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Vocation's Unbroken Chain: Biblical Call Stories and the Experience of Vocation

Chris Keeton

Abstract: This essay reflects on the Biblical passages used to create a vocational curriculum produced by the author's doctoral project. The call stories of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and Ruth are examined to illustrate the experience of vocation. The essay is divided into three strands of thought: vocation as a journey, vocation as it is related to personal ability, and vocation as it is related to certainty.

In a previous article in *Discernment*, "Creating Vocational Curriculums for Youth Ministries," I shared my method of creating a vocational curriculum for my youth group. This endeavor was part of my doctoral project at Lipscomb University. I used two Lilly Foundation initiatives as the basis for my design. Two key findings were the need for a common curriculum (i.e. educating the entire congregation on vocation) and a mentoring environment (i.e. selecting individuals from the congregation to share their vocational experiences to the youth group). In that article, I defined vocation as the task of discerning how God calls each of us in particular ways. Space limitations prevented me from sharing how I created the content of the curriculum. In this article, I will review how I used Scripture as the basis for the teaching material.

The material for the curriculum was based on a theological literature review and a biblical literature review. This article will focus on the latter. The biblical foundation reviewed the direct call stories of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and Ruth. I chose these stories for two reasons. First, they are settled into a narrative. Unlike the call of, for example, the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-13), the narratives express a fuller sense of personal and social context of the call. Whereas Isaiah's call would require additional instruction regarding historical context. I have found that the narrative form from these familiar biblical characters far easier to teach to teenagers.

Second, I wanted to show how these direct call stories were useful models. The cases of Abraham and Moses were exceptional because God told them exactly what to do. Joseph had miraculous powers of dream discernment. And the serendipity Ruth experiences is almost too perfect. Not everybody today is so lucky. But, these stories are still valuable illustrations of what vocation *feels* like. That is, though not everyone will hear a voice from heaven, these stories illustrate the *experience* of vocation. In discerning our vocation, many of us experience uncertainty and setbacks. Many of us make mistakes and bad decisions, too; and so do Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and Ruth. For these Biblical characters, the call itself may be exceptional, but the experience is not.

What follows is the examination of the experiences of these characters with the intention of gleaning insights applicable for young people who are endeavoring to discern their vocation. To that end, this essay will be divided into three strands of thought: vocation as a journey, vocation as it is related to personal ability, and vocation as it is related to certainty.

The goal of this essay is to help youth ministers and leaders engage their imaginations when reading these passages so that their students' imaginations are also stimulated. Such is critical when teaching students the language of vocation, which is a phenomenon related to our desires. Youth ministers and leaders will be able to use the interpretations found here in the creation of their own curriculums, or they will be able use these examples as the basis for their own readings of these texts.

Vocation as a Journey[1]

The Bible features several who receive a direct voice from heaven with instructions for an immediate task. To give just two examples, Abraham is called to leave his Father's house (Gen. 12:1-3) and Moses is told to go back to Egypt and rescue the Hebrews (Ex. 3:7-12). These call stories have a particular appeal to those seeking direction because the calls are so straightforward. Abraham and Moses seemed to have had no question concerning their vocation on the account of God's very voice and God's direct instructions. And these calls demanded immediate and clear action. However, clarity diminishes upon closer examination. Certainly

[1] This phrasing is taken from Younus Y. Mirza, "Doubt as an Integral Part of Calling: the Qur'anic story of Joseph," in *Hearing Vocation Differently: Meaning, Purpose, and Identity in the Multi-Faith Academy*, ed. David S. Cunningham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 95-104.

God's call to Abraham was direct and required immediate action, but the fullness of God's promise came only through adversity and the great passage of time. After all, Abraham was one hundred years old when Isaac, the promised son, was born (Gen. 21:5). Moreover, Abraham knew that he would receive a son, but God was not specific on how that son would come about, especially considering Sara's barrenness. It was not until after Abraham and Sara conspired to bring about a son through Hagar that Abraham received clarification (Gen. 17:15-21).

The above summary illustrates how God's assignment, even in cases such as Abraham's direct call, entails mystery, development of character, and obstacles to overcome. Vocation does not always manifest at a single point in time, but gradually unfolds throughout the course of a person's life. In this way, vocation can be seen as an invitation to a journey. This section explores three features of this journey.

