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WHAT'S IN YOUR TEACHING GUIDE

This Teaching Guide has three purposes:

- to give the teacher tools for focusing on the content of the session in the Study Guide.
- to give the teacher additional Bible background information.
- to give the teacher variety and choice in preparation.

The Teaching Guide includes two major components: Teacher Helps and Teacher Options.

Teacher Helps

Bible Background

The Study Guide is your main source of Bible study material.

This section helps you more fully understand and interpret the Scripture text.



Teaching Outline

provides you with an outline of the main themes in the Study Guide.

Teacher Options

The next three sections provide a beginning, middle, and end for the session, with focus paragraphs in between.

Focus Paragraphs

are printed in italics at the top of the page because they are the most important part of the Teaching Guide. These paragraphs will help you move your class from “what the text meant” to “what the text means.”

You Can Choose!

There is more material in each session than you can use, so choose the options from each section to tailor the session to the needs of your group.

Prepare Before the Session

Read the session for today in the Study Guide. Then read the options in this Teaching Guide, placing checkmarks beside the activities you plan to include. After you have decided which options to use, gather the appropriate materials.

GOD CALLS SARAH

Genesis 17:15-19; 18:9-15; 21:1-8

Bible Background



Abram had lived in covenant with Yahweh, and now God was expanding that covenant.

In chapter 15, the emphasis is upon Abram: his faith, call, and possession of the land. In today's passages, the emphasis is upon the faithfulness of Abram and his wife.

Two distinct differences are clear between the call in chapter 17 and the one in chapter 15. First, the names are different. In chapter 17, God is called "El Shaddai," or God Almighty. God renames Abram and Sarai, Abraham and Sarah.

In ancient days, more so than today, one's name gave dignity. People considered knowing a person's name one of the deepest forms of emotional intimacy (see Prov 22:1; Eccl 7:1). Isaiah 62:2 speaks of those adopted by God as having new names. God individually recognized Abram and Sarai, and they were "made new" by their new names. Even more amazing, Yahweh gave them a new name by which to call God.

Sarah was committed to Abraham through their many years together. Her name translates "princess." Although God left no doubt that Sarah would be the mother of the new nation, she struggled with her worth, self-esteem, and place in the world (Gen 12; 16). Yet here and in New Testament passages (Gal 4; Heb 11), Sarah is remembered as a person of

worth, dignity, and integrity. Genesis 23:1 records her death and is the only biblical passage to also record the age of a woman.

God would be God to Abraham, Sarah, and all their descendents. In their old age, Abraham and Sarah would become ancestors of a great nation. Can a ninety-nine-year-old man and a ninety-year-old woman bear children? Seemingly, this would be physically impossible, but with God, the impossible becomes not only possible but also plausible (Mt 9:26).

Sarah's call experience is different from the traditional call stories (see Ex 3:2 for an example). She was not explicitly "set apart" for the ministry assigned her from God. Yet God made sure to include her in this covenant. Her stature was far-reaching, as evidenced in Hebrews 11.

According to God, Sarah and Abraham would give birth to the heir of the kingdom. Abraham's laughter is understandable. While some scholars try to soften his response by translating "laughs" as "rejoices," Abraham's laughter probably hid feelings of belief, doubt, fear, and hope. Then he questioned, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" Abraham even suggested the covenant be built on Ishmael, who was already born: "O that Ishmael might live in your sight" (v. 18).

In his disbelief, Abraham grasped for straws. However, this typical human

response did not sway God. Abraham laughed, shook his head, and wondered with doubt and hope!

God came to dine with Abraham and repeated the promise of an heir to the kingdom. This time, Sarah laughed. Abraham and Sarah both knew that they were literally “worn out” (well past child-bearing age). Filled with conflicting emotions, Sarah, like Abraham, laughed. As a woman barren all her life, she was now going to bear a son? The questions and the emotions bubbled over in laughter.

God responded, “Is it too miraculous for the LORD?” Nothing is beyond the realm of God’s power (Lk 9:43; 1 Cor 1:18).

When confronted about her laughter, Sarah became fearful of the consequences and denied her response. However, God did not punish either Abraham or Sarah for their laughter, showing grace once again. This passage ends with a sense of incompleteness; perhaps the reader is left with the same uncertainty that Abraham and Sarah felt.

Isaac was born, just as God promised, and the community celebrated. Everyone laughed with Abraham, Sarah, and God. The birth of Isaac was seemingly impossible. The community rejoiced because they knew God had been in their midst. Recognizing a miracle requires eyes of faith. Perhaps it even requires the ability to laugh out loud!

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: As Sarah is included in the call to Abraham, a variety of issues and emotions arise. Abraham and Sarah, though old in age, are still vital to the kingdom of God. Thankfully, God does not give up on us. God gave to Abraham and Sarah the desires of their hearts as they responded obediently to God’s call. The key is faithfulness.

- I. Abraham Laughs at God (17:15-19)
 - A. The giving of new names (v. 15)
 - B. The blessing of promised birth (v. 16)
 - C. Laughter and options (vv. 17-18)
 - D. God’s will (v. 19)
- II. Sarah Laughs at God (18:9-15)
 - A. Eavesdropping (vv. 9-10)
 - B. Jaw dropping (vv. 11-12)
 - C. Heart stopping (vv. 13-15)
- III. The Community Laughs with God (21:1-8)
 - A. “Laughter” is born (vv. 1-3)
 - B. Ceremony and celebration (vv. 4-5)
 - C. Community celebration (vv. 6-8)

A Way to Begin

A In today's passage, God calls a woman who thinks she is beyond usefulness to partner in a wonderfully exciting adventure. Making possible the seemingly impossible, God bestowed grace in the face of disbelief, nervous laughter, doubt, and joy.

God continues to call those of us who think we are beyond use. Perhaps surprising to some, God even allows us to question the call and suggest alternatives. However, God always has the last word. In Sarah's story, God's last word is "laughter"—Isaac is born! About what have you laughed? To what might God be calling you? Consider using some of the learning experiences that follow to enhance your teaching.

○ No Celebrating Allowed?

Maria Harris says, "The inability to engage in communal celebration with integrity and wholeness...is a metaphor for disunity among ourselves—especially economic, educational, and racial disunity" (33-34). In other words, unless we can celebrate together, we will never be truly unified.

Talk about the events listed below and others that come to mind. Ask your group to brainstorm ways we can celebrate these events as a church. Consider how these events help bring unity to the congregation and to the larger community in which you live.

- Birth of a baby
- First day of school
- Baptism of a new believer
- First Communion
- Getting a driver's license
- High school/college graduation
- Marriage
- First job
- New job or promotion
- Divorce
- Death

Questions

- How can celebrating or observing these events bring the unity to which Harris calls us?
- How do we see God in these events?
- When is the last time you celebrated? What was the significance of this event?

○ Thank You, Lord, for Special People!

In today's biblical story, we explore the special place Sarah holds in the development of a new nation. Ask your group about the women in their lives who have answered God's call. Ask volunteers to share their stories. Then provide the necessary materials for each person to write a note of appreciation to someone (male or female) who has influenced their lives for good.

