

Week 2 – The Hope of Calling

First Day:

INTRODUCTION:

When it comes to work, most of us can find no shortage of things to complain about truthfully, work can be tiring, and even overwhelming, but behind our complaints is a lack of faith – an inability to see the work of God’s Spirit. This study is designed to help us see how the Spirit is moving, even and especially in the places where we have felt frustrated, out of control, or hopeless.

Scripture: Ezekiel 37

¹The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out of the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones.

²and he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. ³And he said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” And I answered, “O Lord GOD you know.” ⁴then he said to me, “Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD.

⁷So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.

⁸And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them.

⁹then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath. Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” ¹⁰So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

¹¹Then he said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.’ ¹² Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD;

Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. ¹³And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD, I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Besides the literal lifeless objects Ezekiel sees before him in the desert, what do the bones in this passage represent to the people of Israel?

The striking imagery of a valley filled with dry, scattered bones is first a literal and physical presentation of death. However, this mass grave represents a more spiritual and deeply distressing depiction of death and decay in the hearts of God's people. The suggested widespread slaughter brings to mind the sinful nature of mankind, that we are capable of great evil. God made sure to impress upon Ezekiel that this was not "simply a symbol of death, but death in all its fullness."

They represent judgment. Israel's captivity was a judgment for their repeated sins of idolatry and rebellion against God. The loss of their homeland and their state of exile was a result of their own actions and decisions, which they had been warned about.

- In Deuteronomy, God tells of the punishment that awaits those who refuse to keep God's commandments: "The LORD will cause you to be defeated before your enemies... And your dead body shall be food for all the birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth, and there shall be no one to frighten them away".
- Later in Jeremiah, the coming punishment gets very specific: "...the bones of the kinds of Judah, the bones of its officials, the bones of the priests, the bones of the prophets, and the bones of the inhabitants of Jerusalem shall be brought out of their graves. And they shall be spread before the sun and the moon and all the host of heaven, which they

have loved and served, which they have gone after and which they have sought and worshiped. And they shall not be gathered or buried. They shall be as dung on the surface of the ground.” (8:1-2)

The valley of dry bones is the fulfilled consequences of sin.

They represent hopelessness. Ezekiel 37:11 says. “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.” The dry bones represent their inward state – spiritual death. The scattered skeletons symbolize the disunity, despair, and disconnected people of God as a result of the exile.

The Israelites had once lived with great hope and the promise of a bright future. “God had drawn them close to himself... But like the prodigal son they squandered and wasted the father’s goods.” And so were cut off. This “abandonment was more than a passive act of God leaving his people to their own devices; in Ezekiel 10, God’s glory is even depicted as leaving the temple altogether. This was devastating for Israel. Without their life-giving source, they withered away completely, like a severed tree branch.

Furthermore, the bones are *dry*. These are not dead bodies, recently slain. Their extreme dryness means the “people whose remains they represent have been dead for a long time.” And there is no life force left in them at all. Believing God had abandoned them in their captivity, the Israelites were experiencing a long period of devastation and despair – they had given up hope.

2. What do you find yourself or others in your profession complaining will never change? What area(s) of work seems hopeless? Identify a few pain points of your work/workplace.

Second Day:

In our culture today, we expect a lot from work. We expect our work to provide a deep sense of fulfillment – we want our work to give us security, value, and identity. But we are placing a weight upon our work that it was never meant to carry and assigning to it a value that it was never meant to sustain. If we expect our work to always bring us deep satisfaction, we will experience great disappointment when we encounter the inevitable frustrations of work.

- 1. Considering the text we just studied, is there a difference between complaining vs seeing and naming the frustrations as part of the greater narrative of God at work? How do you discern this difference?**

From “Every Good Endeavor” Pages 85-87

One of the most vivid depictions of the frustration and fruitlessness of work is found in Peter Shaffer’s play ***Amadeus***. Antonio Salieri is court composer to the Hapsburg emperor, and a highly successful writer of operas. He has the power and wealth, and yet he senses the mediocrity of what he had produced. Then he meets Mozart and hears his music, and in a flash, he stands revealed to himself. He realizes that in Mozart’s music he is hearing the beauty he has aspired to create his entire life, but at the same moment, he knows that he will never be capable of producing it himself. As he looks at a written score of Mozart’s music, he feels caged, allowed to look through the bars and perceive but not participate in the glory he has hungered for. As he stares at the score, he thinks, “Displace one note and there would be diminishment. Displace one phrase, and the structure would fall... Here ... was the very voice of God! I was staring through the cage of those meticulous ink-strokes at an absolute, inimitable beauty.”

