



# THE CALLING JOURNEY

AN INTRODUCTION TO CALLING TIMELINES

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*Ever wish you had a roadmap that gave you directions to your life call?*

*The Calling Journey* is just such a map. Presenting the predictable stages and transitions God moves you through to prepare you for your destiny, the Calling Journey timeline will help you discover your current stage in life and understand how to lean into God's growth agenda for you instead of fighting it. Whether you know your final destination or not, the timeline will show you how God is leveraging everything you experience in life—from your greatest successes to your lowest valleys—to prepare you for your call.

Developed through working with hundreds of leaders from all walks of life, the timeline maps four common growth stages and three transitional valleys in the typical leader's journey (see



diagram). From your first taste of living the call in the Natural Promotion stage to the heart challenges of the Valley of Identity, each season has unique characteristics and a unique way of developing you for your calling.

Comprehending God's purposes for the seasons of life can make a huge difference in how you respond to Him. Often the greatest pain and longest delays on the calling journey are caused by simply not grasping what He is up to. Knowing your timeline offers tremendous insight into how God is at work in your story.

This brief introduction to the book [\*The Calling Journey\*](#) will acquaint you with the basics of the calling timeline. The best way to grasp this tool is to see it unfold in the life story of leader. So let's take a look at the journey of Abraham the patriarch.

## Abraham's Journey

Abraham's calling journey begins at 75, when he first lays hold of the mission God has for him and his family line and sets out for the Promised Land. Like Abraham, we embark on the journey when we embrace the notion that God has a call on our lives. The timeline starts when we make Jesus lord (as well as savior) and join in the family business of bringing in the Kingdom of God.

The first stage of the timeline, *Natural Promotion*, is about radical obedience.

Abraham had to leave his home, his clan and his culture for a place he knew nothing about. With no maps, photos or travel guides, this was truly a journey into the unknown.

It's a great biblical picture of one of the common elements of this stage: a *Faith Adventure*. God said, "Go... to the land that I will show you" ([Gen. 12:1](#)). Imagine—loading your entire family and your family business into the truck for a major move without knowing where you are going or how to get there! God often takes us on Faith Adventures like these during the Natural Promotion stage, where we learn to trust without seeing the destination and He shows us what He can do.

As with all leaders, Abraham's call is not just to *do* a task, but to *be* a certain kind of person. While his "doing call" is about going to the land and fathering a nation, his "being call" is more difficult to understand, at least at first. I doubt that at the time Abraham had any idea that three great religions would count him as a father, or what it meant that "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" ([Gen. 12:3](#)).

The 700-mile journey to Canaan would have taken months for Abraham, his servants and his herds to complete. But it's a heady time: God shows up, confirming Abraham's call and saying, *This is the place!* So Abraham begins to explore his inheritance, moving nomadically through the hills to the Negev and getting a first taste of what life in the land of milk and honey

*"What surprised me was that you had a map of my life and that others had the same one... It couldn't have been a better map of my journey if you had come and spent an afternoon with me."*

Pastor

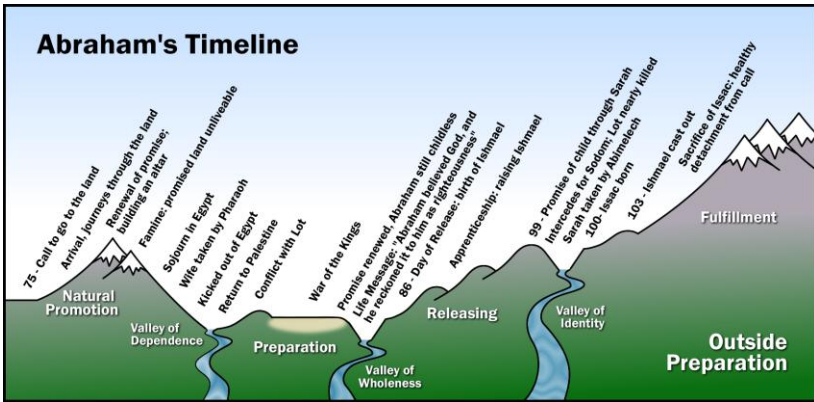
was like. At Bethel he builds an altar, as both a place of worship and a physical reminder of the fulfillment of God’s promise.

