

# **CALLED**

## ***My Journey to C. S. Lewis's House and Back Again***

### **A Study Guide**

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**L E A F W O O D**

**P U B L I S H E R S**

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## **Chapter 1: *Origins***

1. How would you define calling? What does it mean, to you, to be called?
2. Do you have an understanding of God's call on your life? If so, how might you describe it?
3. Ryan Pemberton writes that readers would "completely misunderstand" if they didn't understand that studying theology at Oxford was "the complete opposite" of what he wanted growing up. Why?
4. Why was C. S. Lewis an important guide for God's call on Ryan's life?
5. How would you describe Ryan's calling before he left for England versus after he arrived?
6. Ryan's story begins with a dramatic departure—leaving career, home, and community. What voices did Ryan attend to when considering this dramatic departure?

## **Chapter 2: *Doubt***

1. What are some of the biggest fears or anxieties you have around the topic of calling? When do you feel them the strongest?
2. Ryan describes himself as reluctant to share his dreams of writing when he first arrived in Oxford. Do you have any ambitions that you feel similarly nervous to share?
3. Over dinner at the Eagle & Child, Cole tells Ryan that his fears of being “found out” have a name—Imposter Syndrome (45). Have you ever felt like you were an imposter, just waiting to be “found out”? If so, when?
4. At the point of his greatest doubt about God’s call on his life and his decision to move to England, Ryan found assurance in his sister-in-law’s words (51). Where do you find assurance when you are tempted to doubt either yourself or God’s call on your life?

### **Chapter 3: *Dreams***

1. C. S. Lewis considered it his duty to use his God-given gifts of an exceptional education, a brilliant mind, and imaginative literary talents to help articulate the Good News of God's in-breaking Kingdom (54). In another story, Ryan describes meeting Doug in Maine—a man who built homes for women and children simply because he could (55). What God-given gifts do you recognize in your life? How might these gifts point you toward a similar response to help others?
2. Walter Hooper, C. S. Lewis's former secretary, shares a story from C. S. Lewis about a group of aliens visiting earth to hear "the Good News" and leaving disappointed (56). What was the point of this story?
3. Ryan is struck by a quote from the professed English atheist Matthew Parris while watching a fireworks display in Oxford one evening. Why? What's the connection between Parris's quote and the fireworks?
4. Ryan wrestled with a deep amount of fear before finally sharing his writing with Walter Hooper. Have you had an opportunity to share your dreams or gifts and faced a similar dread? If so, what has helped you move forward?

#### **Chapter 4: *Confidence***

1. In this chapter, Walter Hooper encourages Ryan to pursue the publication of his writing, which gives him the confidence he needs to move forward (78). Describe a time in which someone spoke confidence into God's call on your life.
2. "There are plenty of jobs I could do—I *could* be a mechanic—but that doesn't mean I'm supposed to be," Ryan's former manager tells him over dinner while home for the holidays (81). Why did he feel the need to say this? How might we discern the difference between that which we *can* do and that which we're *supposed* to do?

## **Chapter 5: *Answered Prayers***

1. Describe a time when you were struck by God's clear answer to your prayers.
2. Even after so many seeming affirmations of God's call on his life and this journey, Ryan returns to England once again doubting God's call and whether this is, in fact, what he is supposed to be doing. How can lack of community affect our ability to live into God's call?
3. Ryan describes a time when he was struck by a leaf falling on a pond where C. S. Lewis used to punt and swim (92–94). Why was this seemingly mundane event so meaningful to Ryan?

## **Chapter 6: *Wilderness***

1. In this chapter, Ryan describes the first of two deeply difficult seasons in his journey. Most difficult was Ryan's increasing doubt in God's call, or whether he had heard it correctly: "Had I misheard you?" Pemberton writes. "Is this not what you would have for me?" (101). If you feel comfortable, share a time when you were shaken by a similar "Wilderness" season.
2. Reflecting on your own Wilderness season, where did you find encouragement?
3. Ryan is encouraged by a sermon from his vicar, Simon, which proposed that God may be using this Wilderness season to prepare him. What Scripture did Simon use to make this claim? How might this message encourage you, either in a past or current Wilderness season?
4. Apart from preparation, what other roles might such Wilderness seasons play in the lives of Christians? How might we know whether such challenges are "of God"?

