

# Understanding Our Calling: The Doctrine of Christian Vocation in the Holy Scriptures

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*The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.* (Genesis 2:7)

Dust. Ordinary dust. Heart, lungs, brain, skin, and intestines work together after being formed from the dust of the ground.

What the Lord did then, he still does today. He uses the ordinary things to accomplish the extraordinary. He takes ordinary people, calls them into his kingdom and then causes them to bloom where he plants them. They become a planting of the Lord that he might be glorified, “oaks of his righteousness” (Isaiah 61:3).

It should not surprise us that our God wants to use the ordinary to accomplish the extraordinary. He had his Son become one of us with our human flesh and blood to bring salvation to us. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14, KJV).

The Christian faith is all about trust in the true God who uses the ordinary to bring about the miracle of salvation. Blood flowing from open wounds and dripping down from a cross provide a thorough and complete cleansing for all sin. Water, ordinary water in baptism, coupled with the Word provides forgiveness of sin, puts on Christ and creates new life. Ordinary unleavened bread and ordinary wine from the grapevine with the words of Jesus offer the body and blood of our Lord for the forgiveness of sin.

The Lord also uses ordinary people to carry around the extraordinary as they bear about in their bodies the dying of the Lord Jesus Christ. “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body” (2 Corinthians 4:10). God’s ways are not our ways. “But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-- and the things that are not--to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him” (1 Corinthians 1:27-29).

A study of Christian vocation in the Scriptures is a fascinating journey into the mind of God “who hides himself” (Isaiah 45:15). The God who hides himself also reveals himself to us as a God who takes the ordinary things the world despises and uses them for his glory and his praise.

We will be viewing what Scripture says about our vocation or calling by using the life of Abraham to look into the rest of Scripture. We will see how the Lord calls ordinary people like Abraham, even lets them exist in ordinary callings of life to accomplish the extraordinary for his kingdom.

## The Call Out of Darkness

*The LORD had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”* (Genesis 12:1-3)

Leave. Go. I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you. I will make your name great. All people on earth will be blessed through you. I will. I will. I will. The call of God through the message of the gospel is a powerful call. It transforms people. It brings them out of darkness into the light.

Joshua reminded the people of Israel that the Lord called Abraham from darkness into the light. “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says, ‘Long ago your forefathers, including Terah, the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshipped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the River and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants’” (Joshua 24:2,3).

The Apostle Paul used the life of Abraham to show that our calling into the light is not based on works or performance. “It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith” (Romans 4:13). Abraham had nothing to offer God from the law that made him worthy to be called. He was called to hope and trust in righteousness outside of himself, an alien righteousness, promised to him through a future descendant. “Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:5). This amazing faith looked to a future descendant who would bless all nations. It arose within Abraham because the Word of the Lord called him and created the faith to believe.

Any discussion of Christian vocation or calling must begin with an understanding of what it means to be called by the gospel. Abraham was called by the gospel. We were also called by the gospel. As Paul reminds the Christians in Thessalonica, “He called you by the gospel” (2 Th 2:14).

To call means to invite. Jesus told stories about wedding celebrations where people were called or invited to come. He graciously invites all people, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). John the Baptist issued an invitation to every person who ever lives on this earth when he proclaimed the message of the gospel clearly with the words, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29, NKJV). When we hear how the Lamb of God takes away the sin of the “world” we hear the Lord our God issuing a personal invitation to us. We are included with the word “world.” This call of the gospel creates faith and leads us to accept the blessings of forgiveness and eternal life. The certainty of faith does not rest in an inner call or feeling. It rests on the call of God that brings spiritually dead people to life.

The emphasis is on the Lord. He calls people to faith. “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified” (Romans 8:29,30). The God who predestined you to be his own also brought you to the position of being justified and glorified. He did this through a call that goes out through his Word. “Consequently faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). We are the church, the ἐκκλησία, the “called-out ones.” A popular book on Christian vocation opens with the attention-getting line, “It is not about you” (*The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren, p. 17). A better opening would be, “It is not about you. It is all about God and his call that changed your life.” We have a vocation or call-driven life that comes from God, not from within us.

The Lord told Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.” The call that created faith made Abraham different from the people who surrounded him. The call makes us different from people in our world. “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:9,10). We are called to create a major impact in our world as we show forth the praises (ἐξαγγέλλω) of him who called us out of the darkness. Every royal priest serves as a publicist by virtue of the call from the Lord that took us out of darkness into the light. There are no second-class citizens among those whom God calls into his kingdom. We mutually share the high calling of a chosen generation, royal priests, a holy nation, and a people belonging to God.