○ What's in a Name?

Sarah means "princess," and Isaac means "laughter" or "God laughs." What does your name mean? The Internet has numerous sites available that offer possible meanings for many names. One such site is <www.behindthename.com>.

Consider looking up the meanings of the names of the people in your class. Use this possibility to continue talking about the meanings of names in the biblical story for today. You may make interesting discoveries about your class participants and build community in the process.

B A Way to Explore Scripture

Your challenge today is to examine the thoughts and feelings of Abraham and Sarah as they heard God’s call. *Help learners understand the emotions beneath Sarah and Abraham’s laughter. Examine the relationship between Abraham and Sarah and the differences and similarities of their individual calls.*

Just as God used Abraham and Sarah, so God can use us. Just as Sarah and Abraham experienced a multitude of emotions concerning this call, so will we. Ultimately, however, Sarah and Abraham were faithful. God calls us to be faithful as well.

○ The Patterns of Call and Birth

In order to compare the call of Sarah to that of other servants, assign different people to read aloud each of these Scriptures: Exodus 3:7-10; Judges 6:11-16; Isaiah 6:1-13; Jeremiah 1:1-10. After the class has heard these passages, ask, “What is the common pattern of God’s calling? How is Sarah’s call similar? unique?”

Next, compare miraculous birth stories. Ask someone to read aloud Matthew 1:18-2:23 and Luke 2:1-52. How is the birth narrative of Isaac similar to those of other stories? How is this story unique?

Conclude by asking about the similarities and differences of biblical and modern birth stories.

○ Women Called by God

The Bible gives us many examples of women God has called and used for work in the kingdom. Give each person a copy of the “Women Called by God” activity sheet from page 29. Ask class members to write what they think is the gift or calling of each woman listed. Then use the biblical passages to find the answers.

TEXT	WOMAN	CALLING OR GIFT
Genesis 6-8	Noah’s wife	
Judges 4:1-4	Deborah	
1 Samuel 1-2:10	Hannah	
Exodus 2	Miriam	
Esther	Queen Esther	
Joshua 1:1-21	Rahab	
Ruth	Naomi & Ruth	
Acts 18	Priscilla	
Acts 16	Lydia	
Acts 16	Phoebe	
John 11	Mary & Martha	
Luke 1	Elizabeth	
Luke 2	Mary the mother of Jesus	

○ God’s Personal Call

Read Psalm 23, keeping in mind not only God’s call to David, but also to Sarah and Abraham. Give each person paper and pencil and ask them to paraphrase Psalm 23, shaping the psalm as their thanksgiving for God’s call in their lives.

Questions

- What is the role of “faithfulness” in being called by God?
- How does the theme of restoration relate to a call from God?
- What is the role of obedience in relation to calling?

C A Way to End

God's call to Abraham and Sarah was unexpected, but they responded in an unexpected way—they laughed! However, once Sarah and Abraham got over the initial rush of emotions that led to their spontaneous laughter, they became serious about God's commission. **Responding to God's call is about availability, faithfulness, and obedience.** Sarah and Abraham committed themselves to God's plan.

We tend to judge human beings by how gifted we perceive they are. Thankfully, God doesn't call us based on those kinds of perceptions. God calls us by our faithfulness. We see the short and narrow, but God sees the big, eternal picture. As you close this session, consider using one of the following ideas.

○ Celebrate?

Challenge your group with the following comment, and then discuss the questions provided: "Very few churches (and Christians) will truly reach their highest potential in Christ. We are too nice to sweat...too proud to cry...too sophisticated to laugh...and too busy to celebrate."

Questions

- Do you agree or disagree with this statement?
- Reaching our highest potential seems to require vulnerability. Do you think we can reach our potential without becoming vulnerable with each other?
- When has your church sweated together? cried? laughed? celebrated?
- Why is celebrating our relationship with God important?

○ Hopes and Dreams

Chuck Bugg recounts a story of hope and dreams in *Learning to Dream Again: From Grief to Gratitude*. As he shares the roller coaster of emotions in dealing with his son's cancer, he says,

On the way back to David's room, I passed by the hospital chapel. I saw a sign with words from Dag Hammarskjold, former Secretary-General of the United Nations. The sign said, "For all that has been, thanks; for that that will be, yes." And I thought to myself, "What a way to live!" (65)

In your closing moments, ask your group to imagine the myriad of feelings flowing through the heart of this loving father. Then, imagine the feelings of Abraham and Sarah as they considered the possibility of bearing an heir to the kingdom of God.

Questions

- What are the hopes and dreams of your heart that you dare to utter?
- What are the hopes and dreams of your heart that you have believed impossible?

Close with prayer, thanking God for the possibilities.

GOD CALLS SAMUEL

1 Samuel 3:1-10

Bible Background



The story of Samuel includes Eli, a priest in his twilight years. At the close of 1 Samuel 2, God pronounces a devastating prophecy against Eli and his descendants. The behavior of Eli's sons had grossly offended God and brought disrespect to the nation (see 2:27-36).

God and the people of Israel noted Samuel's dedication, which stood in sharp contrast to the behavior of Eli's sons. Samuel's mother Hannah had dedicated her infant son to God's service. Not only did she dedicate Samuel to God, but she delivered him into the ministry of the temple under the leadership of Eli. Although Eli was not the most faithful father to his own children, he instructed Samuel carefully.

This chapter records not only Samuel's "call," but his validation as a priest. God had already reported to Eli the raising up of one faithful to God. God's appearance to Samuel in the temple fulfills the prophecy from the previous chapter. The biblical writer gives us several key pieces of information.

First, Samuel served in the temple under Eli. Samuel was learning, so Eli must have been faithful with his teaching. We also know that the people respected Samuel; in fact, they were proud of him. We don't know exactly what Samuel did to gain respect, but the people were weary

of Philistine oppression. Evidently, Samuel was faithful in keeping the people focused on God. (See 1 Sam 7 for details of the adult Samuel's life.)

Samuel also gained stature in the eyes of the Lord. Even though Samuel did not know God personally at the time of his call, he must have been a faithful servant in the duties of his ministry for God to acknowledge him (3:7).

A second important piece of information is that the word of the Lord was rare in those days. The last time God had spoken was to pronounce judgment on the house of Eli. This chapter hinges on that information. God was going to punish Eli and provide leadership.

The text tells us that Eli's eyesight was failing. Perhaps this was a play on his inability to "see" the failings of his sons. However, on that particular evening, Eli would "see" clearly and God's word would be heard.

Samuel slept close to the ark of the covenant. (For more on the "ark," see Gen 50:26; Josh 3:6; Ex 25:11-22.) Eli's failing eyesight made him dependent upon Samuel, so Samuel would have been accustomed to Eli calling him during the night. Notice how Samuel was symbolically "closer" to the ark, closer to God, than was Eli, the priest of the temple.

In light of Samuel's faithfulness, verse 7 is interesting because it tells us that Samuel did not yet know the Lord. While Samuel knew about God, he did not yet

know God personally. This passage is a theophany, a report about God's appearance in the human world (Birch, 991). God was calling, but Samuel did not have the emotional or spiritual tools to understand the significance. He needed further mentoring and instruction from Eli before he could respond to and accept this call from God.