## **Chapter 7: *Regret***

1. When Ryan nervously shares the publisher's rejection letter, Walter encourages him with some surprising news about Tolkien and Lewis (113). What was this news? How does this surprising story help, particularly for those just starting a new pursuit or being called in a new direction?
2. After not knowing how he was going to pay his last month's rent in England, Ryan receives a surprise letter in the mail (117–118). This is one of many examples of God providing for the couple, even when things seemed hopeless. Can you remember a similar time of God's faithful provision in your own life?
3. Why do you think this chapter was titled "Regret"? What role does regret play when it comes to pursuing God's call?
4. Over dinner with Laurence Harwood, C. S. Lewis's godson, Ryan receives a timely encouragement (120–123). What is it? Did this speak to you?
5. Ryan is able to attend his college's morning chapel service before the end of the term and is taken aback by the story of God's call on Moses's life in the book of Exodus (124–125). What was it about this story that struck Ryan? How does this help shape your own understanding of calling?



## Chapter 8: *Identity*

1. Upon returning to the States, Ryan attends a gathering of Christian artists. When Ryan confesses his own insecurities about claiming to be a writer even though he has yet to publish anything, another artist tells him, “Ryan, writing isn’t something you do or don’t do. Writing is who you *are*” (135). What did she mean by this?
2. This chapter is titled “Identity.” What’s the relationship between calling and identity?
3. Even though he was speaking to a room full of accomplished artists, the retreat leader in this chapter, Dick, told all of those gathered that what they each brought were some bits of fish or a handful of breadcrumbs (133, 136). What was he trying to do with this reminder?
4. While home, Ryan is made speechless after an impromptu meeting (136–137). After many struggles and prayers for a miracle, Ryan interprets this encounter as affirmation that he was, in fact, pursuing God’s call rightly. What happened? Had this *not* happened, what would that have meant for God’s call on Ryan’s life?
5. God does not always intervene or provide so dramatically. Can you think of a time you prayed for God’s intervention and God didn’t provide, or at least not how you had hoped? How did you handle that? What was helpful to you in that time?

## **Chapter 9: *Unanswered Prayers***

1. Ryan shares a surprising encounter with a palm tree in this chapter, and again in later chapters (143). Why, do you think, was Ryan so taken aback by this tree?
2. After being surprised by the generous support of another, Ryan and Jen are able to return to Oxford for a second year, moving into C. S. Lewis's old home, the Kilns, and attending Holy Trinity Church, where Lewis worshipped for years. Ryan shares an experience from one visit to Holy Trinity (144–147). What was the sermon illustration that he found so striking? Why did Ryan initially feel uneasy with the image? What changed?
3. Receiving more difficult news from a publisher, Ryan has a profound experience beside the pond behind C. S. Lewis's home—even though he's hesitant to share it. What was the experience? Can you think of a time you had a similar encounter?
4. C. S. Lewis once wrote that he was grateful that many of his prayers went unheeded by God (154). Do you feel this way about any of your own prayers? How might this be helpful when we're faced with a heavy, closed door, or series of closed doors on our own prayers?

## **Chapter 10: *Experience***

1. “You’re working so hard to show others, ‘I am not a bum,’” the New York City pastor Tim Keller told a group of students in Oxford’s town hall in this chapter (157). “We all know something is wrong, and we want to prove we’re all right.” How does this line relate to Ryan’s story? How does it relate to your own story?
2. Ryan recounts in this chapter his favorite tour guests (163–164). What made this particular visit his favorite?
3. Over tea at the Kilns, Pastor Tim Keller tells Ryan that “writing comes from experience” (166). Why did he feel the need to say this? How might this wisdom help with your own journey and God’s call on your life?
4. Ryan shares a private walk and conversation with Douglas Gresham, C. S. Lewis’s stepson, after an Oxford University C. S. Lewis Society meeting. In this conversation, Ryan thanks Gresham for sharing some of his more painful experiences with the meeting’s guests, noting that many people are not willing to do so. “No, but perhaps more should be,” Gresham suggests (168). Why do you think Gresham said this? Why does Pemberton suggest we should follow his advice? What would this advice look like in your own life?

