



**THE CALLING OF
FAITH & WORK**

A SIX-WEEK BIBLE STUDY

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LEADERS GUIDE

WEEK 1

The Origins of Calling



For this lesson, read the introduction and scripture aloud as a group; then lead the group through the following five discussion questions, which look at Genesis 1 in-depth. Wrap up your time together with the Hope Exercise, and encourage one another to consider the homework questions as you go about the rest of your workweek.

(Note: The homework assignments can be done with or without the *NIV Faith & Work Bible*, depending on if your group would prefer additional reading material to supplement their learning.)

OVERVIEW OF THE LESSON

- Introduction
- Scripture: Genesis 1
- Discussion
- Hope Exercise
- Homework

INTRODUCTION

Do we live to work or work to live?

What good does work bring to our lives?

Is work purely a means to an end, or does it carry intrinsic value and purpose?

To answer these important questions, we must determine the meaning of work and its connection to the larger Biblical notion of *calling*. This study begins with Creation. As we'll see, Genesis 1 sets forth that calling is first

WEEK 1 LEADERS GUIDE

about knowing the Caller, not the call itself. Calling is not a job description or a gut feeling; it goes beyond occupation and integrates what we do (our purpose) with who we are (our identity).

In this passage, we are introduced to a God who declares purpose and identity over his creation—a God who, at the pinnacle moment of creation, forms humanity in his image. What this means is that he entrusts them to *continue* the work of creation; their calling is to be like their Creator.

Keep this emphasis in mind as you read the following passage.

SCRIPTURE: GENESIS 1

¹In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ²The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

³And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

⁶And God said, “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” ⁷And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. ⁸And God called the expanse Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

⁹And God said, “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. ¹⁰God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

¹¹And God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and

fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth.” And it was so. ¹²The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ¹³And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

¹⁴And God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, ¹⁵and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. ¹⁶And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ¹⁷And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, ¹⁸to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

²⁰And God said, “Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens.” ²¹So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ²²And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” ²³And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

²⁴And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.” And it was so. ²⁵And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the livestock according to their kinds, and everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

²⁷So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

²⁸And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” ²⁹And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. ³⁰And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. ³¹And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. WHAT DOES THIS TEXT REVEAL ABOUT THE NATURE AND CHARACTER OF GOD?

God’s voice/call has life-giving power.

God creates the universe and all that is in it through his Word. Each of the six days of creation in Genesis 1 begin with, “And God said.” Psalm 33:6 and 9 tells us, “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made... For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.” It is the direct speech of God that brings about every created thing; his Word “puts light in the midst of darkness, land in the midst of sea, air in the midst of water.”² More than this, the breath of God imbues a living spirit into Adam’s lifeless body. The voice of God, therefore, has a creative, life-giving power that brings structure and form to the earth.

But God not only spoke the world into being (Heb. 11:3, 2 Pet. 3:5), he also continues to speak directly to us in a way that is consistent with Genesis 1: God’s words to us bring structure and flourishing; without them, we feel lost and chaotic. The same power that created the entire universe, that

commanded Adam and Eve to live in the earth and steward all he had made, that voice still speaks order and direction into our broken world.

God is Creator; he is a working God.

The creation narrative in Genesis 1 presents us with a God who works. Genesis 2 continues to describe God at work as well; he sculpts human bodies from dust (Gen. 2:7, 21), he plants a magnificent garden (Gen. 2:8), and he cultivates an orchard of all kinds of beautiful and edible trees (Gen. 2:9). Speaking may seem outside the accepted definition of “real” work, but God’s labor is much broader than we could ever imagine. Yes, God is Creator, but he is also “sustainer, preserver, provider, revealer, and lawgiver—to mention only a few of his many other occupational hats.”³ God not only works, but he does so in a multitude of ways.

God creates to make his glory known.

“The entire creation is intended to show God’s glory,” says Wayne Grudem.⁴ God was complete in himself before he created the universe; he did not need nor does he depend on humans or the moon or infinite stars in order to *have* glory. Creation was a totally free act determined by his sovereign will. Nonetheless, his aim in and above all is to display his majesty, and he created the universe to exhibit his glory.

We exist to know and glorify God, but we cannot see or feel him with our bodily senses. We understand and experience him—his omniscience, goodness, omnipotence, righteousness, love, etc.—through what he creates. Paul writes in Romans 1:20: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made” (NIV). God creates to be glorified, and his glory is seen through what he makes.

2. WHAT IS OUR ROLE IN THE WORLD? FROM WHERE SHOULD OUR SENSE OF IDENTITY COME?

We are created in the image of God (*imago dei*).

In Genesis 1:26, God says, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” This means we have been given the unique and “unfathomable honor of

bearing the image of God,”⁵ or, as it is referred to in the Latin phrase, *imago dei*. Though “all creation displays God’s design, power, and goodness, only human beings are said to be made in God’s image,”⁶ making us the “head and crown of the entire creation.”⁷

The specific characteristic in humans which primarily displays the image of God has been a matter of debate among theologians for millennium. Whether bearing God’s image relates to the intellectual and moral faculties of the soul, our dominion over the rest of creation, or our immortality and holiness, we may never definitively conclude this side of heaven.⁸ For our purposes here, though, it is enough to affirm that humans are given the high calling of reflecting his character and representing him in the world.⁹

We are mandated to rule as vice-regents.

As God’s image-bearers, we have been given dominion to serve as his vice-regents on the earth. To be a vice-regent is to represent a king in his absence and implement lordship according to his purposes, rather than one’s own. We are to represent our King by carrying on the work of creation: to “be fruitful and multiply” and to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28). We are to rule over it *in God’s stead* and make the purposes of his Kingdom known.¹⁰

Fulfilling this call is twofold. First, we are to fill the earth, which includes more than having children; it is to continue God’s multifaceted work of *filling*. We have the responsibility, power, and capacity to generate all kinds of living things, to “develop the full potentialities of the earth, and bring forth its fruits more abundantly,”¹¹ including to create art, culture, games, governments, communities, families, etc.

Second, as we fill the earth, we are called to subdue or bring structure to our culture and environment, and by doing so, create the context for flourishing. For instance, Keller tells us that “farming takes the physical material of soil and seed and produces food. Music takes the physics of sound and rearranges it into something beautiful and thrilling... When we take fabric and make a piece of clothing, when we push a broom and clean up a room, when we use technology to harness the forces of electricity... we are continuing God’s work of forming, filling, and subduing.”¹² We, as humans, because of

our creative capacities, have the incredible opportunity to be co-creators, or “junior partners in the work of bringing his creation to fulfillment.”¹³

We are created to work.

Genesis 2:15 tells us that God placed humans in the garden to “work it and keep it.” This means that work was part of God’s original intent for creation. It is not a curse or result of the Fall—it is what we were made to do.¹⁴ As we’ve seen, God is a creative, working God. Because we are made in his image, work is intrinsic to our human nature and is thus a reflection of our divine image. Just as God created the universe, its laws, and all that dwells within it out of *nothing*, we have been endowed with a great capacity to take the raw materials presented to us and establish structure and order in the form of human culture and civilization. Whatever form our work takes, whether performing surgery, preaching from a pulpit, or sweeping streets, we are reflecting God’s nature by bringing harmony from chaos and creating meaning from emptiness.

3. HOW DOES THIS TEXT AFFECT THE WAY YOU SEE WORK AND CALLING?

Calling is first and foremost about the Caller, not the calling.

Often when approaching questions of calling, we bypass the most important aspect of discerning calling, which is a growing and intimate relationship with the Caller. Knowing the content of our calling without knowing the one who calls is ultimately hollow. Because of Christ we now have intimate access to our Shepherd who calls us by name.

When we contemplate the question: What am I supposed to do with my life? The first question is not so much: “What is that thing I’m supposed to do,” but rather, “Do I hear the person who actually calls me?”

Work is the expression of our identity, not the source of it.

A healthy perception of work and identity is critical to recognizing and living out the call on our lives: bringing God glory. If we do not have a right understanding of these, we fail to connect with our Creator. He formed us to work, but with the purpose of bringing us closer to him.

When Adam and Eve sinned, humanity's intimacy with God was severed, and we no longer had unrestricted access to the source of our identity. We are hardwired to find our identity outside of ourselves (in God), but because of this separation we look to our work for a sense of worth, security, comfort, this unbalanced reliance on work leads to all manner of discouragement, discontentment, disillusionment, and disengagement.

The gospel invites us to take these areas of brokenness and redirect them to the cross. Our identity is in Christ, we express this relationship by reflecting God's creative, working nature, and we trust in the hope that our peace does not depend on the broken structures of this world.

4. IN WHAT WAYS ARE YOU DISCOURAGED, DISCONTENT, OR DISENGAGED AT WORK?

Allow the group to share their personal reflections on the brokenness they see in areas of their work. This will set the groundwork for deeper reflection through the Hope Exercise.

5. HOW DOES THE GOSPEL ADDRESS AND REDEEM YOUR ATTITUDE AND CIRCUMSTANCES?

Answers will vary depending on the work environments of those in your group. As the leader, try to connect specific areas of brokenness you heard back to the implications that were laid out in question 3.

HOPE EXERCISE

This short exercise is designed to help you take areas of your work that cause you anxiety, trouble, and/or burden, and to consider how, through the gospel, God might be using these very issues to bring renewal to you and your work. (The entire exercise should take around 15 minutes. There are time

suggestions for each section to indicate how long to spend on each question.)

1. What one work-related task/project/issue drains, burdens, or troubles you? (2 min)

2. As you consider your answers to the previous question, read/listen to Psalm 42. (5 min)

Psalm 42

¹As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.

²My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? ³My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, “Where is your God?”

⁴These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:

how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival.

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 ⁶and my God.

My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.

⁷Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me.

⁸By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.

⁹I say to God, my rock: “Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?”

¹⁰As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me all the day long, “Where is your God?”

¹¹Why 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.

3. As the Psalmist faces various difficulties and challenges, he asks himself the important question: “Why are you cast down, O my soul?” When you think of your struggles at work, why do these issues trouble you? What is it that you want from this situation that is disappointing you? Where are you putting your hope? (3 min)

4. What would it look like to trust that God knows about this issue and is taking care of you? How could having hope in this situation expand your vision of what God is doing in your life, in the lives of your coworkers, and in the church? (3 min)

(Additional optional questions for the group if needed: As you consider these questions, can you think of a time when you have experienced our Savior’s love and grace? As you consider God’s faithfulness in your past, how can this confidence in God continue in this context?)

5. In light of this hope placed in the gospel, consider three actions you could take that would reflect a dependence upon God and his grace towards you. Make this your prayer. (2 min)

(Additional optional questions for the group if needed: Our accomplishments and successes are shaped more by God’s grace than our hard work or intelligence. In light of this, how does this affect your confidence in your work?)

HOMEWORK

The following two sections have reflection questions for your group to consider throughout the workweek. The first section does not require further reading or material. For the second section, use the *NIV Faith and Work Bible* as further reading material. Your group can decide which version of the homework they prefer to do.

- **Monday:** As you look back on the past week, would you say your work was more of an expression of your identity as a child of God, more as the source of your identity? Were you confident in the security of the gospel, or did you find yourself responding to challenges with fear, anxiety, and frustration?
- **Tuesday:** God calls us to reign (steward) over this world, which includes our work. In what ways is your work ruling you instead of you ruling your work? Do you exercise the power that God has conferred to you as a creation made in his image and wield this power in his likeness?
- **Wednesday:** How are you cultivating and filling this world through your work? How are you interacting with raw materials and resources to bring about greater flourishing around you (in both material and human)?
- **Thursday:** How do you demonstrate creative capacity in your work? How can you think more creatively about the work you've been given?
- **Friday:** What aspect of your work do you have to subdue? What poses a threat to the flourishing of your work, and how can you actively pray for these challenging elements of your workplace that keep you and others from thriving?

OPTIONAL HOMEWORK

This daily homework is optional and will require the *NIV Faith and Work Bible*. These readings will reinforce the teaching of each week's bible study. For the following days, read the "Deeper in Truth" and "Deeper at Work" sections and reflect on the questions below.

- **Monday:** God - Creator (Genesis 1:1)
 - How does seeing yourself as God's image bearer shape the way you think about work?

- o Do you tend to find the source of your identity in your work, or do you see your work as an expression of your identity?
- **Tuesday:** Humanity - Cultural Mandate (Genesis 1:28)
 - o How does your work bring order and flourishing to your company or community?
 - o How does your work contribute to the common good, the well-being of others, and the improvement of the world?
- **Wednesday:** Humanity - The Fall (Genesis 3:6)
 - o How might your sin affect your coworkers and even the quality of your work?
 - o In what ways do you see Christ's redemption in your work, despite the frustrations you experience as a result of the fall?
- **Thursday:** Humanity - Image of God (Genesis 9:6)
 - o When you think of your coworkers, do you see them as people created in God's divine image—worthy of dignity and value? Or do you see them as merely a means to your own personal gain, maybe even sometimes treating them as sub-human?
 - o How does the truth of the gospel and the grace of God help you better represent God to those with whom you interact each day?
- **Friday:** Humanity - Sabbath (Leviticus 23:3)
 - o How are you practicing Sabbath as part of your regular work rhythms? If you aren't practicing it, what are some ways you might begin to incorporate this practice into your life?

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001).

² Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 60.

³ Raymond Bystrom, "God as Worker: How It Affects Life and Ministry," *Direction* 32 (2003).

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith*, 130.

⁵ David Kim, *NIV Faith and Work Bible*, 19.

⁶ Andrew Schmutzer and Alice Mathews, "Genesis 1-11 and Work," *Theology of Work Project*, 2013, <https://www.theologyofwork.org/old-testament/genesis-1-11-and-work>

⁷ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 223.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁹ Kim, 19.

¹⁰ Greg Gilbert (*What Is the Gospel?* [Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2010], 87-88, 96) further explains:

"Of course it's true that not one square inch of the universe, not one single person is independent of God's rule or somehow outside his authority. He created all, he rules over all, and he will judge all. But when the Bible uses the phrase 'kingdom of God,' it usually refers very specifically to God's rule over his own people, over those who have been saved through Christ. Thus Paul talks about Christians being transferred from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of Christ (Col. 1:12-13), and he is very careful to point out that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9). The kingdom of God, then, simply defined, is God's redemptive rule, reign, and authority over those redeemed by Jesus... The way to be included in Christ's kingdom is to come to the King, not just hailing him as a great example who shows us a better way to live, but humbly trusting him as the crucified and risen Lord who alone can release you from the sentence of death. At the end of the day, the only way into the kingdom is through the blood of the King."

¹¹ Gary North, "The Cultural Mandate" *Biblical Economics Today*, 2 (1979/1980)

¹² Timothy Keller, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 59.

¹³ Andrew Schmutzer and Alice Mathews, "Genesis 1-11 and Work," *Theology of Work Project*, 2013, <https://www.theologyofwork.org/old-testament/genesis-1-11-and-work>

¹⁴ Keller, 38.

WEEK 2

The Hope of Calling



For this lesson, read the introduction and scripture aloud as a group; then lead the group through the following four discussion questions, which look at Ezekiel 37 in-depth. After the lesson, share as a group and end with a time of prayer together. Encourage one another to consider the homework questions as you go about the rest of your workweek.

This week's homework also includes the *Lectio Divina* appendix as an optional addition to the homework. This reflective exercise will help your group use Scripture as a means of hearing from God, specifically to discern the implications and function of calling.

(Note: The homework assignments can be done with or without the *NIV Faith & Work Bible*, depending on if your group would prefer additional reading material to supplement their learning.)

OVERVIEW OF THE LESSON

- Introduction
- Scripture: Ezekiel 37
- Discussion
- Group Prayer
- Homework
- Appendix: Lectio Divina

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 feel frustrated, out of control, or hopeless.

SCRIPTURE: EZEKIEL 37

¹The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in 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.’ ¹²Therefore 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?

They represent death.

The striking imagery of a valley filled with dry, scattered bones is first a literal and physical presentation of death (Ezekiel 37:2). 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.² God made sure to impress upon Ezekiel that this was not “simply a symbol of death, but death in all its fullness.”³

This vision also would have put Ezekiel in mind of Israel’s then-current state of Babylonian exile.⁴ King Nebuchadnezzar II had besieged Jerusalem, destroying the temple and slaughtering thousands. As a nation, Israel was all too familiar with death—as a unique people group, they were essentially wiped out of existence.⁵ They had lost their king, their land, and their temple, rendering them physically and spiritually dead. The dry bones in the valley before Ezekiel do not represent those killed by Babylon, however. The prophet identifies “the dead bones [as] his living contemporaries.”⁶

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 against.