Abraham was a good publicist for the Lord in the new land in which he lived. He took his new calling in life seriously and accepted the responsibility joyfully. The book of James tells us this about his life. “Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the Scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed and it was credited to him as righteousness,’ and he was called God’s friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does not by faith alone” (James 2:21-24). Abraham was credited with righteousness. He publicly declared himself to be a person credited with righteousness by the way he lived in this life. Even the heathen saw the forensic evidence for his credited righteousness by the works he did out of love for the Lord.

The Lord called you to wear a robe of righteousness freely given to you by Christ that covers all your sin. Those who wear the robe gain the reputation from people that they are close to God and friendly with God. They demonstrate the love the Lord has shown them by the lives that they live. Their works declare to the heathen how they are justified through faith, not by works. The call of God that took them out of darkness and brought them into the light shows itself in everything they do. These “called-out people” declare to the heathen how they are saved by an alien righteousness provided for them in Christ.

A Christian college student recently told her mother, “I wake up every morning thankful for who I am. I know where I came from. I know where I am going. I know who I am. This puts a smile on my face. I am ready to face a new day to give glory to what Christ has done for me.” This student has a good grasp on her vocation or calling in life as Christian.

### **The Call to Live in a Family**

*So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. (Genesis 12:4,5).*

Abram took his wife Sarai with him. What seems so ordinary is actually quite extraordinary as we contemplate our vocation to live in a family. Married for many years without children, they eagerly anticipated a new phase in their lives as they waited for the son the Lord had promised them. The man who was known as a friend of God reflected this friendship with God by having a close friendship with his wife. She reflected this love for God by looking up to Abraham as her head.

The family unit is the place to begin your real job, your highest vocation, your job of being salt and light, the job of loving your neighbor as yourself. Everyone has a family. The family is the basic unit of every culture and civilization. Thirty million people in this country can trace their ancestry to people who landed on our shores in the Mayflower. All these people have one thing in common. They can trace their beginning to men and women coming together in marriage, having children and being a family. What seems common and ordinary is quite extraordinary in the order of things that God established when he created male and female and then brought them together in marriage.

It was the Reformers who insisted that moms and dads and kids were not second-class citizens in the kingdom of God compared to priests who served in the church and monks in the monastery. In his table of duties in the Small Catechism, Martin Luther highlighted the importance of husbands who are considerate to their wives. He encourages wives to submit to their husbands and children to obey their parents in the Lord.

We marvel at the wisdom of God when he set up marriage and the family by bringing the woman to the man in a special way. “So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man” (Genesis 2:21,22). It seems so ordinary, taking a rib from the man and making a woman from the rib he had taken from the man. Adam saw the extraordinary in what the Lord gave him as he joyfully proclaimed, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman for she was taken out of man” (Genesis 2:23).

What seems so ordinary, or even secondary, is really an extraordinary vocation or calling. We refer to the husband's job of treasuring the woman at his side who is bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh. Have you ever been asked, “What's your job”? How often have you responded to that question with the words: “I have a great job. I am working hard at being a good husband to my wife”? Strange response? Not really. Where would our society be today if every man took seriously his calling to be a faithful and loving husband to his wife?

In Ephesians 4 the Apostle Paul writes, “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” Then he tells the Christians in Ephesus how they can live the life worthy of the calling they have received. What appear as ordinary functions in life, such as working at the job or living in the family, take on a whole new meaning and purpose because of the call to faith. Christians learn how to

function differently in the family setting. Out of love for Christ and for their calling they enjoy being told, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21).

The Lord’s calling for my life as a husband to my wife is simply yet profoundly set forth in this job description: “Husbands, love your wives as much as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing of water through the word” (Ephesians 5:22). The sun is lighting up the room. You are awake before the alarm goes off. You pray. You start thinking about your day. At the top of the list is your duty as a faithful husband to your wife. Sacrificial love. Agape love. That’s the kind of love that Jesus has for his church, and the kind of love every Christian man wants to have for his woman. “In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own body. He who loves his wife loves himself” (Ephesians 5:28). We are to love our bodies (our wives) as Christ loves his body, the church. Paul calls this “a profound mystery.” I have the privilege of reflecting the relationship of Christ to his church in my relationship to my wife. That indeed is a profound mystery and a high calling.

God determined the relationship of a man and woman in marriage when he brought the woman to the man. There is an order in marriage that continues to exist even after the fall into sin. Husbands and wives find their calling within the order the Lord has established. After the fall, the Lord said there would be pain for the woman in childbirth. Her desire would be to her husband and he would rule over her. Eve felt the pain immediately after the fall when Adam said to the Lord, “The woman you put here with me, she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.” It would not be the last time her man would let her down in her marriage.

