

Week 3 – The Context of Calling

First Day:

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 Jehoiachin 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.

¹⁰For 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 get 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?

Exile is where God summons obedience through suffering. 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. We are called to glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character, and character, hope. 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. God had not forsaken His people. On the contrary, during their time of exile, God’s faithful promises work a profound newness. Jesus is fiercely present – everywhere, in every situation.

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. 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.

2. In what ways are we exiles today?

Second Day:

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.” 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.”

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

From “The Faith and Work Bible” Page 944

I was young and idealistic when I first arrived at the university to teach philosophy. While I have always been a conscientious person by nature, my new job seemed to take more time and energy than I expected. As a result, I worked incredibly hard those first few years.

Since I was raised in a community that over-spiritualized full-time Christian ministry, I often felt guilty about how much time I was devoting to my job. Work outside of the church, I was taught, was “secular” and therefore unimportant.

Over the years, though, as I taught and cared for students, I began to see how my work could honor God. I began to see the sacred-secular divide as fiction. Work, I discovered, could be a form of worship, an opportunity to live wholeheartedly and fully devoted to the Lord. “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” (1 Cn 10:31)

But how does a Christian teach philosophy in a “secular” setting? The accepted norm in academia is that the personal beliefs of the professor have no place in the classroom. But there is no such thing as neutrality in teaching, especially with a subject like philosophy. Jesus calls Christians to live as light in dark places. (Mt 5:14)

So I experimented with different ways to be open and honest about my faith. With each approach, I would warn my students, with a smile, that they were “stuck” with a philosopher who was a Christian and that my faith would color everything I said in the classroom.

Introductory ethics courses were always my favorite to teach. In these classes, as we explored various foundations for objective and universal ethical norms, including the Judeo-Christian foundation, I would challenge my students’ rampant relativism. At the end of one semester, a student wrote in his evaluation, “This was a great class. Unfortunately, you opened up my conscience; is there another class I could take to shut it off?”

Another challenging aspect of my career is navigating university politics and administration. As a Christian, I am called not only to live a holy life at a personal level, but also to fight against evil at a systemic level – in my classroom, on my campus and in my industry. Just as God called the Jewish exiles “to seek the peace and prosperity of the city” to which they were exiled (Jer 29:4-8), so also am I called to work for the common good and human flourishing in my sphere of influence - not triumphantly, but humbly.

For me, the key is to name evil and injustice for what it is. This is not an easy task, and it is not always well received. Surprisingly, though, sometimes it is. Shortly after our new vice president was promoted, he sent me a note, saying, “I have always considered you to be the conscience of the college.”

2. 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?

Third Day: Isaiah 44:24 –

“This is what the Lord says – your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the LORD, the Maker of all things, who stretches out the heavens, who spreads out the earth by myself.”

1. How do you see your work as being patterned after God’s work?

From “The Work and Faith Bible, Page 875 (taken from “Every Good Endeavor”)

If we want to truly understand the purpose and nature of work, we cannot neglect the creation narrative. Unfortunately, many fierce debates have occurred over the proper reading of Genesis 1, specifically regarding how to understand modern science in light of the biblical text, and vice-versa. However, as we read this text, it reveals some fundamental truths about how God’s work during these six days brings meaning to our work.

Tim Keller helps unpack the significance of this pattern in his book “Every Good Endeavor.

“When God first creates the material world, he does not have it spring into being all ready-made. Rather, it is “formless” and “empty”. God then addresses these conditions progressively during Genesis 1 – through his work. He gives the world form. Where it is unshaped and undifferentiated, he distinguishes and elaborates. He takes the general and separates it into particulars, for example, “separating” sky from sea (1:7) and light from darkness (1:4). We even see this love of diversity in God’s creation of Eve. God could easily have created humanity in only one form but instead created us in two genders, different and complementary, yet equal. The creation of Adam and Eve as gendered beings leads to biological procreation, another way in which we are, as beings in his image, carrying on the work he began at the beginning. And where things are empty, God fills them. On the first three days he creates realms (heavens, sky, and waters, earth), and on the second three days he fills each realm with inhabitants (sun, moon and stars, birds and fish, animals and humans).

2. How might the issues you encounter at work be opportunities for God to show His glory?

Fourth Day:

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.

- 1. 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?**

From “Every Good Endeavor” Page 186

God is Creator of the world, and our work mirrors His creative work when we create culture that conforms to His will and vision for human beings – when it matches up with the biblical story line. Yet theologians speak not only of God’s creation, but also of His providence. God does not simply create; He also loves, cares for and nurtures His creation. He feeds and protects all He has made. But how does His providential care reach us? As we have seen in earlier chapters, especially in the teaching of Martin Luther, God’s loving care comes to us largely through the labor of others. Work is a major instrument of God’s providence; it is how He sustains the human world.

- 2. 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?**

Fifth Day:

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. 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.

- 1. What does it look like for you to be resilient in your situation? How does God’s call to persevere change your demeanor and actions on this situation as you consider the big picture of God’s calling in your life?**

From “The Faith and Work Bible” Page 1057

The media’s romanticized depiction of the oil business is for the most part true. We work hard and play hard. People have wet bars in their offices. I know guys who have been offered girls or drugs or both in recruitment interviews.

For many people in my line of work, this kind of social life is just a part of the job, because so much of our business is built on relationships. Our company deals with crude oil from the time it comes out of the ground to when it’s sold, which means we work with thousands of people – from truck drivers to facilities managers to buyers.

In order to get the kinds of deals that we need to succeed, we have to cultivate relationships. We have a budget for entertaining clients. In annual reviews, we evaluate how much money we spend on our customers, and we’re usually encouraged to spend more.

In my industry, it's also common to invite clients on out-of-town trips, where invitations specify "No wives, No family." Before I went on my first trip my wife and I talked about how I should navigate the trip. I made a few rules, such as going to bed at midnight, which I also kept on subsequent trips. For years, I'd get ribbed by colleagues for being straight-laced. The more I consistently kept my rules, though, the less they cared. It helped that I didn't distance myself from them, but took care of them when, say, they drank too much and needed help getting back to their rooms.

I love these men. No, we don't agree on the fundamentals of reality. I'm the only Christian in my office. But together we pursue a common goal: to build a great company. In the process, we have become like family. They are some of the most generous, kind and loyal men I know. They are good guys, but they are lost.

Ironically, these friendships often feel stronger to me than the ones I have at church. Friendships forged by a love for Christ have the power to be incredibly deep. Too often, though, they're built on a veneer of holiness. Work friendships, however, are built on brokenness and authenticity. We are real with each other about some of the most embarrassing areas of our lives. All too often shame keeps Christians isolated from one another.

Over the past eight years, I have had many conversations with coworkers that are just now bearing fruit. Recently, for example, I talked with a guy about taking out a client. He said to me, "let's do anything except drink. I'm just trying to go three to six months without drinking." If he were talking to someone else at the company, rather than the truth, he would probably give some excuse for not drinking. Over time he has come to know that I will accept him no matter what. I like working in this industry because it gives me opportunities to work toward a common goal with people unlike me, and to love and serve them as Christ would.

2. 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?

Sixth Day:

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 underline 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.

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 to which God wants you to pay a bit more attention. 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.