- 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” (28:25-26).
- Later in Jeremiah, the coming punishment gets very specific: “... the bones of the kings 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.⁷ “God had drawn them close to himself... But like the prodigal son they squandered and wasted the father’s goods,”⁸ 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,”⁹ and there is no life force left in them at all.¹⁰ 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 DOES THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD DO IN THIS TEXT? HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO THE SPIRIT’S ROLE IN OUR LIVES TODAY?

The Spirit leads us to see brokenness and despair.

It is the Spirit who leads Ezekiel throughout the vision, pointing him to the brokenness and despair of the valley. The Spirit doesn’t just *bring* Ezekiel to the bones, he leads him “back and forth among them” (Ezekiel 37:2). There is very real sense in which God is obliging Ezekiel to take a long, hard look at the death and brokenness—to notice the bones, their number, and recognize the wretchedness of their condition.¹¹

The Spirit empowers us.

The Spirit not only leads us to see brokenness, but he also empowers us to enter those broken situations as agents of renewal. Ezekiel no doubt felt overwhelmed by the death and despair laid before him, and when God asks him, “Can these bones live?” his response is restrained and cautious: “you alone know” (NIV). But the Spirit leads Ezekiel into positions that overwhelm him, and in each he learns to rely on the power of the Spirit. There are two previous instances worth noting:

- “...There the hand of the LORD was on him... Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking. He said to me, “Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you.” As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me” (Ezek. 1:3, 28—2:1-2 NIV).
- “The hand of the LORD was on me there, and he said to me, ‘Get up and go out to the plain, and there I will speak to you.’ So I got up and went out to the plain. And the glory of the LORD was standing there, like the glory I had seen by the Kebar River, and I fell facedown. Then the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet. He spoke to me...”

When Ezekiel confronts and encounters God, he continually finds himself face down on the ground. He is overwhelmed, and in both cases you hear, “the hand of the LORD was on me, and then the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet.” This is precisely what happens in the vision of the dry bones; in that moment of utter despair, the Spirit of God once again comes upon him, brings him to his feet, and empowers him to prophesy to the bones. The same is true for us when we are confronted by circumstances that bring us to our knees.

The Spirit brings forth new life.

The Spirit of the Lord bolsters Ezekiel’s broken spirit, and he even reverses death, bringing life to dry bones. This process happens in two distinct stages. First, “the bones came together, bone to its bone,” and “there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them” (Ezekiel 37:7-10). Then, God said to him, “Prophecy to the breath... and say to the breath... Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live” (37:9). Ezekiel prophesies and calls the breath to enter; the Spirit completely re-animates the newly reconstituted corpses.

This echoes the two-stage process of *forming* and *filling* in the creation narrative of Genesis. It is a “reenactment of the primal act of creation, when God formed humanity from the dust of the ground and breathed into its nostrils the breath of life.”¹² The same pattern of forming, filling, and flourishing in creation is evident here in the work of re-animation, and it is the breath of the Spirit that ultimately brings forth life (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:10; 4:24; Col. 3:9-10).¹³ As we move forward as creative beings in our work and lives, it is the Spirit that “regenerates us” and ultimately “refashions us after the image of God.”¹⁴

3. WHO IS EZEKIEL, AND WHAT IS HIS RESPONSE TO THIS EXPERIENCE?

He is a prophet.

Much of this passage focuses on speaking and proclaiming. In verses 4, 9, and 12, God specifically commands Ezekiel to prophecy, both to the dry bones and to the people of Israel. We see this man chosen and empowered by the Spirit to witness some terrible visions, and he is ultimately faithful to his calling.

Further biographical context:

Little is known about Ezekiel outside of the book that bears his name, which in Hebrew literally means, “May God strengthen him.” He was one of the major prophets in the Old Testament, and a contemporary of Jeremiah. He came from a long lineage of priests, and was functioning in that capacity prior to being deported with many other Jews to Babylon after the first of many Babylonian conquests of Jerusalem. There he resided in the Jewish settlement in Tel-abib with his wife, who died shortly after.¹⁵ Scholars believe he spent his entire prophetic career in the Babylonian diaspora,¹⁶ where he repeatedly prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem. But in the aftermath of the destruction, “his work became increasingly one of bringing hope to a despairing people and of preparing his fellow exiles to see themselves as fulfilling a central place in this hope.”¹⁷ The vision of the dry bones was this very vision of hope for the Israelites, one that assured them of an eventual return to their homeland where they would rebuild the temple. The nation of Israel would be born anew, spiritually resurrected from the grave,¹⁸ and Ezekiel’s job was to remind them of this hope.

He is overwhelmed, but he responds with faith.

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.”¹⁹ The destruction is personal for him; these are his fellow Israelites, and this valley represents further destruction for his people.²⁰ 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.²¹

He is a Christ-like mediator.

God commands Ezekiel: “Prophecy to these bones” (Ezek. 37:4). Ezekiel is not just a passive observer; he is an active participant. As Ezekiel obeys the Lord’s command to prophecy, he is “suddenly transformed from being the spokesman of human impotence into the spokesman of divine omnipotence.”²² God certainly could have done the work of proclaiming, redeeming, and restoring by himself, and sometimes we expect him to act how we want immediately. But just as we have been chosen to be co-creators and vice-regents in the cultural mandate, God is asking us to be his partners in the restoration and reconciliation of the world, and that applies to the workplace. We don’t do this alone; we do so empowered by God’s Spirit who knows this world intimately and is now at work in us to orchestrate a great work of redemption.

Furthermore, God addresses Ezekiel as “Son of Man” more than ninety times, and even though others are given this designation, Jesus is the only other figure in the Bible to whom it is given so frequently. In many ways, we can see Ezekiel as a representation of Christ, pointing toward the ultimate “Son of Man” who comes to bring ultimate redemption and restoration. Christ’s work restores humanity to its proper place as co-creators, vice-regents, and ones to rule, subdue, and steward the earth as intended.

4. WHAT IMPLICATIONS DO YOU SEE FOR YOUR WORK FROM THIS TEXT?

We can respond in hope to the brokenness we encounter at work.

It’s easy to look at a broken situation, particularly at work, and feel hopeless. We might ask, “Where is God in this?” But this passage shows us that it is in fact the Spirit who leads us to see brokenness and despair. Among the many diverse roles of the Holy Spirit, one is to lead us into God’s truth,²³ and to give us new eyes to see, through faith, that God is present amidst our despair.

Like Ezekiel, when we see brokenness and sin in our workplaces, we too can mourn, but it must be followed by a deep yearning for God’s gracious intervention and a longing to be used in his work of renewal. In situations of brokenness and mourning, we can either *complain*, or we can *trust*. The Israelites chose the former. The difference between them and Ezekiel is that

their lament had turned into despair; they had lost all hope. We must be the hope-bringers in these situations.

We must develop a Spirit-led imagination in how we view work.

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. "[P]rophetic witness is... about calling us as people of God to a radical reorientation of our worldview and consciousness so that we see and perceive the world as God sees it."²⁴

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.²⁵ 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.²⁶

We must engage with the brokenness of work.

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

We must depend upon and act in the power of the Spirit.

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.²⁷ 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, the *ruach*, 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.²⁸

GROUP PRAYER

As a group, discuss your personal experience of work through the following questions.

- 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.
- 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? What might God be at work renewing?

In groups of three, pray about these complaints, and ask to see how the Lord is at work even in these areas. Pray for wisdom and discernment to see his grace at work to bring change to these areas.

HOMEWORK

The following two sections have reflection questions for your group to consider throughout the workweek. The first section does not require further reading or material. For the second section, use the *NIV Faith and Work Bible* as further reading material. Your group can decide which version of the homework they prefer to do.

As a supplement for this and the coming weeks, consider using the *Lectio Divina* appendix to meditate on a scripture before you begin your homework reflection each day.

- **Monday:** 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.
- **Tuesday:** 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?
- **Wednesday:** 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? What might God be at work renewing and calling you to participate in?
- **Thursday:** 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?
- **Friday:** How might the Spirit of God be giving you a new sense of mission and purpose, calling you to mediate his power in your workplace?

OPTIONAL HOMEWORK

This daily homework is optional and will require the *NIV Faith and Work Bible*. These readings will reinforce the teaching of each week's bible study. For the following days, read the "Deeper in Truth" and "Deeper at Work" sections and reflect on the questions below.

- **Monday:** Humanity – Sin (Joshua 7:20-23)
 - Is someone sinning against you at work? How does it dehumanize you?
 - How might your sinning against others dehumanize them?

- **Tuesday:** Church – Cultural Engagement (1 Kings 5:1-12)
 - In your own job, what are some ways you might be flexible for the overall success and harmony of your workplace?
 - What should you not compromise on to avoid losing your distinctiveness as a Christian?

- **Wednesday:** Redemption – Faith (Job 19:25-27)
 - What would it look like to see your work in light of God's abounding grace? How would your attitude change? Your actions?
 - How does faith in Christ change the way you view the risks you are called to take in obedience to God?

- **Thursday:** Cosmic Pneumatology (Job 33:4)
 - How do you see the Spirit of God at work among your coworkers in the calling of creating and sustaining, even in the mundane and ordinary tasks?
 - How can you better recognize, honor and appreciate the Spirit's work at your work?

- **Friday:** Vice-Regents (Psalm 45:16-17)
 - How do you exercise your vice-regency in your workplace? How can you lead while also serving others?

- o 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?

APPENDIX: 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 meditating 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 min)

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 (6 min)

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 min)

In the second movement, 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 min)

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 min)

This final moment 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 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.

- ¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001).
- ² Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 171.
- ³ Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1983), 260.
- ⁴ Walter Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Reprecht, 1970), 510.
- ⁵ William Nicoll, "Commentary on Ezekiel 37:4," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, <http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/teb/ezekiel-37.html>
- ⁶ Paul M. Joyce, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2007), 209.
- ⁷ Zimmerli, 265.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Daniel Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapter 25-48* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 374.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ John Gill, "Commentary on Ezekiel 37:4," *The New John Gill Exposition of the Entire Bible*.
- ¹² Blenkinsopp, 173.
- ¹³ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Abridged in One Volume* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 478.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 495.
- ¹⁵ Blenkinsopp, 8.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 9.
- ¹⁷ Ronald E. Clements, *Ezekiel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 3.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Eichrodt, 507.
- ²⁰ Clements, 166.
- ²¹ Eichrodt, 507.
- ²² Zimmerli, 260.
- ²³ Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2011), 231.
- ²⁴ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 7.
- ²⁵ Tim Suttle, "Prophetic Imagination by Walter Brueggemann," Retrieved February 12, 2017 from Patheos: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/paperbacktheology/2007/10/prophetic-imagination-by-walter-brueggemann.html>
- ²⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 3.
- ²⁷ Eichrodt, 508.
- ²⁸ David Kim, *NIV Faith and Work Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 1393.

WEEK 3

The Context of Calling



For this lesson, read the introduction and scripture aloud as a group; then lead the group through the following six discussion questions, which look at Jeremiah 29:1-14 in-depth. After discussion, you will lead the group through the Prayer of Examen (found in the Appendix). Finally, share as a group and end with a time of prayer together. Encourage one another to consider the homework questions as you go about the rest of your workweek.

(Note: The homework assignments can be done with or without the *NIV Faith & Work Bible*, depending on if your group would prefer additional reading material to supplement their learning.)

OVERVIEW OF THE LESSON

- Introduction
- Scripture: Jeremiah 29
- Questions for Discussion
- Group Prayer
- Homework
- Appendix: Prayer of Examen

INTRODUCTION

To understand the expectations that surround and shape our calling, context is critical. The Israelite's time of exile helped them respond to what God was calling them to with the ultimate hope of Christ renewing all things. God uses exile to restore his people's sense of identity and realign them with himself.

In our own context today, we work in somewhat of an exile of our own. This requires a paradigm shift, upheaving our expectations of and for daily work. In exile, God calls us to seek the good of people and institutions who do

not seek our good. Building upon what was introduced last week: “The very reasons you want to leave your job or field may be the exact reasons God is calling you to stay.”

SCRIPTURE: JEREMIAH 29

¹These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ²This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem. ³The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan and Gemariah the son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. It said: ⁴“Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. ⁶Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. ⁸For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the LORD.

¹⁰“For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. ¹²Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. ¹³You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

WEEK 3 LEADERS GUIDE

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. HOW DO WE SEE GOD USING EXILE TO CORRECT AND RECONCILE HIS PEOPLE TO THEIR TRUE IDENTITY AND PURPOSE?

Exile is where God summons obedience through suffering.²

As painful and confusing as it may be, suffering is often the context in which the “hope of God is most powerfully and characteristically at work.”³ We are called to “glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Rom. 5:3-4 NIV). Trials and tribulations have a unique power to lead us out of ourselves and into genuine repentance and new life. God used the suffering of exile to bring Israel to their knees, removing their blindness to their own sin.

Israel recognized God was not geographically constrained.

Israel comes to understand that God’s presence is not restricted to Jerusalem, he is actually present on foreign soil and will continue to be active in their affairs, regardless of where they live.⁴ God had not forsaken his people. On the contrary, during their time of exile, God’s “faithful promises work a profound newness.”⁵ Through Jeremiah, God reminds Israel that he is present, and despite being deprived of their former institutions, their religion could still be practiced—God could still be worshipped as their true king.

Israel was reassured that their identity as God’s people remained intact, even in exile.

In the absence of traditional markers, Israel struggled to maintain its communal identity as people separate from the practices of the larger, alien culture.⁶ In exile, they were completely immersed in the culture they struggled to avoid but learned a new way of living holy and separate.⁷ They learned to be *in* but not *of* the dominant culture of Babylon. This not only functioned as a renewal of their covenant practices, but as a witness to the surrounding culture of God’s faithfulness.⁸

Israel’s sense of mission was renewed.

Exile also reminded Israel of its role in declaring the glory of God to the

world and seeking its welfare. It was a renewal of the cultural mandate to bring flourishing and prosperity to the earth as responsible stewards and vice-regents. Jeremiah 29:7 says, “But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” This is a call to radical mission: to bring redemption and transformation to the nations. The faithfulness of Israel was to bring blessing to Babylon, and through that service, its rulers would bear witness to the faithfulness and sovereignty of God.⁹ Again, God was calling them to be a light in the world. They were not meant to remove themselves entirely from foreigners, but to engage the life of the dominant culture.¹⁰

2. IN WHAT WAYS ARE WE EXILES TODAY?

We are exiles in our spiritual condition.

In Jeremiah 29:10, the prophet tells his fellow Israelites that God will bring an end to their time in captivity: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place.” His prophecy came to pass; after their time in exile, the Jews were permitted to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their city and temple. But Israel failed to feel at home, even when they had returned to their land.¹¹ Though representing a geographic restoration, returning to their homeland did not ultimately end the exile for Israel; their fuller restoration awaited in the new Jerusalem.¹²

Ever since Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden, exile has represented an existential condition in humanity: a spiritual separation from God only to be restored when we return to our heavenly home. Living in this “in-between” makes us sojourners, aliens, and strangers. As Christians, we are by nature exilic citizens of another kingdom. The early church was reminded of their status throughout the New Testament as “sojourners” and “exiles” in this world (1 Pet. 2:11; 1:1, 17), citizens of a heavenly kingdom (Phil. 3:20) and a heavenly city (Heb. 13:14).

It is our cultural condition.

In most places around the world, Christians are not readily accepted—tolerated at best, but often persecuted at worst. Even in places where there

was once a so-called “Christendom” (i.e., the West in general), the role of Christianity in public life has been slowly diminishing due to:

1. a growing affluence in the population, which has created a level of material security and comfort that leads many to abandon religion and its practices;
2. the rise of individualism and secularization, beginning with the Enlightenment (with the priority of reason) and Romanticism (with the priority of feeling and experience), which abandoned all scriptural moral authority; and
3. a shifting social context with the increase of immigration and globalization, bringing visibility and public recognition to an array of religions and philosophies.¹³

Though our contemporary cultural and political pressures may be a far cry from the iron fist of the Babylonian empire, understanding that we are “made for another world” and aliens in an “environment where the dominant values run counter to our own”¹⁴ can be enormously fruitful. In light of these twin realities of *spiritual* and *cultural* exile, the motif of exile offers a powerful interpretive framework through which to define ourselves in this particular historical moment.¹⁵

3. HOW DOES THE THEME OF EXILE SHAPE OUR UNDERSTANDING OF WORK?

It forces us to contextualize our work.

