

# The **UNFINISHED** Calling

God's Mission Entrusted  
to Maturing Disciples of Christ

Joe Novenson



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DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES



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## Chapter 1

# ANSWERING THE CALL

I want to thank you. I want to thank you for giving me the permission to open the Word of God with you. As I am guessing all of you know, this is one of the highest privileges that any human can be given, and so I thank you for the collateral trust of picking up and reading this book. Thank you for the time you will spend reading. I want to be a good steward of your time and serve you well, but I must ask of you one thing: Please pray with me as you are reading and ask for the Spirit to use the words on these pages to deliver His message, not mine, although I believe He has given me this message to present.

### Where to Begin

I want to introduce to you the calling of God upon older followers of Jesus to serve the next generation as a privilege and a responsibility. I think for many of us this is a new idea—it was for me. Let me give you ways you can see that.

When you first start thinking about growing older or being older, often your mind goes down intuitive tracks such as the physical: *I can feel some aches and pains I've not known before. My insurance now has a much larger deductible. There are limitations I did not ever see coming.* These thoughts also can run down monetary lines: *I really need to check my retirement. Things are now quite different; I hope I have enough.*

And they can go down familial lines: *I hope I can stay close to my siblings, to my children, to my grandchildren, to all my relatives; I don't want to be distant from them.* I suggest to you, it is rarely intuitive for the mind to go first to the thought, *I am so thankful to be called by God to still be alive in order to serve the next generation.*

Yet, I am here in essence to say that thought ought to be where we begin, and I want to challenge you, to begin there—not *stop* but *begin* there.

To be a bit lighthearted and begin to show you how we intuitively aren't thankful to be called by God into old age, I'll share a story that a hero of mine tells which he says is true. (But when a preacher tells a story like this, you're probably like me, and doubt that it's true—but he said it is!)

A man pulled up to a drive-thru restaurant and came to the menu board. He was older and therefore fumbled for his glasses, dropped them, and had a hard time bringing them back up. By the time he got them, the young woman behind him leaned on her horn and was very upset it was taking him so long to place his order. He regained his composure, finally made his order, and moved ahead to the payment window. At the payment window, he was very poised and (rather remarkably in the mind of the salesperson) said, "I'd really like to pay for the woman who just beeped her horn at me. So, as she makes her order, just let me do that."

The attendant smiled and said that was most gracious. The older man paid for his meal, paid for her meal, and then he moved on to the pick-up window. As he arrived at the pick-up window, he turned in both receipts and took his meal and her meal, drove off, and thought, "You don't mess with us older people," as he made her go around to the back of the line!

There's something hauntingly close to my heart about that story. Yet it's not to be "us versus them"; it's to be us *for* them. It's even more than that. We are called *to* them.

Now, it is essential that first we firmly establish the centrality of the aging believer in Jesus to the strategic well-being of God's people. To do so, we'll look at the heart song, Psalm 78. In my estimation, it is one of those sections of Scripture that when prayerfully read is like hugging a functioning chainsaw that has "I love you" written on the handle. It is a 72-verse braid of repeated descriptions of God's historic loving provision intertwined with shocking accounts of God's people utterly disregarding and disrespecting God and His grace throughout history.

### **To "Hurt Like Heaven"**

The simple literary tool Asaph employed is that for almost every human failure in this psalm, there are two descriptions of God's faithfulness. This repeated, stark contrast drives the blade of conviction deeply into our inner person. Double doses of grace reveal deep disregard by God's people of that grace, brutally unmasking the profound hardness toward God in the very heart of His own people.

With this literary tool of contrast, it appears Asaph crafted the psalm to "hurt like heaven," which, I believe, can be misperceived by us as "hurting like hell." But the difference is that heaven wants us to change, whereas hell hopes we never do. Hence, the blade of heavenly conviction has a cross-cutting, cleansing, and constructive end. The brutality of hell is aimed at simply decimating us as the image of God.

