To Launch into Ministry

"Advance" Series, October 31 & November 1, 2026 | Genesis 45:1-8

Rob O'Neal, Senior Pastor

God calls us to do things we weren't dreaming about as kids.

As a boy, I dreamed of growing up to be a paleontologist.

I was fascinated with dinosaurs. Triceratops was my favorite; I loved its horns and that it was built like a tank. I wanted to travel the world digging up bones and studying them to learn more about dinosaurs. *Jurassic Park* hadn't come out yet, so I still hoped to find a way to bring dinosaurs back to life.

What were your dreams as a kid?

Did you dream of climbing mountains? Of being a TV star? Or being President? We all had dreams as children of what the future would be like.

But when we grow up, our lives don't always look like our dreams.

Particularly at work. Some of us work in an office staring at a computer screen for most of the day, in and out of meetings someone else schedules. Others of us are outside when it's 10 degrees and windy wishing we could be in a warm office somewhere. We deal with TPS reports, corporate restructuring, and cranky customers. Frankly, our daily lives sometimes seem so…daily. Is this what we're called to do?

Joseph had dreams, but they divided his family.

Joseph was the son of Jacob and his beloved wife, Rachel. He had ten older half-brothers, but he was clearly their father's favorite. His father made him a special coat that made him stand out from the rest. Joseph made it worse by tattling on his brothers, and they hated him for it. Then Joseph had a dream. He and his brothers were binding wheat, and his brothers' sheaves bowed down to his. His brothers were furious. Joseph had another dream in which the sun, moon, and stars all bowed down to him. His father even took offense at that dream. Soon, his brothers saw an opportunity to get rid of the dreamer. Joseph came to check up on them when they were in the fields with their father's flock. The brothers saw him and planned to kill him and throw his dead body into a pit. The oldest brother, Reuben, persuaded them to just throw him in a pit. (He planned to come back and save Joseph later.) But while Reuben was away, the other brothers saw a caravan of merchants and had an idea. They sold him as a slave to the merchants who then carried him away to Egypt. Joseph's dreams divided his family, but this story is just getting started, and God is actually calling Joseph.

Joseph's experience can help us answer a burning question, "Where is God calling us?"

God calls us all to Himself. He calls us all to be disciples. He calls us all to make disciples in our spiritual backyard. Then he gives each of us a different set of gifts—from spiritual gifts to experiences. He calls each of us to a church home. But where does God want us to use our gifts? That's the most personalized calling we have. And this is the aspect of our calling that we have the most difficulty

wrapping our minds around. Joseph's experience can help. We get to see where God called him, and that will help us see where God is calling us.

God calls us to our work as a ministry.

Joseph did even the worst jobs with purpose.

An Egyptian named Potiphar bought Joseph from the merchants. Joseph was a slave, but he worked hard, the LORD blessed everything he touched, and Potiphar noticed. He placed Joseph in charge of his whole household. Then Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph. When he refused, she accused him of trying to harm her. Potiphar believed her and threw Joseph into jail. In jail, the jailer saw something special in him as well. He put Joseph in charge of the prisoners and the work done in the jail, and the LORD blessed everything Joseph touched. Whether a slave or a prisoner, Joseph did what was in front of him with purpose and excellence. When two of the prisoners had dreams, Joseph interpreted them. Pharaoh's cupbearer was one of the prisoners. Joseph told him that his dream meant that in three days Pharaoh would return him to his old job. Joseph asked that when he was restored, the cupbearer would mention him to Pharaoh. The dream came true, the cupbearer went back to Pharaoh's service, but he forgot Joseph, so Joseph stayed in jail—forgotten until Pharaoh had a dream that he could not understand.

Then Joseph became the prime minister of Egypt with a clear mission.

Two years passed, and Pharaoh had a dream. He was standing by the mighty Nile River and seven fat cows came up out of the river. Then seven thin and ugly cows came up out of the river and ate the seven fat cows. Pharaoh had a second dream like it but about wheat. He was greatly disturbed by the dreams, but no one could tell him what they meant. The cupbearer finally remembered Joseph. He told Pharaoh about the dream-interpreting prisoner, and Pharaoh sent for Joseph. After cleaning himself up, Joseph went to Pharaoh and gave an interpretation of the dreams from God. The seven fat cows symbolized seven years of plenty that were coming. The seven thin cows symbolized seven years of famine that would follow. Joseph said that there was urgency. Egypt had to prepare. He even laid out a plan to save grain during the good years to make it through the famine. Pharaoh loved the plan and put Joseph in charge like a prime minister—responsible for saving Egypt from disaster.