Happenstances

Exodus chapter 3 begins with Moses herding his father-in-law's flock. The herd approaches the mountain called Horeb and there Moses sees the burning bush. He learns that God is indwelling the bush and that he is standing on holy ground. Here Moses receives his call, God says,

> I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey . . . Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt (Ex. 3:7-9, ESV).

Moses' assignment to return to Egypt and rescue the Hebrews on God's behalf is epic, of cosmic importance, and personally empowering, which are qualities that characterize what is perhaps the ideal vocation. He is about to participate in the saving act of God that will result in the proper creation of how the Hebrew Bible understands the people of God (c.f. Ex. 19:5-6).[2]

[2] For a brief discussion of this theological idea see John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 437.

In light of such grandeur, this monumental series of events begins in a relatively humble manner. Moses is not in prayer and he is not in a temple. He is not looking for God but he is tending his family's flock, a task that perhaps he thinks *is* his vocation. In the midst of the mundane he quite literally stumbles upon divinity while he is doing something else. And that seems to be how God himself describes the encounter. Consider Robert Alter's translation of Exodus 3:18. When God elaborates on his plan for the Exodus, he tells Moses the words to use before Pharaoh, "and together you shall say to him, 'The Lord, God of the Hebrews, happened upon us, and so, let us go, pray, three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.'"[3] Alter translates the Hebrew word *qarah* as "happened" in order to emphasize a seemingly accidental encounter. Alter comments, "They use a verb that elsewhere suggests chance encounter, rather than the more definite 'appeared.' This might imply that they want to intimate to Pharaoh that they did not seek this meeting with the divinity."[4]

Knowing how this story will play out, many readers understand this "happenstance" to be the providence of God. Yet one must not allow their theology of providence to downplay the manner in which God arrives. From Moses' perspective, and God's own description of the event, this meeting with divinity that led to his vocation appeared to be a chance encounter, an accident caused by a straying animal.

Another example of the chance nature of vocation is the story of Ruth. After the tragic death of Naomi's husband and two sons, she is left with two widowed daughters-in-law, named Orpah and Ruth. Naomi encourages Orpah and Ruth to return to their former families. Orpah leaves, but Ruth stays and pledges her allegiance to Naomi. The loss of life, coupled with the long famine, left the women with emotional and economic hardship. Naomi renames herself Mara, which means bitter, in lament. She says, "I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty" (Ruth 1:21, ESV).

Naomi resorts to the Hebrew tradition of the kinsman-redeemer, a relative tasked with relieving economic distress.[5] Ruth determines to gain attention from the kinsman-redeemer by working in his field, but she is not

[3] Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, Vol. 1 (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2019), 223-24.

[4] Ibid., 224.

[5] See R. L. Hubbard Jr, "Kinsman-Redeemer and Levirate," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 379.

certain which field is his. Alter's translation of Ruth 2.2-3 again emphasizes the serendipity of human choice, "And she went and came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers, and it chanced that she came upon the plot of Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech."[6] Boaz, of course, is none other than the sought-after kinsman-redeemer who not only relieves the economic distress of Naomi and Ruth, but marries Ruth and enables the continuance of Naomi's family line that would eventually lead to King David, and later to Jesus.

Like the Exodus, this monumental series of events begins with chance encounter. Unlike the Exodus, which features Moses stumbling upon the bush while doing something else, Ruth went for the purpose of finding the kinsman-redeemer. Nevertheless, Ruth experiences the mystique of serendipity, even though she found precisely what she was looking for. Alter comments on how Ruth just happened to find Boaz's plot, "This is hardly an accident because that is precisely where she intended to go. The peculiar formulation may be meant to suggest that there is a concordance between human initiative and God's providence."[7]

These passages teach us that, while God is sovereign, there is still mystery and enchantment in the world. We are always surrounding by the lively possibility of surprising developments. We may find our greatest passion while we are not looking for it. Or our best laid plans turn out better than we imagined. Yet these happenstances are not random. Though much of the order that God maintains over the universe is invisible to us, which means that sometimes the universe will seem decidedly un-orderly, we are rightly reluctant to call anything truly an accident.

