

# The Blessing of Human Vocation

## Pastors' School, 1996

*(by Don Priest)*

### **The LORD builds the house**

'Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved' (Psalm 127:1, 2).

It would seem that Solomon, in writing Psalm 127, has in mind the kingdom promised to his father in 2 Samuel 7:11b–14a, 16: 'The LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me . . . Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.'

David knew that this kingdom was significant for all peoples, and that this significance included his—and his people's—unworthiness of such a calling by the Lord God 'for there is no one like you, and there is no God besides you' who has redeemed and established his people (2 Samuel 7:18–29). The house, then, is primarily the Temple, but also the Palace of the King—as well as each family home in the kingdom (cf. 1 Kings 4:25; Micah 4:4; Zechariah 3:10).

This further unveiling of God's covenant with his people has the Noahic, Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants in mind—as well as God's initial act of creation (including humanity). Each of these covenants spoke of God's provision of a family and of their home where God's propitious mercy and grace would be their life and their worship.

### **East of Eden**

Cain also knew—at least from his parents—that this was God's purpose in creation, but remained committed to his course (Genesis 4:17). His descendants were vengeful and violent (Genesis 4:18–24, 6:1–7, 11:1–9).

This brings futility to all. Its results are clear enough: 'So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind. I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me—and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity' (Ecclesiastes 2:17–19).

In Revelation 18:7, 8 a voice from heaven details God's judgements on Babylon—the city that completes the sequence begun with the one that Cain built 'east of Eden' and named it after his son: 'As she glorified herself and lived luxuriously, so give her a like measure of torment and grief. Since in her heart she says, "I rule as a queen; I am no widow, and I will never see grief," therefore her plagues will come in a single day—pestilence and mourning and famine—and she will be burned with fire; for mighty is the Lord God who judges her'.

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I met a traveller from an antique land  
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away (Shelley).

### **O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!**

The people of God are to conquer *in* Babylon. This conquest is simple—it is the covenant life in which Abel, Seth, and all God's people have lived. Jeremiah wrote to the exiles in Babylon along these lines: 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take 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. 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' (Jeremiah 29:1–7). Ezekiel and Daniel are a great encouragement to us of what this means—as was Joseph in his day.

The victory is not our own doing, it is God's work among us: 'O LORD, you will ordain peace for us, for indeed, all that we have done, you have done for us. O LORD our God, other lords besides you have ruled over us, but we acknowledge your name alone. The dead do not live; shades do not rise—because you have punished and destroyed them, and wiped out all memory of them. But you have increased the nation, O LORD, you have increased the nation; you are glorified; you have enlarged all the borders of the land. O LORD, in distress they sought you, they poured out a prayer when your chastening was on them. Like a woman with child, who writhes and cries out in her pangs when she is near her time, so were we because of you, O LORD; we were with child, we writhed, but we gave birth only to wind. We have won no victories on earth, and no one is born to inhabit the world. Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead' (Isaiah 26:12–19).

John describes Jesus' humanity: 'He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God' (John 1:11–13). Jesus' ministry is embraced by his cleansings of the Temple, as the Temple—as the true Tabernacle of God among us (John 1:14–18; 2:13–22; Matthew 21:12–17). In him, and in him alone, are God's purposes in creation and covenant fulfilled. He is his 'Father's house' that the house of his Father may be the 'house of prayer for all nations' when he, in being 'lifted up', gathers all humanity to himself—in and by his death on the cross (John 11:49–52; 12:27ff.).

Under Moses Israel was taken out of Egypt to be God's family in the Promised Land; the exiles were to return home according to God's promises, but it is only through Jesus that the Family comes Home (John 14:1ff.). Jesus' ministry—including his promise to the dying thief in Luke 23:43—reveals this to us, as do his promises to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3:

'Therefore, brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling, consider that Jesus, the apostle and

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high priest of our confession, was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses also “was faithful in all God’s house.” Yet Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses, just as the builder of a house has more honour than the house itself. (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) Now Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant, to testify to the things that would be spoken later. Christ, however, was faithful over God’s house as a son, and we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope’ (Hebrews 3:1–6).

### **God is at work in you**

‘If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure’ (Philippians 2:1–13).