In spite of the weaknesses, the Lord still wants wives to honor and respect their husbands in a special way. “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body of whom he is the Savior” (Ephesians 5:22). Sarah is held up as model for all Christian women because she “obeyed Abraham and called him her master” (1 Peter 3:6). Peter writes further, “You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.” The wife’s vocation in marriage is to submit to her husband or respect him as her head, and not give way to fear. The husband’s vocation in marriage is to love his wife as much as Christ loved the church. Secure in Christ’s love the husband and wife do not have to fear taking the plunge by dying to self and loving each other according to the Lord’s timeless plan in creation.

Children also have a vocation from the Lord. They are born into this world afflicted with original sin passed down from their parents. Babies enter the world with the idea inherited from Adam that they are the center of the universe with the whole world revolving around them. It does not take long for them to learn how to use their powerful lungs to let the parents know when they need food, or a diaper changed, or to be picked up and held. All too often patient cries give way to ear splitting cries of anger. Christian parents have the responsibility of leading the children to see that God has a calling for children that begins with learning to honor, respect and obey their parents. The second table of the law, the duty toward our neighbor, begins with the responsibility of children to their parents. “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving.”

In the Old Testament, a key component to living in the new land was the need to have children show respect and obedience to their parents. The Lord gave special laws with harsh punishments for the Old Covenant people to insure that the people took seriously the Lord’s calling for the children to obey their parents. Recall the shock you had when you read these words for the first time: “The eye that mocks a father, that scorns obedience to a mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley, will be eaten by the vultures” (Proverbs 30:17)

What place do children have in the Christian church today? Parents are looking for churches that offer something for their children similar to the variety of programs in the communities. In our area most churches offer special places for the children during Sunday worship so that worship will not be boring for them. In the frenetic pace of frenzied activities in the church and in the community, the children can easily fail to grasp or fail to be taught what a privilege it is to honor their parents in the Lord. “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’-- which is the first commandment with a promise—‘that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth’” (Ephesians 6:1-3).

Children who obey their parents will enjoy a long life on this earth. It is a privilege to live a long live on this earth, to fulfill the calling that the Lord has for us, including the calling of obedience and respect to parents. Psalm 127 begins with the words, “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.” Then the psalm continues with an emphasis on the importance of children. “Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him.” Where does the strength of a city and a nation start? It starts with the children honoring and respecting parents. In the Christian church, children can step up to the high calling of being the salt and light the Lord has called them to be by learning to obey their parents in the Lord. What happens at home will radiate into the community as children fulfill their calling out of love for the Lord and for their parents.

Where did Abraham and Sarah get the youthful energy needed to be parents to Isaac? It was the Lord who came through. Abraham was over 100 years old when Isaac was born. The Lord watched over their child as he was growing in the womb. He watched over Sarah as the baby was born in her old age. He gave Abraham the strength to patiently raise his son to be God’s child. When the time came for Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac raised questions about a sacrifice without the lamb. We are never told the words that were spoken between the father and the son, “when the two of them walked on together.” As Abraham built the altar, set down the wood and bound the hands of his son, he saw in the eyes of his child a simple trust and faith in the promise of God that came from all the years of teaching, guiding and leading. The best moments in the life of any Christian parent are those close moments when conversations are shared about deeper, more-important things in life related to promises we have in Jesus our Savior.

Here are the familiar words God spoke to his Old Testament people about teaching children. It can serve as a ringing endorsement for our calling as Christian parents who are privileged to bring the gospel to our children. “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads” (Deuteronomy 6:4-8).

One of the saddest verses in the Bible occurs in the book of Judges. “After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, a new generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord, nor what he had done for Israel” (Judges 2:10). Either the parents did not carry out their calling when they entered the Promised Land or the children did not listen to the instruction of their parents.

### **The Call to Work**

*... Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.” So Abram moved his tents and went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he built an altar to the LORD. (Genesis 13:17,18)*

Walking through the land. Moving tents. Tending herds. Digging wells. Managing servants. Abraham was no stranger to work. He found great joy in providing for people who depended on him, even visitors who came to his tent in the heat of the day. In the ordinary tasks of life, Abraham was privileged to fulfill an extraordinary calling for the Lord.

As we look at the life of Abraham we see how the Lord uses work to provide the daily bread that people need. Affectionately Martin Luther called these “the masks of God” because the Lord hides behind the farmer, the miller and the baker to bring the bread on your table. The Lord still uses the ordinary tasks of life to provide daily bread through farmers, truckers, bakers, factory workers, construction workers, police officers, and sanitation workers. It is not too far-fetched to say that the arms of the garbage truck that lift my garbage up and dump it into the truck are the arms of God that are providing that infrastructure I need to live my daily life. “The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing” (Psalm 145:15,16).