## Chapter 11: *Wilderness, II*

1. “There were times that spring when I wondered if I’d ever get home, both to the place called home as well as the home inside myself,” Pemberton writes in this chapter (173). What led him to write this? What did he mean? Can you remember a time you ever felt the same way?
2. Ryan shares a line from the Genesis account of Creation in this chapter (175). What was the line? What was Ryan’s point of sharing this line?
3. Separated by six thousand miles, Ryan has an imaginary conversation with his wife, who is now back in Washington State (175–177). What news does Ryan have for his wife on this call? How might this experience shape his understanding of God’s call on his life at this point?
4. Taking a quick break from his studies to eat, Ryan shares about a time he passed by a homeless man on the opposite side of the street, referencing the story of the Good Samaritan from the gospels. “As I walked, head hanging low, I realized this familiar story wasn’t about those religious people way back when,” Ryan writes, “It was about me” (181). Have you ever had a similar encounter when you were faced with the opportunity either to help or pass by, and chose not to help? How did you feel afterward? Did that motivate you to respond differently in the future?
5. In one of his most candid moments, Ryan shares about the party culture in Oxford and how, on his last night in Oxford, he thanked his Finnish friends for having him over to their home on Friday nights: “I told them that, without realizing it, they might have saved my marriage” (183). Why do you think Ryan included this line? What difference does it make for your story?
6. During one of the lowest points of his journey, Ryan receives an unexpected note from Jen’s cousin (186–188). Why did this note have such an impact on Ryan? How does this fit with this quote: “One of my favorite theologians has said one reason we need stories is because they remind us who we are. They remind us of the character of the person we’re trying to be, and of the community of which we’re a part” (186)? Can you think of a time in which you needed to be reminded of the story you were trying to tell? What helped?

## Chapter 12: *Decisions*

1. “You will learn,” Professor Lennox tells Ryan and a group of his Oxford friends, “that which costs nothing is worth nothing” (195). Think of the most valuable experiences of your life. At what cost have they come? How might this lesson encourage you when your journey feels particularly costly?
2. While attending a friend’s lecture, Ryan is struck by a guest’s comment: “Good theology makes us *do* something” (201). Why was this such a striking quote for Ryan? Can you remember a time you were moved to do something after reading or listening to a piece of “good” theology?
3. Ryan describes God as having a “topsy-turvy” sense of humor in this chapter, referencing the story of Abraham’s call in Genesis (204). Why do you think Ryan uses this language to describe God’s work, not only in Scripture, but also in his own life? Have you experienced God’s topsy-turvy sense of humor yourself? How would you describe this phrase to a non-believer?
4. In this chapter, Ryan shares how prayer has helped him with some of the biggest decisions in his life. “Prayer—candid, relentless, heartfelt prayer, the kind of prayer that comes from deep within the gut and is heaved up to God—has helped me move forward at those times when my questions are faced with nothing more than vague notions, shrugged shoulders, and dead ends” (205). If you feel comfortable, share one of the most difficult decisions you’ve faced. How did you come to a decision? If prayer was involved, share how you found clarity in prayer. If you didn’t find clarity, talk about what that was like.
5. Ryan confesses he’s not sure he knows the difference between a miracle and a coincidence (207). Assuming he knows the different definitions of these two words, why do you think he might have said this? What does a miracle require? Share a time when you felt the word “coincidence” did not do justice to your experience.