Understandably, Samuel mistakenly thought Eli was calling to him. He obediently arose and went to his rabbi. The Lord spoke to Samuel a second time, and again Samuel ran to Eli. Samuel was not slow-witted; he was simply immature and inexperienced at interacting with God. The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him (v. 7).

The last part of verse 8 is a highlight. Eli was still credible even under the judgment of God. Although aware of his impending punishment, Eli was still a priest, and he responded as a priest should.

Eli gave Samuel clear direction, telling him how to respond should he hear the voice again. The third time, God not only spoke to Samuel but appeared to the boy as well. Samuel responded as Eli had coached him: "Speak, for your servant is listening." While the call must have been wonderfully exciting, the word from God was a grave vision affirming the punishment of Eli and his descendents. Samuel was reluctant to share the message from God with Eli. Yet he maturely shared what God revealed, and Eli accepted his fate. God called, validated, and honored Samuel, and God would continue to be with Samuel. Scripture tells us that the LORD was with Samuel as he grew and that all his words would have worth.

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: There were noises swirling all around Samuel's world. While he knew about God, he did not yet recognize God on a personal level. Eli's world was filled with many noises, too, but he was well aware of the presence of God. Sensing what was happening to his young student, Eli gave appropriate instructions. As God appeared, Samuel responded, leading to mature decisions and challenging leadership.

I. A Lack of Visions

- A. Rarity of the word (v. 1)
- B. Rarity of sight (v. 2)

II. The Call of the Lord

- A. The first call (vv. 3-5)
- B. The second call (vv. 6-7)
- C. The third call (v. 8)

III. Your Servant Is Listening

- A. Wise guidance (v. 9)
- B. Wise response (v. 10)

A Way to Begin

A As you help your group explore Samuel's call and Eli's fate, several key ideas emerge. First, what does it mean to know about God but not know God? In Samuel, God responds favorably to one who had not yet personally encountered God. God still calls those who have yet to know God.

Second, who are our mentors, guides, and teachers? Eli, though facing a severe judgment, was still faithful to his task as rabbi. He gave accurate and insightful instruction to young Samuel. God still used Eli's gifts. God rarely gives up on us.

Third, **how are you responding to the call of God?** Eli did not remain faithful in raising his sons, but when given the opportunity to mentor Samuel, he rose to the occasion. Consider the following learning experiences as possible teaching options.

○ **Speak, Lord—A Litany of Response**

Use the following litany to introduce the session material and to encourage your group to be attentive as God calls today. Ask the group to respond, "Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening" after each line read by the Leader.

Leader: God is calling each of us to serve in the kingdom.

Group: Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening.

Leader: The call of God is to those who know and need to know.

Group: Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening.

Leader: Even as God called through the faithfulness of Samuel, God calls us.

Group: Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening.

Leader: God calls us today to participate in the reign of God.

Group: Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening.

Leader: God brings light into our darkness, sight to our blindness.

Group: Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening.

Leader: God calls us even when our past efforts may have fallen short.

Group: Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening.

Leader: God, bless us as we seek to know you more deeply.

God, bless us as we seek to follow your will for our lives more closely.

God, bless us as we seek to respond to your call more consistently. Amen.

○ **Hope or Despair?**

Share with your group the following quotation from John Claypool:

To the Jew there is only one unforgivable sin, and that is the sin of despair. If God can create the things that are from the things that are not, and even make dead things come back to life, who are we to set limits on what that kind of potency may yet do? (19)

Questions

- How did Eli exhibit hope?
- How could Eli have been such a "blind" father yet a hopeful mentor?
- How does despair enter our lives?
- If Eli had responded in despair, what might have been the results of Samuel's call?
- How did Eli's hope guide Samuel?
- How does Samuel's response to God's call exhibit hope?
- How do you exhibit hope?
- Who needs you to model hope for them?
- Who is waiting for you to be a mentor?

B A Way to Explore Scripture

Recently, Barbara Brown Taylor wrote that God has stopped talking. She suggested that after many years of speaking, encouraging, and prompting, God has decided we are not listening. Thus, God isn't talking much anymore. Of course, this divine silence isn't the first time God has been silent. In the days of Samuel and Eli, God was quiet for a time. Maybe we can take heart that this time isn't the first time. God does continue to forgive us. However, maybe we should be concerned that eventually we will lose the ability or the desire to listen. **What happens when God speaks something we need to hear and we are too busy or uninvolved to listen?**

Eli had not been a faithful father; however, he remained faithful as a teacher. Although Samuel did not yet know God, he responded faithfully when God called. When God calls, will you be able to say, "Speak, God, for your servant is listening"?

○ Luke 2:52

Luke tells us that Jesus increased in wisdom, in stature, and in favor with God and man. The Bible gives similar information about young Samuel.

Ask everyone to choose a partner with whom they will discuss the following questions:

- What and who were the guiding forces that helped shape young Samuel?
- What and who were the guiding forces that helped shape young David (see 1 Sam 17)?
- What and who were the guiding forces that helped shape young Jesus (see Lk 2)?
- What and who were the guiding forces that helped shape you?
- Whom have you helped mentor? Who needs your mentoring?

Move back into a large group to discuss these questions:

- How does one grow in wisdom?
- How does one grow in stature?
- How does one grow in favor with God?
- How does one grow in favor with others?

○ The Word of the Lord Is Rare!

Scripture tells us that the word of the Lord was rare in Samuel's day and that visions were uncommon. Yet *we* have the promise of Matthew 28:20 that Jesus will be with us always! But the word of the Lord is rare today, too. Visions of God have become all too rare and all too suspect. Consider these questions:

- Is God giving us words?
- Is God sending us visions of the reign of the kingdom?
- How is God real to you?
- How does God speak to you?
- What word is God giving to us today?

Remind your group that God spoke to Samuel in a day when the word of the Lord was rare. The word came to Samuel even though Samuel wasn't ready to receive fully the blessing from God. The word came to Samuel through the interpretation of a loving mentor. The word came to Samuel three times before Samuel understood.

Questions

- How are you like Eli? Samuel?
- What needs to happen for you to grow in faithfulness unto the Lord?

C A Way to End

In Eli's world, people believed in many gods. To many people, choosing only one God seemed odd. Jesus once chided the Gentiles for heaping up empty phrases in their prayers. He referred to their practice of mentioning the names of many gods so as not to offend any god. However, Eli heard a single voice, a single calling, among all the competing voices in his life and world. While Internet and email, television and radio, to-do lists and minute management were not part of his daily routine, there was enough noise in his world that God had stopped talking. Fortunately, Eli never stopped listening.

What does it mean to respond to God's calling? How do we nurture others to hear God calling? These are questions to ask as you close your session today. Consider using the following suggestions in some form to help bring this study to a point of application.

○ A Blessing of Giftedness

Eli was wise enough to understand what was happening with Samuel when God called, and Eli blessed Samuel with instruction on the appropriate response. Use the next few minutes to bless each other, just as Eli blessed Samuel.