Martin Franzmann captures the joy of seeing God's hand in the routine work of life: "We thank You, Lord, for the busy people everywhere: those fine, long ranks of men of conscience who march straight and steady on the business of Your world and live on the small, gray satisfaction of their work well done. How good they are, these devotees of duty! What a piece of work is the working of Your will in their wills! Work gets done. Contracts are filled. Buses and trains and planes arrive on time. Letters get delivered. My morning paper and my milk are at my door. Roads are repaired, streets are swept. Lighthouses wink steadily through the unwatched hours. (*Pray for Joy*, Martin Franzmann, p. 38)

The Lord honored the ordinary tasks of life by using them to illustrate important truths about the power of the Word and the blessings of his kingdom. "As the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes forth from my mouth" (Isaiah 55:10,11). Jesus elevated ordinary tasks to a high level by using them as illustrations in his teaching. "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came up and ate it up" (Matthew 13:3,4). "Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish" (Matthew 13:47). He honored the lowly and diligent work of shepherds to illustrate his love for the lost. "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after he lost sheep until he finds it?" (Luke 15:4)

Work that looks ordinary actually reflects the working hand of God that provides and cares for people. God loves work. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). "By the seventh day, God had finished the work he had been doing, so on the seventh day he rested" (Genesis 2:2). The joy of work is passed on to Adam, the crowning glory of his creation. "The Lord God took the man and put him into the Garden of Eden to work it and care for it" (Genesis 2:15).

Even after the fall, the blessing of work would continue but not without its problems. "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow, you will eat your food and until you return to the ground" (Genesis 3:17-19). Whether it is thistles that grow in the field, cement that does not cure properly or computer programs that malfunction, every job has its strain because of the fall into sin. The problems associated with work do not negate the blessing of work for the benefit of mankind. As Luther said in a sermon of 1525, "He gives the wool, but not without our labor. If it is on the sheep, it makes no garment" (*Luther on Vocation*, Gustaf Wingren, pp. 8-9).

Built into the ordinary tasks that provide daily bread for people is the privilege of working as people called out of darkness into the light. The Lord chose ordinary working people to announce the birth of Jesus to the people in Bethlehem. "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shown around them, and they were terrified" (Luke 2:8,9). The Lord chose hard-working, simple fishermen from Galilee to be his disciples and proclaim the message of the resurrection. "Master, we have worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. Because you say so, I will let down the nets" (Luke 5:5). In a sermon on this text, C.F.W. Walther said, "The more heavenly minded he is, the less he is ashamed of the humblest earthly work, even if it is the washing of dirty fishing nets" (*Year of Grace*, Donald E. Heck, p. 222). Richard Baxter had this to say about the poor working people in England. "Many poor laborers (as clothiers, tailors, and other such) can work with their hands and meditate or discourse of heavenly things without any hindrance of their work, while many men of richer means have scarce room for a thought or word of God or heaven all day" (*Callings*, William Placher, p.284).

The Christians who see their lives hidden in Christ and seated with Christ in the heavenly realms (Colossians 3:1-3) treasure their earthly callings in a real world of dirty diapers, freeway commutes, group meetings, customer complaints and spreadsheets. As Gene Vieth points out in his book, *God at Work*: "Many religions consider "the material world" to be evil or at least unspiritual; salvation lies in escaping the bonds of mundane experience through meditation or asceticism. Christianity, though, values the material world. God created it (not a demon as in Hinduism) and "saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:10,12,18,21,25). Moreover, God

entered this material world, becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ. He was born into a family, into a particular culture, where as the son of a carpenter He must have worked with his hands” (p.69).

The Christians in Thessalonica were a model for other believers in Macedonia. Paul does not hesitate to encourage them to live their lives for Christ at a higher level by staying away from sexual immorality, showing more brotherly love to each other, and working with their hands as they patiently wait for the Lord to return. “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind you own business, and to work with your hands just as we told you, so that your daily life will win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody” (1 Thessalonians 4:11).

Abraham made a name for himself in the community as a friend of God while managing large herds in the land of Canaan. His tent was always open to visitors, even strangers passing by. In our 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have lost some of the direct satisfaction that comes with jobs that provide for other people. We no longer go to the cobbler for shoes, the tinker for pots, the tailor for a suit, the baker for bread, and the butcher for meat. Dorothy L. Sayers described the emptiness of work that occurred in England after World War II. “But what are we to say about a civilization which employs so many of its workers in doing work which has no worth at all, work which no living man with a soul in him could desire to seek, work which has nothing whatsoever to justify it, except the manufacture of employment and the creation of profits?” (*Callings*, p. 412) Even though the times have changed and work is not what it once was, the blessing of showing forth the praises of him who called us out of darkness still exists, whatever our jobs may be, just as it did for Abraham as he managed his herds.

