



PART ONE

CALLED FOR A PURPOSE

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IN SEARCH OF A CALLING

Deep in our hearts, we all want to find and fulfill a purpose bigger than ourselves. Only such a larger purpose can inspire us to heights we know we could never reach on our own. For each of us the real purpose is personal and passionate: to know what we are here to do, and why.

OS GUINNESS

A *USA Today* poll found that if people could ask God just one question, most would want to know, “What’s my purpose in life?” Periodically, we find ourselves questioning who we really are and what we are supposed to do in life. These thoughts may nudge us gently or they may launch a season of upheaval in our lives.

We may feel unsettled and restless, sensing that there are truths about ourselves to uncover and mysteries to unravel about why we are here on earth. We dare to believe that there *is* something special within us, and that we *do* have a life mission to find and fulfill. We may not be sure how to discover this purpose but feel driven to do so. Although we may describe our quest as a search for our calling, we may not be entirely sure what it is that we seek.

Looking for Our Place

“Most of us are looking for a calling, not a job,” says Nora Watson in her interview for Studs Terkel’s classic book *Working*. “Most of us . . . have

jobs that are too small for our spirit. Jobs are not big enough for people.” Nora speaks for those who feel trapped in work that provides a paycheck but gives little room for using their gifts or doing something that is personally meaningful. She compared her job with that of her father, who had felt his work was “a profession of himself” and a calling.

Throughout our lives we try to find our place in the grand scheme of things. Marianne, age twenty, voiced the struggle to find her identity in life: “I believe God is calling me to use my gifts, but I don’t know exactly what they are. I’m trying to figure out what he wants me to do, but feel rather lost.” John, thirty-five, described his need for a new direction: “If I died tomorrow, my years of work will have had little meaningful impact in this world. Success isn’t enough anymore. I know I should be doing something different, but I have no idea what that would be.” At forty-eight, Jackie was taking a new look at herself: “My children are grown and I want to find out what I should be doing now.”

A Secular View of Calling

The American culture encourages us to look to our work for our sense of purpose and calling. Today, “work is fast replacing religion in providing meaning in people’s lives. Work has become how we define ourselves. It is now answering the traditional religious questions: Who am I? How do I find meaning and purpose? Work is no longer just about economics; it’s about identity.”¹ We have been told that finding our calling is the same as getting our dream job, doing what we love, or finding our right livelihood. Therefore we are left feeling “uncalled” if we are not using our gifts within work we value.

Equating calling with work is not new; it began hundreds of years ago with the Puritans. In his book *The Call*, Os Guinness describes how “such words as *work*, *trade*, *employment*, and *occupation* came to be used interchangeably with *calling* and *vocation*. As this happened, the guidelines for callings shifted; instead of being directed by the commands of God, they were seen as directed by duties and roles in society. Eventually the day came when faith and calling were separated completely.”²

From this secularized perspective of calling, we are led to believe that we have no more significant purpose than to work.

Without a doubt, work *is* important. Most of us spend 60 percent or more of our lives working. At its best, work uses our unique gifts and abilities and provides opportunities to make a difference in the world around us. Discontentment with work can be agonizing, affecting every area of our lives. Helping you discover your giftedness and find your calling within work and volunteer activities are key goals of this book.

The Bible, however, reveals that work is *not* our central calling. There are no biblical examples of someone being called to paid employment.³ Although God has designed each of us for special tasks and assignments, his calling for us is much greater and more soul-satisfying than a summons to work.

Called to Know the Caller

Before being called to something, we are called to Someone. Before we are called to *do*, we are called to *be*. Our *primary calling*⁴ is to be in a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us that God has *called* us into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ.⁵ God created us and knows our strengths, weaknesses, dreams, and fears. In spite of our imperfections, God loves us perfectly and completely. He wants us close to him. He calls us to belong to him.

Garrison Keillor recalled painful childhood memories of being chosen last for baseball teams. He dreamed of just one time being picked first—of hearing the team captain say, “‘Him, I want *him!*’ . . . But I’ve never been chosen with much enthusiasm.”

In contrast, the gospel message is that God chooses each of us with great enthusiasm. None of us is a last pick, or chosen grudgingly. To each of us God says, “You! I want *you!*” God has created us to be his and to have a significant place in this world.

Our primary calling is not tied to our employment. We don’t lose our calling if we lose a job. We can live our calling even if we are unemployed or in work that doesn’t fit us well. God values us for who we

are, not for what we can produce or achieve within work. God's call to us is an eternal one that encompasses and transcends our temporal activities. (See "Your Most Important Calling" on our Website, www.LiveYourCalling.com, if you would like to know more about your primary calling to a personal relationship with God.)