Mistakes and Setbacks

Journeys entail seasons of hardships or even regression. These periods may be caused by the journeyer, which can be called a mistake, or the cause may lay outside the journeyer, which can be called a setback. The danger of mistakes is obvious. Periods of selfishness or laziness will obviously create barriers towards the realization of vocation. Some mistakes, however, arise from the desire to realize our vocation. In other words, the mistake occurs not because we are negligent in working toward our vocation, but perhaps because our desire is tinged with some element

[6] Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, Vol. 3, 628-629.

[7] Ibid., 629.

of sinfulness.[8] For example, Moses makes a serious mistake in killing the Egyptian and burying him in the sand (Ex. 2:12). But Moses' motivation for the murder arises from his desire to protect his own people. Recall that the murdered Egyptian had earlier harassed Moses' Hebrew brother. Nevertheless, even with good intentions acknowledged, the mistake halted Moses' vocation for decades.

Joseph, on the other hand, experiences a setback, a season of hardship caused by a force outside of himself. Joseph's vocation entailed his connection to prophetic dreams. This ability, coupled with his father's favoritism, created great jealousy and animosity in his many brothers. The jealousy came to fruition when the brothers threw Joseph in a pit and sold him into slavery (Gen. 37). Obviously, enslavement was outside of Joseph's control here. Moreover, as with Moses' mistake, the setback arose from a connection to his vocation. The brothers would not have been *as* jealous had Joseph not expressed his prophetic dreams. This outside force threatened to squash Joseph's vocational journey.

In each of these cases, the seasons of hardship or regression did not end the trek toward the discernment of vocation. Though Moses fled, he would later return wiser and better equipped to fulfill his task. And Joseph, though he would experience more hardship, is eventually able to use his prophetic ability to save the very family that rejected him. In the tender closing of Genesis, Joseph's brothers plead for forgiveness. Joseph begins to weep, not just over the return of his brothers' bodies, but over the return of their love for him. Joseph replies, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Gen. 50:20, ESV). In these words of comfort, the journeyer finds that seasons of hardship and regression, whether they be mistakes or setbacks, are not permanent deviations from the journey, but they become part of the journey itself.

Possibility of Change

Vocation should not be understood as too rigid of an assignment. When Moses flees Egypt, he begins a different life in Midian. He marries and has children and becomes a shepherd for his father-in-law. Based on appearances, Moses has moved on from his earlier desire to relieve the burdens of the Hebrews. Yet, according to the earlier discussion of mistakes and setbacks, this other life has become an integral part of who Moses is

[8] St. Augustine would call these "disordered loves." See Augustine, *The City of God* 15:22.

and who he is becoming. It is during this season of shepherding in a foreign land and raising a family that God reminds Moses of his original desire to unburden the Hebrews, as if God was waiting until Moses was ready. God did not call the hot-headed bachelor, but the older, presumably wiser, family man.

Another example of the flexibility entailed in the vocational experience is the Joseph story. Joseph experienced and could discern prophetic dreams, but the assignments presented to him throughout his life are not always primarily about those prophetic dreams. Indeed, his tasks are varied: he becomes the overseer of Potiphar's house (Gen. 39.4), a trustee inmate given management over the whole prison-house (Gen. 39.22), and eventually he becomes vice-ruler over Egypt (Gen. 41:40-43). Indeed, Joseph seems to have had multiple calls during his vocational experience.

Happenstances, mistakes and setbacks, and the possibility of change are only a few features that illustrate how vocation often plays out like a journey. The process is ongoing and rarely has a definitive starting point or end. Also, the point of using these Biblical stories is not so that one may map their vocational journey on top of them. Every journey is different and attempting to find a direct series of parallels to one of the above characters would quickly become frustrating. The message gleaned is the reality of the journey itself. The call may take the form of a command, but adherence to the call often takes the form of answering an invitation to a long, but rewarding, journey.