### **The Call to Civic Responsibility**

*When Abram heard that his relative Lot had been taken captive, he called out the 318 trained men born in his household and went in pursuit as far as Dan.* (Genesis 14:14)

Citizens of the kingdom of God place a high value on serving as good citizens in their respective earthly kingdoms. Abraham used his substantial resources to rescue the people and possessions that had been whisked away by the four kings. “He recovered all the goods and brought back his relative Lot and his possessions, together with the women and the other people” (Genesis 14:16). Melchizedek honored him and blessed Abraham with the words, “And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand” (Genesis 14:20).

Christians have a calling to be good citizens of the land in which they are living. The Lord uses the mask of government to protect his people through government leaders, police officers, judges and soldiers. “The authorities that exist have been established by God”(Romans 13:1). The Lord provides for us through ordinary people serving in our communities, the police officer who patrols our neighborhood, the firemen who respond to emergencies, and even the governor of the state where I am living.

Government leaders function with the natural law that the Lord embedded in their consciences to make them better leaders. “Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them” (Romans 2:14,15). The government serves as God’s servant to do us good, as God’s servant to bring punishment on the wrongdoer and as God’s servant to spend full time governing (Romans 13: 4-6). Support for the government includes paying taxes and showing respect. The every day reality that some governments are bad does not nullify the system of government set up by God, just as bad marriages do not nullify the structure of marriage that has been instituted by God.

Jesus told us how important it is to balance our responsibilities to government with our responsibilities in the kingdom of God. Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Matthew 22:21). Our congregation in Santa Maria, California enjoys the services that our local government provides. A sheriff patrols our neighborhood at night. Government officials make decisions about our roads, our water supply and what is best for our community. Our congregation shows its support for government by displaying a flag in our narthex, providing a room in the fall and spring for elections, paying some taxes for our

property. We regularly pray for our government and its leaders in our worship service. The government does not tell us what we should be teaching, and we do not tell our government how to run its affairs.

What is often overlooked in our service to the government is the power of prayer. Jesus made it clear to us that our prayers have great power to effect changes. “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7). Paul encouraged Timothy to lead the congregations he served in praying for those who ruled, including the emperor in Rome. “I urge, then first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made for everyone, for kings and those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” (1 Timothy 2:1,2).

When we worship we intercede for everyone, including our government. “Protect and prosper the family, the school, the government and all good institutions you have established for the benefit of society.” “Bless our land, our people, and those who hold offices of high trust. Keep our government and schools upright and strong for the advancement of good citizenship and useful vocations, that we may enjoy your gift of peace, security and well-being” (*Christian Worship* p. 42). We value the prayers we pray on Sunday and expand on them during the week in our personal lives.

The prophet Jeremiah sent a letter to the exiles living in the land of Babylon with instructions from the Lord on how they should live their lives as captives in a foreign land. “This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (Jeremiah 29:4-7).

You can serve the kingdom of God by serving the country in which you are living, even if you are a captive in the land. Good citizenship involves building homes, settling down, raising families and planting gardens. Such activities contribute to the benefit of society. High on the list of carrying out our calling is our responsibility to pray for the land in which we live, pray for peace in the world, and pray for those who put their lives in harm’s way to protect us from danger.

### **The Call to be in the World but not of the World**

*Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The Lord appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him. (Genesis 12:6,7)*

The Canaanites were in the land. This simple statement speaks volumes about the daily challenges facing people who are called out of darkness into the light. Abraham had to live among the Canaanites who did not know the name of the Lord. That is where the Lord called him to live. He rubbed shoulders with heathen friends and neighbors as he carried out his daily affairs of life. He took the initiative and welcomed strangers into his tent to share a meal with them. Without fear and without compromise, Abraham built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord. This public worship helped him carry out his calling to be the light that was shining in a land of darkness.

As much as Abraham loved the blessings the Lord had given to him and the opportunity to live in a new land, he had his sights on a better place. “By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:9,10).

Ordinary believers, called out of darkness into the light, share this same worldview. “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:18). It is the Lord who calls us and infuses into us this other world perspective that sees this life as temporary. “Now it is God who has made us for this purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (2 Corinthians 5:5).

