

This book helps you view your calling as ongoing and dynamic. God has ordained six seasons as your life unfolds: childhood, adolescence, early career, mid-career, late career, and transition. Instead of wandering aimlessly through life, let the six seasons of calling provide structure for the life God has for you.

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# DYNAMIC CALLING

It took God six days to make the world. Six, somehow distinct, passages of time. Getting caught up in the duration of those “days” seems less wondrous to me than the underlying implication: it took more than one. There is something profoundly important about this first lesson from God as Creator and crafts-person. Creation is a process.

He took His time.

In those opening words, we also learn that He made us in His image. Male and female He created us, presumably to create as well. Perhaps part of what it means to be created in the image of God is that we too are given six metaphorical days to create something good, complex, and beautiful—to enter into our rest, surveying all that we have done and being able to say. . . it was good.

Surely we can agree our lives are also the culmination of a process. In some strange partnership, it seems our lives are both the product of our own creative freedom and His ongoing creative impetus. Those of us who have pledged our lives to Jesus live as a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17), “created in Christ Jesus to do

good works” (Eph. 2:10). We are given our own span of Six Days to create and be re-created. Our individual lives stand as potential works of art, changing and growing into His likeness. But we too are makers. Our lives can do work, as He did, creating something that was not there before. Then, when we finally rest from all our labor, that work will be left behind as a legacy gift to those who would come after us.

## LIFE AS PROCESS

Your life is a process. You are not what you once were and you are not what you will yet become. These two truths are the basis for Christian hope. God is still at work, creating us and creating through us. The New Testament offers us the beautiful idea and often invisible work of sanctification; that ever-present contact with the living presence of God. In our time, we have taken to calling it growth, which is also a nice way of saying it. But the more ancient idea of sanctification, to make something holy, gives more modern words like growth and development needed dimension. We are meant to grow and develop. But why? For what purpose? “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom. 8:29).

Missiologically, this means God wants people set loose in the world who think, act, and feel like His Son. We are sent by God to represent Jesus, but we are works in progress in reflecting Him. So, we are changed (sanctified) to better reveal Him. But developmentally, we are also being prepared for eternity. That is, we are being remade for union too. Because this kind of growth is

often painful, it helps to see it as preparation for something. And it hurts a bit less when we realize it is the loving presence of God at work in us, reshaping and redeeming the pain of our lives to reveal His Son and prepare us for eternity. However you analyze it, we have all been given our own span of days to create, to make something with our lives. But we are also being made into something through the process of living. God is always there, using us, yes, but also recreating and making us as we go.

## LIFE AS LONGING

I am convinced that the two greatest longings of the human heart are for intimacy and purpose. We all (whether we admit it or not) need to be known, wanted, and loved. This is only possible in relationship with something or someone outside of ourselves. Let's call that the longing for *intimacy*. Simultaneously, we all need to believe we matter, that our lives are significant in some way, not useless, futile, or inconsequential. Let's call that a longing for *purpose*. Elegantly, the truest satisfaction of those two longings are found in the same place. Calling.

Calling implies two corresponding realities. First, there is someone who calls. And what can you know about that One who calls? The God who calls you is also the One who created you. The God who calls you also called His Son to die for you. In other words, the One who calls you has twice loved you, in both creation and sacrifice. His longing is for you, and so He calls. When I call for one of my kids, it means I want them to come to me. It is deeply relational. It means, of course, I know them by name. But

it also means I want them. Think about that. To be known and wanted is implicit in hearing any call from God. Further, calling means that drawing near is not just something you initiate. He initiates with you. Calling implies the deepest possible intimacy with the greatest possible person.

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Second, calling implies that there is something He wants you to do. Only you. Significance and purpose, then, offer a secondary implication of calling. We like the idea of “knowing our calling” because we want to know what to do with our lives. We want to be good at something; we wonder what will bring us the greatest job satisfaction or personal fulfillment. And perhaps it will, but only if it is coupled with the intimacy that is offered at first. To know and operate from a place of gifting and talent without a relationship with the One who designed and gifted you is to feel a special kind of emptiness. An emptiness that comes from being so close to something, to sense it is near, but never close enough to touch or hold. Purpose then, is something connected to *His* will and wishes in the world. God is still at work, through His people, announcing and ushering in His kingdom; and to be a part of that in any way is its own reward. Conversely, to be good at something—to walk skillfully through the world while divorcing that ability from the ultimate purposes of God—is to fall just short of a full life.<sup>1</sup>

It is therefore impossible to live into the fullness of your purpose—to flourish through the developmental Days of your life—without intimacy with your Father and without clarity on the part

you are meant to play in His purposes. If you hope to see your life reach its full potential, you must draw close to the One who designed you and sends you into the world He loves. We all have a part yet to play in the coming of His kingdom. Just as finding intimacy in the face of Jesus is the greatest possible intimacy, so finding purpose in the mission of Jesus is the greatest possible purpose.

