

Praise for The Calling Journey

“You rocked my world—and nailed my middle age. This addresses the culmination of my journey—stepping up and risking my future on God’s identity. [I must] give up my illusion of myself as still having enough game to run with the entrepreneurial crowd and risk who I am on God working through me as a coach/chair for Convene. I cannot find any convenient mental myths that allow me to dismiss the reality of taking the risk to do what God has called me to do. Thank you, friend!”

Steve Tucker, Convene Chair

“I cried the first time I saw my life on The Calling Journey timeline. The visual made it undeniable that God has orchestrated seasons and experiences to shape my life for others. It put events and seasons of life in perspective. What I’d thought was senseless suffering and failure was actually His way of making me the man I was born to be so that I could do the task I was born to do. Thank you!”

Jeff Williams, Grace and Truth Relationship Education

“[The Calling Journey] gave me incredible insights into my life which allowed me to understand more of who God is and how He works. Thank you, Tony.”

Lisa Schultz, Office of the Senate Chaplain

“[The timeline] has brought great encouragement to me that nothing is wasted in God’s economy . . . It has inspired a new sense of hope to see the mighty hand of my loving heavenly Father through it all. . . I am thankful to Kathy and Tony for being there during a deep valley where nothing made sense. We came back out with a much different view and were even thankful for it all! I look forward to the next peak, and I’m not afraid of the journey it will take to get there.”

Amy Heilman, Mother

“The timeline that Tony presents is amazing. It helped me to understand so many things and make sense of why the Lord takes us through the things He does.”

Raeann Fitz, Certified Life Coach

“The Calling Journey timeline is a fantastic visual tool to use with people in helping them understand the season they are in. Tony makes it so easy for people to grasp where they are on their calling journey and thus respond in the best way possible.”

Janine Mason, Dreamvesting

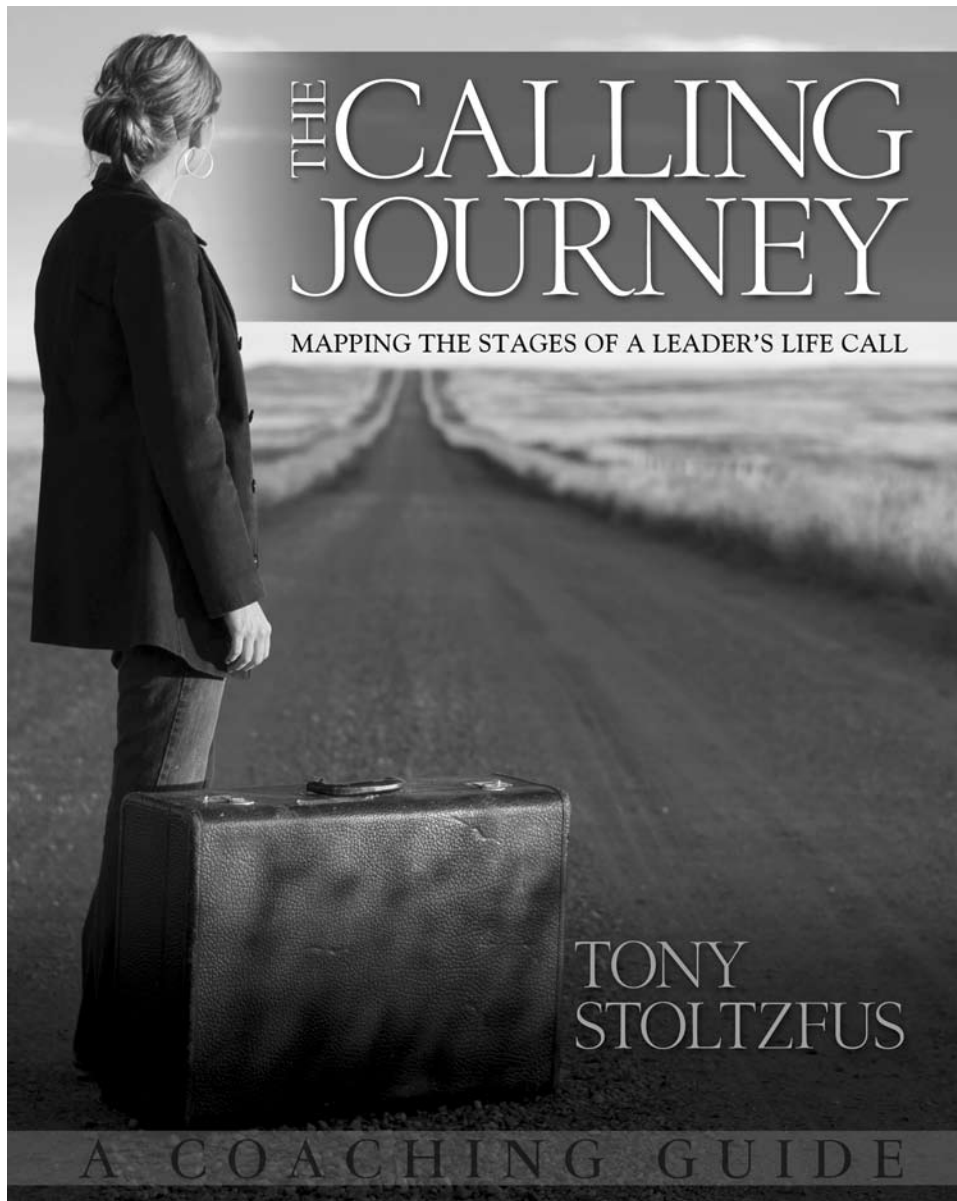
“As one who has often struggled to make sense of the many twists and turns of my life, The Calling Journey helped me to see these events from the larger vantage point of God’s purposes . . . one of the greatest truths that emerges is that, through all the ups and downs of our life, God’s primary focus is on the shaping of who we are in preparation for what he has called us to do.”