The ‘Therefore’ in verse 12 indicates that God is working in us to fulfil our calling, even as he—the Father—did in Christ, and, does now in us through this work in Christ. It is because of Christ’s work as man that we can ‘work out y[our] own salvation with fear and trembling’. As Christ worked so are we to work, for he—with the Father and in the Spirit—is at work in us.

This is the encouragement that is in Christ, the consolation from love, the sharing in the Spirit, the compassion and sympathy of which Paul speaks of as being the ‘mind that was in Christ Jesus’.

Ephesians 2:8–10 conveys a similar message, perhaps with Isaiah 26:12 in mind (‘O LORD, you will ordain peace for us, for indeed, all that we have done, you have done for us’): ‘For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life’.

Paul also wrote to the Philippian church in a similar vein, ‘I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it [carry it on] to completion by the day of Jesus Christ’ (Philippians 1:6; cf. *NIV*).

### **At work on the Sabbath**

John 5:17–21 speaks of God’s work on the Sabbath (cf. 1 John 3:8b). The Sabbath reminded the Israelites not only of Creation but of their Exodus from the slavery of Egypt (Exodus 20:11; Deuteronomy 5:15; cf. Exodus 5:1ff.): ‘But Jesus answered them, “My Father is still working, and I also am working.” For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God. Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished. Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes”’.

Since all history from the commencement of the seventh day of Creation is in the

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‘Sabbath of God’, true human vocation is the overflow of communion with God—in his vocation in his Creation, his dwelling place (his home), his kingdom (Genesis 2:1–3). All is fulfilled in the dawn of eternity, in the Paradise of God, his New Creation (Revelation 14:13; 21:1ff.). Outside of this is endless toil and turmoil, futile ‘vocation’ which is ‘vacant-ation’—death to the life, love, liberty and joy of being co-workers with God.

‘For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD—and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD. Thus says the LORD: Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting place? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things are mine, says the LORD. But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word’ (Isaiah 65:17–66:2; cf. Acts 17:22–31).

God’s work in creation and in covenant is in the Human Family at Home. He is at work in us, according to his purposes in us and in all history:

- in Marriage.
- in Vocation.
- in the Sabbath.

### **Christ is the Bridegroom, he is the True Worker, and his is the True Sabbath**

‘Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast”’ (Matthew 9:14, 15; cf. John 3:27–30; Matthew 19:3ff.).

‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed’ (John 17:1–5).

‘At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”’ (Matthew 11:25–30).

Our renewed relationships are our life in God’s covenant in his creation. They are known—according to his personal calling of us—in our relationships:

- with our spouse (if married).
- with our parents and children (if given).
- in the community.
- in the church.

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These relate to the human community in our home—the creation, the kingdom—in various domains, including:

- science, technology, environment, agriculture, etc. (where the focus is in our exploring creation as it relates to our vocation).
- humanities, art, arts, music, languages, etc. (where the focus is in our community together as citizens in creation).

But it is especially in our participation in the Word and Worship that the Triune Community share with humanity as they bring all history to its true goal that our full vocation is realised.

### **Blessing and sanctification**

To participate in this Triune action is to live in the blessing—in the Blessed! It is the Father's plan that we are blessed 'in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love'. Our sanctified destiny is 'adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved'. This is the great work of God at Calvary where 'he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth' (Ephesians 1:3ff.).

'In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance' for which we 'were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit . . . the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory'. These blessings are the culmination—the realisation, the revelation—of the blessings at Creation (Genesis 1:22 28; 2:3; 5:2) and to Noah (Genesis 9:1), Abraham (Genesis 12:3), as well as to Moses, David, and in the New Covenant in Jesus. These blessings find their expression in our immediate circumstances, however dislocated they may be. This is Christ's word in the Spirit from the Father to us—to the 'heavy laden', to those Jesus referred to in the Beatitudes, and for whom he died and rose and ascended to the Father to pour out the Spirit, so as to free us from the futility of 'dead works to serve the living God' (Matthew 5:3–16; 11:26–30; Hebrews 9:14; 10:5–25, 35–39).

There is nothing artificial about this service. Anyone 'in Christ is a new creation'. Each one, and all together, are 'ambassadors for Christ': 'God is making his appeal through us' (2 Corinthians 5:14–21). This must mean that God cites us as evidence of the (kind of) work that he does. He raises those dead in sin, he grips fallen humanity with his love, and we become evidence (testimony) to all humanity of what God does! It is in this vein that we live in this vain world! It is as renewed humanity in Christ that God speaks through us to our fallen race!