So, how could God's people simply forget all that God has done, all that God has given, all the loving grace God has shown? More pointedly, how could *we*, like our forebears, forget what ought to be unforgettable and ignore the glorious grace of God? The answer is a key for establishing the centrality of the aging believer in the life of the believing community. Just after the psalm's opening, Asaph wrote:

*He has established a testimony in Jacob  
and appointed a law in Israel,  
which He commanded our fathers  
to teach their children,  
that the next generation might know them,  
the children yet unborn,  
and arise and tell them to their children,  
so that they should set their hope in God  
and not forget the works of God,  
but keep His commandments;  
and that they should not be like their fathers,  
a stubborn and rebellious generation,  
a generation whose heart was not steadfast,  
whose spirit was not faithful to God.*

(Ps. 78:5-8)

The lavish love of heaven slices the malignancy of mediocrity so that it ceases to metastasize to the whole of our lives—and to the next generation—and spiritual health begins to flourish. The proactive, preventative, preparative step commanded by God Himself to reverse this kingdom-wide, catastrophic, gospel amnesia is for the “fathers” to teach the next generation about their God. And then a cycle begins: they shall “arise and tell them to their children.” There it is! The centrality of the mature believer is to impart gracious realities to the next generation. That is the rescue strategy!

It’s gloriously obvious and arrestingly simple. Aging believer, step up. Older servant for Jesus, stand fast. Maturing disciple, speak into the next generation. Is it not patently clear that this is God’s prescribed solution? The strategic centrality of this place in kingdom life given to aging believers is further magnified when the scope of Asaph’s historic summary of Israel’s failures is considered. To emphasize this, Asaph twice covered the historic period between

the exodus and the conquest of the promised land, addressing the approximately forty-plus years of spiritual drift of God's people in the wilderness. The solution, therefore, was meant for the long term, but apparently, the older people of God—those who had crossed the Red Sea and been witnesses to God's mighty acts—while in the wilderness had been horribly and irresponsibly silent before the struggling younger believers.

Conversely, it appears from Psalm 78 that the Lord of heaven and earth wants to give His Word and His Spirit not only to the next generation, but also to His older followers. It seems He wants people who can embody defiant hope and resilient faith to surround those newer to the faith, to flesh out kingdom life right before the watching eyes of the younger generation. He calls for a concrete community of constant communication between generations to surround those yet to be born.

What does this mean for us? What are we to do? We, too, must take up, take in, and cry out Psalm 78:2-4 as our own call to action:

*I will open my mouth in a parable;  
I will utter dark sayings from of old,  
Things that we have heard and known,  
that our fathers have told us.  
We will not hide them from our children,  
but tell the coming generation  
The glorious deeds of the LORD, and His might,  
and the wonders He has done.*

That's exactly where we begin to take up this mantle, this calling, this purpose. You see in Psalm 78, the centrality of the maturing adult's ministry to speak to the next generations. "But how?" you may ask. For those of us who have become accustomed to living at a distance from our own children, grandchildren, or younger

members of our family, church, or community, it is important to take intentionally progressive steps toward this calling.

### **Do What You Can**

Statements such as “I almost never hear from my kids,” “I don’t know my grandchildren well. They live on the other side of the country,” are not excuses. They are merely a description of the reality into which God’s prescription for you is to be faithfully applied. Please take to your own heart with great confidence, Jesus’s words found in Mark 14:8 about Mary’s tender choice to anoint Him: “She has done what she could.” Begin there yourself. Do what you can do, not what you think a spiritual hero of yours might do.

May I suggest a simple step I use? In this age of digitized communications where email, texting, and apps designed for family, business, and colleague communications are simply overwhelming, there is a single piece of communication which sticks out like a telephone pole in the Gobi Desert: a handwritten letter. If letter writing was good enough for the apostle Paul, it should be good enough for us. A handwritten note is almost like an original piece of artwork.