Brainstorm some of the faithful gifts you have evidenced in your study group. Record these on the board. (NOTE: Even guests can join in this sharing.) After several responses, model a blessing of your members. Your response could be: I bless you/I thank you/I thank God for you. Then call the person's name and their gift. For example, "I thank God for you, Mary, and for your love for children." As the teacher, you can choose to bless each class member or model this example so the class may bless each other.

Next, encourage class members to share blessings with one another. You can accomplish this blessing by forming a circle and asking each person to bless the person to his or her right or left. However you choose to work out the experience, give everyone an opportunity to share.

Close with a prayer of thanksgiving for the gifts and blessings of your group. Ask for God's grace and continued guidance in your lives.

○ It's Just Too Noisy!

Consider this question for a closing discussion: "How can we hear God's call amid the noise of our lives?" Choose one of the following ways to approach your discussion:

- Have several "noisemakers" working in your classroom as you try to begin this discussion.
- Play loud music as you try to ask and discuss the question.
- Ask for silence, and then whisper the question, encouraging discussion in "still, small voices." Then talk about the difficulty of hearing.

The purpose of this activity is to help your group identify the noises that exist in their lives. Perhaps by identifying some of the noises, turning down the volume, and simply ignoring others, you can begin to recognize the consistent call of God.

Pray for wisdom in sorting through the noises of our lives that distract us from hearing God. Pray for courage to act once we hear and discern God's call.

GOD CALLS ELIJAH

1 Kings 18:30-40

Bible Background



Elijah was God's prophet, and although Scripture tells us nothing of his ancestry, Elijah was secure in his purpose from God. He knew he was God's prophet.

Despite his confidence, he may have met his match in King Ahab. Ahab's decisions negatively affected his people. Using him as a scapegoat, Ahab blamed Elijah (and, by association, God) for the problems his decisions caused.

Ahab allowed the worship of Baal and Yahweh to coexist in the kingdom. A major tenant of Baalism was that one could buy oneself into the heavenly graces of Baal through extravagant gifts (Ex 20:3). The people considered the sun god the supreme Baal. However, each town had its own special Baal. Such widespread worship of another god caused deep theological conflict in the kingdom.

God's punishment for their split loyalties fell upon the nation in the form of a great drought. The drought drained not only the resources, but also the faith of the people. Ahab labeled Elijah the troublemaker, but Elijah remained true to God. He denounced the worship of any other god but the one true God, Yahweh.

To prove that he was not the cause of the problems affecting the people and to display the power of Yahweh, Elijah proposed a contest. The contest would reveal the true God of creation: Baal,

backed by Ahab, or Yahweh, backed by Elijah.

Elijah invited all of Israel to Mt. Carmel for the contest, challenging the 450 prophets of Baal (and 400 other prophets) and Ahab to call to their god for a response. They cried to Baal for a show of fire. They danced, wailed, and prayed from morning until noon, but Baal did not respond. Elijah taunted the false prophets, and they cut themselves and wailed to Baal for a response; still, the heavens remained silent.

Elijah knew Baal's silence had cost the prophets' respect among the people. He also knew he would be intensely scrutinized. Using their scrutiny to his advantage, Elijah called the people to participate with him in preparing the altar (Ex 20 and 30 record explicit details about preparing the altar).

Elijah's goal was to vindicate Yahweh and, by association, himself. There was no margin for error. The prophet and the people prepared the altar according to Levitical law. They placed twelve stones around the altar (Ex 27-28) and prepared the sacrifice. They dug around the altar to keep fire from accidentally coming to the altar, and then poured twelve jars of water on the wood, the sacrificial bull, and the trench around the altar. Elijah wanted to eliminate any doubt of Yahweh's response. He was now ready to make his point: Ahab had let the kingdom deteriorate, but Yahweh would restore order.

Elijah prayed that Yahweh would be revealed as the God of all Israel. He also asked for personal vindication, that God would show the people that Elijah was indeed God's servant. Finally, he prayed for the people, asking that God's power reveal God's lordship so that those who worshiped Baal would claim Yahweh as Lord, knowing that Yahweh had not turned away from them, that Yahweh's love was available to all.

Yahweh's response was quick and impressive. The fire of the Lord fell and consumed everything: the offering, altar, stones, and even the water in the trench. Yahweh is the only God, and Elijah proved that he was God's prophet. The people fell down in awe and in worship of Yahweh. Eventually, Yahweh brought rain to restore the land.

The story has a troubling ending because the people seized and killed the prophets of Baal (v. 40). Had Elijah lost, he most surely would have been killed. The killing of the prophets of Baal may seem harsh to us today. Yet Yahweh, time and again, demonstrates power to defeat those who challenge, deny, and reject the one God. The killing of false prophets was common (Ex 32:28; Lev 13:34), and though we may not be comfortable with the outcome, it does make us more aware of the seriousness of this contest. Ultimately, God will always show "that there will be no other gods before me!" (Ex 20:3).



Outline FOR TEACHING

Introduction: The nation is in turmoil, and the reputation of the prophet is in question. The people are angry with Yahweh. Ahab blames Elijah and Yahweh for the troubles.

- I. The Preparation of the Prophet
 - A. An invitation to participate (vv. 30-32)
 - B. Water, water everywhere (vv. 34-35)
- II. The Prayer of the Prophet
 - A. A prayer for vindication (v. 36)
 - B. A prayer for redemption (v. 37)
- III. The Validation of the Prophet
 - A. Fire (v. 38)
 - B. Profound proclamation (v. 39)
 - C. Retribution (v. 40)

A Way to Begin

Your challenge is to help learners discover the richness in what the text meant then and what it means now. Elijah's preparation and prayer are evidenced by his confidence that God would act. Elijah knew he had to prepare—not just sit and wait.

God does not call us to sit; God calls us to serve.

Elijah filled his prayers with many requests. He prayed that God would act in order to validate Yahweh as the supreme God and, by association, validate the prophet as well. He also prayed that the nation would return to Yahweh and that Yahweh would accept the people when they returned. Often we pray selfish prayers, but notice that Elijah's main purpose was for Yahweh's validation. Elijah's prayer models that we must first love God and then love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Consider the following options for teaching.

○ **God Will Save Me!**

Share the following modern parable with your group.

A flood came, and emergency officials urged everyone to move to higher ground. A neighbor in a moving truck came by a man's house offering to help him move some of his belongings. The man declined, saying, "I'm not going anywhere; God's going to save me."

The floodwaters crept higher, and soon the man was up to his waist in water. A neighbor in a motorboat came by and offered to take the man to safety. Again, the man declined help. "God's going to save me!" he responded confidently.

The floodwaters finally covered the house. The man clung to the chimney with waters swirling around his head, threatening to pull him under at any moment, when a rescue helicopter appeared and hovered over him. A voice on a loudspeaker urged the man to grab the rescue ladder and escape the surging waters. Unbelievably, and for a third time, the man declined and could barely be heard above the flood shouting, "God's going to save me!"

The waters swept the man away and he drowned.