When one of us responds to God's call to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, he or she enters into a new relationship with God⁶ and a brand new life.⁷ Jesus then calls us to become his disciples, or students, so that we can learn from him how to grow in the knowledge and power of our new life.⁸ (See Appendix C for information about the spiritual disciplines and other resources for spiritual growth.) In the New Testament, *calling* represents the life of faith itself. We are exhorted to "walk worthy"⁹ of the calling we have received. Dallas Willard describes the crucial idea of discipleship as "learning from Jesus to live *my* life as he would live my life if he were I."¹⁰

As disciples, we seek to live as God's people wherever we are and in whatever we do. God thus works through our individual lives to do the work of his kingdom. This was beautifully illustrated at a conference on spiritual renewal when a group of participants shared how they had seen God's Spirit at work in their lives in the preceding week.

One woman described how she believed God was using a column she writes in her company's newsletter to bring healing to the dissension-torn organization. Two men brought God's kingdom into a restaurant by praying with their waitress about her fear of developing a debilitating physical condition. A college student taking a class in Eastern religions found that his teacher and classmates were curious about the Christian spiritual disciplines he practiced and were asking him many questions about his faith.

As each person spoke, we were given snapshots of how God was active in the world through the day-to-day lives of his people. God has chosen to do his work on earth through us. He knows who we can become as we follow Jesus. Our primary calling is to travel through life with God, living each day as called people. We live our calling as we walk with God.

Your Individual Calling

Imagine getting a letter from the White House saying the president of the United States needs you for a critical assignment. He has determined that you are the only person in the world who can accomplish the mission. No doubt you would experience a flood of emotions, among them feeling highly valued.

Someone far greater than the president has already sent you this message. The Bible tells us that God has brought you into this world for specific purposes in his eternal plan. You have been born for such a time as this. Ephesians 2:10 tells us that “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” God has been ahead of us, getting everything ready for our accomplishing what he calls us to do. He is “manipulating all the resources of the universe in order that the work you do may be a part of his whole great and gracious work.”¹¹

The life of faith opens our eyes to see ourselves and the world around us differently. The closer we walk with God, the more we understand God’s agenda for humanity and our part in it. Incredibly, God calls us to be his “fellow workers.”¹² Embracing us as his partners to help fulfill his purposes on earth, God calls us to various tasks and life roles. These are our *secondary callings*, which include such life roles as parent, spouse, family member, worker, student, church member, citizen, friend, and neighbor. Our secondary callings provide the contexts in which we can live our primary calling to follow Jesus.

Your work, or *vocational calling*, is one of your secondary callings. It is inextricably connected to your primary calling to be in relationship with God. The English word *vocation* has its origin in the Latin word *vocare*, which means “to call.” Your vocational calling is a summons from God to use your gifts in the world, whether it be within paid employment, the home, or volunteer activities.

Guinness explains the crucial distinction between our primary calling and secondary callings: “We can therefore properly say as a matter of secondary calling that we are called to homemaking or to the practice of law

or to art history. But these and other things are always the secondary, never the primary calling. They are ‘callings’ rather than the ‘calling.’ They are our personal answer to God’s address, our response to God’s summons. Secondary callings matter, but only because the primary calling matters most.”¹³

Johnny Hart’s story illustrates how his vocational calling is an expression of his primary calling. Hart is called to be a cartoonist. He has used his long-running comic strips *B.C.* and the *Wizard of Id* to communicate God’s truths to people who might never read a Bible or visit a church. At times, the impact has been dramatic. One woman wrote him that a *Wizard of Id* strip saved her from committing suicide. Johnny also finds opportunities to share the hope of Christ with fellow cartoonists and others with whom his work brings him into contact.¹⁴

The God of Possibilities

Like Johnny Hart, we also have been gifted in specific ways, equipping us for particular vocational callings. When God allows us to glimpse our potential, however, we are often tempted to retreat behind the wall of our perceived limitations (“Gee, God, I’d love to do that . . . but you know, I just can’t”). We forget that God has never let human limitations get in the way of his plans for a person. It has been said that God doesn’t call the equipped; he equips the called.

