

PRACTICE GUIDE

JOURNEYING IN THE WILDERNESS

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PARTICULARITY

VOCATION

What does abundant life look like, and how does loving God and our neighbor fit into our everyday life? The practice of vocation, or particularity, brings these concepts together. Take a moment and imagine living abundantly within the particulars of your world. Who is present? What is involved? Maybe living abundantly involves grandchildren or working in a chosen field. Maybe it imagines a medical breakthrough or food sustainability for people in your community. **God's vision for abundant life comes through particulars.**

Loving God and our neighbor is a simple command worthy of a lifetime commitment. A life shaped by this command weaves our story with God's story. **It is within real relationships and specific circumstances that God extends love and we receive it.** Missiologist Lesslie Newbigin says:

The Bible invites us to see the real human life as a life of shared relationships in a world of living creatures and created things, a life of mutual personal responsibility for the created world, its animal and vegetable life and its resources of soil and water and air. This, and no other, is the real human life, which is the object of God's blessing and of his saving purpose.

(*The Open Secret: Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, 69).

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*Journeying in the
Wilderness, 156*

VOCATION



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Journeying in the Wilderness, 157

The practice of particularity helps us discover a Christian way of life through our stations in life.

Our relationships, locations, and responsibilities are avenues for loving God and our neighbor and experiencing abundant life. Kathleen Cahalan, a professor of pastoral theology and ministry, uses *prepositions*—the grammatical part of speech—to discover the particularities of call. She uses prepositions because they demonstrate that vocation is “relational, dynamic, and multiple.” (*The Stories We Live: Finding God’s Calling All Around Us*, xi–xii.) They also “express the whole of our lives, even the places and experiences we never thought of as callings.” (Ibid.) She sums up calling in this simple statement: “I am called by God, to follow, as I am, from grief, for service, in suffering, through others, within God.” (Ibid.) These prepositions define how we can love the world with our own particularity.

God is the source of our callings. As unique, unrepeatable persons, our callings emerge from our God-given design. We discover our uniqueness across time in ordinary and transformational moments. While being aware of our gifts is important, the greater point is that God is the giver of those gifts. Given by God, we follow God into the world to love others as God loves us. Our callings give specificity to how we love God and our neighbor. That is both exciting and hard.

Try this exercise to illustrate the point: Think about your family and friends. What makes each of them unique? Now think about your co-workers, neighbors, and church acquaintances. What makes them unique? Reflect on the unique blend of gifts in your social circles. Now imagine God’s vast network of people across the world. What would the world be like if everyone was using their gifts to their fullest potential? Each is called by God to follow God *into* the world.

VOCATION

Sometimes callings take us away *from* people, places, and/or situations *in* the midst of suffering. These callings can be redemptive, as they release pain and move us toward health. In this process, callings emerge from both pain and joy. For example, at the age of twenty-five, I faced the end of a marriage. During that painful time, I talked with people who had similar experiences. Those conversations demonstrated God's love and were tangible ways the church accompanied me during a rough period. In that season, my calling was to receive. Later, as I healed, I was able to accompany others.

Callings extend outward—for service in the world. Callings reorient us from ourselves to the world. As we embrace God's love for us, God turns us toward our neighbor. Our lives are not centered on personal fulfillment or happiness; meaning comes by contributing to a greater good. God intends to sustain and transform life—through us. We may only see a small part of the transformation, but God is surely changing the world through our service to the world.

Our callings may come from different sources, but nearly always involve listening to and interacting with others. Through relationships and in community, God speaks and directs our lives. Both strangers and people we know may be avenues God uses to speak to us about how we might serve the world. Relationships are a petri dish for callings to be birthed and grown.

God not only dwells in the world; God also dwells within us. Paul says in



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1 Corinthians 3:16 NIV, “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst?” Sometimes, we sense God working in us, and sometimes, God seems silent. Either way, God is present. It is true for the young and curious as well as for the old and reflective.

We are always becoming the creatures God created us to be. Our wilderness journey can be a time of abundance, discovery, experimentation, and/or suffering—and we never know how it will present itself. A family friend discovered a new calling after a stroke. As he spent his final years in an assisted living facility, his spirit shone bright as his smiles and infectious love left its mark on the staff and residents. Ken knew God’s calling throughout his life, but it never was as important as when he was confined to a wheelchair. God’s Spirit is in us, allowing us to be a light in the world and a vehicle for loving others in the particularities of our lives.

We are God’s beloved people, called to love the world. Each day, in each season, God’s people love others through their relationships, roles, and responsibilities.

How is God calling you today?
Where has God been active in your story?
How might God be pulling you into in the future?

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