David Smith, Businessman

Also by Tony Stoltzfus ...

A Leader's Life Purpose Workbook: Calling and Destiny Discovery Tools for Christian Leaders
Christian Life Coaching Handbook: Calling and Destiny Discovery Tools for Christian Life Coaching
Leadership Coaching: The Disciplines, Skills and Heart of a Christian Coach
Coaching Questions: A Coach's Guide to Powerful Asking Skills
Peer Coach Training Facilitator's Guide
Peer Coach Training Workbook

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Out of all the several dozen leaders I interviewed for this book, Greg seemed to have travelled his calling journey exceptionally well. Raised in a dysfunctional home—he took out a life insurance policy on himself when he was 17, thinking he wouldn’t live to see 20—Greg came to Christ in the midst of a drinking binge while throwing up in a toilet. Since then, he’s been moving steadily onward through the calling stages toward God’s big dream for him. I was particularly struck by how successfully Greg navigated the key transitions of his calling journey. He seemed to have gotten the lessons of those times with much less pain and dislocation than I (and others I studied) had experienced.

When asked to what he attributed his success as a journeyer, he replied:

“I always kept in touch with leaders that were farther along than me—at least ten years farther down the road—so I never went through these situations alone. When things got difficult I would go to them for help and insight.”

Greg had stumbled upon an important principle that sums up the purpose of this book: *Those who journey with the perspective of fellow travelers travel well.* My purpose in writing is to offer a perspective that will speed your journey and reduce the self-inflicted pain you might experience along the road.

While you cannot know exactly what life will bring, the future is not a complete mystery. God is in it, working out his plan to develop you as a leader. That plan includes predictable developmental stages all leaders walk through and surprisingly universal valley seasons when God focuses on claiming our hearts. While the specific details of each person’s life are unique, the larger patterns are common

to leaders who walk with God. In other words, God has you on a developmental timeline. And having perspective on this larger plan can be the difference between leaning into what God is doing in you or fighting against it.

The Value of a Timeline

It always makes me a little nervous to travel without a road map. Turn-by-turn directions don't do it for me: I want to visualize where I am going. Once I can see the route and where the important turns are in my mind, I am much more confident that I won't get lost.

This book shows you how to create a personalized map of the journey to your own calling: a Calling Timeline. By looking at the timelines of fellow travelers, you'll get a big-picture view of the road you are taking. Comparing your story to theirs will offer amazing insights into how different events in your life fit into God's plan for your development, in the same way that a road map lets you visualize the twists and turns on a cross-country trip.

The first thing you'll probably notice about the timeline is how bumpy and windy the road is. This map is very different from popular images of "following your call." The glamorous journey we imagine our heroes traveled—an ever-onward-and-upward path that, if we make the right choices, leads in a few short years to our full release—exists mostly in our imagination. The actual road is anything but straight, and it takes decades to walk it. Wilderness seasons, valleys, even being ejected from long-time roles are as much a part of the journey as great victories, golden opportunities and demonstrations of God's power.