In heaven, the man was indignant, asking God, "Why didn't you save me like you promised?"

"Well," said God, "I sent a moving van, a motor boat, and a helicopter. What else did you want me to do?"

Questions

- How are you like the man in the story?
- How are you like the neighbors?
- What are the obstacles to your continued growth in faith?
- How have you failed to act on God's call in your life?
- How has God affirmed God's lordship in your life?

○ **The Way to Validation**

The writer of the "Is God Calling" study guide makes the following statement: "Perhaps, only as we are serving the needs of others will we ever be validated in our own."

Questions

- Do you agree or disagree with the writer's statement? Why?
- Why do you think God calls us?
- How has God validated you as a "good and faithful servant"?
- What signs has God given you of the Holy Spirit's presence?
- How does God's affirmation of you affect your service to others?

B A Way to Explore Scripture

*Reading the text is only part of the equation. **The challenge is to live according to what the Scripture teaches.** How do we unleash the truth of Scripture, allowing it to lead us to a higher plane of spiritual maturity? How do we embrace the truth of Scripture?*

This session's passage is dramatic. Can you imagine calling God into a contest and expecting God to respond? For Elijah, it meant life or death. Deliver your words with energy, passion, and enthusiasm to help your learners realize Elijah's urgency and his confidence.

God responds, affirming that God is the God of all. Share the following options, and proclaim with urgency the goodness and power of God.

○ What Would You Do If You Weren't Afraid?

Who Moved My Cheese? is a parable about change and how we respond to it. At one point, the writer asks, "What would you be willing to do if you weren't afraid?" (48). This is an important question for people of faith.

Questions

- Was Elijah afraid?
- What would have been the circumstances for Elijah if Yahweh had not responded?
- How did Elijah model confidence?
- How did Elijah's confidence help him act?
- When God calls us to serve, what gifts are we given?
- When God called you to serve, what gifts were you given?
- How has God validated your call?

○ Preparation and Prayer

Elijah carefully prepared the altar. He did not want there to be any possibility for the people to dispute God's response. In his preparation, not only did Elijah pay attention to specific detail, but he also made sure to include the people in the preparation. Finally, he prayed to Yahweh.

Ask your group to respond to the following statements. Discuss as many as time allows.

- a. Elijah prepared with such detail because he lacked faith.
- b. Elijah's prayer showed that he had no more faith than the prophets of Baal.
- c. Preparation in responding to God's call indicates a lack of faith for God's provision.
- d. Prayer in responding to God's call shows a total dependence upon God's provision.
- e. Elijah's preparation was to silence the people of Israel.
- f. Elijah's prayer was not for his own need but for the nation.
- g. Since the people had turned to Baal, Elijah was praying in vain for God's openness.
- h. God has given up on the people in our world who have turned from following God.
- i. If we are truly called by God, there is no need to pray or prepare.
- j. God gifts us automatically to fulfill the tasks to which we are called.
- k. Even though God is at work in our world, it is still okay to doubt.

C A Way to End

*It is unlikely that any of us will ever face a showdown like Elijah did. However, before viewing this text as a call to confront faiths different from our own, we must first claim our faith and live it. God's displeasure in the biblical story most often comes from the unfaithfulness of God's people. Jesus argued that before we attempt to remove the speck from our neighbor's eye, we should remove the beam from our eye. **Our best witness to others is to live our faith with conviction and to share it with love and grace.***

In Elijah's day, God needed a good representative to remain faithful, to be a witness and a vehicle for God's work in the community. While the circumstances differ today, the call remains the same. Our faithfulness to God, coupled with God's faithfulness to the divine promises, is a strong witness to the validity of our belief and to the reality of God's love for us all. Close the session with one of the following activities.

○ I'd Rather Do It Myself!

When have you heard, "I'd rather do it myself"? Many of us would much rather do things ourselves. "Doing it myself" is easier, cleaner, safer. "Doing it myself" lets me control it, protect it, and make sure it is what I want it to be. "Doing it myself" can be selfish.

Elijah shared with the people the preparation and anticipation of the offering to Yahweh. He gave instructions, but he allowed others to help him. Elijah knew that sharing ministry had great benefits. Sharing his ministry expanded the anticipation of the nation. Sharing ministry created a sense of unity and excitement in the people as they waited on Yahweh to work. The same is true for us today.

Questions

- What are the benefits of sharing ministry?
- What are the dangers of doing ministry "by myself"?
- Who are you involving in your ministry efforts?
- What have you learned by sharing ministry with others?
- How are you keeping your service to God from being boring?

○ I'd Rather Have Jesus than Silver or Gold

Under Ahab, the nation of Israel had turned to false gods. Ahab modeled that there were other, better ways to experience heaven than Yahweh. Ahab led his people away from an intimate relationship with Yahweh and into a false sense of security. Ahab deceived his nation into a lifestyle of "if it feels good, do it."

Questions

- What false gods are in your life?
- What false gods get in the way of your intimate relationship with God?
- What do you do to keep God at the center of your life?

Close with a prayer to strengthen shared ministries and for confidence in our God, who continues to show power in mighty ways.

GOD CALLS MATTHEW

Matthew 9:9-13

Bible Background



The ministry of Jesus was confusing, inexplicable, and controversial. After carefully observing his ministry, the Pharisees were not pleased. They were present at his baptism (Mt 3:7), they criticized his disciples (Mt 12:2; 15:1), and they tried to tempt him (Mt 16:1; 19:3). The Pharisees even plotted against Jesus (Mt 21:46) and sent soldiers to arrest him (Jn 7:32, 45).

The Pharisees were the guardians of the Jewish traditions. They believed teaching and preaching were their main purposes. Their work extended to training children, promoting the faith of their ancestors, and protecting faith traditions. The Pharisees embraced the ideas of the resurrection and future rewards. They seem perfectly respectable; however, they were a proud and arrogant group. They delighted in separating themselves from their culture, and they took law-keeping to the extreme (Mt 23:23-32). They stretched the Ten Commandments into an intricate, almost absurdly detailed code of laws in an attempt to keep any commandment from being broken. This strictness also extended to a strong nationalistic zeal. Thus, the Pharisees were defenders of Judaism from both a religious and a political position.

Because of their nationalism, the Pharisees could not accept that a true Jew

would ever work for Rome. Matthew, however, was a tax collector. That Jesus would call a person like that into ministry ran counter to their sense of nationalism—and to their spirituality. They had overlooked Jesus forgiving sins, calming storms, and healing lepers, but they could not tolerate Jesus befriending such scandalous people as this tax collector.

Jesus never backed down from the Pharisees' critique even though their continuing "battle" caused alarm in the disciples: "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard your parable?" (Mt 15:12).

Matthew, consistently identified as the "Levi" of Mark 2 and Luke 5, was a tax collector—part of a most despicable lot. People despised tax collectors for several reasons, the first being that they were on contract to the Roman government. Because of their relationship with Rome, they were usually excluded from any relationship with the synagogues. Leviticus 20:5 groups tax collectors with robbers and murderers, who were forbidden to enter the temple. Ironically, Matthew (also referred to as "Levi") may have been a "Levite," part of the priestly tribe dedicated to service in the temple. If Matthew was a Levite, he lived as far from temple service as one could get.