Do people who fix their sights on a better world lose perspective and become useless in the calling for this present life? No, the very opposite is true. The more heaven-minded people are in this life, the more equipped they are for their earthly calling. “Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day that he visits us” (1 Peter 2:10,11). Augustine, in his book *City of God*, describes the Christian who walks toward the eternal city of God as a worthy citizen of Rome, upholding the ancient laws of justice and other virtues that made Rome great. “For in the Holy Scripture, the King and Founder of the City of which I have undertaken to speak revealed to his people the judgment of divine law: ‘God resisteth the proud and giveth grace to the humble’” (Book 1, Preface, *City of God*, Augustine)

The night before he died our Lord Jesus set before his heaven-minded followers of every age his reason for leaving us in the world along with the plan by which he will protect us as we wait for him to take us home. “I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name-- the name you gave me-- so that they may be one as we are one” (John 17:11).

The purpose for leaving us here was not hidden. “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, as we are one” (John 17:20,21). Jesus wants other people to believe through our message. The gospel will be heralded through the lives of the people Jesus leaves here in this world. He wants us to live in the world and rub elbows with the world but not be part of the world. By establishing contact with people and building bridges to them, the opportunities will arise to bring the message so “they may be one as we are one” (John 17:22).

A church newsletter once had at the bottom of the page these words: “I am a nobody, telling everybody, about somebody, that can save anybody.” Notice the part of this statement that conflicts with our understanding of Christian vocation. Because of the call of the gospel I do not think of my self as a “nobody.” It would be better to say that I am one body, one very special body living in this world, taking up space, functioning as the salt of the earth and the light of the world, called to show forth the praises of him who called me out of the darkness. Jesus has left me in this world for the sake of those who will believe in him through my message. He promises to protect and keep me.

The Apostle Paul spoke of the treasure of the gospel that has been placed into ordinary, earthly pots of clay. Again the emphasis is on God using the ordinary to accomplish the extraordinary. “We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God not from us. ... We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body” (2 Corinthians 4:7,10). I know my origin. I know my final destiny. I know my purpose in life. My job is to bear about in my body the dying of the Lord Jesus Christ that the life of Jesus might also be revealed in my body.

Abraham carried around in his body the blessing of the future descendant who would bless all nations. Through his worship, he publicly proclaimed himself to be different from other people in the area. How he worshipped the Lord publicly strengthened him to worship the Lord in everything he did as he interacted with the people of the land.

How we worship together publicly strengthens us to worship the Lord in our everyday lives. In our public worship, we recall the blessings received from the Lord. We show our thanks for these blessings by our prayers and our hymns of praise. Another way of showing thanks is to offer our lives during the workweek as living sacrifices to the Lord. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship” (Romans 12:1). Paul goes on to define how we offer our bodies as living sacrifices with our changed lives. “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). The transformation that occurs through the blessings of Word and Sacraments leaves its impact on every facet of our lives, including our interaction with the heathen in our land.

The Word and Sacraments offer us the protection and strength we need to live in the world and not be part of the world. In the Sacrament we receive the body and blood Christ Jesus sacrificed for us. In appreciation

for this saving gift we offer our thanks to God in songs and prayers. We even ask the Lord to help us offer our changed lives as thank offerings wherever the Lord has planted us. “Hear the prayer of your people, O Lord, that the lips which have praised you here may glorify you in the world, that the eyes which have seen the coming of your Son may long for his coming again, and that all who have received in his true body and blood the pledge of their forgiveness may be restored to live a new and holy life.” (*Christian Worship*, p. 36). The offertory extends into the workweek. “Brothers and sisters, go in peace. Live in harmony with one another. Serve the Lord with gladness” (*Christian Worship*, p. 37)

### **The Call to Carry the Cross**

*Then God said, take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.* (Genesis 22: 2)

Abraham faced a tough challenge. Would he be able to sacrifice his one and only son without losing hope that the Lord would raise him back to life again? The book of Hebrews draws our attention to the unwavering faith of Abraham. “By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered up Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said, ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’ Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from the dead” (Hebrews 11:17-19). The Lord convinced Abraham to believe that Isaac would be the one from whom the Seed or descendant would come to bless all nations. That is what God promised. That is what Abraham believed. Abraham reasoned on the basis of the promise that God would have to raise Isaac back to life again after he was sacrificed.

The trip up the mountain was not easy. As they walked together, Isaac asked the obvious question: “The fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering” (Genesis 22:7)? The only answer Abraham could offer at the time was, “My son, the Lord will provide.” Abraham was convinced the Lord would bring his son back to life. Commenting on this, Martin Luther wrote: “Thus Abraham relies on the promises and attributes to the divine Majesty this power, that He will restore his dead son to life; for just as he saw that Isaac was born of a worn-out womb and a sterile mother, so he also believed that he was to be raised after being buried and reduced to ashes, in order that he might have descendants, as the Epistle to the Hebrews (11:19) states: ‘God is even able to give life to the dead’” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 4, p. 66).