Our vocation finds expression in creation in covenant, and in covenant in creation. This proclamation is suitable for the ends of the ages—and beyond. It is the testimony of Jesus—the Spirit of prophecy—concerning the Holy People in the Holy City: the Father's family at home; the marriage of the Bride and the Lamb; the Temple who is God with us (Revelation 19–22).

### **Work, vocation and calling**

The words 'vocation' and 'calling' are closely related. It is God who calls; the church is the gathering of those whom he has called—our calling is our vocation. Paul described

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himself as one who was ‘called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God’. The church is ‘those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints’, regardless of their background (1 Corinthians 1:1, 2, 26; cf. Romans 1:1–7; 11:29).

To be called by God the Father—who ‘is faithful’—‘into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord’ is not individualistic. It is a participation not only in the human community of the church, but in the divine fellowship that is Jesus’ within the Trinity. This is the fruit of Christ’s death on the cross (1 Corinthians 1:9, 22–24; 7:20, 24; cf. 1 John 3:1ff.). Paul identifies ‘the hope to which he has called you’ with ‘the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints’; the ‘one hope of [y]our calling’ with the ‘one body and one Spirit’. Hence his exhortation that we are to ‘walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called’ (Ephesians 1:18; 4:1–4; cf. 4:1 in AV).

This active participation in God’s purposes is frequently a matter of exhortation:

‘Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you’ (2 Peter 1:10, 11).

‘Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you’ (Philippians 3:12–15).

Nonetheless it is an exhortation to share in ‘the holy calling’ that God has given to his people:

‘We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified’ (Romans 8:28–30).

It is God ‘who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel’ (2 Timothy 1:9, 10).

We are ‘holy partners in a heavenly calling’, a calling that is realised in Christ who ‘was faithful [in all God’s house] to the one who appointed him’. In his faithfulness he pioneered our salvation through his sufferings. We are sanctified in him; he calls us ‘the children whom God has given me’ (Hebrews 2:10 – 3:2).

Our human vocation (calling) is our response to the Caller—the ‘Vocator’, to coin a term! The Psalmist contrasts this vocation with the lot of the wicked (Psalms 37, 73). The writer of the Proverbs tells us that ‘the human mind plans the way, but the LORD directs the steps’, and that ‘all our steps are ordered by the LORD; how then can we understand our own ways’ (Proverbs 16:9; 20:24).

In this vocation one is not to be concerned about security or greatness: ‘Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all’ (Ecclesiastes 9:11). It is the Father’s pleasure to provide for his children (Matthew 6:25–34; Luke 11:13; 12:13–40). He, with his Son and the Spirit are among us ‘as one who serves’ (Luke 22:24–27).

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This is the true greatness of true vocation—as is described by the story of the poor wise man: ‘I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. There was a little city with few people in it. A great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. So I said, “Wisdom is better than might; yet the poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are not heeded.” The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouting of a ruler among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one bungler destroys much good’ (Ecclesiastes 9:13–18).

### **Conclusion**

East of Eden lie the ruins of self-designed and self-oriented enterprise. This is the converse of the Lord building the house—for his family. God rebuilds his house—his dwelling place—by resurrecting his people into covenant relationship with himself. This is the story of Abel, Noah, Abraham, Moses and the Israelites, David and his kingdom; but it is ultimately in Jesus that all God’s redeemed prodigal family comes home. There they discover not only their true identity and vocation, they know themselves as worshippers in God’s Sabbath, as participants in his work—of creation and covenant grace.

The blessings now flow where the curses had been. The cup of wrath has been drunk at the cross. The cup of blessing is our ‘sharing in the blood of Christ’, for the Passover Lamb has been sacrificed and the festival has begun (1 Corinthians 5:7; 10:16). God’s sanctified people share in Christ’s calling. This calling is nothing less than the renewal of all things in heaven and on earth.

Our vocation is the calling of God personally and corporately to his people. It is an exploration in the Spirit of our inheritance in Christ as he—the Father—directs.

Human vocation cannot be seen individualistically. Its milieu is the society in which one lives. We know who we are—personally and as a community—as we know the Father as the one who Calls (as ‘Vocator’), the Son as the one who is Called, and the Spirit who brings us into this calling, and who brings this calling to us. This revelation will then declare the true vocation for humanity—in community to this world.