge source of division for them. They were elitist and thought themselves spiritually above other people, including Paul, because they were so gifted. You would think that if Paul were to do anything in the opening, he would say, you think you're hot stuff, but you're not. But he doesn't do that. He says, God has blessed you with His presence. He's filled you with His Spirit. Praise God for that. Right? What an amazing thing to say to such a frustrating church.

All jokes aside, I know, I know it is easy to get frustrated in the church. Maybe not a very well-kept secret. Pastors are probably some of the most frustrated people when it comes to the church, not only our church, but the church. When we look around and we see all the craziness, it's easy to get frustrated with the church. If you are part of a church for long enough, you will feel this way. There will be many, many, many moments, like in a healthy marriage, when you want to walk out the door and never look back. And there are a lot of Christians these days who have given up on the church altogether. But why is Paul so committed to the church?

It is because Jesus is so committed to the church. Paul realizes that Jesus remains committed to those whom He has called. He remains committed to those whom He has called.

[ 22 : 32 ] Who are we to think that we can or should do any differently? Right? I think it offers tremendous hope for people who feel discouraged about the church. Number two, I believe that this offers tremendous hope for Christians who may be losing their faith. Christians who may be losing their faith.

And I know this applies to some people in this room, and that's why it's important to talk about. You hear a lot of people these days, you hear a lot of talk about Christians who are in various phases of deconstructing their faith, trying to figure out what they still believe.

Now, there are dishonest versions of this, but there are also very honest versions of this, people who are really honestly asking very hard questions, trying to pick apart the faith that they inherited. Often, it's people who grew up in more conservative circles, theologically, trying to figure out what, if anything, they still have to hold on to.

And if somebody is honestly going through something like this, it can be incredibly lonely, it can be incredibly disorienting, it can fill you with fear because it feels like it threatens your relationships with your friends and family, maybe even your job. There's a whole support group out there, by the way, for pastors. It's an anonymous support group. Pastors who lost their faith at some point along the way, and yet their livelihood depends on their job. And so, they've been in ministry, some of them for maybe decades, but long ago lost their faith.

And they have an anonymous support group where they basically encourage one another because they feel trapped. They can't do anything else professionally, and so they have to keep gutting it out. Right? So, it can be incredibly, incredibly distressing to go through something like this, considering the implications of it. And it raises the question, what does it mean when a Christian loses their faith? Well, here's where this connects, right? If our faith solely depends on us, then there would really be no hope for a person like that. You were saying the right words, and then at some point, you stopped saying the right words, you stopped believing the right words, and well, at that point, there's really not much we have to offer you unless you're willing to say the right words again. So, you'd have somebody who maybe needs to explore some of their doubts, who's terrified of the implications and won't even go there because of what it might mean.

[ 24 : 50 ] And so, the worst thing, worse than even doubts that you're willing to explore are doubts that you pretend aren't there. Right? Those will just sit there for years and years and years eating away like acid in the basement. But this passage, I think, speaks directly to this issue in verses 8 and 9.

Paul is speaking to everyone who's been called to follow Jesus, and he says that the Lord Jesus Christ, quote, will sustain you to the end. Guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ, God is faithful by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. If you're someone who has at some point in your life responded to the call of Jesus, and there has been evidence of genuine faith in your life, you may let go of Jesus, but He will never let go of you. He will never let go of you.

How do we know this? It's because, as Paul says, because the God who called you, the God who is behind that moment in your life when you gave yourself to Him, that God is faithful. He's faithful. And ultimately, all of this hinges not on our character, not on our commitment, but on His character and on His commitment. So, this creates a space for people who genuinely and honestly need to be open with themselves about the doubts that they have, to ask the questions that they need to ask, and to do it knowing that even if you try to let go, Jesus is going to continue holding on to you. He will sustain you to the end. Yes, there are people who call themselves Christians who were never really in relationship with God. There are places in the Bible that talk about that kind of thing. But what we're talking about are people who at some point in your life, you were a follower of Jesus, and now you're figuring out whether or not you can continue to be so. Jesus has called you. Jesus will remain committed to you to the end. Thirdly, I think that this offers tremendous hope for parents who want our kids to follow Jesus. I assume, by the way, that if you're a parent and you're in this room, you want your kids to follow Jesus. I say that because I do sometimes hear parents say that they don't want to influence their kids to be Christians, they want them to decide for themselves what they believe. With all due respect, that's woefully naive. You better believe that there are other people out there trying to convince your kids what to believe. You better believe that every single day of their life, they're going to be bombarded constantly with every kind of truth claim that you could possibly imagine and a dozen that you can't. And so, if you opt out of that with the idea that you're somehow freeing them to exist in a neutral space where they decide for themselves, it's woefully naive. There's no such thing as a neutral space. Our minds and hearts are contested territory. They always will be. And if you opt out as a parent, then yours will be the only voice they don't hear. And with all due respect, that's an abdication of your role. If you're a Christian and you have a child, I think, I believe that, and I think that what we're talking about here would bear this out.