### Chapter 13: *Culmination*

1. By the time Ryan's exams arrive, he is surprised by how at peace he is. What was said over dinner with John and John that led Ryan to say, "That makes this an entirely different ball game for me" (214)? How does this view help shape a Christian perspective of work? Does this perspective motivate Christians to put less effort into their work than their non-Christian colleagues? Why or why not?
2. After finishing his last exam, Ryan remembers a C. S. Lewis quote he read years earlier: "The proper rewards are not simply tacked on to the activity for which they are given, but are the activity itself in consummation" (219). What do you think this quote means? Why was it in this moment that Ryan recalled these words? How might this quote shape your understanding of the relationship between calling and rewards?
3. "I think sometimes that's a sign of the Lord's work in our lives, those unexplainable moments when things turn out completely different than we would have thought, when the current of life moves us in a new, unexpected direction, and we cannot believe how well it fits" (222). What was it that led Ryan to write this? Have you ever had this experience? If so, what was it?
4. At the end of his time in Oxford, Ryan writes, "I wondered if this wasn't, in some small way, God saying, *This is what I'd like you to do: give up your dream girl. First your wife, then Oxford. And make me your dream*" (224). What did Ryan mean by this? Have you ever felt God calling you to a similar place of making room for him?
5. Ryan's friend, Professor Steve, says he thinks every story has one theme: Home (224). How has this claim been true of Ryan's story? How about your own story?

## **Chapter 14: *Memories***

1. On his last time leading a tour of the Kilns, Ryan shares the story told to him by Walter Hooper from the end of C. S. Lewis's life. What was the line spoken by C. S. Lewis that Ryan found himself quoting and repeating (227)? Why was this quote so moving to Ryan at the end of his time in Oxford?
2. At a dinner party held at the Kilns, Ryan says good-bye to many friends he has met during his two years in Oxford. Afterward, he asks his friend Ignacio how he manages to say good-bye to so many friends each year (228–229). What is Ignacio's response?
3. Ryan found himself worrying that he'd never find his way home. Here, in the last chapter, Ryan finds himself holding his wife and the gift of new life. How might you explain this scene as God's grace?

## *Afterword*

1. “At some point on our journey, I began to believe being called means having clarity about where one is being called,” Ryan writes, reflecting on his journey to Oxford in pursuit of God’s call (234). Why does Ryan question this clarity in how God’s call would unfold?
2. In a candid moment of reflection, Ryan writes, “Much of my journey had been, at its root, the pursuit of an idol” (235). What led Ryan to make such a bold claim?
3. What does Ryan say was one of his biggest fears before leaving home to set out on this journey (236)? How did Ryan eventually find peace from this fear?
4. Given Ryan’s childhood, a social services waiting room seems like the last place he would come to a deeper understanding of what it means for him to be called by God. What did Ryan learn in this scene? Why did this particular space allow Ryan to hear from God in a new way (237)?
5. Ryan makes a distinction between “my calling” and “God’s calling” on his life (238). What is the significance of this distinction? What difference does this make in your own life? Can you identify an example of each in your own journey?
6. Speaking of the unique challenges that come when one sets out in pursuit of God’s call, Ryan warns against “self-seeking suffering” (239). What does he mean by this phrase? Why is it something to avoid?
7. Reflecting on his conversation with Douglas Gresham, Ryan writes, “The truth is, we need each other’s stories, to help us as we go” (239). Are there any stories in your own life you feel God is calling you to share with others that might be helpful?
8. Ryan describes writing as that which he can’t *not* do, as well as that which he has been gifted with to help others: “When I look out at the world, I want to help it; and somehow, I feel as though by writing, I just might,” even after facing so many closed doors (240–241). What in your life do you feel you can’t *not* do? What gift do you feel God has given you to help others? What might it look like to live into that gift in a way you haven’t before, for others?
9. After so many stories of success, Ryan says he no longer believes an attitude of self-sufficiency can co-exist with Christianity following his experiences in Oxford (244). What does he mean by this? At least for Christians, why does this challenge the rags to riches success stories we love about people pulling themselves up by their bootstraps?



10. “The cross has always looked like failure from the outside,” Ryan writes in his afterword (244–245). What does this picture of success and failure have to do with a Christian understanding of calling?
11. Ryan concludes his afterword with a quote from the Presbyterian minister and writer Frederick Buechner: “My story is important not because it is mine, God knows, but because if I tell it anything like right, the chances are you will recognize that in many ways it is also yours” (246). At the end of Ryan’s story, in what ways have you recognized your own story? Have you understood your story any differently after reading the story of Ryan’s journey?
12. At the start of this study you were asked what it means to be called. How would you answer that question after finishing *Called*?
13. Have you gained a clearer sense of God’s call on your life after reading the story of Ryan’s journey? If so, please share.