This gap, between the road we expect and the one we eventually travel, is the source of a great deal of angst. Much of the pain and frustration of the calling journey is not so much from the actual heart surgery God does in us as it is from our fear of the operating table. We never imagined God would take us down such a path, and so we go kicking and screaming to the fulfilling of our call.

Last week I had a coaching session with a senior leader who was in the Valley of Identity¹. God leverages this late-life wilderness season to help us fully embrace our calling identity, while at the same time teaching us to let our call go and find life in Him alone. It was a difficult time for this pastor: unable to find work for nearly a year, he was about to lose his home to foreclosure. Even more, he feared he'd lose the respect of his peers, become unemployable and literally end up on the street, homeless. He was asking himself painful questions: "Where is God in all this? Why hasn't he come through for me? What am I doing wrong?"

A few days after he shifted his focus from job-hunting to exploring what God was doing in his heart, God spoke to him about the control issues in his life (while he was counseling another person about her control issues!) and he had a significant breakthrough. My friend responded by placing his situation in God's hands, letting go of trying to make something happen and actively resting in where God had placed him. By the end of the week, he had a job and was able to renegotiate with the bank to save his house.

How you interpret this story depends on how you think God deals with us. Was my friend walking in disobedience for a year, only seeing his prayers answered when he finally repented and aligned with God's will? Was he just so hard of hearing on this issue that it took a year for God to get through to him?

1 Appendix A contains a glossary with definitions for the special terms used in *The Calling Journey*.

Or did God take him to the limit of losing everything just to “test his faith?”

That’s not what this map shows us. The Calling Journey is not about how we fall short, but about the revelation of who our Father is to us. In our successes, he is revealed as the one who believes in us, treats us as partners and wants to tackle the job together with us. In our sufferings and failings, he makes himself known as the Great Redeemer. He is the only one who can take whatever life throws at us (including our mistakes and failures) and so completely transform it that even what seemed intended for evil is woven seamlessly into the flawless fabric of his good purposes.

In the Calling Journey, we don’t interpret a story like this in terms of God’s disfavor or our disobedience. Instead, we see God working to redeem the fallout of living in a broken world. He does not send financial distress or painful circumstances to his children, yet neither does he always save us out of them. Rather, he co-opts them, employing adversity to form us in ways that bring great good into our lives and the world. “Filling up the sufferings of Christ” refers to our participation in this redemptive process. The power of Jesus’ resurrection invades this fallen world by redeeming our sufferings, bringing joy from sorrow, growth from pain and life from death. Adversity in a Christian’s life is not the sign of God’s anger, or our sin, or even our human frailty, but a giant advertisement of how the Great Redeemer turns mourning into dancing.

I’ve coached hundreds of senior ministry and business leaders, and time and again, seeing life in terms of this journey is one of the greatest gifts I have to give. Through this book I’d like to share that perspective with you. We’ll get to know Jesus, the Great Redeemer and master developer of leaders. As you learn more about his ways, you’ll find amazing parallels between your life story and the stories of others. You’ll probably find that you are more in the center of God’s will for your life than you ever realized or dared believe, and that the God you serve is so astonishingly prescient that he has already incorporated your failings and weaknesses into the plan.

Understanding the calling journey lets you take your hands off the wheel, knowing that in success or failure, expansion or demotion, dryness or overflow, Jesus is steering you through exactly the experiences you need to do what you were born to do. What a relief to paranoid travelers like me!

The Development of the Timeline Model

I began exploring the Calling Timeline model a decade ago through studying the life stories of biblical leaders. The first application I made was to my own life. It brought tremendous perspective to my wilderness years of Outside Preparation, and to the Releasing stage I was going through. Over the last ten years I’ve used it repeatedly with the ministry and business leaders I’ve coached and trained, often to great effect. Finally, during the writing of this book I undertook 40 in-depth interviews (and numerous informal ones) with contemporary leaders of all ages and vocations. For each of those leaders I constructed a timeline to help flesh out the model. While the research process has led to some significant additions to the model, the basic framework developed from the lives of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David and Jesus remains at its core.

Because this is an attempt to create an ideal model of a calling timeline, I chose to interview people who seemed fairly on track in their call. I have not focused on the ways we can go awry, or examined cases where a person has fallen away from God, given up on a call or chosen not to follow it. Since

this model starts with a Lordship decision to follow Christ, I have targeted individuals who made that commitment as interview subjects.