Vocation and Ability

The second strand of thought to be explored is how vocation relates to one's abilities. From the stories we have examined so far, it seems that God would not call a person to a task that they were not capable of accomplishing.[9] If this is the case, then discovering one's aptitudes is a necessary step on the path to expressing one's vocation. But it is not the case that vocation is *merely* about discovering one's abilities. Having found an ability, how do you use it? Or, what if a person truly feels she has no abilities? Can one develop abilities? This section explores three stories that place one's ability in the proper context of vocation.

[9] For an extended discussion see Margaret E. Mohrmann, "Vocation is Responsibility," in *Vocation Across the Academy*, ed. David S. Cunningham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 21-44.

Ability Can Be Developed

The Apostle Paul speaks of Abraham as the model of faithfulness. In his discussion on justification and righteousness in Romans 14, Paul argues that both come by faith and that Abraham is the archetype of the faithful person. Paul even affirms that Abraham is "the father of us all" (Rom. 4:16, ESV). Abraham's calling was to be the father of many nations (Gen. 12:1-3), and the ability that allowed him to live into that calling was faith. The key story that displays Abraham's faithfulness is the binding of Isaac, wherein Abraham was willing to offer up the promised son as a sacrifice to God. The story is a frightening example of how Abraham trusted that God would provide (Gen. 22:8), even in spite of such dire circumstances.[10] The Hebrew writer interprets this episode by having Abraham believe that God was capable of raising up even the dead (Heb. 11:19). A feat of faith indeed.

The Abraham in Genesis 22, however, was not the same Abraham in Genesis 12, when he first received the call of God. In fact, he even had a different name. Abraham, or Abram, should certainly be given credit for the faithfulness to leave his father's house in Genesis 12, but, at that point, his capacity for faithfulness was not at the level necessary to sacrifice his son. The first episode following Abraham's call is his encounter with the Pharaoh. A famine forced Abram to seek refuge in Egypt. Before arriving, Abram instructed his wife Sarai to lie. He says, "I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake" (Gen. 12:11-13, ESV). Abram felt that his own life was in danger and he did not have the faith necessary to trust that God would protect him. If God would have blessed Abram with the promised son in Genesis 12 and then immediately commanded the sacrifice of that son, would Abram have had the faith to follow through? If Abram did not have the faith to bravely confront Pharaoh, then it is very unlikely that Abram would have had the faith to bind Isaac.

Abraham's "faith ability," that ability in which he carried out his calling, had to be developed over time. This development required various challenges and tests. Abraham passed some tests, but others he did not. As already noted, Abraham and Sarah attempted to bring about the promised son through the slave-girl Hagar. But in spite of their failure, God showed grace and mercy, even to the harshly treated Hagar. Thus, the story of

[10] For an extended discussion see Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 97-117.

Abraham is not only about a demonstration of the model of faithfulness, but also about the development of Abraham's abilities.

Ability Is Not Vocation

Moses appeared to be a formidable physical presence. He struck down an Egyptian (Ex. 2:12) and later drove away a group of shepherds who were harassing the daughters of Reuel (Ex. 2:17). Moses had the ability, and perhaps even the desire, to be a warrior. With warlike ability, Moses could have led a violent uprising against the Egyptians. But God never asked Moses to express that ability in Moses' vocational experience. In fact, the expression of Moses' fighting ability was counter to God's divine purpose, as the text indicates in Moses' killing of the Egyptian. Indeed, the Exodus event was intended to illustrate God's power, not the power of Moses and the Hebrews (Ex. 9:14, Josh. 2:9-11). Following abilities alone can be misleading.

Joseph's vocational experience is another example that distinguishes ability from vocation. Joseph's penchant for prophetic dreams is expressed early in his life, but this did not mean that he understood his vocation. The prophetic ability was God given, and Joseph would have certainly related that ability to some divine calling. But early on, Joseph could not have known what that calling would have been. Had Joseph been selfish, and, of course, not have been sold into slavery, perhaps he would have attempted to open up a fortune telling business, similar to how Balaam would misuse his prophetic ability (Num. 22-24). In this hypothetical situation, Joseph embraced his ability but not his vocation.

This hypothetical situation may also illustrate how developing ability without thought of vocation can be harmful. If Joseph would have used his prophetic ability as Balaam used his, which was to take money to curse God's people, then Joseph's ability would have worked directly against his vocation. Because in the conclusion of the Joseph story we find him blessing his family with the fruits gained from his prophetic ability, which was a demonstration of ability *in service* of vocation.