Salieri had to live with the existential frustration of work. That is despite his dedication and experience, he wasn’t as good at composing music as he wanted to be. Yet in terms of outcomes, he was professionally accomplished, achieved high status, and enjoyed financial success. Meanwhile, Mozart was a musical prodigy with abundant gifts, yet he suffered rejection and poverty.

Both Mozart and Salieri had success in some aspects of their work lives yet experienced deep frustration in others.

In light of all this, was Salieri missing his calling? Should he have taken up work further afield from composition, in the hope that he would not have been as frustrated? I think many contemporary young adults actually might have given him that advice; and they would have been wrong. Salieri was called to contribute to the world as a concert composer – in fact, he produced music that we still have today. The same may well be true of you. Just because you cannot realize your highest aspirations in work does not mean you have chosen wrongly, or are not called to your profession, or that you should spend your life looking for the perfect career that is devoid of frustration. That would be a fruitless search for anyone. You should expect to be regularly frustrated in your work even though you may be in exactly the right vocation.

2. In your own job, what are some ways you might be flexible for the overall success and harmony of your workplace?

Third Day:

As a prophet, Ezekiel's role was to spur the imagination of the Israelites to seize the hope set forth in his visions. He glimpsed into an alternative destiny, and he was called to put before people a radically different future. Our purpose as Christians today is the same. Like Ezekiel, we are called to adopt this prophetic consciousness, to imagine a different world – to envision a new reality that does not yet exist. In doing so we evoke an anticipation of the newness that God has promised and will surely give, so that we, as people of God, may begin to move towards it.

- 1. What might the Spirit be helping you see regarding the complaints discussed? “Can these dry bones live?” How might you begin to envision the Spirit breathing life into these frustrations?**

From Every Good Endeavor” pages 88-90

Because of the nature of God's creation, we need work for our happiness. And because of God's intentions for our work – to contribute to the flourishing of the world – we have glimpses of what we could accomplish. But because of the fall of the human race, our work is also profoundly frustrating, never as fruitful as we want, and often a complete failure. This is why so many people inhabit the extremes of idealism and cynicism – or even ricochet back and forth between those poles. Idealism says, “Through my work I am going to change things, make a difference, accomplish something new, bring justice to the world.” Cynicism says, “Nothing really changes. Don't get your hopes up. Do what it takes to make a living. Don't let yourself care too much. Get out of it whatever you can.”

Genesis 3, verse 18 tells us not only that “thorns and thistles” will come out of the ground but also that “you will eat the plants of the field.” Thorns and food. Work will still bear some fruit, though it will always fall short of its promise. Work will be both frustrating and fulfilling, and sometimes – just often enough – human work gives us a glimpse of the beauty and genius that might have been the routine characteristic of all our work, and what, by the grace of God, it will be again in the new heavens and new earth. Tolkien's dream and the

resulting story, “Leaf by Niggle,” are simply a depiction of this hope. Niggle imagined a beautiful tree that he never was able to produce in paint during his life, so he died weeping that his picture, the great work of his life, was not completed. No one would ever see it. And yet, when he got to the heavenly country – there was the tree! This was Tolkien’s way of saying, to us as well as to himself, that our deepest aspirations in work will come to complete fruition in God’s future. Just as Niggle’s tree survived in all its glory, people *will* hear Salieri’s music, and they will somehow taste the fruit of the project you are working on right now. There will be work in the paradise of the future just like there was in the paradise of the past, because God himself takes joy in His work. In that paradise, you will be useful in the lives of others to infinite degrees of joy and satisfaction; you will perform with all the skill you can imagine.

2. What would it look like to see your work in light of God’s abounding grace? How would your attitude change? Your actions?

Fourth Day:

Ezekiel is demoralized by what he sees in the vision. As the Spirit leads him around, he is overcome by the extent of decay, coming to an “overwhelming realization that this is the place where death holds triumph.” The destruction is personal for him; these are his fellow Israelites, and this valley represents further destruction for his people. Ezekiel’s response to God’s question: “Can these dry bones live?” is restrained and cautious. It exudes grief, mourning, and a grave understanding of the message he needs to share with God’s people.