The timeline model addresses the developmental *process* of becoming who you are called to be. Figuring out what your calling actually is in the first place is covered in the companion volume, *A Leader's Life Purpose Workbook*. It contains over 60 discovery exercises you can use to identify your passions, dreams, values and strengths, discover who you are called to serve, develop a life mission statement and more.

If your interest lies in coaching or training others to find and follow their life call, a third book in the set, the *Christian Life Coaching Handbook*, provides sample dialogs, coaching questions, examples and techniques for coaching others to discover or clarify their call. If you are would like to offer calling discovery experiences for groups, the necessary workshop materials and PowerPoint presentations are also available through www.Coach22.com.

The Destiny Challenge

The thing that has most deeply impacted me through working with calling timelines is the amazing, unstoppable hand of God, moving his leaders toward their callings. I've listened to men and women who have contemplated suicide, had moral failures, shuttered businesses, endured divorces, shut down emotionally for years, run from God—about anything you can do to miss the mark. Still, their lives continue to move through the calling stages as Father's relentless gentleness overwhelms their failings to fulfill his purpose. Once you make Jesus Lord of your life, unless you tell him to stop, he *will* get you to your destination.

Hear a story of God's faithfulness in a leader's life, and it's a compelling tale. Hear 30 or 40 of them in a row, and a window opens onto the extraordinarily complex dance of God with the human will. No one but God could have pulled this off; none but him would think to walk in a way that is so mysterious and at the same time so manifest. It's pretty cool.

So as you read and work on your own timeline, tune into this mysterious, manifest God who gets a kick out of revealing himself in the most counter-intuitive ways. That's what the journey is about, really—the chance to travel together with Jesus and share your vocation with him. Enjoy the journey!



Today, and every day, you are on a journey. God is moving you through a well-defined process to prepare you to be who you were made to be and do what you were born to do. Whether you are in business, politics, ministry, or any other vocation, the path is essentially the same.

The object of this book is to give you a map for the great adventure of living your God-given call. This map can help you understand the seasons and transitions of your life, why you go through them and how to meet God in them. Since this map was developed from the life stories of many leaders, the best way to introduce it is through a story.

We'll start with the tale of a fellow traveler—a business and political leader who journeyed well and left a legacy of insight into the ways of God for us all. Through his life story, we'll begin to discover the critical valleys and growth stages we go through on the road to our destiny.

*The Calling Journey
begins when we accept
God's call and put him
in charge of our lives.*

Born in Palestine around 4000 years ago, Joseph is the second youngest in a fractured family torn by two wives battling for a husband and a dozen sons yearning for a father's attention most never receive. In spite of all that, Joseph is singled out as the favorite. He gets special clothes, special assignments and special attention—and his overlooked siblings despise him for it.

But more than that, he is the favored son in a family with a special generational calling. God had revealed to Joseph's great-grandfather that this family would become a great nation, his own covenant people. From a young age, Joseph knew that he was part of something big.

But the dreamer in him wanted to be more than merely an eleventh son in a culture where everyone assumed the eldest would be the heir. Joseph knew his father Jacob was younger than Esau, and yet had received the birthright and the blessing. His grandfather Isaac was the younger son, but God had preferred him over Ishmael. *“If God is in the habit of choosing a younger son for his promised line,”* Joseph thought, *“Why wouldn’t he choose me?”*

Embracing the notion that he has a call during his teen years launches Joseph into the first stage of his calling journey, the season of *Natural Promotion*². His father favors him, placing him in the position of reporting on his brothers and giving him a special multi-hued tunic. While his brothers are off herding the sheep, he gets to hang out with dad. In this time of growth and expansion, Joseph discovers he has a gift with prophetic dreams, and begins to practice functioning in it. That special talent offers a window into Joseph’s God-given destiny.

While this early season of favor and functioning is part of God’s plan, it is also painfully evident that Joseph isn’t ready. He has a prophetic gift from God, natural leadership ability and a call to lead, but he also has the petulant arrogance of a 17-year-old pretty boy whose dad thinks he can do no wrong. Lacking any ability to see the situation from his brothers’ perspective, or the character to give them the honor they deserve, he blurts out his proud dreams of lording over them.

His brothers are livid. In a final blunder, Joseph has the hubris to stand before the whole family and claim his parents will bow to him, a cultural faux pas that earns him a public rebuke from his father. His brothers, emboldened by seeing dad finally stand up to the little tattle-tale, claim their revenge by faking Joseph’s death and selling him into slavery. Like many of us at this point in life, Joseph’s own arrogance is part of what leads him down off the mountain of Natural Promotion and into the wilderness with God.