Work can be an obligation, a destination, or a calling.

Joseph shows us the difference among the three. It would have been easy and understandable for him to approach work as an obligation. He was betrayed into slavery and then unjustly put into prison. And yet, he worked like it was something more than an obligation. Work is an obligation when we do it just to get a paycheck, just to survive it, and just to get to the weekend. Work can be so much more. Joseph shows us that. Work can also become a destination; that's when it's an idol or an obsession. We work because we can't stop ourselves. Success at work will, we think, finally make us "someone." That's not God's will for our work either. Work—at its best—is a calling. It's a place where we can serve God and put our gifts to use. It can be a ministry.

Are you serving food or creating magic?

Will Guidara grew up around the restaurant industry and eventually became the co-owner of Eleven Madison Park in Manhattan. He set about working to make the service side of the restaurant as excellent as the food. That meant paying attention to every aspect of the guest's experience. He was

determined to transform the way his team thought about serving. In his bestselling book *Unreasonable Hospitality* he wrote, "The moment you start to pursue service through the lens of hospitality, you understand there's nobility in it. We may not be saving people's lives, but we do have the ability to make their lives better by creating a magical world they can escape to—and I see that not only as an opportunity, but as a responsibility, and a reason for pride."[1] He helped Eleven Madison Park become one of the best restaurants in the world. Guidara helps us to see the difference between work as an obligation and work that is something more.

Look deeper until YOU can see the calling in your work.

Don't dismiss your work as unimportant. Press harder. Guidara reframed serving as making magical memories for guests that they will never forget. That's what we all want to do. Ask about the impact your work has on the world and on people's lives. Find the ways that what you do is like what God does. God creates, He tends creation, He relates to us, He redeems people, and He transforms the world. You do one of those things. A calling is there.

God can call us through our pain.

Joseph lived knowing that his brothers wanted to murder him.

Picture Joseph sitting at the bottom of that pit his brothers threw him into. Was that when he realized for the first time just how much they hated him? Did he hear them arguing over whether to murder him or not? Then they pulled him out of the pit only to sell him like a goat to merchants. Joseph experienced so many hurts, but I just imagine that being thrown into that pit by his brothers stung the worst.

Have you ever been sitting at the bottom of a pit while your brothers debate your fate?

You may not have had that literal experience, but what is your moment of great pain perhaps mixed with betrayal and a sense of utter failure? Was it the day your marriage ended? Or the day you filed for bankruptcy? Or the night the police rang your doorbell at two in the morning? Was it like sitting at the bottom of a pit wondering if you would get out alive?

Pain can point us to the places where we are needed.

Pain can be an opportunity for us to grow. Hurting can make us more empathetic toward other people who are hurting. It can create an instant connection. If you've lost a job, you understand those who have lost theirs. If you have had a teenager struggle with mental health, you feel connected to other parents whose kids are struggling. That connection can point us to the places where our gifts are most needed and most effective.

Watching her brother live with a traumatic brain injury has driven Colleen's passion for serving people with disabilities.

Colleen's brother was hurt on a swing set when he was a child. Colleen saw it happen. His life was changed. He has cognitive issues, speech impediments, and multiple challenges with mobility and balance. But that's Colleen's brother. She loves him. She sees his needs and the needs of people like

[1] Will Guidara, *Unreasonable Hospitality: The Remarkable Power of Giving People More Than They Expect* (Optimism Press, 2022), 98.

him, but she also sees the amazing person he is. Her brother loves games; he's a Skip-Bo master! And he loves hamburgers. Colleen worked in special education in the public schools for years, and she was a blessing to many, many special kids. Now, she is her brother's caregiver, and she is fantastic at it. Her brother's pain and her own pain have pointed her to her calling in life.

Where is God calling you through your pain?

Your pain could be pointing you to people to serve. You have hurt or seen people hurt, and you want to alleviate pain. Your pain could be pointing you to problems to solve. There is a holy anger that grows up inside us when we see the brokenness in the world and the way that the world breaks us. We want to do something about it! Your pain could even be pointing you to a role that you were made to fill. God is calling, and your pain may be pointing the way.

God is calling even when we don't see it.

Joseph saw God's purpose and power at work, even in his pain.