Second, tax collectors were usually dishonest, regularly extorting money. They taxed everything, took bribes from rich merchants, and generally cheated

everyone. They were rich. Verse 10 indicates that Matthew owned a house large enough to accommodate a group of his friends and business acquaintances.

Lastly, some suggest that what really irritated the Pharisees concerning Jesus' relationship with Matthew is that they saw themselves and their own behaviors in Matthew.

This encounter between Jesus and Matthew was probably not the first. Jesus was no stranger to Capernaum; the Gospel says this was "his own town" (9:1). Jesus had probably been by Matthew's booth before, and certainly Matthew had heard about this Galilean evangelist.

Notice that Jesus confidently called this "sinner" with two words: "Follow me!" Jesus must have looked Matthew in the eye, with a look that probably went to the tax collector's heart. Jesus knew the heart of this would-be disciple (Mt 5:8; 15:18). He was confident that this "sinner" had goodness within him that would serve well the kingdom of God.

Matthew responded with the same confidence, certain of Jesus' acceptance. He knew this was a defining moment, and he acted boldly and assertively. First, he left a vocation to which he could never return. While many of the other disciples were fishermen, Matthew was a government official. Turning his back on Rome could have been dangerous. Undoubtedly, if things didn't work out with Jesus, Matthew could never again be a tax collector. Matthew also lost a steady income. Still, he followed and claimed his integrity. His confidence is also evident as he included Jesus in a public gathering. The gathering was significant, for a meal implied intimacy and closeness. Matthew didn't try to hide his association with Jesus; he invited other "tax collectors and sinners" to join the party!

Jesus called Matthew to make service a priority. Jesus is Lord of our friends, of our critics, and of our vocations. We, too, are called to make serving Christ a priority. This priority of service sets the

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: The Pharisees could not understand how Jesus could choose someone with the sinful reputation of Matthew, the tax collector, to be a disciple. Jesus and Matthew responded to their critics with courage and confidence.

- I. A Confident Call—A Confident Response
 - A. The confident call from Jesus: "Follow me!" (v. 9)
 - B. The confident response from Matthew (v. 10)
- II. A Condescending Question
- III. A Clarifying Response
 - A. Jesus responds with a clarifying response to his ministry (v. 12)
 - B. Jesus challenges the Pharisees in their own arrogance (v. 13)

foundation of our character, ethical behavior, and quality of work. Jesus is Lord of our ethics, our morals, and our daily activities.

The Pharisees' question illustrates the distance they liked to keep between themselves and "sinners." Clearly, they were not sincerely searching for truth.

What the Pharisees reviled, Jesus embraced. Jesus saw goodness in Matthew. Jesus' response to the Pharisees is built upon Hosea 6:6: "God desires mercy over sacrifice." Jesus established that our relationship with God is not based on our giftedness or our "bribes" to God.

Furthermore, Jesus embarrassed the Pharisees. To these so-called scholars, Jesus simply said, "Go and learn what this means."

A Way to Begin

Pharisees are still with us. Because of someone's past, profession, or situation, people sometimes pass judgments about others' worth to the kingdom of God. Sometimes we may feel that the "religious establishment" expects us to behave in certain ways, to perform certain functions.

*Critics will always be with us. Someone will always pass judgments. What about you would some people deem unworthy for service in God's kingdom? What do you judge as unworthy in others? **Lead participants to share their experiences with criticism and how their faith has helped them cope.** Consider using the following learning experiences to begin your study.*

○ Playing Pharisee

Tax collectors in Jesus' day were grouped in the same category as murderers and robbers. They were definitely marked with a negative social stigma. Nearly everyone despised them.

Though we might like to think of ourselves as more graceful, we pass judgments daily. Read the following list and then ask what assumptions we make about the people on the list. Discuss how we might judge these kinds of people in relation to their "worth" to the church and their "worth" to God.

- A bartender
- A dancer in a Las Vegas show
- A street person
- A person who is HIV-positive
- A person with tattoos and piercings
- A person of a different race or nationality
- A person of a different religious practice
- A drug pusher or habitual drug abuser
- A televangelist
- An extremely overweight person
- A person with an alternative lifestyle
- A convicted felon
- A "pious" Christian

Close your discussion by having your group consider ways that others might consider them unworthy of service for God. Allow learners to share responses as they feel comfortable.

Pause for a time of silent reflection. Ask learners to reflect on areas in their

lives where they need to dedicate themselves to God. Lead in a prayer of dedication for becoming a more effective disciple.

○ Silencing Your Critics

Critics are always with us. In order to help your learners get perspective on dealing with critics, examine how Jesus responded to the Pharisees. Share some of the following Scripture references to learn how Jesus responded to his critics: Mark 7:1-16; Luke 5:33-39; 16:13-17.

Questions

- How did Jesus show courage in responding to his critics?
- How did Jesus model confidence in his reactions?
- What impresses you about his responses? What puzzles you about his responses? What can we learn from his responses?
- How have we reacted or responded to our critics?
- What is the best way to respond to a critic (see Mt 22:3)?

B A Way to Explore Scripture

*Bible study should help us understand the text. As we understand, we are also to live according to the truths of Scripture. **The real proof of understanding is in the transformation that comes from putting learning into practice.***

Examine today's passage to learn how Jesus dealt with the Pharisees. Read the text aloud, allowing its hearing to "transport" the learners into the biblical situation. Remind them that too often we can fall into the behaviors exhibited by the Pharisees. Help learners consider Jesus' call to Matthew. Just as Jesus called Matthew to discipleship, so he calls us. Help learners examine the broader biblical perspective. Just as Jesus challenged the Pharisees to learn the meaning of Hosea 6:6, we too are challenged to "go and learn." Consider the two following options as ways to study the text.

○ The Call of Matthew

Jesus used two words to call Matthew into discipleship: "Follow me!" Why do you think Jesus didn't first ask Matthew for a confession of faith? Why didn't Jesus ask Matthew, "Do you believe in me?" Jesus saw more than Matthew's profession and behavior.

Note that the challenge to "follow" is issued almost three times as often as the challenge to "believe." Perhaps, in following, we come to believe.

Examine other Scriptures for similarities and differences in calling other disciples: Matthew 4:18-22; Mark 1:19-20. Discuss these passages in relationship to today's reference.

Ask volunteers to share how they have understood their call to discipleship. To what did Jesus call them? How did they "hear" their call? How did they respond to their call? How have their lives been different since responding?

Questions

- Is it possible to be a disciple without first believing?
- What did Jesus know about Matthew that the Pharisees did not?
- What does Jesus know about you that your critics do not?
- What about your discipleship might some people misunderstand?