However, Ezekiel, empowered by the Spirit, uses this opportunity to bring hope in the promises of the Lord: “And I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD” (Ezekiel 37:14). The hope we have in the renewal of work is rooted in the ability to see that the valley, a place of judgment and suffering, can become the place where God triumphs over death.

Our response should not be complaint or hopelessness, but action. God is showing us the brokenness in order to engage it – it is an opportunity. We must adopt this radically new orientation toward the dry bones of our work. In some cases, the very reasons you want to leave your job or field may be the exact reasons God is calling you to stay. Instead of running away from difficult situations, prayerfully consider how you can influence and better understand the complexities of your workplace. This doesn’t always mean that we must stay in brokenness. Sometimes God is calling us out of it, but we must be able to exercise discernment when it comes to hearing God’s voice in terms of vocational direction.

- 1. When you see brokenness or a hopeless situation at work, how do you typically respond? How might your despair reveal a deeper**

distrust of God or a rejection of the power of the gospel and the transformative work of the Spirit?

From “Every Good Endeavor” Page 153-154

People cannot make sense of anything without attaching it to a story line. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, no one mentioned the event without placing it into some kind of narrative structure. Some said, “This is the result of America’s abuse of its imperial power in the world.” Other said, “There are many evil people out there who hate us because we are a good and free country.” Depending on which story you believed, you would be associated with the antagonists or the protagonists, and your response – both emotions and actions – would be completely different.

A classic illustration of the need for stories comes from philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre in his book *After Virtue*. He asks that you imagine you are standing at a bus stop when a young man you do not know comes up to you and says, “The name of the common wild duck is *Histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus*.” Even though you understand the sentence, his action makes no sense. What does it mean? The only way to make sense of it is to try to learn the story into which the event fits. Perhaps the young man is mentally ill; that would explain it. Or what if yesterday someone of your gender, age, height, and general appearance had approached the young man in the library asking him the Latin word for the wild duck, and today he had mistaken you for that person? That would also explain it. Or perhaps the young man is a foreign spy “waiting at a prearranged rendezvous and uttering the ill-chosen code sentence which will identify him to his contact.” The first story is sad, the second is comic, and the third is dramatic. But the point is, without a handle on the story, there’s no way to understand the meaning of what happened and no way to know how to answer the man.

If you call the police when it was a simple case of mistaken identity, it will be very embarrassing. If you pick a fight with someone who is a trained assassin,

the result will be even worse! But in any case, if you get the story wrong, your response will be wrong. And if you get the story of the world wrong – if, for example, you see life here as mainly about self-actualization and self-fulfillment rather than the love of God – you will get your life responses wrong, including the way you go about your work.

2. How can you better recognize, honor and appreciate the Spirit's work at your work?

Fifth Day:

The vision of the valley of dry bones tells two stories: the frailty of humanity, and the fullness of God. In our own strength, we are limited, but with God's Spirit, even death fails to limit the manifestation of His power. What the vision teaches us is that new life depends on the power of God's Spirit and not our own. The first stage of reanimation produced corpses – flesh and bones – but it was the breath of the spirit that ultimately brought forth life.

Without the Spirit, we exist purely as flesh and blood, unable to experience the fullness of life. Ezekiel demonstrates, in his human frailty a total dependence on the power of God. The good news is that, as 2 Corinthians 12:9 tells us, God's power is made perfect in weakness. As we face the daunting call of being agents of renewal, we can be encouraged to press forward in the calling He has given knowing that it is the Spirit who empowers us and provides all that is needed to be faithful in our workplaces.

1. How might the spirit of God be giving you a new sense of mission and purpose, calling you to meditate his power in your workplace?

From “The Faith and Work Bible” Page 1393

The gospel works to change this world by leading people to experience God's glory. By the power of the Holy Spirit, God constantly works around us and, in our workplaces, to advance His kingdom. God also empowers His people with particular gifts and abilities that strengthen believers in their calling. This empowerment is not necessarily a reflection of a person's spiritual maturity or holiness as much as it is a gracious sign and pointer to the glory that is to come with Christ's return. In His second coming, all things will be renewed, and until then, God's power comes to individuals in the midst of weakness to demonstrate God's divine presence and love.

Believers experience God's empowerment so that they might be encouraged to press forward in the calling that He has given. The Holy Spirit empowers people to persevere in difficulty and provides all that is needed to be faithful in our workplaces. We have not been left to ourselves at work, but we have been clothed with power from on high (Luke 24:49).