Given our status as exiles, we must, like Israel, *creatively* embody faithfulness in such a way that takes account of the dominant culture in which we find ourselves. The Babylonian captivity forced Israel to “reformulate their religion according to their new context.”¹⁶ This doesn’t mean that we should “rewrite the rules”; it simply means that remaining faithful in exile requires great discernment in knowing and understanding the culture and contextualizing the practice of holiness in this new reality—an “accommodation without compromise.”¹⁷

We live and work in a rapidly changing culture. The reality of pluralism, global markets, increasing secularization, expanding deinstitutionalization, and the growth of new technologies all culminate in a unique social, cultural, and historical moment. But the complexity of our reality in exile does not negate our calling to be faithful and holy people. We must seek a new posture toward holiness, understanding that it is an art more than it is a science. Having an adaptive and responsive theology helps us find the appropriate response to the complexities of the modern workplace.

It changes our expectations for work.

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.

Expectations are shaped by *context*; the knowledge that we are currently in exile ought to shape our expectations for work this side of eternity. If we understand the exilic context in which we work, we make space for both the limitations and hope of work.

You may find the following helpful as you discuss work expectations and ways to change them. If time does not allow, feel free to continue with Discussion Question 4.

When it comes to work, we consciously or subconsciously operate from one of two different perspectives: a *Jerusalem* perspective or an *exilic* perspective. The Jerusalem perspective refers to the golden age of the Solomonic monarchy when nations came to Jerusalem to marvel at her beauty and splendor (e.g. Queen of Sheba: 1 Kings 10). During King Solomon's reign, there was an unparalleled sense of flourishing, national identity, and security; however, within one generation, this golden age of prosperity and *shalom* led to civil war and subsequent exile for both the northern and southern kingdoms. The following chart contrasts these periods

and provides a framework for our expectations in the current cultural climate:

JERUSALEM	EXILE
dominant culture	minority culture
building a kingdom within a kingdom	seeking the prosperity of an alien kingdom
expectations of comfort & security	expectations of discomfort & insecurity
identity taken for granted	identity challenged
inward orientation	outward orientation
triumphalistic attitude towards surrounding cultures	servant attitude towards surrounding cultures

Dominant vs. Minority Culture

In Jerusalem, there was a shared allegiance to belief, practice, and culture, but exile took this power from Israel, leaving them to exist within a culture whose ideas and culture were in opposition to Israel’s own, relegating them to a minority culture. But there is great power in being a minority—the glory of the Gospel shines brightest from these groups because it’s clear that it is not the power of great people, but the power of a great God.

Building a Kingdom within a Kingdom vs. Seeking the Prosperity of an Alien Kingdom

In Jerusalem, the goal was to build a kingdom within a kingdom—an isolated haven of holiness with little spiritual impact outside its own walls. We see this played out today in churches that seek to grow the institutional church by keeping Christians within its buildings and constrained by its religious rules. But God told his people, “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf” (Jer. 29:7). Like exilic Israel, we are called to seek the flourishing of our surrounding culture by sending our members out as the scattered church. By building a kingdom within a kingdom, we create a subculture rather than cultivating influence in the broader culture.

Expectations of Comfort and Security vs. Discomfort and Insecurity

In Jerusalem, there were expectations of comfort and security. When you are part of a dominant culture, you expect your workplace to feel like home. In exile, one expects discomfort and insecurity. When we encounter brokenness in our work, instead of complaining or walking away, we accept it as a reality of our context. Even though we crave security and comfort, Jesus never promises those things; in fact, he and the New Testament writers all promise that we are going to face trials and persecution (Matt. 10:24-25; John 15:20; 16:33; Acts 14:22; 2 Tim. 3:12; 1 Pet. 4:12). An exilic mindset ultimately leads us to more joy in our work as we assume certain difficulties and challenges to be part of our earthly calling, rather than pursuing the elimination of these discomforts as our goal.

Identity taken for Granted vs. Identity Challenged

In Jerusalem, being a member of the dominant culture ensures that one's sense of identity is constantly reinforced by his or her surroundings, so much so that it is taken for granted. In exile, there is a constant awareness of being alien, and consequently, there is a continual re-envisioning of what it means to be the people of God. When your identity is taken for granted, it can slowly lose its potency and meaning. Israel eventually forgot who they were—and *whose* they were—falling into idolatry and erupting into civil war. But in the Babylonian exile, a re-imagining of Jewish identity took place, leading to a great revival among the people of God.

Inward vs. Outward Orientation

As a dominant culture, individuals enjoy the luxury of focusing inward, but this results in an almost exclusively therapeutic and self-improvement orientation. Exile, on the other hand is about calling us out of the *private* world of the church and into the *public* world. It shapes the way we spend our marginal time, engaging our neighbors and our world, rather than spending all our free time in church programs or exclusive circles. The understanding of exile is crucial for a developed sense of public engagement—seeking the common and redemptive good for those in our workplaces and our culture. We are still called to focus on inward life, but it extends beyond personal piety (without overlooking the importance of it).

Triumphalist vs. Servant Attitude

In Jerusalem, there was a triumphalist attitude towards the surrounding culture that manifested itself as pride and boasting—a belief that we “have it all together” and that others should join us if they want to be a part of what the “good” people are doing. There are hints of empire, conquest, and imperialism. But in exile, there’s a servant attitude and posture towards the surrounding culture, because as the people of God, we are called to serve those who don’t serve us. We don’t look down upon the culture with an air of arrogance; instead we adopt of posture of humility.

4. WHERE ARE YOU CURRENTLY EXPERIENCING FRUSTRATION IN YOUR WORK? WHAT PEOPLE, PROJECTS, OR RESPONSIBILITIES FEEL FRUITLESS, DISCOURAGING, OR STRIFE-LADEN?

The answers among the group will vary depending on the work environments of those in your group.

5. IN EXILE, GOD SENDS HIS PEOPLE TO AREAS OF BROKENNESS SO THAT HIS REDEMPTIVE POWER CAN BE AT WORK. AS YOU CONSIDER THESE EXPERIENCES, HOW MIGHT THE REALITY OF WORKING IN EXILE CHANGE YOUR PERSPECTIVE ON THESE ISSUES?

The answers among the group will vary depending on the work environments of those in your group. As the leader, try to draw the specific areas of dominant vs. exilic expectations that were laid out in question 3.

6. WHAT DO YOU THINK GOD WANTS TO REMIND YOU OF AS YOU CONSIDER HOW HE’S WORKING IN THE FRUSTRATIONS OF YOUR CURRENT WORK SITUATIONS?

Some implications you might lead the group to explore based on the passage:

Believe God is present.

We are prone to believe that God’s spirit is absent in exile. However, Israel’s exile was intentional and integral to God’s purposes for his people, whom

he led there. “Exile did not mean that God had abandoned Israel. Rather, exile was the place where God was at work.”¹⁸ God is sovereign over all of creation and is intricately involved in its development and unfolding through his providential guidance. “The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it” (Ps. 24:1 NIV). This means there is no workplace or industry in which God is not at work, or in which his purposes cannot be realized.

Seek flourishing.

Jeremiah’s proclamation to “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer. 29:7) was a radical paradigm shift for Israel. It is equally radical for us. Christians have approached this challenge in different ways over the course of history. In his book *To Change the World*, James Davison Hunter proposes a theology of “faithful presence” as a way to faithfully engage the dominant culture and our workplaces in today’s world—a concept he draws from Jeremiah 29 and bases on the idea of incarnation (Christ coming to earth in the form of a man). He argues that “faithful presence commits us to do what we can to create conditions in the structures of social life we inhabit that are conducive to the flourishing of all.”²⁰ Counterintuitive as it may have seemed, God was making clear to the Jews that the welfare of the Babylonian conquerors was intricately tied to their own welfare—their destinies were bound together.²¹

Christ’s incarnation into time and place is the foundation for our own faithful presence.²² Just as the Word became flesh in Jesus Christ, and just as he refused to see us as “other,” we are to model Christ’s incarnation in the world as people who pursue a theology of engagement.²³ Faithful presence is when the “Word of shalom becomes flesh in us and is enacted through us toward those with whom we live”²⁴ and work.

Be set apart in order to be a light and a witness.

Faithful presence in our workplaces and spheres of influence does not imply passive conformity to, nor blind acceptance of, the established order.²⁵ Seeking the welfare of the city through faithful presence requires “critical engagement,” not a paradigm of assimilation, revolution, or escapism.²⁶

Critical engagement in this sense is about embodying distinctiveness. Though we are called to lives of engagement, “our engaged lives must also reflect our relationship with Jesus in a way that shows us as distinct from those with whom we rub shoulders on a day-to-day basis.”²⁷ Rather than being *against* the culture, or “rejecting the beliefs and practices of others,”²⁸ Israel gave their “allegiance to something distinctive.”²⁹

But this distinctiveness must focus on a *positive* affirmation, rather than a *negative* rejection. For the Israelites, their alternative community was to “give public witness to a new way of life.”³⁰ We are not to aggressively impose ourselves on the world, but to “live in faithfulness to God and to the values of God’s kingdom, inviting others to do the same.”³¹ As God calls us as exiles to engage industries plagued with brokenness, we must do so in a manner that reflects the nature and character of God. In bringing light into dark places, God’s faithfulness is revealed through us, and the world becomes a witness to who he is. He remains committed to blessing the obedience of his people, and now that blessing is to extend through us to our enemies.³²

Be resilient.

Despite the very real pain of exile, we must come to terms with the fact that exile is our home for the time being. Jeremiah knew that Israel would be in Babylon for generations, so his counsel was to settle in for the long term: “build,” “plant,” “marry,” “have children,” etc.³³ Therefore, like Israel, we are not supposed to merely exist—we are to thrive in our new existence. We must view our own exile as an opportunity to rediscover our true identity and missional calling. The people of God can still thrive in the midst of marginalization with the hope of a faithful God who calls us into the pain of the world.

GROUP PRAYER

Lead your group through the Prayer of Examen attached in the Appendix. You may want to use a timer as you work through the different steps. Once you have finished this process, break into small groups to pray over the situations in your work where you are an exile. Ask for wisdom and discernment of how God might be using you to seek the welfare of those who do not seek yours.

HOMEWORK

The following two sections have reflection questions for your group to consider throughout the workweek. The first section does not require further reading or material. For the second section, use the *NIV Faith and Work Bible* as further reading material. Your group can decide which version of the homework they prefer to do.

As a supplement for this and the coming weeks, consider using the *Lectio Divina* appendix to meditate on a scripture before you begin your homework reflection each day.

- **Monday:** Do you feel like an exile at work? If so, what makes you feel this way?
- **Tuesday:** Think about a tough workplace situation from this past week. What expectations shape your understanding of that situation—are you operating more from Jerusalem or Exile expectations?
- **Wednesday:** What does it mean—specifically in *your* work situation—for you to seek the good of those who don't seek yours?

- **Thursday:** How can you critically engage this situation in a way that reflects your calling to be set apart in exile while still seeking the good of those who don't seek yours?
- **Friday:** What does it look like for you to be resilient in this situation? How does God's call to persevere change your demeanor and actions in this situation as you consider the big picture of God's calling in your life?

OPTIONAL HOMEWORK

This daily homework is optional and will require the *NIV Faith and Work Bible*. These readings will reinforce the teaching of each week's bible study. For the following days, read the "Deeper in Truth" and "Deeper at Work" sections and reflect on the questions below.

- **Monday:** God – Sovereignty (Esther 4:14-16)
 - o Have you faced a situation recently at work where you have found yourself believing that everything depends on you—that your well-being, your future, or the good of your organization is dependent on you in that moment?
- **Tuesday:** God – Creation (Isaiah 44:24)
 - o How do you see your work as being patterned after God's work?
- **Wednesday:** Church – Antithesis (Jeremiah 17:9)
 - o Consider your perception of and attitude toward a particular colleague you may find difficult to love. How might your interactions change if you took seriously the reality that both sin and grace are at work to some degree in his/her life?
- **Thursday:** Redemption – Regeneration (Ezekiel 37:1-14)
 - o Do you expect work to be the context in which God is refining you and clarifying your calling as his child going about his work in the world? Why or why not?

- **Friday:** God – Prayer (Habakkuk 3:17-19)
 - o How might the issues you encounter at work be opportunities for God to show his glory? How might God be conforming you to the image of Christ through them? How might God want us to extend his love to others through them?

APPENDIX: PRAYER OF EXAMEN

In the midst of the chaos of life, we can go on for days or weeks divorcing our world from God’s gracious and guiding presence; the results can be a frightening unawareness of our own hearts. We become a stranger to our own selves, and we easily become unaware of the grace that surrounds us. The Daily Examen was a form of prayer developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Jesuit Order, to help Christians become more self-aware and aware of Christ’s presence in the midst of daily life. The goal of this adapted Prayer of Examen is to help us better understand our own selves, particularly our emotional lives, in light of God’s daily gracious presence through a series of daily questions.

Emotions are an important part of what it means to be created in God’s image; it may surprise you to see how emotional God is throughout the Scriptures. Yet, in our modern world we seldom have the time and discipline to think about our emotional lives. We feel emotions all the time, but often they become either over- or under-expressed, and this distortion can lead us away from God’s truth and grace. The gospel is at work to sanctify our emotions as much as any other part of our being, and this devotional will help you examine the emotions that are associated with the events of your day. By becoming more aware of our emotional lives, we not only begin to know ourselves better, but we come to know how God is active and present in our daily lives.

The Prayer of Examen can be practiced either at the beginning or the end of the day—whichever time you are most clear-headed. Ideally, begin your time reading Scripture for 15 minutes.

Opening prayer of invitation: Becoming aware of God's presence throughout the day (2 min)

- Sit comfortably in stillness for two minutes.
- Be reminded that our God brings structure out of the chaos of our days.
- Invite the Holy Spirit who searches our hearts to guide you through this prayer.

Reviewing the past day's events (3 min)

- Remembering that each day is a gift from the Lord, review your day and write down a basic chronology of what happened.
- Does any particular event, meeting, conversation, or interaction stand out to you? In the rush of our days, it is easy to overlook so much. Think about the things you ate, saw, smelled, and heard. Remember that God is even in these details.

Considering your emotions (3 min)

- Our emotions are an important expression of the desires in our hearts; however, we can become unaware of our emotions given the frantic pace of our lives. When we are not aware of our emotions and the desires that underlie them, our idols can gain strength and power in our lives.
- Reflect on the day's events and list the feelings that you experienced throughout the day—fear, anxiety, boredom, happiness, resentment, elation, hope, anger, compassion, etc.

Choose one feature of the day and pray for it (3 min)

- As you examine the events and emotions of the day, ask the Holy

Spirit to guide you to something that God wants you to pay a bit more attention to. This can be something unexpected or seemingly insignificant at first glance. It can be something positive or negative.

- Pray for this particular thing. How would God want you to pray for this? What could God be wanting you to know or learn? How could He be affirming you or leading you to change?
- Remember that the gospel is at work in this issue.

Closing prayer: Looking towards tomorrow (2 min)

- Remember that God patiently leads us each day. Today's mistakes are redeemable, and today's victories do not guarantee success tomorrow. How might you be able to carry forward what you've learned today and apply it tomorrow?
- What action can you take tomorrow as an expression of faith and dependence upon God's abounding grace?
- Ask that you would be more aware of God's guiding presence tomorrow.

- ¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001).
- ² Walter Brueggemann, *To Build, To Plan: A Commentary on Jeremiah 26-52* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 30.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Lee Beach, *The Church in Exile: Living in Hope After Christendom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 58-59.
- ⁵ Brueggemann, 30.
- ⁶ Beach, 60.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid., 61.
- ⁹ Ibid., 63.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 63-64.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 21.
- ¹² Ibid., 21.
- ¹³ Ibid., 33, 44-45. See also Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balance, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 183, Kindle.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 21.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 20.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 57.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 156.
- ¹⁸ James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York, NY: University Press, 2010), 277.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 247.
- ²¹ Ibid., 277.
- ²² Ibid., 240-241.
- ²³ Ibid., 238-248.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 252.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 247, 278.
- ²⁶ Jack Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2004), 351.
- ²⁷ Beach, 177.
- ²⁸ Miroslav Volf, "Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter." *Ex Auditu 10* (1994), 20.
- ²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Beach, 59.

³³ Hunter, 277.

WEEK 4

The Purpose of Calling



For this lesson, read the introduction and scripture aloud as a group; then lead the group through the following six discussion questions, which look at Isaiah 6 in-depth. After the lesson, share as a group and end with a time of prayer together. Encourage one another to consider the homework questions throughout the rest of this week, using the Prayer of Examen introduced in last week’s lesson.

(Note: The homework assignments can be done with or without the *NIV Faith & Work Bible*, depending on if your group would prefer additional reading material to supplement their learning.)