○ Hosea 6:6

Jesus' use of Hosea 6:6 marks a critical turn in silencing the Pharisees. Many people want to influence God into loving them. Many want to make a deal with God. The Pharisees were all about power and influence. They were used to impressing the "commoners" with their bright robes, entourage of admirers, and eccentric "airs." They were convinced that they protected God's traditions. Their arrogance would ultimately contribute to their undoing. God is not impressed by our attempts to manipulate others or to manipulate God. Jesus emphasized that God works through mercy. His confrontation of the Pharisees embarrassed them, and they did not choose to "go and do" as Jesus had instructed. They just kept scheming.

Questions

- How was the Pharisees' behavior similar to a tax collector's behavior?
- What did Jesus mean when he quoted the Hosea text?
- How are we like the Pharisees?
- When have you tried to manipulate God?
- What have you learned about the mercy and grace of God?
- In what ways have you grown since responding to God's call?

C A Way to End

*What does it mean to be a disciple of Christ? What does it mean to respond to the call of Christ? How are we to deal with modern “Pharisees”? The Bible gives us clear direction on answering these questions, yet we still have to “figure it out” for ourselves. **Jesus continues to call disciples. How will you respond?***

As you close the session, encourage learners to boldly consider Jesus’ call. Jesus called Matthew with confidence, and Matthew responded in like manner. He even had a party to celebrate! Matthew made being a disciple his first priority. He turned away from tax collecting to a new way of living. What will you do differently because of Jesus’ call?

○ Who Determines My Qualifications for Discipleship?

Many people are willing to pass judgments on our behaviors. An elderly pastor once told me, “When I saw your beard, I knew you were hiding something from God! Until you shave your face clean, Christians aren’t going to trust you. You’ll never be an effective minister!”

Questions

- What qualifications do you place on disciples/ministers?
- What qualifications have others tried to impose on you?
- How have others tried to limit your ministry?
- When have you been able to offer grace to someone else?

○ Love Finds a Way!

Anne Lamott tells of her pilgrimage to faith in her book *Traveling Mercies*. Her writing is sometimes humorous, sometimes harsh, but always straightforward. She shares many of the painful, hurtful, self-loathing days of her life. She shares her struggles to parent. She speaks openly of her dark days of self-abuse. She is the last person on earth many would think of as inspirational.

Anne found new life in Christ. Her prayers are similar to my prayers. Near the end of her book she writes, “This is the most profound spiritual truth I know: that even when we’re most sure that love can’t conquer all, it seems to anyway” (264).

Close with a prayer for strength—that we will respond to God’s call with the same confidence with which Matthew responded.

5

GOD CALLS
PAUL*Acts 9:1-22**Bible Background*

The conversion and call of Saul of Tarsus may be the most well known of all call stories.

Probably from a wealthy family, Saul was raised in the strictest sect of Judaism. He was a Pharisee, a Roman citizen, and a fierce persecutor of Christians. Saul was present at—if not instrumental in—the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:54). At the very least, Saul approved of the murder. He was zealous and dangerous.

Following the death of Stephen, Saul led a wave of fierce persecution against Christians in Jerusalem. The apostles scattered in fear for their lives. Saul took a personal vendetta against the church and began a reign of terror to destroy it. He was a “door-to-door inquisitor,” searching homes and throwing men and women into prison for their allegiance to “the Way.”

Upon hearing of a cell of believers in Damascus, Saul journeyed to that city, breathing murderous threats. It seemed nothing could stop his ruthless attacks on Christians—nothing, that is, except the miraculous power of God.

The conversion and call of Saul is one of the most important episodes in the Christian movement, so much so that Acts records the event three times: Acts 9; 22:3-16; 26:4-23. Once a fierce persecutor, Saul (now Paul) would become equally

fierce in his missionary zeal, especially among Gentiles. Providing the background for Paul’s mission, Acts 1:8 says the gospel would spread from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the world. Paul’s call was to carry God’s word to the Jews first, then to the Gentiles, and ultimately to the world.

Paul’s calling is nothing short of miraculous. Saul set out on the journey as a mean-spirited, hateful Jewish zealot. Before the sun set, however, he was a prisoner, blind and dependent upon others for his well-being.

A light from heaven, an appearance of Jesus, stopped Saul in his tracks. This sudden bright light—brighter than the noonday sun (26:13; 2 Cor 4:4-6)—indicates a theophany, an appearance of God (Ex 19:16; Ezek 1:4, 7; Dan 10:6). Saul’s response was similar to that of the prophets (see Moses’ response to the burning bush and Ezekiel’s response to God).

Saul knew from his studies, particularly of the exodus, about God’s appearances in the world. Saul’s use of “Lord” was not a confession of faith, for he could just as easily have been saying, “Who are you, sir?” However, his knowledge of God suggests that he at least understood this to be a special situation. Jesus issued a definite call to Saul: “Get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” Saul got up and realized he was blind.

Saul's traveling companions had no idea what was happening. They heard the voice of Christ but saw nothing. Having expected a great hunt, they were now saddled with a blind Pharisee. They led him into the city, following the directions from Christ. For three days, Saul waited and pondered the significance of this encounter with the risen Jesus.

The second part of this story begins with another call, this one to Ananias, a disciple in Damascus. God told Ananias to go to Straight Street and lay hands on Saul. After understandable hesitancy, Ananias set out to commission the murderous Saul. Ananias entered the house in which Saul was staying, laid hands on him, and pronounced a prayer. He even addressed Saul as "brother." Saul's sight was restored, and he was baptized. These two men—one who had feared, the other who had hated—shared an intimacy possible only through Christ. This was a watershed moment in the growth of the Christian movement. Paul would become the central missionary figure in the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles and the rest of the world.

Ananias could bear witness for him, but Paul had to prove the validity and sincerity of his call. To do so, Paul preached Jesus! His actions were confounding to Jews and Christians. However, Paul increased in wisdom and strength and preached the gospel of Christ to all who would hear him (Gal 1:15-24). Paul would prove himself to the apostles and ultimately become one of the most passionate missionaries of all time.

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: Saul, the fiercest opponent to the early days of Christianity, is confronted by the risen Christ and called to conversion and service. The conversion and call of Paul would lead to the greatest missionary of all time. Paul would live out the missionary commission of Acts 1:8, and the word of God would spread to all the world.

I. The Call of Saul

- A. Permission to persecute (vv. 1-2)
- B. The light of heaven (v. 3)
- C. A life-changing encounter (vv. 4-6)
- D. Led to Straight Street (vv. 7-9)

II. The Conversion of Saul

- A. The call of Ananias (vv. 10-11)
- B. Ananias converses with God (vv. 12-16)
- C. Ananias and "Brother Paul" (vv. 17-19)

III. The Confirmation of Paul

- A. Paul preaches Jesus (v. 20)
- B. Unbelieving audiences (v. 21)
- C. Baffling the Jews with Jesus (v. 22)

A Way to Begin

A Luke must have thought Paul's conversion was important. Three times in Acts, Luke tells us this story! No longer was Paul the hated and feared Zealot. He had changed. He had seen the light—literally. Whether because Luke believed that change was so significant or because he thought his readers might have to hear it more than once to believe it, the writer of the third Gospel gives us this wonderful news of God's call to the most unlikely candidate.