If you're a Christian and you have a child or children, you have a God-given vocation to raise them in the faith because they, I believe, chances are God intends to use you as a part of how He calls that child to Himself. But the hope that comes from this passage and this idea of calling is that even though that is a God-given responsibility and it is a serious vocation that we need to take seriously, it doesn't all depend on you. You're going to make tons of mistakes. You know, one of the things that I still don't know how to answer this question, people say, well, you know, I'm a pastor, and so sometimes people will ask, well, how are you doing it with your kids? How are you raising your kids in the faith? You know, and I could give the, like, window dressing answer. I could be honest, and I prefer to be honest and say, listen, it's most of the time really hard, and most of the time we feel like we're failing. We try to do family devotions, they're a total train wreck. I mean, nine out of ten times, they're a train wreck, right? You've got kids squirming and fighting and rolling their eyes. If we get five sustained minutes of focus on whatever we're trying to, you know, use as our devotional material, then praise Jesus, it's a massive D-Day type victory, okay? Most of the time, it's a train wreck. We try to read Scripture with our kids. We try to pray with our kids. You know, sometimes we have sweet moments, but by and large, it feels like a struggle, and you can easily feel like everybody else is doing much better than you, and you must be failing, and why is it so hard for you?



But the hope that comes from this passage says, listen, even if it feels like an exercise in futility, trust the Lord. It doesn't hinge on you getting it right. God's purposes cannot be thwarted no matter how hard we try to thwart them. God cannot be thwarted. It's ultimately the work of the Lord in your children's heart. So, with all of the struggle and all of the challenge, be of good courage, and remember, don't just do the things, but pray. Pray for your children. That's probably the most important and powerful thing we can do. And number four, lastly, how does this offer hope? This offers hope for the unreached people of the world. Because I said before, if it all just hinges on us making the right decision in the right moment, you're born in the wrong family or the wrong zip code, then oh well. Out of luck. But we have this truth here that God calls people through the circumstances of their lives. And that gives tremendous hope to all people, because no matter how far away someone may seem, and we all have people in our lives we can think of who would fit that bill. You know, I can imagine all these other people may be coming to faith, but this person, they will never come to faith. There would be no hope for that person. No matter how far away someone may seem, with God, no one is out of reach. And I think this is extremely motivating for those of us who are Christians when it comes to sharing our faith. Every time, and I don't know about you, but every time I have seen someone come to faith, maybe following a conversation we had or something like that, I've never really felt like I was very much a part of what was happening. I felt like I was really in the right place at the right time to be witness to something that had very clearly been happening in them long before maybe I even met this person. There's a clear sense when people come to faith that God has already been at work. If you're lucky enough, fortunate enough to be there when it happens, then praise God, but don't think it was you. You're just there at the time that the fruit becomes visible in their life. So, these are reasons why I believe this offers hope to the world. And as we sit here in this season and pray prayers about the gospel going to the world, I think that this is a great theme to focus on because we never know how and when God might use us. So, it motivates us to share our faith more and more knowing that God is always at work in ways we cannot see.

[ 32 : 22 ] Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You that it doesn't all depend on us. We thank You that we are given the great honor of playing a role in seeing others come to faith.

We thank You that the choices that we make in our lives, that our desire to repent and follow You, Lord, that those are real choices, Lord, that our choices matter, and yet we can never we can never tie Your hands, Lord. And I pray that that would give us great hope. I pray that it would, as we think about the areas of our lives that feel hopeless, the people that feel unreachable, the doubts that feel insurmountable maybe in our own hearts, Lord, I pray that this would give us great hope, that we're dealing with a God ultimately of sovereign power and abundant grace, Lord. I pray that when we are in the new creation and we look around and we see who is there that we will be shocked and amazed to see the people, maybe people we never thought we would see. Lord, I pray that You would fill us with hope and boldness in light of this truth. We pray this in Your Son's holy name. Amen.