Just as his upward ascent seemed to have him on the fast track to his call, Joseph’s subsequent descent into the *Valley of Dependence* put him on a down-elevator to a brutal obscurity. Stripped of his special robe, his favored position, his rights and his future, Joseph is carried off to Egypt by Midianite traders. Several weeks later he is resold to Potiphar, an Egyptian captain of the guard. Thoughts of survival replace dreams of grandeur. Lost in a strange culture with strange gods and an unknown language, forced to do the dirty work he had always looked down on, Joseph has nothing to cling to but God.

Through this first Valley we discover that even a divine calling, great abilities and a supernatural gift are not enough. There is a long journey ahead before

*The journey’s first stage is **Natural Promotion**, when God’s grace on our natural gifts produces a rapid ascent.*

In Natural Promotion, we have the innate abilities for our call but not the character.

Natural Promotion is followed by a valley season, where our lack of inner formation catches up to us.

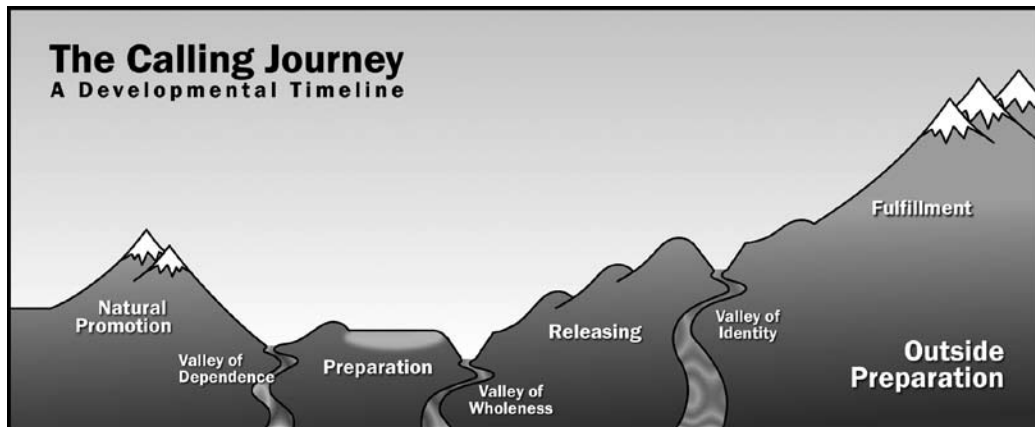
*Sometimes our own hubris is what triggers our descent into the **Valley of Dependence**.*

2 A list of each stage and its primary characteristics is found in Appendix B.

The Valley of Dependence teaches reliance on God instead of on natural abilities.

Joseph's dreams come true, and the once-clear road to his destiny is now hidden.

Down in the pit of the Valley of Dependence, the part of the human soul that craves self-sufficiency and having life under control is dealt a mortal blow. Up to this point Joseph is the one pulling the strings, playing the system and planning out his own future. But now there are no strings left to pull. Staring glumly at a once-bright future that lies dying in the Egyptian dirt, Joseph faces a universal



This map shows the Four Stages of calling (Natural Promotion, Preparation, Releasing and Fulfillment) and three critical Valleys leaders pass through on the calling journey.

choice: *Who do I trust for my future? Do I grip tighter to my own abilities and believe that it depends on me to make my dreams happen? Do I let go and somehow trust God to*

do it all on his own, even though he seems absent and gives me no assurances? Or do I stop hoping at all to protect myself from disappointment, and reconcile myself to living an insignificant life?

Joseph did not give up hope (although there was probably a lot of sniveling and whining on that caravan trip to Egypt!). With the choice to cling to the God of his fathers, dependence on God replaces his previous posture of entitlement and self-sufficiency.

As Joseph learns to embrace his circumstances and let go of the life he once thought he deserved, God's favor and blessing launch a second period of upward promotion in his life. His years in this *Preparation* stage are a time where Joseph learns the practical disciplines of successful leadership. Eventually, his management abilities gain him a position over all of Potiphar's household. Finally, his life seems at least somewhat back on track.

While his sphere of influence and responsibility is increasing, this period of Joseph's life is more about learning to lead than actually accomplishing his calling. Joseph develops skills that will someday be vital to his destiny role: managing a household, leading a staff, the culture and language, and how to do business with upper-class Egyptians. The formerly-pampered golden child is

*When we let go and allow God to lead us his way, he moves us into the next stage, **Preparation.***

The Preparation stage is about developing the skills and experience needed for our call.