That's the focus of the passage we read today from Genesis. During seven years of plenty, Joseph led the Egyptians to store up grain. Then the years of famine hit. Joseph started selling grain to the Egyptians. But the famine spread to Canaan. His family was hungry, and his father sent his brothers to Egypt to buy grain. Joseph saw them and recognized them immediately. He set a long, elaborate test for them to see if they had changed. The brothers seemed to be changed men. Joseph was moved. He sent everyone out but his brothers and began weeping. He revealed his true identity. His brothers were speechless. They were terrified, but Joseph reassured them that they need not fear him. Joseph had realized his own purpose in God's plan. In **Genesis 45:5-8** Joseph said,

> God sent me before you to preserve life…God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God …

God's purpose wasn't going to be stopped by Joseph's brothers.

They were doing evil—hating and even plotting to kill one of their own. But God wasn't thwarted by their evil hearts or their evil deeds. God was working even in their evil to save the family and preserve the future. God saved Israel and Jesus's family line once again.

Providence *is God's purpose and power at work in the world, even in our pain.*

Providence is a word we don't often use anymore, but it expresses an important theological truth. The world is not spinning all on its own, nor are events spinning out of God's control. God is at work in the world, and He is accomplishing His purposes. We just don't always see it, particularly when we are hurting. God's Providence points us to an important truth:

Even when we hurt, God is at work.

Joseph probably struggled to see it from the bottom of the pit, when he was sold as a slave, on the day he went to prison, or when he was rotting in jail forgotten. But God was working through all those events, refining Joseph's character and sharpening his skills for the day he would save Egypt and his family. God was at work. As Jesus said, God is paying attention to every single bird. In **Matthew 10:31** Jesus says,

> Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

God sees you and is working in and through you, even when you're hurting. And those trials are making you a masterpiece. **James 1:2-4** says,

> Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

I remember watching my mom do cross-stitch when I was a boy.

I remember watching her start projects. She would make tiny crosses. Frankly, the pictures didn't look like much at first. Then, slowly, a bouquet of flowers might emerge. God is doing something similar but on a much bigger scale. You can see it in **Genesis 50:20**. Joseph was talking with his brothers one more time about what they had done to him. He said to them,

> 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.

The word in Hebrew implies intent. His brothers intended evil, but God intended good. The word in Hebrew is related to weaving. It's like we are making tiny crosses on the fabric of life. Sometimes the individual crosses are incredibly painful. But God is creating something much bigger that is beautiful. Our pain can point to God's purposes and our own calling.

Now, WHERE is God calling you, and what will you say?

Joseph came to understand his calling when he realized where he truly was.

Joseph was in Egypt. He was no longer a slave on a wealthy landowner's estate. He was no longer a prisoner in a dungeon of injustice. Nor was he prime minister simply because he was so talented or because fate was balancing on the scales of justice. Where was he? He was in the position where God could use him to save Egypt and to save his family.

Like Joseph, we want to know our calling.

Joseph shows us how we might find it. His position and power were unique, but his journey lights our way. We look at the places where God has taken us and the roles He has given us to fill. We look at our pain and how God was with us through that pain. When we look deeply with eyes to see, we might find where God is calling us.

That question, "WHERE?" channels our calling too.

God is calling all human beings to Himself. He calls all Christians to be disciples who make disciples in our spiritual backyard. He gives us many gifts to use for His glory and purposes. He calls us to a church home. But then the question, "where?" channels all of those other callings together. Where does God want us to follow all our other callings and use our gifts?

Bob Stevens' calling includes answering questions about land use.

Bob is a long-time member of Valley. You may know him as someone who leads men's discipleship groups, as a prayer warrior, or as an Elder. He has been part of every building program we have ever done here at Valley. Bob is uniquely qualified because he is an architect who specializes in land use and master planning. He has created land use and master plans for colleges, camps, and cities around

the country. But his real love is to help churches and Christian non-profits with land use and master plans. The reason he loves doing it is because of the way that lives are changed. He tells the story of a young woman who came to a Christian camp he helped to design, and she showed up without a single piece of luggage. When asked, she told the counselors that it was because she had come to camp to kill herself. They intervened and helped her. By the end of that week, she had made the decision to follow Jesus, and it changed her life immediately. She was filled with life and joy that was overflowing. That's why Bob does what he does. It's his answer to the question, "where?"

Where is God calling YOU?

I haven't answered the question for you. I've given you questions to ask and shown you people who have found answers. So, ask questions. Don't let go of those questions until you figure out the answers. Assume that the answers are there because God is calling, and He wants to be heard! The answer is probably right there in front of you. It was for Joseph when the time was right. When you hear God calling, what will you say?