

AN UNEXPECTED CALL

I can do everything through him who gives me strength. (Philippians 4:13)

Growing up as a preacher's kid was not a bad experience. All of the usual complaints about angry church members, unfair expectations, and unreasonable demands were absent from my childhood. We had a happy home and church was always an enjoyable place.

In spite of the positive experiences of growing up in the parsonage, I had no desire to follow in my father's footsteps and become a preacher. There was nothing about the occupation that appealed to me.

As I approached the end of high school and the time to make decisions about the future, my interests were directed toward radio and television announcing. The famous newscaster, Walter Cronkite, was nearing retirement age and someone had to fill his shoes. That was my objective.

Two years of junior college, majoring in speech, prepared the way for me to chase my dream. I enrolled in radio and television career school in Denver. It consisted of night classes conducted on the first floor of an FM radio station. Once we proved ourselves capable, we were allowed to have some air time. By the time I completed the course requirements I had spent many hours behind the microphone, reading the news.

My first real radio job was at KSLV in Monte Vista, Colorado. It was a typical small town radio station. We played a wide variety of music, reported all the local news and gossip and provided other community services. Perhaps the most memorable part of that radio station was the way we handled calls to the fire department. It was an all-volunteer crew. When a call came in a siren was sounded on main street. The sound could be heard at the radio station. We immediately called the fire station, ascertained the location of the fire, and broadcast the address. Thus, the volunteers could go directly to the fire.

After two months my services were no longer needed at KSLV. My first realization that radio jobs are destined to end with disappointment. It is a career pursued by many but successful only for a few. The radio training proved very helpful later as it provided employment during college days.

Returning to Denver and moving back home was not a terrible ordeal. I was homesick anyway so being with family was a welcome situation. For the next year and a half I worked as a police dispatcher. It was a good job but I knew it was not to be my life's work.

During this time I was very busy with activities at church. The church was my source of friends and provided direction for my free time. In spite of my interest in spiritual growth and following God's will, I did not seriously consider a career in the ministry.

However, as is often the case, God's plans were different than mine. I began to sense His call to become a preacher. I do not recall ever thinking it was a ridiculous notion but I was convinced that I would never pursue that direction. I had the perfect excuse. With my physical condition it would be impossible for me to do the tasks required of a preacher. Specifically, I could not baptize someone, nor could I do door-to-door visitation. Therefore, God would have to find something else for me.

In spite of my intentions, God would not give me any rest about the matter. The impression was a constant companion. I hesitated sharing my thoughts with anyone because I was afraid they might be on God's side (a fear that was later confirmed).

The matter was finally settled on a Sunday afternoon while I was in my bedroom reading the Bible. I can testify that if you are trying to ignore God, the worst thing you can do is read the Bible. I do not remember how I happened to be reading the fourth chapter of Philippians but my attention fell upon verse thirteen - *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"* (it was before the NIV translation).

Suddenly my excuses evaporated. It no longer mattered that I was not physically equipped to preach. God's word was so firmly entrenched in my mind from that day forward that I have never once doubted His call nor His promise to provide.

I was anxious to tell my father because I have always respected his opinion. There was a fear that he might tell me it was impossible but I was prepared to defend my position. When I made the straightforward announcement that God had called me to preach, his reply caught me off guard. He quickly said, "I have known it for years."

His wisdom in not coming directly to me has always been appreciated. I have no doubts that it was the call of God and not simply a suggestion from my father. It demonstrated his confidence that God could speak and that I would listen.

I do not recall if it was the advice of my father or of my pastor, Brother Campbell, but I immediately departed for college. Wayland College in Plainview, Texas was chosen for one reason. It was the nearest Baptist College to Colorado. The education, experiences, and the lasting friendships have proved that it was the right choice.

Before I left for school, my father provided an opportunity for me to preach my first sermon. If there were any doubts that an education was needed, they were silenced by that initial preaching event. I left for Wayland knowing that I was not prepared for God's task.

Although I never questioned God's call to preach, there were times when I wondered if people would allow me the opportunity. I remember seeking the advice of Dr. Bishop, the head of the Religion Department. He told me that it would be very difficult for a church to call me as pastor.

Undaunted by his discouraging assessment, I moved to Louisville, Kentucky to finish my education at the seminary. Once again, the quality of the education and the ministry experiences demonstrated that it was the proper choice.

During the final semesters of seminary, the Placement Office began to suggest that I should consider a career in counseling or some other ministry related occupation. I was even excused from the basic preaching course on the premise that I would probably not preach much anyway. Rather than discouraging me, these attitudes and suggestions only served to strengthen my resolve to pursue God's call.

Although I took heavy course schedules and attended every extra session in order to get my diploma quickly, it was a year and a half after graduation before God provided a church for me to pastor. The First Baptist Church in Morse, Texas gave me the privilege of being their pastor for thirteen years.

I am sure they had some initial reservations about my physical handicap, but I do not recall a single instance where anyone had a problem with my crutches or braces. I worked hard to prove that I could do all that was required of a pastor. Although I could not baptize, the deacons graciously provided this ministry. Visiting in homes was accomplished by asking one of the men to accompany me, which turned out to be a blessing to everyone involved.

After many years at Morse, my vision for the church finally faded. We had accomplished everything that I knew to do and it was obviously time to move on. I followed the typical Baptist procedure of getting friends to send out resumes and recommendations. I even had several well-known pastors and denominational leaders in my corner.

In spite of an abundance of letters and phone calls, I did not get serious consideration from any church. In spite of the silence, I was convinced that God was not finished with my preaching ability. He had given me gifts to communicate the gospel and the only question was where he would employ them.

After several years of searching and an uncomfortable situation at the church, I simply resigned with no direction from the Lord. We moved to Fort Worth, Texas, home of thousands of preachers without a pulpit. There was a fear that preaching opportunities might become scarce.

However, God called me to preach. In the years that we have lived in Fort Worth, there have been only a handful of Sundays when I was not in a pulpit. I even write a monthly article with sermons and illustrations that is sent to every Baptist preacher in Texas.

God's call to preach has been the greatest surprise of my life. It continues to energize my life. It is the direction and purpose of my existence. From a human perspective it still makes no sense that a man in my physical condition can do what God has asked me to do. Yet, I have learned that I can do everything through Christ who strengthens me!