God says that his power is made perfect in our weaknesses.¹⁵ He calls us to do things that we cannot do in *our* own power so that we will draw on *his* power. Although he is an award-winning cartoonist, Johnny Hart has only a high school education. He says, “I have always been stupid. I don’t have a good memory . . . I’ve looked up every word in the dictionary almost twenty times.” His difficulty with words continuously discouraged him. Even when his career was skyrocketing, he would sit down to read “just a normal book . . . and in one paragraph I’d have to look up five words. And I’d think, man, will I ever have a vocabulary?”¹⁶ Yet God has called him to work that depends on the skillful use of words. God’s power shines through our limitations.

God is greater than any obstacle. Each of us has our own personal set of doubts, fears, insecurities, and challenging life circumstances. Some people may feel that they have waited too long and are too old to do what God has called them to do. Lois Prater's story challenges our perceptions about limitations to living our calling at any age.

As a young teen she had promised God she would serve him overseas. But instead she entered into a difficult marriage and never acted on her promise. When her husband died, she once again experienced the desire to serve God in a foreign country. She resisted, however, feeling that at age seventy-six her opportunity had come and gone. "I said, 'Lord, I'm too old to go now. I can't do this,'" Lois admits. But she found she couldn't turn down this second chance to fulfill her childhood promise to God.

So at eighty-seven, Lois Prater has become God's unlikely choice to build an orphanage in the Philippines and rescue thirty-five children from neglect, poverty, and abuse. Lois lives with the orphans in a two-story, two thousand square foot white stucco home. They call her *Lola*, meaning "grandmother" in Tagalog, their native language. Lois says confidently, "I serve a mighty God. He's in control. I feel I'm not talented enough to do any of this. But God enables me. My responsibility is to do what I can."¹⁷

It's Not Too Late

Many people fear it is too late to do anything of significance with their lives. They may be filled with a profound sense of despair and regret because they feel they have already wasted much of their lives. In our work, clients have made comments such as "I wish I had done career planning twenty years ago. I could have done so much more for the Lord!" or "I really have buried my talents. It's too late to do much now." They find themselves burdened by guilt, remorse, and fear about how God will judge their lives.

Lois Prater's life witnesses to the fact that as long as we are alive it is never too late to live our calling. If we are still alive, we know that

we have not yet completed our mission on earth. God can use everything in our lives. When we turn to him and seek to live our calling, he can take all of us—our life and work experiences, our successes, our supposed failures, our strengths, our weaknesses, our past, our present, and our future—and use it for his purposes and our good.

The Invitation of Grace

Jesus told a parable about workers in a vineyard.¹⁸ In the story, an estate manager hires workers at five times throughout the day. The first come early in the morning; the last are not hired until 5:00 P.M. An hour later the workday is over and it is time for all the men to be paid. Those hired at five o'clock are paid first. Each is given a dollar (in the Message version of this story). When the men who were hired in the early morning see that, they think, "Great! We'll get paid more." When their turn comes, however, they are also paid a dollar. "That's not fair!" they grouse. "Those guys only worked an easy hour while we slaved all day under the hot sun." But the estate manager reminds them that they agreed on the wage of a dollar. "I decided to give to the one who came last the same as you. Can't I do what I want with my own money? Are you going to get stingy because I am generous?"¹⁹

In this parable Jesus shows us the grace of God. Dallas Willard defines *grace* as "the action of God bringing to pass in our lives good things which we neither deserve nor can accomplish on our own."²⁰ Grace is God's love in action. Willard writes, "God has a plan for each of us in the work he is doing during our lifetime, and no one can prevent this from being fulfilled if we place our hope entirely in him. The part we play in his plans now will extend to the role he has set before us for eternity."²¹

Our gracious God invites each of us to come to work in the vineyard. It doesn't matter if it is the morning, afternoon, or evening of our lives. Come, you who are weary and heavy-laden. Come, you who feel unworthy. Come, you who have been worshipping other gods. Come, you who have denied me. Come, you who are burned out by all you

have been trying to do for the kingdom. Come, learn from me and find rest for your souls.

It doesn't matter what you have been doing up to this moment. God calls you to be a part of his great work in this world, and thereby become the person he created you to be. God is choosing *you* for his team. God has plans for your life; plans that will prosper and not harm you; plans to give you hope and a future.²² Place your hope entirely in him and respond to his calling to come work with him today. As you grow closer to him and participate more fully in the work he calls you to do, you will find and fulfill the central purpose of your life.

Personal Application

1. Why do you think so many people struggle with the question, "What's my purpose in life?" What is your response to the question?
2. What is your reaction to the idea that your primary calling is to a relationship with God, and that work is one of your secondary callings?
3. In what way can you see yourself being God's "fellow worker"?