If you do not write your children, your grandchildren, your nephews, your nieces, may I encourage you now to write them letters—not texts, not emails. It’s almost a buck for a stamp, I know, but it’s worth it. I have been doing this for years, and I have a photo my daughter-in-law took of my grandson at age thirteen. He’s not exactly what I would call an expressive, overly emotional young man, but in the photo, he was holding my letter, folding it up, and putting it away to keep it. All my children have kept their letters.

It need not be long. It need not be sermon-like or packed with Bible quotes. It needs to be sincere, vulnerable, Christ-honoring, and loving. Just one paragraph telling your grandchildren you are praying for their studies, their sport competitions, their choir

performances, or for their parent to be healed of an illness can be ever so important.

This brief pledge of prayer would also be most appropriate for a handwritten note to pastors, elders, missionaries, schoolteachers, physicians, neighbors, community leaders, first responders, and even political officials.

It was my custom as a pastor to write to newly born or recently adopted babies. I wrote to welcome them to the world and to their family. I briefly told them that the world into which they have been born is an amazingly beautiful but tenderly broken place. There are marvelous experiences ahead of them: sunrises, snowfalls, lightning bugs, homemade ice cream, hot dogs at baseball games, homemade bread and jam, and Handel's *Messiah* presented by a full orchestra and choir. But I also told them there are hurts and difficulties that are just ahead because we have some very distant relatives named Adam and Eve who made some very poor choices long ago for which we have been cleaning up ever since they messed up. I suggested that their older siblings and parents are God's gift to help them handle some of the skinned knees and hard falls which will surely come along the way.

Then I told them the most wonderful news: the God who made them and sent them to their parents also sent His only begotten Son to a cross for sinners like them and like me in order to heal what is wrong with us and the world. I said I will be praying for their hearts to be opened whenever those two tall people who keep kissing them all the time (their mom and dad) speak or sing to them about God's Son Jesus. And finally, I hope they will find this letter tucked away in the midst of other photos, yearbooks, and nostalgic memorabilia which will likely collect during their lives, and when they find it, they will realize someone was praying for them long before they arrived in the arms of their parents. I closed my letter by inviting them to crawl into my office, kitchen, or living room for a visit anytime they would like and to feel free to ask me any questions.

I met a grown man who was parking cars, and as I walked up to him, he said, “When I was adopted by my parents, you sent me a letter. I still got it.” I have met parents who have told me they framed it and hung it next to their children’s bed. Write to your kids or to the members of your church. Begin to do this sort of thing. I think you will be stunned by how God will use your words of encouragement and spiritual direction.

Simple notes of encouragement are so much more faithful than simply adding our voices to the cultural chorus of complaint, condemnation, cynicism, and criticism of those younger than we are who are taking positions of leadership, service, and ministry. Break through the snarky conversations that often fill church gatherings by speaking, serving, and writing such encouragement. I’ve just recently written two grandsons and said, “I just want to talk to your heart, is that okay?” One of them responded right back and said, “Papa, do it. Really, I want to hear it; tell me.” Really pursue this challenge and see what God will do!

In the next few chapters, we’ll look at specific next steps we maturing believers can take to answer the call to serve the next generations.

Let’s pray.

*Shepherd King, slow us down when we are with younger disciples of Yours. Help us slow them down if and when we can. An invitation for a brisk walk or slow stroll side by side, an offer of a warm cup of tea or coffee over which to linger inquiringly, a brief visit at their home or place of work for only minutes to do two things: encourage them and pray—then go out the door! Help us to actually get to know them, asking good questions, and help us to be vulnerable with them about ourselves. Build Christ-honoring relationships among us, Holy Spirit. In Jesus’s name, amen.*

**Discussion Questions:**

1. Carefully read all of Psalm 78. Consider marking the groupings of one unfaithful act by God's people and two faithful acts by God. Highlight anything that stands out to you. Then, make your own list (It needn't be endless, just thoughtful.) using the chart below.

My Unfaithfulness/ Forgetfulness	God's Faithfulness

2. Reread Psalm 78:1-8. What are we to tell the next generation? Why?