The Joseph story demonstrates that ability is not the same as vocation. God's divine purpose for Joseph entailed the saving of Joseph's family and the continuation of the promise of Abraham. His prophetic ability was a key factor in his vocational experience, but so were his other abilities. For example, Joseph was a talented administrator, having become the overseer of Potiphar's house and later the lead trustee in the prison-house. Moreover, since Joseph's family was directly saved by his *administrative ability* over the land of Egypt, one may argue that prophetic

ability played only a secondary role in Joseph's vocation. Abilities are the tools of vocation, but not the vocation itself. Joseph's faithfulness to God, integrity, and wise use of his God-given abilities led to the manifestation God's divine purpose.

Abilities Must Be Outwardly Focused

Many who struggle with discerning vocation would relish a voice from heaven informing them of precisely what to do with their lives; but Moses refuses the call multiple times. In Exodus 3, Moses receives a direct call from God to return to Egypt and rescue the Hebrews. This call should have been met with celebration since the call matched Moses' earlier desire to relieve the burdens of the Hebrews (Ex. 2:11-12). Nevertheless, Moses refuses the call five times. These refusals entail his feelings of unworthiness, lack of authority, and his insecurities regarding his ability to speak. These refusals reveal that Moses is hindered by his perceived inadequacies. And he certainly has reason to feel inadequate given how his earlier heroic act, though clearly an error in judgment, was met with scorn from his own people (Ex. 2:14). Moses is an example of one who receives the call but must be convinced of his ability to carry out that call.

The source of Moses' feelings of inadequacy seem to be directly related to his self-centeredness. Moses does not at first appear to be one who could be called selfish—he takes vengeance on an abusive Egyptian, attempts to break up a fight between Hebrews, and runs off bullies who were harassing the daughters of Reuel. Nevertheless, every refusal in Exodus 3-4 arises from Moses' own navel gazing. He says, "Who am I that I should go" (Ex. 3:11, ESV); "If I come to the people of Israel . . . what shall I say to them?" (Ex. 3:13, ESV); "They will not believe me or listen to my voice" (Ex. 4:1, ESV); and "I am not eloquent" (Ex. 4:10, ESV). These statements reveal that behind the refusals is Moses' over-reliance on his own abilities. On his ability alone, Moses knows that he is incapable of the task. He has evidence of this in the fact that it was his own *in*-ability to relieve the burdens of the Hebrews that got him exiled from Egypt. Moses has trouble seeing outside of himself, and so refuses the call.

God counters the self-centered refusals by broadening Moses' perspective. Moses is not going alone to Egypt. God is going, too. And God will empower him with the ability to do miraculous works. God will even reveal the divine name to Moses. In a telling passage, Moses complains that he does not possess the power of persuasion, he says, "I am slow of speech and tongue" (Ex. 4:10, ESV). Moses affirms that he is simply ill-equipped for the assignment. Without hesitation, God answers, "Who has made

man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?" (Ex. 4:11, ESV). Here we see that Moses was so inwardly focused that he could not see that any ability related to vocation will be divinely empowered.

God finally convinces Moses of the divine power at work and puts Moses on a path to prove that he can become a master persuader.[11] He returns to Egypt and, with God's empowerment, rescues the Hebrews in the wake of the ten plagues and the parting of the Red Sea. But the full power of his persuasive ability is not expressed in the Exodus event. While Moses is receiving the law on Mount Sinai, the Hebrew people are building the golden calf. The creation of this graven image so angers God that God determines to consume the Hebrew people with fire and start a new people beginning with Moses. This is a startling turn of events in two ways. First, the divine savior has become the divine killer. Second, God invites Moses back to a self-centered perspective. God tells Moses, "I will make you a great nation" (Ex. 32:10).[12] The task is no longer to relieve the burdens of the Hebrews, but to turn Moses into another Abraham. But Moses counters the great *I AM*. Moses reminds God of the promise made to the patriarchs, cleverly arguing that the destruction of the Hebrew people would make God look evil before the Egyptians (Ex. 32:11-13). Moses even unselfishly offers himself as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the people (Ex. 32.32). After this display rhetoric and self-sacrifice, God changes his mind. Thus, through careful wording and clever reasoning, Moses, who complained about his heavy-mouth[13] that would not persuade anyone, persuades *God himself* to change his mind about the destruction of the Hebrew people.