OVERVIEW OF THE LESSON

- Introduction
- Scripture: Isaiah 6
- Questions for Discussion
- Group Prayer
- Homework

INTRODUCTION

The Westminster Catechism begins with the question, “What is the chief end of man?” The answer is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. If the ultimate purpose for our lives and what we do is to glorify God, where does work fit in?

Work often feels like a drudgery—something we have to endure in order to pay the bills. In these cases, work is reduced to its utilitarian value and becomes increasingly devoid of any intrinsic meaning. But how does the light of the gospel renew our work in such a way that we become increasingly

aware of the deep fulfillment and purpose behind all work, even work that appears at face value to be mundane and repetitive?

How do we glorify God with our work, and what impact does that glory bring to our lives and work environments?

SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 6

¹In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ²Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”

⁴And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

⁶Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

⁸And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE PROPHET ISAIAH? WHAT IS THE SETTING AND CONTEXT OF THIS PASSAGE?

Isaiah was a prophet of God.

Isaiah was a prophet who lived and worked in Jerusalem in the 8th century BCE. Relatively little is known about the prophet himself, but he is often considered one of the greatest to ever live. His name in Hebrew—Yeshayahu—means “Yahweh is salvation,” a name he lives up to, considering much of his prophetic ministry foretold the Messiah. He was married to a woman described as a prophetess (Isa. 8:3), and Jewish tradition indicates that he died a brutal martyr’s death: sawn in two by King Manasseh, the son of King Hezekiah.

Israel is being threatened with an impending invasion due to the untimely death of their leader.

“In the year that King Uzziah died” (Isa. 6:1) is where the chapter begins, making it “apparent that Isaiah wished to locate this vision in time.”² Recognizing the reality of Israel’s dangerous and shifting historical circumstances is key to understanding this text.

Beginning his 52-year reign at the young age of sixteen, King Uzziah was one of Judah’s kings who “did what was right in the eyes of the LORD” (2 Chron. 26:4). He was considered a strong and capable ruler who protected the national sovereignty and security of Israel by fortifying his country, reorganizing and re-equipping the army.³ Although he was considered a faithful king, Uzziah’s death was a direct result of his own pride: refusing to heed the warnings of numerous priests, he burned incense on the altar in the temple and paid a terrible price for it. God inflicted the king with leprosy as judgment, and Uzziah died soon thereafter. As a result of his death, the government became unstable, and the political and social situation changed rapidly.⁴

His death was demoralizing for Isaiah and his people; “Judah had known no king like Uzziah since the time of Solomon.”⁵ With the king’s passing, it put everything in question, including the call Isaiah felt on his life. But this vision showed the prophet the futility of having hope in anything but the ultimate one.⁶ God was commissioning Isaiah for great things despite the shifting sands and rampant uncertainty of their political climate. The Lord was showing his prophet that his fate—and the fate of his people—did not ultimately “rest in the hand of any human king, however competent and faithful that king may be. Rather, it was in the hands of the only One who is true Monarch of creation.”⁷ “It was only when the lesser king was removed that the greater King could be seen.”⁸ God was encouraging Israel to remember their true king.

God’s glory in this vision purifies and readies Isaiah to respond faithfully to God’s call.

Most scholars believe Isaiah’s vision was his initial call to prophetic office,⁹ and in this powerful multilayered vision, a number of things were revealed.

- First, God is on a throne, portrayed in a political setting as ruler.¹⁰ This is a representation of God’s ultimate sovereignty and reign over the earth as well as a reminder of the vice-regency we have been given in Genesis 1.
- Second, angels, whom the prophet calls “seraphs,” surround God’s throne in this vision. They are depicted as covering their faces and feet, seemingly protecting themselves from God’s glory.¹¹ The heavenly creatures also sing “Holy, Holy, Holy...the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa. 6:3), an expression of reverence and awe. Even in the midst of God’s presence, they recognized his glory on earth.
- Third, Isaiah is overcome by God’s glory. “Woe to me!” he cries, “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty” (Isa. 6:5 NIV). In God’s presence, Isaiah is confronted with his own unworthiness and the sinfulness of his people.¹²

In each of these details, God’s holiness is evident and overwhelming. Even to be in the presence of God is an act of purification, but we see Isaiah respond faithfully to the call to ministry. He steps up immediately, saying, “Here I am! Send me” (Isa. 6:8).

2. HOW DO WE AS HUMANS EXPERIENCE GOD’S HOLINESS AND GLORY?

The glory of God is the visible manifestation of God’s invisible holiness.

What precisely is God’s glory? Before we can see it, we must first understand that the glory of God is the *external* manifestation of his *internal* holiness. As we learned in the Genesis 1 study, God’s *invisible* qualities (his attributes, nature, and characteristics) have been made *visible* in creation. If we want to know these invisible qualities of God, we must look at the work he does—he reveals himself to us through what he creates. God’s glory is the “going public of his holiness. The way he puts his holiness on display for people to apprehend.”¹³ It is the showcase of his character.¹⁴

But what exactly is God’s holiness? It is the essence of his nature. To be holy is to be set apart, to be in a class all by oneself. God is holy because he is perfect, so he is distinct and separated by virtue of his infinite greatness and incomparable worth.¹⁵ “His glory is his disclosed holiness; his holiness is his inner glory.”¹⁶ God’s glory, therefore, is the *visible*, tangible expression of his *invisible* holiness.

Work can be the tangible experience of God’s holiness.

As God’s image-bearers, our capability to create and perform our jobs well proclaims the glory of God. That we are able to add meaning to a task simply by doing it with excellence conveys value and worth not only to that task, but also to the person or people you are serving.

To give a more concrete example, think of a nice, steaming cup of coffee. There is a very real difference between coffee brewed at a local boutique coffee house by someone who cares deeply about the process—where the beans are from and the way they’re roasted, how long they’re steeped, the temperature of the water—and the hours-old coffee you get out of a vending machine at a convenience store. When someone who actually cares about all

of the elements that go into creating a good cup of coffee blesses you with that small and maybe even seemingly insignificant gift, it is an experience of glory.

Maybe you don't like coffee or you can't taste the difference either way, but the concept is true in every kind of work. When you achieve mastery or are a recipient others talents and abilities at their full potential, you witness something that brings flourishing to our world and makes God's glory manifest. All of our work has this capacity, no matter the profession, no matter the recognition—whether you create spreadsheets or clean offices or teach high school math.

3. HOW IS THE EARTH FULL OF GOD'S GLORY?

The earth proclaims God's glory through the ongoing cultural mandate to work to create, fill, and subdue.

Remember the creation mandate in Genesis 1 and 2 to “fill the earth and subdue it”? As we learned in the first lesson, what we create is an expression of God's glory, and the angels recognize this in Isaiah 6:3—they call to one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” Surprisingly, when the angels look out at the earth, they are in awe. And they aren't looking at a pre-fall earth in all of its perfection; they are looking at the world as it stands, in all of its brokenness. Yet, they still proclaim, “the whole earth is full of his glory.” The fullness and abundance of the earth and its culture that we are called to cultivate bears witness to God's glorious being.¹⁷

More importantly, the angels are actually marveling at God. They are not amazed at humanity, but with God's ability to bring forth his glory and wonder from such a broken and rebellious people. Despite the fall of humanity, despite the sin and perversion that we bring into the world, the glory of God continues to reign on earth. Even in dark moments of pain, death, and uncertainty, “God rules and has always ruled.”¹⁸ This means that in the midst of all brokenness, God can bring about his glory in and through our work as we bring structure and flourishing.

In many ways, the seraphim were asking God: “Who are you that you can take a people so broken, so opposed, so rebellious against you and your character and still in the midst of that rebellion create such wonder in this world?” We begin to see that despite the fall, despite our failures, God’s grace is powerfully at work to display his glory. His glory will not be marred or mitigated by our own fallenness, and the tangible evidences of his glory will be seen in human beings, broken and beautiful. This truth must profoundly shape the way we view the world, that despite the brokenness and corruption that we see in every sector of our society, God is sovereign.

Delight in our work brings God glory amidst the brokenness.

When we work in-line with God’s creational purposes for us, and when our work becomes the expression of our identity instead of the source of it, the product of our hands is nothing less than the very glory of God. When we master our work, and “do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31 NIV), we see his character manifested in the world. When we begin to behold the glory of God, it enlivens us as human beings. It captures the fullness of who we are as creatures made in God’s image.

As we begin to understand this, work becomes not merely instrumental to a paycheck, but an expression of our passion and identity. Just as God’s creative work reveals who he is, so our work tangibly expresses our identity. The product of our hands materialize, like God, the very invisible and internal essence of our being. We reflect who we are—children of God—in the work we do.¹⁹

4. HOW CAN WE RECOGNIZE AND PRAISE GOD FOR HIS GLORY IN OUR DAY-TO-DAY LIVES?

Look for God’s glory being proclaimed in all areas of life—give him credit for the good you see in the world.

Like the angels, we must have eyes to see the glory of God in the world. “The whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa. 6:3), the seraphim proclaim; the problem is that we don’t often see the world from this perspective. But as we’ve learned, the glory of God is not some abstract, ethereal concept; it’s something tangible and experiential. There is not a day in our lives where the

glory of God is not proclaimed, whether through humans or through rocks and mountains and oceans. It is present when we enjoy a well-brewed cup of coffee, when much-needed rain helps crops to grow, or when the subway gets us from A to B in a relatively efficient and affordable manner. These circumstances may seem mundane to us—it’s just normal life—but we must have eyes to see it and name it for what it is. To see that, despite the sin and brokenness of the world, God is still sovereign, and his glory is being uniquely displayed in every sector of the world we inhabit. And when we perceive the glory of God, it engages our full being because we are created by glory for glory.

Worship God as you see evidences of his glory.

When we perceive the glory of God, we are engaged with him on a spiritual level; when we see God’s glory around us, it begins to enlarge who we are as human beings. Glory envelopes our hearts and our motivations. Comprehending what it means to be created in God’s image with a unique capacity to behold his glory leads us into worship.

When we meditate on or experience the wonders of God’s glory, we are unable to resist worshipping God. “The incredible size of the universe and the amazing complexity of every created thing will, if our hearts are right, draw us continually to worship and praise him for his greatness.”²⁰ Furthermore, our worship presents a manifold blessing:

1. Our worship honors God. In the presence of God, the seraphim proclaimed: “Holy, Holy, Holy” (Isa. 6:3). They were captured by the awesome holiness of God and were unable to contain their praise.
2. Our worship leads us to awe: the seraphim covered their faces (Isa. 6:2), awe-stricken by a deep reverence for who he is.
3. Our worship leads us to humility and an awareness of sin. “Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined!” Isaiah 6:5 says. He is overwhelmed with the sense of his own unworthiness and with an absolute conviction of his sin. This act of humility, a response to God’s perfect holiness, leads to Isaiah’s confession of sin.

4. Our worship leads us to service, which we'll unpack below.

Approach work with a willing heart. Say in response to your calling, “Here I am! Send me.”

As the glory of God becomes more evident to us, it propels us into our calling. It allows us to submit ourselves wholeheartedly to God. Initially, Isaiah is overcome with shame at the awareness of his sin, but instead of hopelessness, an act of grace occurs: “Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, ‘See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for’” (Isa. 6:6-7 NIV). This act of purification prepared Isaiah to be God’s messenger. His shame was taken away and his sin removed.

This happened to prepare Isaiah for the road ahead of him, a difficult journey to be sure, but one rooted in and supported by faith in God and worship of his glory. The Lord asks, “Whom shall I send? (Isa. 6:8). “Here I am, send me” (Isa. 6:8), Isaiah responds. Despite the changing circumstances and his own discouragement, Isaiah’s encounter with the glory of God propels him into his calling. The same is true for us. When we overlook the glory of God around us, when we look to the broken world for a sense of belonging or fulfillment instead of the Glorious One, we ultimately lose our sense of purpose. But when we have hearts and eyes open to see God at work in the midst of the brokenness, we unashamedly engage our own calling.

5. WHERE ARE YOU CURRENTLY FEELING ENCOURAGED IN YOUR WORK? WHAT PEOPLE, PROJECTS, OR RESPONSIBILITIES HAVE BEEN LIFE-GIVING OR AFFIRMING?

The answers among the group will vary depending on the work environments of those in your group. Try to draw the specific areas of some of the examples of God’s glory that were laid out in the answer to question 4.

6. AS YOU CONSIDER THESE LIFE-GIVING AREAS, FOCUS ON ONE THAT MOST ENCOURAGES YOU. HOW MIGHT THIS BE A TANGIBLE EXPRESSION OF GOD'S GLORY? IN WHAT WAYS DO YOU SEE GOD'S CHARACTER REFLECTED IN THIS PARTICULAR AREA OF YOUR WORK?

Again, the answers will vary but try to lead the group to see different aspects of God's character reflected in the different situations your group shares. (For example, a healthcare provider may focus on God's character as a healer, someone in finance as God as a provider and sustainer, and an artist may focus on God's beauty and creativity.)

GROUP PRAYER

Take some time to break up into groups of three to praise God for the glory you witness in your workplaces. Pray for areas of brokenness you're encountering. Pray also for wisdom and discernment to see how your work can all the more display the glory of God.

HOMEWORK

The following two sections have reflection questions for your group to consider throughout the workweek. The first section does not require further reading or material. For the second section, use the *NIV Faith and Work Bible* as further reading material. Your group can decide which version of the homework they prefer to do. Consider using the Prayer of Examen from last week's appendix as part of your homework each day as well.

In light of this study, answer the following questions on the given days:

- **Monday:** How can your work today express God's glory?

- **Tuesday:** What aspect of God’s holiness and character will you make known through your work today?
- **Wednesday:** What aspects of your work lead you to worship God?
- **Thursday:** How can you express your worship to God appropriately during the course of your day?
- **Friday:** What difference does it make when you actually believe you are being sent into your work to witness God’s glory?

OPTIONAL HOMEWORK

This daily homework is optional and will require the *NIV Faith and Work Bible*. These readings will reinforce the teaching of each week’s bible study. For the following days, read the “Deeper in Truth” and “Deeper at Work” sections and reflect on the questions below.

- **Monday:** God – Glory (Isaiah 6:3)
 - o How does your work communicate who you are as God’s image-bearer?
 - o How might your work communicate God’s glory in the world?
- **Tuesday:** Church – Common Grace (Matthew 5:45)
 - o After considering the doctrine of common grace, reflect on some examples of this you see evidenced in your workplace.
- **Wednesday:** Christ – Incarnation (John 1:14)
 - o How might the incarnation of Christ lead you to love and serve those with whom you work?
- **Thursday:** God – Trinity (Mark 1:10)
 - o Respond to the statement “The goal of work is not self-promotion, therefore, but rather to love and serve others.” How does your understanding of the Trinity affect your working relationships?

- **Friday:** Christ – Resurrection (Luke 24:33)
 - o How might the reality of Christ’s resurrection bring a hopefulness to the work you do every day?

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001).

² John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 176.

³ Emil G. Hirsch & Ira Maurice Price, "Uzziah," *Jewish Encyclopedia*.
<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14622-uzziah>

⁴ S. H. Widyapranawa, *Isaiah 1-39: The Lord is Savior: Faith in National Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 30.

⁵ Oswalt, 177.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 183.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ J. J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 91.

¹⁰ Ibid., 92.

¹¹ Ibid., 97.

¹² Ibid., 99.

¹³ John Piper, "What is God's Glory," *Desiring God*.

<http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-is-god-s-glory>

¹⁴ David Kim, *NIV Faith and Work Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 828.

¹⁵ Piper.

¹⁶ Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 55.

¹⁷ Oswalt, 181.

¹⁸ Childs, 55.

¹⁹ Kim, 828.

²⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential teachings of the Christian Faith*, 140.

WEEK 5

The Discernment Needed in Calling



For this lesson, read the introduction and scripture aloud as a group; then lead the group through the following four discussion questions, which look 1 Corinthians 2 in-depth. Once you finish these questions, read through “Other Aspects of Discernment” as a group and answer the following two questions. At the end of the lesson, you can lead the group through a regular time of prayer and sharing or through the Prayer of Discernment exercise in the appendix, which will take around 20 minutes to complete.

(Note: The homework assignments can be done with or without the *NIV Faith & Work Bible*, depending on if your group would prefer additional reading material to supplement their learning.)

OVERVIEW OF THE LESSON

- Introduction
- Scripture: 1 Corinthians 2
- Questions for Discussion
- Group Prayer
- Homework
- Appendix: Prayer of Discernment

INTRODUCTION

At work, we are sometimes faced with difficult decisions where the path is not clear and the context is not black and white. These circumstances and the way in which we form decisions in the midst of them have consequences for us, our families, our coworkers, and perhaps even our organizations. How can God lead us through these challenging choices?