The challenge comes in actually planning and executing the details of the sacrifice according to God’s requirements. What knife shall I use to take the life of my son? Should I chip the flint one more time to make it sharper so the fatal wound will be less painful? Should I make the cut at the throat the way I do with the lambs? How much blood will cover me? How will I light the fire? How much wood do we need to carry up the mountain? Faith wants to push forward, trusting the promise. Human emotions and feelings urge him to look for an easier way.

Abraham says nothing at first when Isaac asks about the lamb. The book of Genesis tells us, “And the two of them went on together.” When the time came to arrange the stones for an altar and the wood for a sacrifice, the son was ready to trust the same promise that compelled his father to go forward. It has not been recorded for us what the two talked about while they walked on together. Did they talk about the promise once more? Is that the reason Isaac allows himself to be bound and placed on the altar? Even the smallest doubt would have led him to resist his father and run away to protect himself. Faith trusts the Lord will come through. Father and son shared the same faith as they walked on together.

The Lord did come through. Abraham held up his hand to slay his son. Then he heard the angel of the Lord call from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham! Do not lay a hand on the boy” (Genesis 22:12). Nearby a ram was caught by its horns in the thicket. The Lord had even provided a ram. “So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, ‘On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided’” (Genesis 22:14).

The Christians who are called out of darkness into the light will face serious challenges in life when they believe as Abraham did that the Lord has provided. Jesus summed up this challenge with the words: “If anyone

would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul” (Mark 8:34-36)? Christians carry a cross wherever they go in this world. The cross we carry is the unique belief that the Lord has provided salvation for all people by having his Son punished for their sin by dying on a cross. This belief flies in the face of human reason and looks like foolishness to those who are not called. “But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23). The struggle that Jesus faced in the Garden of Gethsemane hinged on the all-important question of whether the cross was the only way for people to be saved or whether another path were possible for the salvation of those who were lost. “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will” (Matthew 26:39).

We carry the suffering, death and resurrection with us wherever we go. The challenge that Paul saw in his calling as a missionary is a challenge all Christians face in their daily calling. “To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task” (2 Corinthians 2:16)?

Someday we will gather in white robes and with palm branches in our hands around the throne of the Lamb, and we will not have to carry this cross and experience its shame and disdain. We will proclaim with loud, unashamed voices, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb” (Revelation 7:10). No one will be there to laugh at us, or judge us as foolish for believing with Abraham that the Lord provides. The present will be tough, very tough, as we bear about in our bodies the dying of the Lord Jesus, just as it was tough for Abraham to contemplate what he had to actually do to sacrifice his son. It is the Lord who has called us to this task. He has promised to be with us, and he will provide.

I once saw a project in Vacation Bible School that illustrates how hard it will be to take up our cross and follow Jesus. A cross was attached to a flat piece of wood. Beneath the cross the kids had glued smooth stones of different sizes, shapes and colors, all directed toward the cross. On each stone they glued two little eyes also looking up to the cross. That simple project defines the challenge we face in our Christian calling. We want to see the eyes of all people directed to Jesus as the source of their salvation. What a burden that is for us to carry.

If we believe that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, then we are compelled by love to take up the challenge to do whatever we can to lift up the eyes of people to the cross and “preach Christ crucified.” We will work and pray for the message to come to those who don’t believe. We will suffer pain, tremendous pain, whenever we see people taking their eyes off the cross and becoming blinded again by the god of this age. We will personally suffer pain as we take our own sinful actions, place them beneath the cross, and see them forgiven. In the eyes and on the faces and through the words of those who bear this cross, the world will see Jesus. That is our calling in life as we wait for the Lord to take us home.

Where I live on the Central Coast of California a man painfully struggles along the beach on all fours for about two miles with a wooden cross hanging from his neck. He has been doing this every Sunday for about 15 years. He is getting old. His body is tanned and sinewy. Every crawl appears to be painful. People stare at him and wonder what he is doing as his body agonizingly twists with feet and hands simultaneously planted in the sand at the edge of the ocean. Then they notice the cross and wonder even more what he is doing and what message he is trying to project.