Moses' ability to persuade reaches its apex when he puts those abilities to a cause greater than himself. Moreover, Moses' persuasive ability is one of the most prominent abilities shown in the Biblical story. The power to persuade is an integral part of Moses' identity—it is part of who Moses *is*. Yet early in Exodus 3, we see Moses void of that ability because he is too self-centered. Thus, in focusing too much on self, Moses became less himself.

This final story ties together the other two in demonstrating that the abilities that led to and empowers one's vocation must be directed outward. Abraham does not reach his full potential until he learns to trust in God's

[11]Pharaoh would have freed the people after the fifth plague had God himself not hardened Pharaoh's heart (Ex 9:12, c.f. Ex 7:3).

[12] Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, Vol. 1, 340.

[13] Ex. 4:10-11, Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, Vol. 1, 226.

provision, Joseph's unflinching loyalty to God's will allows him to reach second in command over Egypt, and Moses' becomes the model mediator through his willingness to sacrifice for his people. Their abilities grow when outwardly focused and seem to shrink when inwardly focused. Indeed, these important people only realize their vocation through sanctifying their abilities for the service of causes outside themselves.

Vocation and Certainty

The third strand of thought toward understanding vocation is that certainty is not required. In many Biblical call stories, God consistently leaves in mystery even in the most particular calls. This section explores how uncertainty, and even doubt, play into the discovering and manifesting one's vocation.

Joseph and Uncertainty

As discussed earlier, Joseph certainly knew that his vocation was tied to his ability to have and interpret prophetic dreams. At first this seems to be yet another example of a Biblical figure easily discovering his calling because of a miraculous message from the divine. But one must not read this story with the ending in mind, because Joseph's dreams in Genesis 37, which began his vocational journey, were not a direct message from God in the sense that Joseph is told explicitly what to do. Joseph is not told who the dream is from. Moreover, Joseph's father and brothers interpreted the dreams, not Joseph (Gen. 37:8, 10).

Joseph's uncertainty surely grew as his journey continued. After being sold into slavery, he finds some measure of relief in the house of Potiphar but is soon betrayed by Potiphar's deceitful wife. He is thrown in prison where he exercises his divine gift in the interpretation of dreams but is promptly forgotten. Having been rejected by his family and forgotten in prison, what could Joseph have been thinking at this point? He knows that God is with him and is providing a particular gift (Gen. 40:8), but these communications from God are not direct. God does not provide specific instructions about the future, or even the present. Joseph is forced to remain patient as his uncertain vocational journey unfolds.

Moses and Doubt

In Exodus 2:11-14, Moses may have been certain about his desire to help his people, perhaps he even knew that relieving the burden of the Hebrews was his vocation, but certainty surely faded when he was rejected by those people. Many years later, after he gets a wife and becomes a

shepherd, he meets God in the burning bush. God invites Moses to renew his desire for his people and return to Egypt. As discussed earlier, Moses refuses this call multiple times because of doubt, among other things. If Moses can doubt his vocation while speaking directly to God, then one may be forgiven for doubting her vocation when divine instruction is considerably more vague.

This does not mean that doubt is an approved posture in vocational discernment. God's extended conversation with Moses was about *removing* Moses' doubt. In this way, doubt is similar to a mistake. As long as we remain faithful, God will be gracious and will bring about divine results even in spite of our errors. The point here is that doubt is often an uncomfortable reality in the vocational experience. If it can happen to Moses, then it can happen to anyone.