After the resurrection, Jesus says that it is better that he leaves his disciples (John 16:7) so that he can send the Spirit in his stead. Despite the seemingly unhelpful departure of Jesus, his Spirit is an invaluable gift to all believers as he is the one who brings to us a greater discernment. Christian maturity requires the Spirit's power and guidance in our lives and, especially in situations like those described above, in our work.

The Christian notion of calling is not a passive revelation of God's will as much as it is an active engagement of our discernment through the prompting of the Holy Spirit. God places us in difficult and broken places so that we can bring the hope and power of the gospel to light. This often requires risk and perseverance; we learn to depend upon wisdom from God in knowing how to navigate our work places and in making decisions that sometimes feel like we're stuck selecting the best of bad options.

SCRIPTURE: 1 CORINTHIANS 2

¹And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ²For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

⁶Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. ⁷But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹But, as it is written,

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”—

¹⁰these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹²Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

¹⁴The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. ¹⁶“For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. WHAT IS THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THIS LETTER?

Paul is speaking to the members of the early church.

This passage is part of Paul's first Epistle to the newly established church in ancient Corinth. He wrote the letter from Ephesus during his third missionary journey, several years after spending eighteen months establishing the church in Corinth. The letter acts a response to reports he received of quarrelling, division, and dissent within its ranks. Though he had left them well-resourced, the early church was broken; they were already beginning to forget whose they were and what they were called to do. They had lost sight of their vision. But God is able to work even when we lose our way and become distracted.

Wisdom and rhetoric are an important facet of intelligent society during Paul's time.

Paul existed within a historical and cultural context that was preoccupied with human wisdom and rhetorical eloquence.² In this letter, he attempts to

challenge the self-sufficiency and self-congratulation inherent in the great minds of his day.³ Paul is playing to the understanding of his audience and the popular form of debate: reason. Yet, he flips the narrative on its head; he points to the cross, to the “weakness of God” in the crucified Messiah.⁴ He provides a new way of understanding.

The church at large is the fulfillment of the Ezekiel 37 vision.

We tend to read this passage in 1 Corinthians individualistically, without an understanding of the corporate context in which it takes place. We can look to our lesson from Week 2 in which we looked at Ezekiel 37. In his vision of the valley of dry bones, Ezekiel sees a vast army being raised up to usher in God’s kingdom. It is a vision of God’s people being restored as a strong body. This vision is embodied in the early church hundreds of years later. When Paul is writing to the church of Corinth, a mighty army of believers is being raised up with a missional purpose of establishing God’s kingdom and reigning with him.

2. WHAT IS AT THE HEART OF PAUL’S PLEA IN THIS PASSAGE?

Paul is reaffirming the calling of God’s people.

In his letter, Paul is reaffirming God’s call to be vice-regents. Paul says, “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2 NIV). Here he is referencing the death, resurrection, and glory of Christ, which is the process through which God reestablishes humanity to its proper calling and place in the work of vice-regency. The resurrection was not simply the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth, but also the restoration of humanity to its original calling.

Looking back to Genesis, we see how sin has thwarted the cultural mandate, but through the work of Christ, we see the restoration of humanity, empowered by the Spirit (Ezek. 37) to re-establish our place as vice-regents in the ongoing work of redemption.

Godly wisdom sets Christians apart from those with human wisdom.

Paul says, “We do... speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to

nothing. No, we declare God’s wisdom” (1 Cor. 2:6-7 NIV). Paul’s deeper message is that human discernment alone cannot unravel or begin to understand the mysteries of God; this is only done through the revelation of God’s Spirit.⁵

The eighteenth-century American preacher Jonathan Edwards made this same distinction in a sermon titled, “The Divine and Supernatural Light.” In it, he explains that the distinguishing feature of the Christian is the work of the Spirit. The difference is seen in the unique wisdom beyond human capabilities. This distinction is precisely what Paul is drawing attention to all throughout this passage.

How do we know if we have received wisdom from the Spirit? The difference between the two is faith; faith is not something you can conjure up through sheer force of will, nor something elicited through philosophical rhetoric.⁶ It comes purely through the power of God alone. This is what makes the gospel distinct from the wisdom of the world.⁷

Godly wisdom is incomprehensible to nonbelievers.

Here we encounter a paradox of sorts, because the “folly” of the cross to nonbelievers is “wisdom” for Christian believers.⁸ Jesus died—he was taken down by the human rulers of his time. He didn’t *win*. When Christ was dying on the cross, the reasonable explanation was that he was a liar and a failure. However, the cross tells believers that things are not what they appear to be. The reality was that his magnificent defeat vindicated all his words and marked the greatest victory in all of history—the conquest of sin and death.

God’s glory is magnified, not minimized, when we think and speak of him in terms of the crucifixion. How? “God shows that he is God... precisely in the fact that he is mighty in weakness, glorious in lowliness, living and life-giving in death.” Only God is great enough to win by losing. Only God is loving enough to love the unlovable. Only God is eternal enough to be swallowed by time and death and live to tell the tale. The cross magnifies the divine King who played the fool in order to end the folly of sin and death.⁹

This is what sets us apart. “God... has revealed in Christ another kind of wisdom that radically subverts the wisdom of this world: God has chosen to save the world through the cross, through the shameful and powerless death of the crucified Messiah. The word of the cross, which looks like nonsense to a lost and perishing world, is the power of God for salvation to those who believe.”¹⁰ And we only believe through faith.

3. ACCORDING TO PAUL, HOW IS THE SPIRIT AT WORK IN THE BELIEVER?

The Spirit empowers those who are weak.

Paul says, “I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling” (1 Cor. 2:3 NIV). Paul often faced enormous pain and suffering when he proclaimed the gospel.¹¹ He was beaten, whipped, cast out, and imprisoned; we learn, too, of Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” later on in 2 Corinthians 12:7, which, as we know, hindered much of his work. But “fear and trembling,” one scholar notes, “depicts a person’s humble response to the awe-inspiring majesty of God.”¹² Paul, knowing the enormity and gravity of his task, as well as the greatness of his God, likely felt deeply inadequate. But he was in good company: Moses struggled with eloquence (Exod. 4:10), Isaiah had unclean lips (Isa. 6:5), and Jeremiah did “not know how to speak,” for he was “only a youth” (Jer. 1:6).¹³ The good news is that, throughout Paul’s writing and woven through the rest of Scripture, we are reminded again and again that God works powerfully through weakness.

Being aware of his own insufficiency, Paul knew that his only recourse was a total reliance on the power of God’s Spirit. He was not a gifted orator like the teachers and philosophers of his time, “whose goal was persuasion by the manipulation of arguments and skillful rhetoric.”¹⁴ He knew he couldn’t restore the church in his own wisdom, so he learned to embrace his weakness as the “means by which God’s power was revealed in him.”¹⁵ His very insufficiencies made room for “the sufficiency of God’s grace and the perfection of God’s power.”¹⁶

Spiritual wisdom draws those who hear it closer to God, the true source of wisdom.

Paul gloried in his weakness, not because he “enjoyed” it, but because it ensured that the force of his words came solely from the Spirit of God.¹⁷ It was evidence that the power with which he preached was of God and not of himself.¹⁸ Paul says, “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power” (1 Cor. 2:4-5 NIV). Paul intentionally avoids sophisticated rhetoric.

Origen, an early church father, once said, “If our Scriptures had persuaded people to believe because they had been written with rhetorical art or philosophical skill, there is no doubt our faith would be said to depend on the art of words and on human wisdom rather than the power of God.”¹⁹ But Paul ensured this folly would not occur. He kept things simple, and the message simpler: “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). Transformed hearts are the result of the sheer power of the cross as the way of salvation.

The Spirit brings needed discernment.

In this passage, Paul is teaching the church in Corinth about the task of discernment. Making decisions, both big and small, is an important part of our daily work. But God has promised that we need not face any decision alone. Few decisions do not involve some level of complexity, especially in the workplace, so in these gray areas, the Spirit of God brings clarity as we learn to rely on his wisdom rather than our own. Paul says, “What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us” (1 Cor. 2:12 NIV).

The Spirit gives us new eyes to see and new ears to hear. “The work of the Spirit is to restore sight: to allow human beings to see truly.”²⁰ Paul says, “We have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16). This means we have the ability to share in Christ’s plan, purpose, and perspective. But this was not always the case; our sin distorted our relationship with God, and our ability to see his divine truth became drastically impaired. This great privilege is made possible again through the Spirit. All who have received the Spirit now have the ability to to make known his glory in the world.²¹

4. WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS PASSAGE FOR YOUR WORK?

We must have eyes to see the Spirit at work and learn to be dependent on him.

God's wisdom is freely available to all believers, but Paul intentionally says that he speaks a message of wisdom "among the mature" (1 Cor. 2:6). We do not magically become all-knowing overnight; the complexity of discernment and of having eyes to see and recognize the Spirit at work takes practice and effort.²² We even have to first discern that there is something, someone, to be discerned."²³ It is often too easy to only see what is in front of us, believing that God and his Spirit are absent or uninvolved, instead of relying on faith.²⁴ Being people of faith, though, means having hope and confidence for what we cannot see. We must enter into the process of discernment in order to see with fresh eyes how his Spirit is moving in the world and empowering us.

As we grow in the task of discerning the voice of the Caller and seeing his Spirit at work, we simultaneously recognize our desperate need for that power, and it moves us into an active dependence. Just as Paul relied on the "demonstration of the Spirit's power" (1 Cor. 2:4 NIV), so must we also move toward actively choosing and relying on him first and foremost. It means seeking his direction and will in those moments where we are confronted with difficulty or decisions, instead of operating out of our own human wisdom.

We must spend quiet, dedicated time with the Spirit.

It's easy to get caught up in the busyness of life and hustle of the city and forget to set time apart for the Lord. God commands his people to imitate his pattern of labor and rest, setting aside sanctified time to honor God. This means we must practice the oftentimes difficult spiritual practice of solitude to practice seeking the Lord and asking for the indwelling of the Spirit. Henri Nouwen says,

In solitude I get rid of my scaffolding: no friends to talk with, no telephone calls to make, no meetings to attend, no music to entertain, no books to distract, just me—naked, vulnerable, weak, sinful, deprived, broken—nothing. It is this nothingness

that I have to face in my solitude, a nothingness so dreadful that everything in me wants to run to my friends, my work, and my distractions so that I can forget my nothingness and make myself believe that I am worth something. The confrontation with our own frightening nothingness forces us to surrender ourselves totally and unconditionally to the Lord Jesus Christ.²⁵

Stopping and spending dedicated time alone in silence allows us to take a moment outside the demands and compulsions of work; it reminds us of our desperate need for God.

We must seek godly discernment in community.

By ourselves, we often lack the wisdom to discern effectively. So, in addition to turning directly to God, we do well to turn to trustworthy friends and colleagues.²⁶ Proverbs 11:14 says “Victory is won through many advisors,” and Proverbs 27:17 says “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another” (NIV). Those in our inner circles know us well; they are able to speak into our personal situations, and when we walk in company with them, they can help broaden our vision.²⁷ In Christian community, the body of Christ, we can partner with others who have also received God’s wisdom.²⁸

We must actively respond to difficult situations by trusting in God’s guidance.

Calling is not a passive revelation of God’s will, but an active engagement of our discernment. To hear the voice of God is to take part in the process of active listening. God rarely gives us everything we need in one miraculous moment of revelation. Instead, God reveals himself in glimpses over time. We must always be actively engaging and discerning the voice of the Caller. When we are able to discern God’s voice, we are able to participate more fully in his work of redemption.

OTHER ASPECTS OF DISCERNMENT

1. Acting in Our New Nature

A life in Christ means we become new people—there is a shift that happens when we choose to follow the leading of the Spirit. Ephesians 5:8-10 says, “for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.” Paul encouraging the church to “Try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord” is the whole point. We are to *try*. The wisdom to know what this new life looks like comes from the Spirit. Lean in; dive in deep to “all that is good and right and true.”

2. Renewing Our Minds

Romans 12:2 says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” To discern God’s will, we must continually renew our minds. This happens as we saturate our minds with God’s Word and train our moral senses to discern what honors Christ and what doesn’t, what shows love to people and what doesn’t.

God wants us to become mature and conformed to his own character. When this happens, we see what is beautiful in Christ and in Christ’s way. Once we love it, we choose it. If we choose a path of behavior because we see its fitness as a way of glorifying God, and honoring Christ, and helping people, then Christ is honored—we walk in the light.

3. Discerning Love

Philippians 1:9-11 says, “And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.” In order for our *love* to abound more and more, our knowledge and discernment must also abound more and more. The most loving thing to do is not always readily apparent, but to approve what is excellent is a matter of being pure and blameless; therefore, discernment is not a light matter. Still, we are filled with the fruit of righteousness that

comes through Jesus Christ, so we are able to discern as we ought; he has given us everything we need. From all we have seen above, the most loving thing may not be approved by human wisdom, but our faith does not rest in the wisdom of men but in the wisdom and power of God (1 Cor. 2:5).

4. Glorifying God

The beautiful pattern of discernment in the New Testament is rooted in transformation by the Spirit through the Word. We are called to glorify Christ in the way we make our choices. God is not mindless; we are not mindless; sanctification is not mindless; discernment is not mindless. We have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16). Therefore, we glorify God in our decision-making, not when we default to human wisdom, but when we act in our new nature, rooted in God's Word, sensitive to God's Spirit, discerning how best to love, and pursue the glory of God.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

1. Consider this past week of work. Is there a moment when you recall being able to discern the work of the Spirit:

- a. renewing your motivations for your work through a glimpse of God's glory,
- b. intentionally pointing you toward an interaction with a particular coworker,
- c. guiding you in the actual work itself?

2. What particular decisions do you need to make in the coming week that require increasing wisdom and the guiding discernment of the Spirit?

GROUP PRAYER

Take some time to break up into groups of three and pray for wisdom and discernment, especially amidst complex, difficult issues, to see how you can all the more display the glory of God in your decision-making.

HOMEWORK

The following two sections have reflection questions for your group to consider throughout the workweek. The first section does not require further reading or material. For the second section, use the *NIV Faith and Work Bible* as further reading material. Your group can decide which version of the homework they prefer to do. Consider using the Prayer of Discernment in the appendix as part of your homework each day as well.

In light of this study, answer the following questions on the given days:

- **Monday:** Can you sense the Spirit's presence influencing your work or the work of you colleagues? What are the characteristics of the Spirit activity in your work? How would his presence be known by others looking for it?
- **Tuesday:** What would it look like to depend upon the Spirit's power and God's wisdom at work? What would be different from how you usually handle difficult or stressful situations?
- **Wednesday:** How can you make time today to become more aware of the Spirit's presence and activity at work? How do you feel after taking this time to slow down and be more conscious of his presence?
- **Thursday:** Whom in your work community can you ask for counseling

or advice? What issues or concerns can you discuss with this person to gain a wise and discerning perspective?

- **Friday:** Where is doubt leading you to be passive in your responses or decision-making? How can God’s power and wisdom lead you to more confidently engage these issues?

OPTIONAL HOMEWORK

This daily homework is optional and will require the *NIV Faith and Work Bible*. These readings will reinforce the teaching of each week’s bible study. For the following days, read the “Deeper in Truth” and “Deeper at Work” sections and reflect on the questions below.

- **Monday:** God – Sphere Sovereignty (Romans 1:20)
- **Tuesday:** Holy Spirit – Empowerment (Romans 15:19)
- **Wednesday:** Holy Spirit – Discernment (1 Corinthians 2:13)
- **Thursday:** Church – Ascension (Acts 1:9)
- **Friday:** Christ – The Son of Man (Acts 7:56)

APPENDIX: PRAYER OF DISCERNMENT

This exercise will take around 20 minutes to complete. Lead your group through reading the opening scripture and descriptions of consolation and desolation. Then lead them through the steps of the exercise (you may like to use a timer to signal when each new section has begun).

1 John 4:1-6 (NIV) says:

¹Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ²This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world. ⁴You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. ⁵They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

John teaches us that followers of Christ need to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God,” yet it is challenging for many Christians to have this kind of necessary discernment. We constantly face various decisions throughout the day, and we are in desperate need of this kind of discerning wisdom to guide us. So where can we find it? John’s exhortation is grounded in the reality that, as Christians, we have the Spirit of God who is able to lead us to this kind of discernment. However, we are often oblivious to this grace which we have received. How can we grow in this kind of spiritual discernment?