This passage is ripe with issues that relate directly to modern living. The focus of your teaching could be on any one of these issues. There is the call of Paul and Ananias. There is the blindness of Paul (both physically and spiritually). There is the issue of trust between Ananias, the Christian community, and this new convert. There is also the issue of Paul's convictions before his conversion. Your challenge is to meet the needs of your class. Prayerfully discern what is of central importance to helping your class grow. Trust God to help you apply truths to life.

○ Help Me!

The phrase "Help me!" seems to fill our session passage. After meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus, Saul was struck blind, and he became dependent upon his traveling companions. He needed their help, for they had to take him to Straight Street as Jesus had instructed.

For three days, this man of action could only ponder. Perhaps you and I need some "pondering" days to reclaim our passion, to redirect our purpose. How might your prayer be like Saul's? How might your passion need redirecting?

God then called Ananias for a specific task. Ananias needed help by way of an explanation. Saul was the dreaded foe of Christians. Fear must have consumed Ananias as he asked for clarification. Could he bring healing to his enemy? When have you questioned God's direction in your life? When have you been afraid to attempt something God called you to do?

The apostles and others who heard the converted Paul preaching probably had to pray "Help me!" too. Saul had been on the way to Damascus to capture and kill Christians. Now, they heard him preaching about Jesus! Might they have questioned Paul's sincerity? Perhaps they discounted him altogether. When has God's message come to you from an

unlikely source? When has someone you didn't trust actually spoken the truth?

○ Blind Spots

Spiritual sight, or lack thereof, is a theme in today's passage as well. Saul was literally blinded by the light. He was physically unable to see. However, he had been spiritually blind for a long while. Ananias's spiritual sight, on the other hand, was acute, even when God called him to a challenging task. The Christian community was blind to Paul's conversion.

In *The Church on the Other Side*, Brian McLaren says, "Experience is just experience. It's all there is and life is wonderful...experience experience!" (164).

Consider the following questions to bring together the ideas of spiritual blindness and experience.

Questions

- What are your spiritual strengths?
- What are your spiritual blind spots?
- How does "experiencing experience" help keep our spiritual vision sharp?
- How did Paul experience the experience of Christ's call?
- What happened when he accepted Christ's call?
- When has an experience clarified God's call in your life?

B A Way to Explore Scripture

Paul's life story would make a wonderful movie: the terrible persecution of his early years, his miraculous change, and the terrible persecution he endured later. His story seems larger than life. Maybe that is part of our struggle with Paul's conversion. It is like that of the biker who dealt drugs, terrorized a town, maybe even killed once or twice, spent twenty years in solitary confinement, but who met Jesus along the way. Now the former biker preaches the gospel in churches, helping thousands begin their own relationship with Christ.

We also have been transformed, but instead of the "rocket's red glare" experience, it was more of the "still small voice." Maybe we weren't even so bad; now we are just more forgiven than different.

What does Paul's story have to do with our less dramatic conversion accounts?

If we study Scripture for more than mere information, it will shape us. Certainly, applying biblical truths to daily living is the goal. Maybe we are not modern Pauls in the change wrought in our lives, but who is to say that the living of our faith will have less influence on others like us?

Consider the following ideas to help you guide this study.

○ Consider the Question

Ask the group to consider this question: "What do you want out of life?" Write their responses on the board. Then take a few minutes to categorize the responses. Are there identifiable themes (for example, relationships, money, prestige, love)?

Now ask, "Why are these things important?" Record these responses in another column. Again, look for similar themes in the responses. Finally, ask the group to consider whether it would be possible to get the things they want by changing the question to "What do you feel called to give to others?" Help your group clarify the sense of calling in their lives with the following questions.

Questions

- Who needs you to reach out to them?
- Who needs you to free them from their spiritual blindness?
- Whom do you need to help heal your blindness?
- Who has helped you clarify your call? How did they do so?
- How did you convince the community of believers your call was authentic?

○ The Call of Paul—Three Versions

If your class size permits, form three small groups. Give each group one of the following Scripture passages, and ask them to consider the questions that follow.

Group 1—Acts 9:1-9

Group 2—Acts 22:3-16

Group 3—Acts 26:4-23

Questions

- Who is telling the story?
- Who is doing the calling?
- How does God get Paul's attention?
- How does Paul respond?
- What are the responses of those on the road with Paul?
- Why is God calling Paul?
- What does God see in Paul that no one else could see?
- How does Paul answer the call of Christ?

After each small group has time to discuss their assignment, compare the three versions of Paul's call found in the book of Acts. Consider similarities and differences. Ask why Acts records this experience three times.

C A Way to End

Paul had been a thorn in the flesh of the developing Christian community. However, God turned him into the greatest missionary in the history of the Christian church. What does this mean for you and me?

Just as God called Paul to a great missionary task, God also calls us into the service of the kingdom. *God knows that each of us has been less than qualified for ministry and service. God knows that each of us has failed in our Christian living. Yet God continues to call. God continues to give us opportunities to share in the kingdom. Consider using the following options to close your session.*

○ A Litany of Calling

Use the following reading to review this study on call and to remind learners of the importance of each believer in sharing in the reign of God.

Leader: God calls each of us to use our gifts for the kingdom of God.

Response: Help us, God, to hear your call and respond in faith.

Leader: God's call to Sarah seemed impossible. Yet, with God, all things are possible.

Response: Help us, God, to acknowledge you as the God of possibilities and to respond in faith.

Leader: God's call to Samuel was a whisper. Yet Samuel would speak loudly in service.

Response: Help us, God, to listen for your still small voice and to respond in faith.

Leader: God's call to Elijah was a life-or-death confrontation with the enemies of God. And Elijah's response silenced the critics, leaving no doubt of Yahweh's strength.

Response: Help us, God, to participate in helping our world become aware of your power.

Leader: Those who thought themselves more spiritual than he rejected God's call to Matthew, but Matthew followed with confidence.

Response: Help us, God, to respond in the face of our critics as obediently as Matthew.

Leader: Paul pondered God's call and was led to conviction through a trusting servant.

Response: Help us, God, to respond with the faith of Ananias and the passion of Paul.

All: God, lead us as you have led your servants throughout history. Help us to be faithful, and bless us as we serve others.

○ A Lyrical Prayer

"Amazing Grace" is a timeless hymn. Use these verses as a prayer to conclude this study on call narratives. The words remind us of God's call to us, our gratitude in response, and the grace of God that supports each call. The first verse is provided below.

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now I'm found,
Was blind, but now I see.

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WOMEN CALLED BY GOD

TEXT	WOMAN	CALLING OR GIFT
Genesis 6-8	Noah's wife	_____
Judges 4:1-4	Deborah	_____
1 Samuel 1-2:10	Hannah	_____
Exodus 2	Miriam	_____
Esther	Queen Esther	_____
Joshua 1:1-21	Rahab	_____
Ruth	Naomi & Ruth	_____
Acts 18	Priscilla	_____
Acts 16	Lydia	_____
Acts 16	Phoebe	_____
John 11	Mary & Martha	_____
Luke 1	Elizabeth	_____
Luke 2	Mary the mother of Jesus	_____