## **STATIC AND DYNAMIC CALLING**

One problem we must then confront has to do with the nature of our calling. Is it something that happens only once in our lives? Whether conscious or not, we often think about calling as something static and unchanging. Thinking about calling in this way, as a singular event, not only weighs it down with tremendous anxiety (as in I had better get it right), but it causes us to procrastinate coming to a conclusion. In the early years of our weekend calling experience, which we named the Calling Lab, I used to think that someone could just lock themselves away in the place of prayer and hear God tell them what they were called to. We learned quickly that it was never quite so simple. While people can and do hear God in the place of prayer, what they hear is rarely as specific as we imagined it would be. Further, as we walked with the same people through the years, we began to see that those nudges from God, when they did come, were often only true for a time. They would often evolve through the complexity of the lives of people who heard them. For instance, a young woman might hear a call to advocacy for children, which at first takes the form of

systemic action, but then evolves into something more localized once she has kids of her own. Calling in that way is adaptive and responsive to the major changes of our lives.

I was a hyperactive child. I had trouble sitting still and found the ever-present class directive to listen in silence pretty close to impossible. Coupled with my authority issues, I was often in trouble and my grades were poor. School simply was not a place I ever did well. This might be why I can remember so vividly the first time I was praised by a teacher. It was fifth grade and we were asked to give a speech about someone from history. I am not sure why, but I chose Julius Caesar. I fashioned a makeshift bedsheet toga, slid on my mother's sandals, and took my place at the front of the class.

When I had finished, I can still remember the long, shocked pause from my teacher as she searched for what to say. She settled on some version of the sentiment, "Well, now, Brian, that was actually not bad." No one was more surprised than I was. It was not just the rarified air of affirmation that lived on in my memory, but the feeling I had just before her assessment. The feeling of *knowing* that I had done well, even before she said anything. That feeling of finding something that for others is hard but for you is easy. This is not just a clue to calling; it is evidence of the work of God in us. You see, we are desperate sinners, corrupting as much as we nurture. We are all deeply selfish and even dangerous in the right (or wrong) conditions. So, to find something that you can do that is not like that, that is somehow good for the world, that somehow reflects back to the grace (*charis*/gift) of God at work in the world through you, is truly magical.



There was a clue, even then, to my calling. Though I could not recognize it yet, I was hearing the voice of God. Still, I was not ultimately called to give historical speeches to ten-year-olds. This was only a clue. But an important clue. If we think about calling as something static, as something one-dimensional, we miss the way it is meant to grow and change with us. If what we do is one dimension, then how we do it changes over the second dimension of time.

In other words, we have to think about calling as something that interacts and intersects with our life-long development. We are always changing. The circumstances of our lives are always changing. The quality of our character, our skill, wisdom, and maturity changes the way in which we execute our calling. In short, calling is something that is meant to grow and change with us. Calling is dynamic.

## CALLING OVER TIME

The first revelation for me was that we are all called. Not just some of us, all of us. The second revelation was that our calling is not something that happens to us once. It is something that changes with the changes of our lives. But the third revelation is just as significant: *calling is something that changes but also lasts*. I contend that your calling will materially change about six times over the course of your life. But whether you agree fully with my proposal or not, calling is not a single event, and it is likewise not something that should be revisited every year.

Again, it is important to remember that calling is not a

disembodied or impersonal idea. It is fundamentally relational. In other words, calling is dynamic because God is dynamic and your relationship with God is dynamic. But calling also requires fidelity to a course of action, because God gives us assignments that require persevering obedience. I am convinced that God does want to give us the experience of what Friedrich Nietzsche called “a long obedience in the same direction,”<sup>2</sup> while continually calling us back to Himself. How then can we know when enough time has passed and our calling might be changing?

## THE CALLING CYCLE

The search for calling usually begins with a crisis. That crisis could be big or small. It could be something external or something internal, and it could be something good or something bad. It could be something that we do to ourselves, such as failing or succeeding; or it could be something that happens to us, like a loss or an opportunity. But behind the cause lies the true crisis, which is one of identity. The college freshman who has to pick a major; the college graduate who no longer has school to define their existence; the young careerist who has just lost their first job or been promoted to a better one; the parents who are sending their last child off to college; or the husband who is burying his wife. All of these people are sharing, not one experience, but an inception of the same crisis of identity. Who am I now? Who am I if I am not a student? An employee? A parent of kids at home? A spouse?