To continue “Deeper in Truth” go to Page 1393 of the Faith and Work Bible.

- 2. Where are you responding in fear and anxiety instead of with boldness and courage? How are you shaping the world around you to be more in line with God’s loving character?**

Sixth Day:

LECTIO DIVINA

An ancient art, practiced by many Christians throughout the ages, is the technique known as *lectio divina* – a slow, contemplative praying of the Scriptures. This ancient practice has been kept alive in the Christian monastic tradition. Together with liturgy and daily manual labor, time set aside in a special way for *lectio divina* enabled the monastics to discover an underlying spiritual rhythm in their daily lives.

Within this rhythm, we discover an increasing ability to offer more of ourselves to the Father and to accept the embrace that God is continuously extending to us in His Son, Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. As you begin or return to this practice, keep the following in mind:

- Selecting a time for *lectio divina* is very important. Disciplining your schedule so that you can set aside a minimum of half an hour in the morning to do this devotion is recommended. Committing to this time is a critical part of developing a rhythm and habit of meditation on God's Word. Using the same time every day leads to a highly effective daily habit of prayer.
- Try to find a place for prayer that is free from excessive noise and distractions. This means it should be isolated from other people, phones, visual distractions, etc. If one does not have this luxury, feel free to use headphones to listen to non-distractive music (e.g. instrumental music, certain worship songs). Use the same space each day for *lectio divina* if possible, especially as one first begins to practice it. Familiarity with a location reduces the possibility of distraction away from prayer. However, one may wish to pray in an unaccustomed place, like a church building near your home or work for the purpose of finding a place that will be dedicated to prayer alone and no other daily activities.

Prayer & Preparation (5 minutes)

Prior to reading the scripture passage, it is important to engage in a transitional activity that takes one from the normal state of mind to a more contemplative and prayerful state. A few moments of deep, regular breathing

and a short prayer inviting the Holy Spirit to guide your prayer time helps to set the tone and improve the effectiveness of the lectio. *The Valley of Vision* by Arthur Bennett may be a helpful resource. You may consider beginning each devotional time with a prayer from this Puritan book.

THE FOUR MOMENTS

1. *Lectio* – Reading (5 minutes)

This first moment consists in reading the scriptural passage slowly and attentively three times. Reading in lectio divina is very different from the speed-reading which many modern Christians apply to newspapers, books, and often to the Bible. Lectio is reverential listening – listening both in a spirit of silence and of awe. We are listening for the still, small voice of God that will speak to us personally – not loudly, but intimately. In lectio, we read slowly, attentively, gently, listening to hear a word or phrase that is God’s word for us this day. The third time you read, underline words, phrases, or verses in the Scripture that stand out to you or grip your attention.

2. *Meditatio* – Meditation (7 minutes)

In the second moment, we will take the underlined words or phrases and meditate upon them. Repeat these phrases to yourself a few times slowly, perhaps even memorizing them. As you repeat this word or phrase, allow it to interact with your thoughts, your hopes, your anxieties, your desires, your fears, your joys.

Through meditation, we allow God’s Word to become His word for us, a word that touches us and affects us at our deepest spiritual levels.

Remember that God is present in His Word and through the Holy Spirit as He imparts spiritual understanding of the sacred text – or illumination. It is not a special revelation from God, but the inward working of the Holy Spirit, which enables the Christian to grasp the revelation contained in Scripture. At the end of this time of meditation, feel free to write particular things that come to mind that you want to remember throughout the day.

3. *Oratio* – Prayer (7 minutes)

After meditation, pray through the things that come to mind, whether they be prayers of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, or supplication. This is a response to the passage by opening your heart in dialogue with God. It is not simply an intellectual exercise, but a Spirit-led conversation with God to pray for the things that are upon His very heart.

4. *Contemplatio* – Contemplation (5 minutes)

This final movement is characterized by a simple, loving focus on God in stillness and silence. Affirm God's presence in your life and consider this marvelous God who has called you. This is a beautiful, wordless communion with and contemplation of God – a rest to simply enjoy the experience of being in His presence. “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10).

Psalm 43

¹Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people, from the deceitful and unjust man deliver me!

²For you are the God in whom I take refuge; why have you rejected me? Why do I go about mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?

³Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling!

⁴Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God.

⁵Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.