Scripture teaches that we live in a world where sin, the flesh, and the devil are constantly leading us into deception, confusion, and darkness, but we often are oblivious to the impact of these various spiritual forces upon us. In our desire to live obediently and walk closely with God, we need to be aware of the influence of spiritual realities upon our lives and the lives of others. Once aware of them, we are able to pray against our real enemies. This area of spiritual discernment is critical for our personal growth and ability to

wisely counsel others. As we look to Christ, we are empowered to overcome evil and live triumphantly in the power of the gospel.

Building on the “Prayer of Examen” devotional, we now move to the discipline of discernment as we consider two helpful concepts of consolation and desolation.

Spiritual Consolation

A consolation creates within the soul a love for God and the gospel. Consolations draw the individual towards God as he or she becomes more aware of their own inadequacy and the abounding nature of God’s sufficient grace. Consolations make us more aware of the depth of God’s love and care for us, which in turn moves us towards loving those around us. Consolation is what makes us more like Christ in his passions and service—his love for the marginalized and for justice. Finally, consolations increase faith, hope, love, peace, prayer, worship, and joy and makes our earthly calling clearer as it also draws us towards the hope of Christ’s return and the renewal of all things. The desire to glorify God begins to displace the desire to seek our own glory.

Spiritual Desolation

Desolation, in contrast, is all those things that oppose and hinder spiritual consolations. Desolations arise from the sin that is both within the individual as well as from the evils that are external to us. Desolations darken the soul and contract our ability to experience the love of God. This then leads to a diminished capacity to love others. Desolations make turn our focus upon ourselves and our needs, our desires, our demands, and our schedules. Desolations lead us to lose sight of larger and more noble principles of life and love, of community and service. They lead us away from the light and warmth of the gospel, tempting us towards greater insecurity, coldness, anxiety, laziness, cowardice, fear, isolation, and sadness.

The key question in interpreting consolation and desolation is: Where is the movement coming from, and where is it leading me? Spiritual consolation does not always mean happiness or positive emotions, though it’s tempting to think all good feelings come from God. Likewise, spiritual desolation does not always mean sadness or negative emotions. Sometimes an experience

of sadness can be moment of deep intimacy with God. Times of human suffering and difficulty can lead to moments of great grace. Similarly, peace or happiness can be illusory if these feelings are helping us avoid changes we need to make. We must take the time to discern what the Lord is saying to us through these experiences.

DIRECTIONS

Discernment of spirits is a challenging task. It requires maturity, inner quiet, and the ability to reflect on one's internal life. Yet we also must be ready to improvise and adjust because God's Spirit works in each of us uniquely. This is why we need the encouragement and wisdom of trusted spiritual friends, advisors, and pastors.

The following directions will lead you through the Prayer of Discernment. Do this exercise at the end or beginning of each day, not only to help you become more aware of spiritual promptings, but also to lead you into a deeper intimacy with Christ.

Opening prayer of invitation: Becoming aware of God's presence throughout the day (2 min)

- Sit comfortably in stillness for two minutes.
- Be reminded that our God brings structure out of the chaos of our days.
- Invite the Holy Spirit who searches our hearts to guide you through this prayer.

Reviewing the past day's events (3 min)

- Remembering that each day is a gift from the Lord, review your day and write down a basic chronology of what happened.

- Does any particular event, meeting, conversation, or interaction stand out to you? In the rush of our days, it is easy to overlook so much. Think about the things you ate, saw, smelled, and heard. Remember that God is even in these details.

As you review the day, list the desolations you've experienced (4 min)

Desolations can:

- Turn our focus in on ourselves.
- Drive us down the spiral ever deeper into our own negative feelings.
- Cut us off from community.
- Make us want to give up on things that used to be important to us.
- Take over our whole consciousness and crowd out our broader vision.
- Cover up a sense of gratitude.

As you review the day, list the consolations you've experienced (4 min)

Consolations can:

- Direct our focus outside and beyond ourselves.
- Lift our hearts so that we can see the joys and sorrows of other people.
- Bond us more closely to our human community and draw out a love for them.
- Deepen our love for God.
- Restore balance and refresh our inner sense of calling and purpose.
- Show us where God is active in our lives and where he is leading us.

Closing prayer: Looking towards tomorrow (2 min)

- Pray to live more in the power and guidance of God's Spirit.

- ¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001).
- ² Richard Hays, *First Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 26.
- ³ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 90.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ David Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 96.
- ⁶ Gerald Bray (ed), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: 1-2 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 19.
- ⁷ Joseph Fitzmeyer, *First Corinthians* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 168.
- ⁸ Ibid., 170.
- ⁹ Mark R. Shaw, *10 Great Ideas from Church History* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 26.
- ¹⁰ Hays, 27.
- ¹¹ Roy Ciampa & Brian Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 113.
- ¹² Garland, 85.
- ¹³ Ciampa & Rosner, 117.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Garland, 85.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Raymond Collins, *First Corinthians* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 117.
- ¹⁸ Fee, 93.
- ¹⁹ Bray, 20.
- ²⁰ Steven Guthrie, *Creator Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Art of Becoming Human* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 153.
- ²¹ Garland, 92.
- ²² Archibald Robertson & Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (New York, NY: C. Scribner's Sons, 1911), 36.
- ²³ Guthrie, 163.
- ²⁴ Guthrie, 156.
- ²⁵ Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York, NY: Ballantine, 1981), 15, 18.
- ²⁶ David Kim, *NIV Faith and Work Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 1400.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Adapted from John Piper, "Can a Coin Flip Reveal God's Will for My Life?" (February 27, 2019), <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/can-a-coin-flip-reveal-gods-will-for-my-life> (accessed March 19, 2019).

WEEK 6

The Fulfillment of Calling



For this lesson, read the introduction and scripture aloud as a group; then lead the group through the following four discussion questions, which look Revelation 21 in-depth. The lesson will end with prayer in small groups. Leave some time at the end of the study to discuss the overall experience of the course as this is the last class. Encourage the group to answer the final homework questions as they go through the next week of work.

OVERVIEW OF THE LESSON

- Introduction
- Scripture: Revelation 21
- Questions for Discussion
- Group Prayer
- Homework

INTRODUCTION

What is the end of the biblical narrative? What happens when Jesus returns? How would you answer these questions if someone asked? For many Christians, this is difficult to answer, yet the end of the story is a critical part in being able to discern our calling today.

This final session will explore the penultimate chapter of Scripture and draw profound implications for our work today from this vision of New Jerusalem. How does the vision of eternity begin to change the way we live faithfully today?

SCRIPTURE: REVELATION 21

¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

⁵And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. ⁷The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. ⁸But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

⁹Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, “Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.” ¹⁰And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, ¹¹having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. ¹²It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed—¹³on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. ¹⁴And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

¹⁵And the one who spoke with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure

measure the city and its gates and walls. ¹⁶The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal. ¹⁷He also measured its wall, 144 cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel's measurement. ¹⁸The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, like clear glass. ¹⁹The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, ²⁰the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. ²¹And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass.

²²And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, ²⁵and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. ²⁷But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MOST STRIKING ASPECTS OF THIS VISION OF CHRIST'S RETURN?

The Bride of Christ is a city.

When most people think of the biblical notion of the Bride of Christ, they think of the church—the redeemed people of God. Notice in this climactic passage that the bride is not merely the church but actually the city of New Jerusalem, which includes both the people and the cultivated works of their hands. This urban reality of the afterlife points to the reality that our future with God is not about some “tranquil, idyllic, one-on-one encounter in a sanctuary of eternal solitude, cloistered away from the hustling, bustling

interaction with others that is so much a part of civic life on the old and apparently the new earth.”² It is seen as a “complex, other-connected and no doubt other-oriented relationship that brings with it all of the social and political ramifications that life in any city engenders.”³

In Genesis 1, God gives us the cultural mandate, calling us to continue the ongoing work of creation through developing society and civilization. The city is the place where culture reaches critical mass.⁴ It is in many respects the pinnacle of our culture making. “Perhaps the most fitting symbol of the development of creation from the primordial past to the eschatological future is the fact that the Bible begins with a garden and ends with a city.”⁵

Believers will physically experience a “new creation.”

This New Jerusalem a cultivated material world. The texts describe, in detail, an actual physical place. This is significant because it means that where we will spend eternity is not completely discontinuous from the world that we currently occupy.⁶ Though Revelation 21 describes a “new” heavens and a “new” earth, it is more of a transformation of the “old.”⁷ The Greek word being used here for “new”—*kainos*—encompasses some continuity,⁸ so when God claims that that he will “make all things new” (Rev. 21:5), he means that he is taking what is old and transforming it.⁹ In a similar way, the New Testament tells us that in Christ, we are a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17, Gal. 6:15). The new earth won’t just be a slightly restored version of our broken world, “but a transformation beyond imagining, a transformation so radical as to be a ‘new creation.’”¹⁰

Even with the description of this vision, there is a great amount of confusion about heaven and the resurrection among Christians. Many believe simply that when we die, our disembodied spirit will reside in heaven with God forever. Though not *entirely* incorrect, this is, for the most part, a misinformed view. We certainly will reside with God, but the Bible teaches us that after the final judgement, there will be a unification—a joining—of heaven and earth.¹¹ Therefore, our final destination—the place where we will enjoy God’s presence forever—is not technically in heaven as disembodied spiritual entities, but in a renewed creation as embodied, resurrected selves where we will continue to exist and act in a material reality.

2. HOW DOES THIS PASSAGE ADDRESS THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR WORK TODAY?

Our current work has more meaning than we can imagine.

The work that we do here on earth is not in vain; it is deeply significant. The glimpses of New Jerusalem in these texts give us good reason to believe that there is a real sense of continuity between this life and the next. Because life in this new holy city is similar to our present cultural patterns, including its material artifacts—which clearly resemble those here on earth—our work, and the things we build and create here and now, will echo into eternity. The picture of a “city” by definition encapsulates not just the people, but also the work of their hands.

Looking back to the study on Isaiah 6, we see that the things we create and the culture we build powerfully reflects the glory of God. He is not going to trash this earth and forfeit all of history; he will not “forsake the work of his hands. In faithfulness, he upholds his creation order.”¹² He is instead going to redeem it. Through refining and purifying fire, he will strip away the brokenness, the tears, and the pain. And it is not just our “Christian” work like evangelism or Bible teaching that will last, but all the “work of our hands” like our architecture, and our art. It’s important to note that our work here and now does not “directly” build the city. “The Holy City comes ‘down out of heaven from God’ (Rev. 21:12); the Lord is its ‘builder and maker’ (Heb. 11:10).”¹³ Nonetheless, we have the opportunity to create beauty and good that will last. Our whole perspective on work changes with this reality in mind.

Though precisely how our work will echo into eternity is beyond our imagination, we are assured that “our marks are permanent.”¹⁴ Richard Mouw explains it like this:

Human culture will someday be transformed, and we are called to await the coming transformation. But we should wait actively, not passively. We must seek the City which is to come. We can call human institutions to obedience to the Creator. When we invite the manufacturers of

weapons to devote themselves to making instruments of peace, we are seeking the City in whose midst swords will be beaten to plowshares. When we propose programs of racial justice, we are actively preparing for the day when the new song to the Lamb will fill the earth. And in a very special and profound way, we prepare for life in the City when we work actively to bring about healing and obedience within the community of the people of God.¹⁵

We will continue to work in the New Jerusalem.

The continuity between this life and the next means that there is a very good chance that we will work in heaven. God has not stopped working—nor will he ever—and as creatures made in his image, we will also continue the work of dominion, service, and care for creation.¹⁶ But as we’ve seen, our work will be done without toil or frustration. Without the curse of sin, our labor will be completely satisfying. Isaiah 65 says, “They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit” (v. 11). It’s almost impossible to know for sure what our work will look like in the New Jerusalem, but what’s most important to note is that we will not be disembodied souls floating around in heaven for eternity; we will exist in resurrected bodies, continuing to rule and work as God originally intended.

Our work will be fulfilled in the New Jerusalem.

Looking back to Genesis, we remember that because of the fall, our work became toil. Adam and Eve’s decision to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil brought about a curse that has stretched all the way to our modern workplaces. This is seen in the fact that “everyone imagines accomplishing things, and everyone finds him- or herself largely incapable of producing them.”¹⁷ But even though we experience frustration in our work today, and are rarely, if ever, able to complete every project we begin, we can rest in the assurance that our work will be fulfilled and completed in the New Jerusalem with God’s final victory over sin.

In *Every Good Endeavor*, Tim Keller tells the tale of J. R. R. Tolkien’s “Leaf by Niggle.” In this short story, Tolkien describes Niggle, a perfectionist who was unable to finish his masterpiece—a painting of a tree—before his death.

Devastated by his unfinished work, he miraculously finds his completed painting in the afterlife, part of the reality in which he will enjoy forever.¹⁸ Keller goes on to assure us that “there really is a tree;”¹⁹ “there is a future healed world” in which our work will come to ultimate fruition.²⁰

Isaiah 60 says that “Your sun shall no longer go down, Nor shall your moon withdraw itself” (v. 20). Similarly, Revelation 21 says that “[God] will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.’ And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new’” (v. 4-5). In the New Jerusalem, where the *shalom* of God prevails, we will experience true justice, beauty, joy, community, and harmony, and our work will be filled with satisfaction and joy, free from sin, toil, frustration, and corruption.²¹

God will redeem *everything* for his glory.

In Isaiah 60, goods of all kinds—precious metals, livestock, and the riches of the earth—are being brought into Jerusalem. All of these “signs of pagan cultural strength or displays of alien power”²² and everything once associated with greed and human pride are now being brought into the city for a *new* purpose.

They are to serve God and his people.²³ The camels are to “proclaim the praise of the Lord” (Isa. 60:6), the ships of Tarshish bring precious metals “for the name of the Lord” (Isa. 60:9).²⁴ Earlier in Isaiah, we even hear of swords being beaten into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks (Isa. 2:4). Artifacts once created for destruction are now being used for cultivation in the New Jerusalem. There is a repurposing of everything, even those things created for destructive purposes. This helps us to again see that our work matters to God, even work that we might initially think of as being unimportant to eternal realities or that we might look down upon.

There are no limits to how God will transform and redeem even the most destructive and exploitative artifacts and put them to good use in the New Jerusalem. This all makes sense if we remember that “the earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it” (Ps. 24:1 NIV).

He will take those things we have perverted, that were originally intended for good, and reclaim them for his glory and service.

We will have all eternity to explore all that we were unable to do in this life because of the ramifications of sin.

We do not have to put all the weight of all our hopes and expectations on this lifetime. So much of what can paralyze our ability to follow God's call for our lives is our fear of missing out or making a decision that will make our lives turn out very differently than we hope. However, knowing that our home awaits us with the return of Christ, we will have the rest of eternity to explore all the different sides of our personalities and interests in the sin-free context of New Jerusalem. Whatever we surrender or sacrifice in this life will be returned to us a hundred times over in the age to come. This good news allows us to be fully present in the moment so that we can be faithful with what God has placed in front of us.

3. HOW DOES UNDERSTANDING THE END OF THE REDEMPTIVE NARRATIVE AND THE COMING OF NEW JERUSALEM BRING INCREDIBLE HOPE AND MEANING TO THE WORK WE DO TODAY?

Participants will share their personal reflections on how the passage brings them hope.

GROUP PRAYER

Take some time to break up into groups of three to thank God that our work is not in vain, even though we don't always know exactly how he is using our work. Pray for greater trust that God is using our work to advance his kingdom, and ask for greater faithfulness to carry out our work with the New Jerusalem in mind.

HOMEWORK

Practice the Prayer of Discernment each day this week (below).

In light of this study, answer the following questions on the given days:

- **Monday:** How does the possibility that your work today could last into all eternity change your perspective on the value of your work?
- **Tuesday:** What would it look like for Jesus to redeem the work that you do? Imagine what your work would look like in New Jerusalem.
- **Wednesday:** How do you respond to the notion that we will be able to work for all eternity unhindered by the effects of sin?
- **Thursday:** How does knowing that you have all eternity to explore the possible versions of your story impact the way you think about your work choices? How does this affect your contentment with your current circumstances?
- **Friday:** What kind of work would you like to explore in New Jerusalem?

PRAYER OF DISCERNMENT

Opening prayer of invitation: Becoming aware of God's presence throughout the day (2 min)

- Sit comfortably in stillness for two minutes.
- Be reminded that our God brings structure out of the chaos of our days.

- Invite the Holy Spirit who searches our hearts to guide you through this prayer.

Reviewing the past day's events (3 min)

- Remembering that each day is a gift from the Lord, review your day and write down a basic chronology of what happened.
- Does any particular event, meeting, conversation, or interaction stand out to you? In the rush of our days, it is easy to overlook so much. Think about the things you ate, saw, smelled, and heard. Remember that God is even in these details.