Living with Uncertainty

The inevitability of uncertainty in vocational pursuits seems to be a feature that arises from the dynamic character of vocation. David Cunningham, director of Scholarly Resources for the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education, compares this aspect of vocation with the concept of revelation.[14] His understanding of revelation, however, does not necessarily entail that perfect knowledge is revealed. Cunningham argues that we make an error when we affirm that revelation is like removing the veil of a painting. We do not have knowledge of the painting until it is revealed, but once it is revealed, then we are able to see directly all the artist's details. This illustration is flawed because the object that is revealed is a fixed entity. Revelation is often dynamic. Cunningham writes, "Most of the things that are *revealed* to us, however, have a more dynamic character: a person's attitudes, a government's intentions, a teacher's knowledge, a friend's love."[15] In the stories presented in this section, we find Joseph and Moses in almost constant flux. Joseph is a slave, then a prisoner, then a ruler. Moses is a son raised in the house of Pharaoh, then an exile, then a mediator of the divine. The path of vocation can seem as capricious as human feelings.

If one allows, the uncertainty can be freeing. Cunningham notes that the stress that arises from feelings of uncertainty comes from the feeling that certainty is required. Some may feel frozen with anxiety, fearing they

[14] David S. Cunningham, "Who's There?" in *At This Time and In This Place*, ed. David S. Cunningham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 157.

[15] Ibid.

will make a mistake and miss their calling. But exhaustive details regarding vocation are rarely forthcoming. Cunningham writes, "By recognizing that this knowledge will never be complete, they may find themselves willing to take a few provisional steps in a particular direction, without assuming that they are therefore committing themselves to a single course of life."[16] From this perspective, uncertainty, when it entails dynamism, is a driving force for action. When Joseph became a slave, he found productive means of exercising his integrity and was rewarded for doing so. When Moses found refuge in Midian, he seized the opportunity to rescue the priest's daughters and so found of a wife. Each of these episodes, and the episodes to follow, would serve a purpose in these characters' vocations. And these purposes would have been beyond their knowledge at the time. In uncertainty, we are free to act.

This does not mean that *any* action may be taking during uncertainty. The one seeking God's call is constrained by God's moral and spiritual intentions for her. Joseph, though uncertain concerning the path before him, acted in faithfulness and integrity. He was assured that adultery with Potiphar's wife would be kept secret, and yet Joseph proclaimed "how could I do this great evil and give offense to God" (Gen. 39:9)?[17] Joseph fled the sinful act and for his faithfulness he was thrown in prison. He could have become bitter. He could have resented God. But he continued to act faithfully in those uncertain circumstances.

Conclusion

Not everyone will read these stories as I have, but laying out these narratives in this manner is intended to allow teenagers to compare and contrast their own experience with the characters of these stories. When considering characters' disappointments, insecurities, failures, and eventual victories, the characters become relatable. The goal of this way of reading these passages is expressed beautifully in Anton Chekhov's "The Student."

In that short story, Chekhov has Ivan Velikopolsky, a clerical student, telling the story of Peter's denial of Jesus to two women. Ivan has stopped to warm himself by a fire, which reminds him of the similar warmth Peter must have felt. The two women who listen to the story are Vasilisa, a nurse, and Lukerya, Vasilisa's daughter who had been physically abused by her husband.

[16] Ibid., 159.

[17] Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, Vol. 1, 150.

By the end of Ivan's retelling, both women are visibly affected by the story. Chekhov describes Ivan's reflection as follows,

> The student thought again that if Vasilisa had shed tears, and her daughter had been troubled, it was evident that what he had just been telling them about, which had happened nineteen centuries ago, had a relation to the present—to both women, to the desolate village, to himself, to all people. The old woman had wept, not because he could tell the story touchingly, but because Peter was near to her, because her whole being was interested in what was passing in Peter's soul . . . ."The past," he thought, "is linked with the present by an unbroken chain of events flowing one out of another." And it seemed to him that he had just seen both ends of that chain; that when he touched one end the other quivered.[18]

There are various interpretations of "The Student," nevertheless, this passage poetically argues for the power of the Biblical story. As Christians, we value these stories not just because we believe that they happened,[19] but because we know that, in some sense, they continue to happen. And as Peter was near Vasilisa, the characters delineated in this essay are near to us and our students. As ministers, we must be able to see and touch the unbroken chain.

[18] Anton Chekhov, "The Student," http://www.online-literature.com/anton_chekhov/1273/ (accessed August 19, 2020).

[19] Of course, one is not required to take these stories as historically accurate portrayals of literal individuals for them to have the affects described above.

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