We bear about our bodies the dying of the Lord Jesus Christ in a different way. Just as Jesus came into the flesh in a humble way, the Lord uses our humble, ordinary lives to help people see the cross of Jesus through us. The true God is a God who hides himself. In the lowly death on the cross the sacrificial love of the Father and the Son is hidden. Ordinary Christians struggle daily as they place their sins beneath the cross and crucify the sinful nature. In that struggle the Lord hides himself and slowly reveals to the world the true source of salvation. Gustaf Wingren writes, “From the roughness of earthly life there opens up a vista of life and freedom in the coming kingdom, and only one way leads to it--subjection to the cross here” (*Luther on Vocation*, Gustaf Wingren p. 58). We struggle as Abraham did walking up the mountain, sharing our faith with those who walk with us. Our lives lived under the cross proclaim a powerful message for all to hear: “The Lord provides!”

## The Call to Serve God's People Publicly With the Gospel Message

*On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, Euphrates." (Genesis 15:18)*

The Lord called ordinary people to possess the land of Canaan and serve as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations, you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5,6). It's a pattern we see in the Old Testament, the New Testament and this current age. The Lord calls unlikely candidates for special purposes.

Moses was an unlikely candidate to lead Israel out of Egypt and be their spiritual leader. The 80-year old shepherd, former prince in Egypt, was reluctant to lead and afraid to speak. The call of the Lord changed his life and gave him strength for the task. "So now I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring the Israelites out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:10). "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say" (Exodus 4:12).

Isaiah considered himself a man of unclean lips and unworthy for the call the Lord gave him, "Woe to me! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King the LORD Almighty" (Isaiah 6:5). In his vision from the Lord, he saw a seraph touch his lips with a live coal taken from the altar. He received assurance that his guilt was taken away and his sin was atoned for. The Lord called out, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" The man of unclean lips responded confidently, "Here am I. Send me!"

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah and told him, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5). When Jeremiah complains that he is only a child, the Lord assures him, "Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you."

Jesus called fishermen from Galilee to leave their nets, follow him and fish for people. He told Peter, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch people" (Luke 5:10). The Lord was hiding behind these humble men. He took them aside from the crowds and spent time teaching them. When it came time to leave, the Lord assured his followers the Holy Spirit would come and help them remember what they heard. "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:4,8). The Holy Spirit unleashed his power when Peter, the fisherman, speaking with a Galilean accent, preached Jesus' resurrection from the dead and 3,000 people came to believe.

The Lord called Paul out of darkness with the words, "Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me?" Paul cried out in fear, "Who are you, Lord?" The voice that came back to him said, "I am Jesus." Imagine having your whole world turned around by three simple words, "I am Jesus," and then be called to special service for the kingdom. "This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (Acts 9: 5,15,16). Ananias questioned how the Lord could call such a candidate who made a name for himself by persecuting Christians. Paul always stood in amazement of the grace of God that called him out of darkness and then called him to lead other people out of darkness and prepare them for service to the Lord. He introduces himself as, "Paul a servant of the Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God" (Romans 1:1).

The risen Lord is still setting apart certain believers to help other believers serve as oaks of righteousness wherever the Lord plants them. "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-13). The Lord provides the necessary leaders who prepare God's people for works of service so the body of Christ may be built up.

There is a definite pattern throughout the Scriptures regarding this call into special service for the Lord, this public ministry, or divine call. The Lord of the church sees the need to build up people in their ordinary tasks of life. He calls people to fit that need, often ordinary people and unlikely candidates on whom he bestows a special blessing of his Holy Spirit. The hands of God are behind the ordinary hands that select and call certain people to prepare God's people for works of service. "Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you" (1 Timothy 4:14). To the elders in Ephesus Paul said, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers" (Acts 20:28). Through the Christians gathered together in Jesus' name, leaders are still chosen, and the Lord places people into special positions of service.

### **Look at the Stars**

Abraham had his moments when he needed the Lord to help him see the big picture of his vocation or calling in life. When he had fears and doubts about ever having a son, the Lord spoke directly to him. "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward. "Look up at the heavens and count the stars if indeed you can count them" (Genesis 15:2). Then the Lord told him, "So shall your offspring be." Ordinary saints easily lose sight of their high calling in life. They struggle to see the big picture of being called by God to show forth his praises. They fail to see clearly the large number of people shining like stars in the universe and brought through the message they were called to share with those who live in darkness.

This past summer we had the opportunity to hike to the top of Cone Peak in the Big Sur area of California. We slept out under the stars, 5,500 feet above the Pacific Ocean, above the fog line, one of the best areas in the country to see the stars. I thought of Abraham. I thought of myself. I need to see the stars, not just the beauty of God's creation, but the greater beauty of all those who will believe through the message that we are privileged to carry with us, wherever we are planted.

The Lord who formed Adam from ordinary dirt has formed us from nothing and made us his saints, his holy ones with a vocation or calling he has planned for us. He wants us to see the big picture of what we can do in our respective callings. "Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand" (Isaiah 64:8).