Considering your emotions (3 min)

- Our emotions are an important expression of the desires in our hearts; however, we can become unaware of our emotions given the frantic pace of our lives. When we are not aware of our emotions and the desires that underlie them, our idols can gain strength and power in our lives.
- Reflect on the day's events and list the feelings that you experienced throughout the day—fear, anxiety, boredom, happiness, resentment, elation, hope, anger, compassion, etc.

Choose one feature of the day and pray for it (3 min)

- As you examine the events and emotions of the day, ask the Holy Spirit to guide you to something that God wants you to pay a bit more attention to. This can be something unexpected or seemingly insignificant at first glance. It can be something positive or negative.
- Pray for this particular thing. How would God want you to pray for this? What could God be wanting you to know or learn? How could He be affirming you or leading you to change?

- Remember that the gospel is at work in this issue.

Closing prayer: Looking towards tomorrow (2 min)

- Remember that God patiently leads us each day. Today's mistakes are redeemable, and today's victories do not guarantee success tomorrow. How might you be able to carry forward what you've learned today and apply it tomorrow?
- What action can you take tomorrow as an expression of faith and dependence upon God's abounding grace?
- Ask that you would be more aware of God's guiding presence tomorrow.

- ¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001).
- ² Brian Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 378.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 115.
- ⁵ Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basis for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 48.
- ⁶ Blount, 376.
- ⁷ Wilfrid Harrington, *Revelation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 207.
- ⁸ Craig Koester, *Revelation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 794.
- ⁹ Blount, 376.
- ¹⁰ Harrington, 210.
- ¹¹ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith* (Leicester, England: IVP, 1999), 465.
- ¹² Wolters, 47.
- ¹³ Richard Mouw, *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 19.
- ¹⁴ Paul Stevens, *Work Matters: Lessons from Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 158.
- ¹⁵ Mouw, 129.
- ¹⁶ Stevens, 163.
- ¹⁷ Timothy Keller, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2012), 30.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 24-30.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 30.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Mouw, 23.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Ibid.

PARTICIPANTS GUIDE

WEEK 1

The Origins of Calling



INTRODUCTION

Do we live to work or work to live?

What good does work bring to our lives?

Is work purely a means to an end, or does it carry intrinsic value and purpose?

To answer these important questions, we must determine the meaning of work and its connection to the larger Biblical notion of *calling*. This study begins with Creation. As we'll see, Genesis 1 sets forth that calling is first about knowing the Caller, not the call itself. Calling is not a job description or a gut feeling; it goes beyond occupation and integrates what we do (our purpose) with who we are (our identity).

In this passage, we are introduced to a God who declares purpose and identity over his creation—a God who, at the pinnacle moment of creation, forms humanity in his image. What this means is that he entrusts them to *continue* the work of creation; their calling is to be like their Creator.

Keep this emphasis in mind as you read the following passage.

SCRIPTURE: GENESIS 1

¹In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ²The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

³And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

⁶And God said, “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” ⁷And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. ⁸And God called the expanse Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

⁹And God said, “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. ¹⁰God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

¹¹And God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth.” And it was so. ¹²The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ¹³And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

¹⁴And God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, ¹⁵and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. ¹⁶And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ¹⁷And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on

the earth, ¹⁸to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

²⁰And God said, “Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens.” ²¹So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ²²And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” ²³And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

²⁴And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.” And it was so. ²⁵And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the livestock according to their kinds, and everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

²⁷So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

²⁸And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” ²⁹And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. ³⁰And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. ³¹And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. What does this text reveal about the nature and character of God?**
- 2. What do we learn about our role and sense of identity in the world?**
- 3. How does this text affect the way you see work and calling?**
- 4. In what ways are you discouraged, discontent, or disengaged at work?**
- 5. How does gospel address and redeem your attitude and circumstances?**

HOPE EXERCISE

This short exercise is designed to help you take areas of your work that cause you anxiety, trouble, and/or burden, and to consider how, through the gospel, God might be using these very issues to bring renewal to you and your work. (The entire exercise should take around 15 minutes. There are time suggestions for each section to indicate how long to spend on each question.)

- 1. What one work-related task/project/issue drains, burdens, or troubles you? (2 min)**
- 2. As you consider your answers to the previous question, read/listen to Psalm 42. (5 min)**

Psalm 42

¹As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.

²My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? ³My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, “Where is your God?”

⁴These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:

how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival.

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 ⁶and my God.

My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.

⁷Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me.

⁸By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.

⁹I say to God, my rock: “Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?”

¹⁰As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me all the day long, “Where is your God?”

¹¹Why 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.

3. As the Psalmist faces various difficulties and challenges, he asks himself the important question: “Why are you cast down, O my soul?” When you think of your struggles at work, why do these issues trouble you? What is it that you want from this situation that is disappointing you? Where are you putting your hope? (3 min)

4. What would it look like to trust that God knows about this issue and is taking care of you? How could having hope in this situation expand your vision of what God is doing in your life, in the lives of your coworkers, and in the church? (3 min)

5. In light of this hope placed in the gospel, consider three actions you could take that would reflect a dependence upon God and his grace towards you. Make this your prayer. (2 min)

HOMework

The following two sections have reflection questions for your group to consider throughout the workweek. The first section does not require further reading or material. For the second section, use the *NIV Faith and Work Bible* as further reading material. Your group can decide which version of the homework they prefer to do.

- **Monday:** As you look back on the past week, would you say your work was more of an expression of your identity as a child of God, more as the source of your identity? Were you confident in the security of the gospel, or did you find yourself responding to challenges with fear, anxiety, and frustration?
- **Tuesday:** God calls us to reign (steward) over this world, which includes our work. In what ways is your work ruling you instead of you ruling your work? Do you exercise the power that God has conferred to you as a creation made in his image and wield this power in his likeness?
- **Wednesday:** How are you cultivating and filling this world through your work? How are you interacting with raw materials and resources to bring about greater flourishing around you (in both material and human)?

- **Thursday:** How do you demonstrate creative capacity in your work? How can you think more creatively about the work you've been given?
- **Friday:** What aspect of your work do you have to subdue? What poses a threat to the flourishing of your work, and how can you actively pray for these challenging elements of your workplace that keep you and others from thriving?

OPTIONAL HOMEWORK

This daily homework is optional and will require the *NIV Faith and Work Bible*. These readings will reinforce the teaching of each week's bible study. For the following days, read the "Deeper in Truth" and "Deeper at Work" sections and reflect on the questions below.

- **Monday:** God - Creator (Genesis 1:1)
 - o How does seeing yourself as God's image bearer shape the way you think about work?
 - o Do you tend to find the source of your identity in your work, or do you see your work as an expression of your identity?
- **Tuesday:** Humanity - Cultural Mandate (Genesis 1:28)
 - o How does your work bring order and flourishing to your company or community?
 - o How does your work contribute to the common good, the well being of others, and the improvement of the world?
- **Wednesday:** Humanity - The Fall (Genesis 3:6)
 - o How might your sin affect your coworkers and even the quality of your work?
 - o In what ways do you see Christ's redemption in your work, despite the frustrations you experience as a result of the fall?
- **Thursday:** Humanity - Image of God (Genesis 9:6)
 - o When you think of your coworkers, do you see them as people

created in God's divine image—worthy of dignity and value? Or do you see them as merely a means to your own personal gain, maybe even sometimes treating them as sub-human?

- o How does the truth of the gospel and the grace of God help you better represent God to those with whom you interact each day?

- **Friday:** Humanity - Sabbath (Leviticus 23:3)

- o How are you practicing Sabbath as part of your regular work rhythms? If you aren't practicing it, what are some ways you might begin to incorporate this practice into your life?

WEEK 2

The Hope of Calling



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 feel frustrated, out of control, or hopeless.

SCRIPTURE: EZEKIEL 37

¹The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in 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.’ ¹²Therefore prophesy, 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?

2. What does the Spirit of the Lord do in this text? How does this apply to the Spirit’s role in our lives today?

3. Who is Ezekiel, and what is his response to this experience?

4. What implications do you see for your work from this text?

GROUP PRAYER

As a group, discuss your personal experience of work through the following questions.

- 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.
- 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? What might God be at work renewing?

In groups of three, pray about these complaints, and ask to see how the Lord is at work even in these areas. Pray for wisdom and discernment to see his grace at work to bring change to these areas.

HOMework

The following two sections have reflection questions for your group to consider throughout the workweek. The first section does not require further reading or material. For the second section, use the *NIV Faith and Work Bible* as further reading material. Your group can decide which version of the homework they prefer to do.

As a supplement for this and the coming weeks, consider using the *Lectio Divina* appendix to meditate on a scripture before you begin your homework reflection each day.

- **Monday:** 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.
- **Tuesday:** 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?
- **Wednesday:** 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? What might God be at work renewing and calling you to participate in?
- **Thursday:** 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?
- **Friday:** How might the Spirit of God be giving you a new sense of mission and purpose, calling you to mediate his power in your workplace?

OPTIONAL HOMEWORK

This daily homework is optional and will require the *NIV Faith and Work Bible*. These readings will reinforce the teaching of each week’s bible study. For the following days, read the “Deeper in Truth” and “Deeper at Work” sections and reflect on the questions below.

- **Monday:** Humanity – Sin (Joshua 7:20-23)
 - o Is someone sinning against you at work? How does it dehumanize you?
 - o How might your sinning against others dehumanize them?

- **Tuesday:** Church – Cultural Engagement (1 Kings 5:1-12)
 - o In your own job, what are some ways you might be flexible for the overall success and harmony of your workplace?
 - o What should you not compromise on to avoid losing your distinctiveness as a Christian?

- **Wednesday:** Redemption – Faith (Job 19:25-27)
 - o What would it look like to see your work in light of God’s abounding grace? How would your attitude change? Your actions?
 - o How does faith in Christ change the way you view the risks you are called to take in obedience to God?

- **Thursday:** Cosmic Pneumatology (Job 33:4)
 - o How do you see the Spirit of God at work among your coworkers in the calling of creating and sustaining, even in the mundane and ordinary tasks?
 - o How can you better recognize, honor and appreciate the Spirit’s work at your work?

- **Friday:** Vice-Regents (Psalm 45:16-17)
 - o How do you exercise your vice-regency in your workplace? How can you lead while also serving others?
 - o 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?

APPENDIX: 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.

- 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 min)

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 (6 min)

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 min)

In the second movement, 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 min)

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 min)

This final moment 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 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.

WEEK 3

The Context of Calling



INTRODUCTION

To understand the expectations that surround and shape our calling, context is critical. The Israelite's time of exile helped them respond to what God was calling them to with the ultimate hope of Christ renewing all things. God uses exile to restore his people's sense of identity and realign them with himself.

In our own context today, we work in somewhat of an exile of our own. This requires a paradigm shift, upheaving our expectations of and for daily work. In exile, God calls us to seek the good of people and institutions who do not seek our good. Building upon what was introduced last week: "The very reasons you want to leave your job or field may be the exact reasons God is calling you to stay."

SCRIPTURE: JEREMIAH 29

¹These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ²This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem. ³The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan and Gemariah the son of Hilkiyah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. It said: ⁴"Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. ⁶Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in

marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. ⁸For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the LORD.

¹⁰“For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. ¹²Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. ¹³You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How do we see God using exile to correct and reconcile his people to their true identity and purpose?

2. In what ways are we exiles today?

3. How does the theme of exile shape our understanding of work?

4. Where are you currently experiencing frustration in your work? What people, projects, or responsibilities feel fruitless, discouraging, or strife-laden?

5. In exile God sends his people to areas of brokenness so that his redemptive power can be at work. As you consider these experiences, how might the reality of working in exile change your perspective on these issues?

6. What do you think God wants to remind you of as you consider how he's working in the frustrations of your current work situations?

GROUP PRAYER

Your group leader will lead you through the Prayer of Examen, attached in the Appendix. At the end of this process, break into small groups to pray over the situations in your work where you are an exile and to ask how God might be using you to seek the welfare of those who do not seek yours.

HOMework

The following two sections have reflection questions for your group to consider throughout the workweek. The first section does not require further reading or material. For the second section, use the *NIV Faith and Work Bible* as further reading material. Your group can decide which version of the homework they prefer to do.

As a supplement for this and the coming weeks, consider using the *Lectio Divina* appendix to meditate on a scripture before you begin your homework reflection each day.

- **Monday:** Do you feel like an exile at work? If so, what makes you feel this way?

- **Tuesday:** Think about a tough workplace situation from this past week. What expectations shape your understanding of that situation—are you operating more from Jerusalem or Exile expectations?
- **Wednesday:** What does it mean—specifically in *your* work situation—for you to seek the good of those who don't seek yours?
- **Thursday:** How can you critically engage this situation in a way that reflects your calling to be set apart in exile while still seeking the good of those who don't seek yours?
- **Friday:** What does it look like for you to be resilient in this situation? How does God's call to persevere change your demeanor and actions in this situation as you consider the big picture of God's calling in your life?

APPENDIX: PRAYER OF EXAMEN

In the midst of the chaos of life, we can go on for days or weeks divorcing our world from God's gracious and guiding presence; the results can be a frightening unawareness of our own hearts. We become a stranger to our own selves, and we easily become unaware of the grace that surrounds us. The Daily Examen was a form of prayer developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Jesuit Order, to help Christians become more self-aware and aware of Christ's presence in the midst of daily life. The goal of this adapted Prayer of Examen is to help us better understand our own selves, particularly our emotional lives, in light of God's daily gracious presence through a series of daily questions.

Emotions are an important part of what it means to be created in God's image; it may surprise you to see how emotional God is throughout the Scriptures. Yet, in our modern world we seldom have the time and discipline to think about our emotional lives. We feel emotions all the time, but often

they become either over- or under-expressed, and this distortion can lead us away from God’s truth and grace. The gospel is at work to sanctify our emotions as much as any other part of our being, and this devotional will help you examine the emotions that are associated with the events of your day. By becoming more aware of our emotional lives, we not only begin to know ourselves better, but we come to know how God is active and present in our daily lives.

The Prayer of Examen can be practiced either at the beginning or the end of the day—whichever time you are most clear-headed. Ideally, begin your time reading Scripture for 15 minutes.

Opening prayer of invitation: Becoming aware of God’s presence throughout the day (2 min)

- Sit comfortably in stillness for two minutes.
- Be reminded that our God brings structure out of the chaos of our days.
- Invite the Holy Spirit who searches our hearts to guide you through this prayer.

Reviewing the past day’s events (3 min)

- Remembering that each day is a gift from the Lord, review your day and write down a basic chronology of what happened.
- Does any particular event, meeting, conversation, or interaction stand out to you? In the rush of our days, it is easy to overlook so much. Think about the things you ate, saw, smelled, and heard. Remember that God is even in these details.

Considering your emotions (3 min)

- Our emotions are an important expression of the desires in our

hearts; however, we can become unaware of our emotions given the frantic pace of our lives. When we are not aware of our emotions and the desires that underlie them, our idols can gain strength and power in our lives.

- Reflect on the day's events and list the feelings that you experienced throughout the day— fear, anxiety, boredom, happiness, resentment, elation, hope, anger, compassion, etc.

Choose one feature of the day and pray for it (3 min)

- As you examine the events and emotions of the day, ask the Holy Spirit to guide you to something that God wants you to pay a bit more attention to. This can be something unexpected or seemingly insignificant at first glance. It can be something positive or negative.
- Pray for this particular thing. How would God want you to pray for this? What could God be wanting you to know or learn? How could He be affirming you or leading you to change?
- Remember that the gospel is at work in this issue.

Closing prayer: Looking towards tomorrow (2 min)

- Remember that God patiently leads us each day. Today's mistakes are redeemable, and today's victories do not guarantee success tomorrow. How might you be able to carry forward what you've learned today and apply it tomorrow?
- What action can you take tomorrow as an expression of faith and dependence upon God's abounding grace?
- Ask that you would be more aware of God's guiding presence tomorrow.

WEEK 4

The Purpose of Calling



INTRODUCTION

The Westminster Catechism begins with the question, “What is the chief end of man?” The answer is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. If the ultimate purpose for our lives and what we do is to glorify God, where does work fit in?

Work often feels like a drudgery—something we have to endure in order to pay the bills. In these cases, work is reduced to its utilitarian value and becomes increasingly devoid of any intrinsic meaning. But how does the light of the gospel renew our work in such a way that we become increasingly aware of the deep fulfillment and purpose behind all work, even work that appears at face value to be mundane and repetitive?

How do we glorify God with our work, and what impact does that glory bring to our lives and work environments?

SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 6

¹In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ²Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”

⁴And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

⁶Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

⁸And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What do we know about the prophet Isaiah? What is the setting and context of this passage?