It is in this crisis of identity that we are tempted by fear and despair, but also driven into the presence of God. I cannot say

how many times something like this will happen in your life, but it will happen. And it will happen more than once. Again, I am making the case that for most of us, it will happen about six times. And that is normal, healthy, and to be expected. As a follower of Jesus, these moments of identity crisis can and should become the catalyst for a renewal, not so much of our current calling, but of our relationship with the Father.

The beautiful and painful question “Who am I now?” not only seeks an answer, it seeks an answerer. Perhaps what we need most is to know

that there is someone who can (and has always been able to) answer it. So, the identity crisis is meant to drive us into intimacy with Jesus, to seek His face, and to find there, not just the answer to our questions, but the One who defines all that we are.

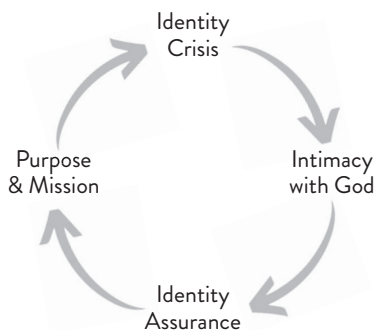
The identity crisis drives us to intimacy and prayer. And it is in the place of prayer, Scripture reading, listening, and hearing His still, small voice, that we come again back to ourselves. We hear again His words over us, “You are . . .” Often, that word is very much a renewal of something He has said to us before, reviving our previous sense of calling and pushing us back into the same fight, the same work, and the same hope. Still, there is always something new that is conferred. Even if that new thing is simply deeper conviction. From identity comes purpose: “You are . . .” therefore, “Go and do . . .” Almost certainly this is where we will experience real change in the contours of our calling. Perhaps the change is subtle, but it could very likely be something big. And

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so we venture out again, in faith, into that work He has called us to do. From my perspective, that too, will last about twelve years. And then we will find ourselves again, bored, ineffective, limited, or facing some truly new situation that will begin the cycle again.

### The Calling Cycle



You can see why experiencing this every month or even every year would not only be destabilizing, but it would not allow us to accomplish much with our lives. You can also see how going through this cycle only once or even twice in our lives would not really reflect the bigger changes and challenges we each must face. So it is that we will all search and find our calling several times in our lives.

## CALLING AS CULMINATION

Over the Six Days of our lives, calling will look different because in each Day the demands of growth and development are different. Each of our callings are unique, but the process of being called and responding to that dynamic calling is remarkably similar. Before you can be a professional athlete, you must first

learn the fundamentals, learn your own strengths and weaknesses compared to other players, build a body of experience, and practice until you achieve mastery. So too with your own life. You are growing for a purpose. Every failure, every mistake, every hard fought lesson, and every apparent success has value if it is integrated and repurposed for something greater.

Of course we are playing all of these roles throughout the stages of our lives, but having a sense of what is first or essential can relieve some of the anxiety as we search for meaning and identity. This is hard because just as you get the hang of living in a certain Day, things seem to change. What worked for you (and was often hard to settle into) becomes foreign or just off in the new Day. Calling changes, because we change. Remember my Julius Caesar moment? God might have been calling me to be a ministry leader, but He wasn't calling me to be one while I was in fifth grade. Still, because of that call, He first called me to lead through communication, something that would be developed in me even when I was not living for Him.

So, while we change and the context of our lives changes, there is often a thread of focus that stays with us. Is this what we mean when we say words like vocation and calling? I think so. But you may not be able to see it fully until it is behind you. You must then live in the fullness of the Day you are in. In time, a bigger picture may well emerge.

I offer six stages because I am convinced that the “just right” Goldilocks principle applies to the twelve-year period. It is just long enough to really live into a calling but not so long that we lose our zeal or contextual relevance. I am also convinced of the

markers I will share, the transition points in our development that occur right around these increments of twelve. This template has been confirmed for me time and again in the lives of the people who have come to us trying to discern their calling. Still, no developmental map like this can fit every life, and each person's journey is unique. In the next section we will take these six seasons one at a time, unpacking the dynamics of calling and growth and the forces that keep us from both. Try to locate your own story, but also to notice the ways that your story might deviate from the pattern. Both discoveries can become raw material for your own self-discovery and ultimately for hearing God speaking to you about your past, your present, and your future.

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