2. How do we as humans experience God’s holiness and glory?

3. How is the earth full of God’s glory?

4. How can we recognize and praise God for his glory in our day-to-day lives?

5. Where are you currently feeling encouraged in your work? What people, projects, or responsibilities have been life-giving or affirming?

6. As you consider these life-giving areas, focus on one that most encourages you. How might this be a tangible expression of God's glory? In what ways do you see God's character reflected in this particular area of your work?

GROUP PRAYER

Take some time to break up into groups of three to praise God for the glory you witness in your workplaces. Pray for areas of brokenness you're encountering. Pray also for wisdom and discernment to see how your work can all the more display the glory of God.

HOMEWORK

The following two sections have reflection questions for your group to consider throughout the workweek. The first section does not require further reading or material. For the second section, use the *NIV Faith and Work Bible* as further reading material. Your group can decide which version of the homework they prefer to do. Consider using the Prayer of Examen from last week's appendix as part of your homework each day as well.

In light of this study, answer the following questions on the given days:

- **Monday:** How can your work today express God's glory?
- **Tuesday:** What aspect of God's holiness and character will you make known through your work today?
- **Wednesday:** What aspects of your work lead you to worship God?

- **Thursday:** How can you express your worship to God appropriately during the course of your day?
- **Friday:** What difference does it make when you actually believe you are being sent into your work to witness God's glory?

OPTIONAL HOMEWORK

This daily homework is optional and will require the *NIV Faith and Work Bible*. These readings will reinforce the teaching of each week's bible study. For the following days, read the "Deeper in Truth" and "Deeper at Work" sections and reflect on the questions below.

- **Monday:** God – Glory (Isaiah 6:3)
 - o How does your work communicate who you are as God's image-bearer?
 - o How might your work communicate God's glory in the world?
- **Tuesday:** Church – Common Grace (Matthew 5:45)
 - o After considering the doctrine of common grace, reflect on some examples of this you see evidenced in your workplace.
- **Wednesday:** Christ – Incarnation (John 1:14)
 - o How might the incarnation of Christ lead you to love and serve those with whom you work?
- **Thursday:** God – Trinity (Mark 1:10)
 - o Respond to the statement "The goal of work is not self-promotion, therefore, but rather to love and serve others." How does your understanding of the Trinity affect your working relationships?
- **Friday:** Christ – Resurrection (Luke 24:33)
 - o How might the reality of Christ's resurrection bring a hopefulness to the work you do every day?

WEEK 5

The Discernment Needed in Calling



INTRODUCTION

At work, we are sometimes faced with difficult decisions where the path is not clear and the context is not black and white. These circumstances and the way in which we form decisions in the midst of them have consequences for us, our families, our coworkers, and perhaps even our organizations. How can God lead us through these challenging choices?

After the resurrection, Jesus says that it is better that he leaves his disciples (John 16:7) so that he can send the Spirit in his stead. Despite the seemingly unhelpful departure of Jesus, his Spirit is an invaluable gift to all believers as he is the one who brings to us a greater discernment. Christian maturity requires the Spirit's power and guidance in our lives and, especially in situations like those described above, in our work.

The Christian notion of calling is not a passive revelation of God's will as much as it is an active engagement of our discernment through the prompting of the Holy Spirit. God places us in difficult and broken places so that we can bring the hope and power of the gospel to light. This often requires risk and perseverance; we learn to depend upon wisdom from God in knowing how to navigate our work places and in making decisions that sometimes feel like we're stuck selecting the best of bad options.

SCRIPTURE: 1 CORINTHIANS 2

¹And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ²For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

⁶Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. ⁷But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹But, as it is written,

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”—

¹⁰these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹²Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

¹⁴The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. ¹⁶“For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. What is the historical context of this letter?**
- 2. What is at the heart of Paul's plea in this passage?**
- 3. According to Paul, how is the Spirit at work in the believer?**
- 4. What are the implications of this passage for your work?**

OTHER ASPECTS OF DISCERNMENT

1. Acting in Our New Nature

A life in Christ means we become new people—there is a shift that happens when we choose to follow the leading of the Spirit. Ephesians 5:8-10 says, “for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.” Paul encouraging the church to “Try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord” is the whole point. We are to *try*. The wisdom to know what this new life looks like comes from the Spirit. Lean in; dive in deep to “all that is good and right and true.”

2. Renewing Our Minds

Romans 12:2 says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” To discern God's will, we must continually renew our minds. This happens as we saturate our minds with God's Word and train our moral senses to discern what honors Christ and what doesn't, what shows love to people and what doesn't.

God wants us to become mature and conformed to his own character. When this happens, we see what is beautiful in Christ and in Christ's way. Once we love it, we choose it. If we choose a path of behavior because we see its fitness as a way of glorifying God, and honoring Christ, and helping people, then Christ is honored—we walk in the light.

3. Discerning Love

Philippians 1:9-11 says, “And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.” In order for our *love* to abound more and more, our knowledge and discernment must also abound more and more. The most loving thing to do is not always readily apparent, but to approve what is excellent is a matter of being pure and blameless; therefore, discernment is not a light matter. Still, we are filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, so we are able to discern as we ought; he has given us everything we need. From all we have seen above, the most loving thing may not be approved by human wisdom, but our faith does not rest in the wisdom of men but in the wisdom and power of God (1 Cor. 2:5).

4. Glorifying God

The beautiful pattern of discernment in the New Testament is rooted in transformation by the Spirit through the Word. We are called to glorify Christ in the way we make our choices. God is not mindless; we are not mindless; sanctification is not mindless; discernment is not mindless. We have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16). Therefore, we glorify God in our decision-making, not when we default to human wisdom, but when we act in our new nature, rooted in God's Word, sensitive to God's Spirit, discerning how best to love, and pursue the glory of God.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

1. Consider this past week of work. Is there a moment when you recall being able to discern the work of the Spirit:

- a. renewing your motivations for your work through a glimpse of God's glory,
- b. intentionally pointing you toward an interaction with a particular coworker,
- c. guiding you in the actual work itself?

2. What particular decisions do you need to make in the coming week that require increasing wisdom and the guiding discernment of the Spirit?

GROUP PRAYER

Take some time to break up into groups of three and pray for wisdom and discernment, especially amidst complex, difficult issues, to see how you can all the more display the glory of God in your decision-making.

HOMEWORK

The following two sections have reflection questions for your group to consider throughout the workweek. The first section does not require further reading or material. For the second section, use the *NIV Faith and Work Bible* as further reading material. Your group can decide which version of the homework they prefer to do. Consider using the Prayer of Discernment in the appendix as part of your homework each day as well.

In light of this study, answer the following questions on the given days:

- **Monday:** Can you sense the Spirit’s presence influencing your work or the work of you colleagues? What are the characteristics of the Spirit activity in your work? How would his presence be known by others looking for it?
- **Tuesday:** What would it look like to depend upon the Spirit’s power and God’s wisdom at work? What would be different from how you usually handle difficult or stressful situations?
- **Wednesday:** How can you make time today to become more aware of the Spirit’s presence and activity at work? How do you feel after taking this time to slow down and be more conscious of his presence?
- **Thursday:** Whom in your work community can you ask for counseling or advice? What issues or concerns can you discuss with this person to gain a wise and discerning perspective?
- **Friday:** Where is doubt leading you to be passive in your responses or decision-making? How can God’s power and wisdom lead you to more confidently engage these issues?

OPTIONAL HOMEWORK

This daily homework is optional and will require the *NIV Faith and Work Bible*. These readings will reinforce the teaching of each week’s bible study. For the following days, read the “Deeper in Truth” and “Deeper at Work” sections and reflect on the questions below.

- **Monday:** God – Sphere Sovereignty (Romans 1:20)
- **Tuesday:** Holy Spirit – Empowerment (Romans 15:19)
- **Wednesday:** Holy Spirit – Discernment (1 Corinthians 2:13)
- **Thursday:** Church – Ascension (Acts 1:9)

- **Friday:** Christ – The Son of Man (Acts 7:56)

APPENDIX: PRAYER OF DISCERNMENT

This exercise will take around 20 minutes to complete. Lead your group through reading the opening scripture and descriptions of consolation and desolation. Then lead them through the steps of the exercise (you may like to use a timer to signal when each new section has begun).

1 John 4:1-6 (NIV) says:

¹Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ²This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world. ⁴You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. ⁵They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

John teaches us that followers of Christ need to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God,” yet it is challenging for many Christians to have this kind of necessary discernment. We constantly face various decisions throughout the day, and we are in desperate need of this kind of discerning wisdom to guide us. So where can we find it? John’s exhortation is grounded in the reality that, as Christians, we have the Spirit of God who is able to

lead us to this kind of discernment. However, we are often oblivious to this grace which we have received. How can we grow in this kind of spiritual discernment?

Scripture teaches that we live in a world where sin, the flesh, and the devil are constantly leading us into deception, confusion, and darkness, but we often are oblivious to the impact of these various spiritual forces upon us. In our desire to live obediently and walk closely with God, we need to be aware of the influence of spiritual realities upon our lives and the lives of others. Once aware of them, we are able to pray against our real enemies. This area of spiritual discernment is critical for our personal growth and ability to wisely counsel others. As we look to Christ, we are empowered to overcome evil and live triumphantly in the power of the gospel.

Building on the Prayer of Examen devotional, we now move to the discipline of discernment as we consider two helpful concepts of consolation and desolation.

Spiritual Consolation

A consolation creates within the soul a love for God and the gospel. Consolations draw the individual towards God as he or she becomes more aware of their own inadequacy and the abounding nature of God's sufficient grace. Consolations make us more aware of the depth of God's love and care for us, which in turn moves us towards loving those around us. Consolation is what makes us more like Christ in his passions and service—his love for the marginalized and for justice. Finally, consolations increase faith, hope, love, peace, prayer, worship, and joy and makes our earthly calling clearer as it also draws us towards the hope of Christ's return and the renewal of all things. The desire to glorify God begins to displace the desire to seek our own glory.

Spiritual Desolation

Desolation, in contrast, is all those things that oppose and hinder spiritual consolations. Desolations arise from the sin that is both within the individual as well as from the evils that are external to us. Desolations darken the soul and contract our ability to experience the love of God. This then leads to a diminished capacity to love others. Desolations make us turn our focus

upon ourselves and our needs, our desires, our demands, and our schedules. Desolations lead us to lose sight of larger and more noble principles of life and love, of community and service. They lead us away from the light and warmth of the gospel, tempting us towards greater insecurity, coldness, anxiety, laziness, cowardice, fear, isolation, and sadness.

The key question in interpreting consolation and desolation is: Where is the movement coming from, and where is it leading me? Spiritual consolation does not always mean happiness or positive emotions, though it's tempting to think all good feelings come from God. Likewise, spiritual desolation does not always mean sadness or negative emotions. Sometimes an experience of sadness can be moment of deep intimacy with God. Times of human suffering and difficulty can lead to moments of great grace. Similarly, peace or happiness can be illusory if these feelings are helping us avoid changes we need to make. We must take the time to discern what the Lord is saying to us through these experiences.

DIRECTIONS

Discernment of spirits is a challenging task. It requires maturity, inner quiet, and the ability to reflect on one's internal life. Yet we also must be ready to improvise and adjust because God's Spirit works in each of us uniquely. This is why we need the encouragement and wisdom of trusted spiritual friends, advisors, and pastors.

The following directions will lead you through the Prayer of Discernment. Do this exercise at the end or beginning of each day, not only to help you become more aware of spiritual promptings, but also to lead you into a deeper intimacy with Christ.

Opening prayer of invitation: Becoming aware of God's presence throughout the day (2 min)

- Sit comfortably in stillness for two minutes.

- Be reminded that our God brings structure out of the chaos of our days.
- Invite the Holy Spirit who searches our hearts to guide you through this prayer.

Reviewing the past day's events (3 min)

- Remembering that each day is a gift from the Lord, review your day and write down a basic chronology of what happened.
- Does any particular event, meeting, conversation, or interaction stand out to you? In the rush of our days, it is easy to overlook so much. Think about the things you ate, saw, smelled, and heard. Remember that God is even in these details.

As you review the day, list the desolations you've experienced (4 min)

Desolations can:

- Turn our focus in on ourselves.
- Drive us down the spiral ever deeper into our own negative feelings.
- Cut us off from community.
- Make us want to give up on things that used to be important to us.
- Take over our whole consciousness and crowd out our broader vision.
- Cover up a sense of gratitude.

As you review the day, list the consolations you've experienced (4 min)

Consolations can:

- Direct our focus outside and beyond ourselves.
- Lift our hearts so that we can see the joys and sorrows of other people.
- Bond us more closely to our human community and draw out a love for them.

- Deepen our love for God.
- Restore balance and refresh our inner sense of calling and purpose.
- Show us where God is active in our lives and where he is leading us.

Closing prayer: Looking towards tomorrow (2 min)

- Pray to live more in the power and guidance of God's Spirit.

WEEK 6

The Fulfillment of Calling



INTRODUCTION

What is the end of the biblical narrative? What happens when Jesus returns? How would you answer these questions if someone asked? For many Christians, this is difficult to answer, yet the end of the story is a critical part in being able to discern our calling today.

This final session will explore the penultimate chapter of Scripture and draw profound implications for our work today from this vision of New Jerusalem. How does the vision of eternity begin to change the way we live faithfully today?

SCRIPTURE: REVELATION 21

¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

⁵And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water

of life without payment. ⁷The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. ⁸But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

⁹Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, “Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.” ¹⁰And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, ¹¹having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. ¹²It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed—¹³on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. ¹⁴And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

¹⁵And the one who spoke with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. ¹⁶The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal. ¹⁷He also measured its wall, 144 cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel’s measurement. ¹⁸The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, like clear glass. ¹⁹The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, ²⁰the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. ²¹And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass.

²²And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, ²⁵and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶They will

bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. ²⁷But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are some of the most striking aspects of this vision of Christ's return?

2. How does this passage address the importance of our work today?

3. How does understanding the end of the redemptive narrative and the coming of New Jerusalem bring incredible hope and meaning to the work we do today?

GROUP PRAYER

Take some time to break up into groups of three to thank God that our work is not in vain, even though we don't always know exactly how he is using our work. Pray for greater trust that God is using our work to advance his kingdom, and ask for greater faithfulness to carry out our work with the New Jerusalem in mind.

HOMEWORK

- Monday: How does the possibility that your work today could last into all eternity change your perspective on the value of your work?
- Tuesday: What would it look like for Jesus to redeem the work that you do? Imagine what your work would look like in New Jerusalem.
- Wednesday: How do you respond to the notion that we will be able to work for all eternity unhindered by the effects of sin?
- **Thursday:** How does knowing that you have all eternity to explore the possible versions of your story impact the way you think about your work choices? How does this affect your contentment with your current circumstances?
- **Friday:** What kind of work would you like to explore in New Jerusalem?

PRAYER OF DISCERNMENT

Opening prayer of invitation: Becoming aware of God's presence throughout the day (2 min)

- Sit comfortably in stillness for two minutes.
- Be reminded that our God brings structure out of the chaos of our days.
- Invite the Holy Spirit who searches our hearts to guide you through this prayer.

Reviewing the past day's events (3 min)

- Remembering that each day is a gift from the Lord, review your day and write down a basic chronology of what happened.
- Does any particular event, meeting, conversation, or interaction stand out to you? In the rush of our days, it is easy to overlook so much. Think about the things you ate, saw, smelled, and heard. Remember that God is even in these details.

Considering your emotions (3 min)

- Our emotions are an important expression of the desires in our hearts; however, we can become unaware of our emotions given the frantic pace of our lives. When we are not aware of our emotions and the desires that underlie them, our idols can gain strength and power in our lives.
- Reflect on the day's events and list the feelings that you experienced throughout the day— fear, anxiety, boredom, happiness, resentment, elation, hope, anger, compassion, etc.

Choose one feature of the day and pray for it (3 min)

- As you examine the events and emotions of the day, ask the Holy Spirit to guide you to something that God wants you to pay a bit more attention to. This can be something unexpected or seemingly insignificant at first glance. It can be something positive or negative.
- Pray for this particular thing. How would God want you to pray for this? What could God be wanting you to know or learn? How could He be affirming you or leading you to change?
- Remember that the gospel is at work in this issue.

Closing prayer: Looking towards tomorrow (2 min)

- Remember that God patiently leads us each day. Today's mistakes are redeemable, and today's victories do not guarantee success tomorrow. How might you be able to carry forward what you've learned today and apply it tomorrow?
- What action can you take tomorrow as an expression of faith and dependence upon God's abounding grace?
- Ask that you would be more aware of God's guiding presence tomorrow.