In the same way, Natural Promotion gives us a taste of what functioning in our destiny will look like. This first stage, usually lasting three to five years, often includes experiences that confirm our call, a sense that God can do anything and rapid promotion based on God’s grace on our natural, unrefined abilities.

### The Valley of Dependence

While Abraham was still celebrating God’s activity, change was already in the air. A famine crept over the land ([Gen. 12:10](#)). Abraham had graduated from the Natural Promotion stage, and God used this new circumstance to lead him into the *Valley of Dependence*.

The famine grew severe, and Abraham was forced to leave the country God had promised to his descendants and go down



to Egypt. Now, imagine for a moment that you are Abraham. God calls you on this crazy journey, so you take the risk and obey. After uprooting your whole life to pursue His promise, you arrive in the country that He says is his blessing and your inheritance—and it’s a poverty-stricken wasteland!

So after all the preparation and planning and work of moving, you have to pull up stakes and move again, because the Promised Land just didn’t work out. I sometimes wonder if we were Abraham whether we would have stayed in Canaan, standing on the promise of God until we starved to death!

Approaching Egypt, a fearful Abraham concocts the story that his wife is his sister to protect himself ([Gen. 12:11](#)). He had believed and experienced God's promise when things were going well. But now that the heat is on, he loses both his confidence and his wife!

To Abraham, it must have felt like his dreams were falling apart. Circumstances spun completely out of control, and

*"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."*

Business Owner

he lost the mate who was supposed to give birth to his son, the child of promise. While in the Natural Promotion stage we learn we can do anything with God, the Valley of Dependence teaches us we can't do anything without him. We learn dependence.

Despite Abraham's fearful scheming, God acts on his behalf. His lie is uncovered, his wife is given back, and the two of them are kicked out of the country, richer for the experience to boot!

After a Natural Promotion season where God's blessing pursues us at every turn, it is difficult to understand when He chooses to shape us in the wilderness. The first time we enter a valley, our greatest difficulty is realizing that God is in it. We scramble to get out of the desert and back into what we perceive as God's blessing (even though we never left it), kicking fruitlessly against the goads until we are exhausted. The greatest pain of the valleys is self-inflicted—the pain of wondering where God is in all this. The real trouble is that our paradigms simply aren't big enough to contain all the ways He works.

## Preparation

When Abraham left Egypt, he trekked back through the desert to a familiar place: Bethel ([Gen 13:1](#)). Revisiting the altar he'd erected to the Lord reconnected him to his dream and to God's promise, and he called again on the name of the Lord. With that refocusing, Abraham settled down to the serious business of becoming the man God had called him to be. This *Preparation* season of learning about faith lasted close to a decade.

One important incident is the conflict with Lot over finding adequate grazing land (see [Gen. 13:5-18](#)). Abraham trusts his future to God instead of trying to hold on to prosperity, giving Lot first choice of the land. The reward of his trust is an expanded inheritance.

A few years later he rescues Lot from the sack of Sodom, yet refuses to keep any of the spoil from his victory. Abraham's reason is that he doesn't want anyone to think he got rich off of others instead of from the blessing of God. Abraham is learning to trust his future and his heritage to God. Interestingly, it is when Abraham reaches this place of contentment with his lot in life that his Preparation stage comes to an end.

The Preparation stage is a lengthy season where we settle down into a career or long-term role and begin the hard work of making ready for our call. We gain the skills and experience needed for our destiny role, and increase our capacity for responsibility and leadership. All the while we live in the often-difficult tension of knowing we have a destiny but not yet being fully released to it.

While some leaders are prepared within their area of call (for instance, if you are called to the teaching profession and function in a primary role as a teacher all your life), Abraham's Preparation stage happened outside of his area of calling. One of the most important religious and family leaders in history had neither a family nor a ministry during his Preparation stage. Instead, he functioned primarily as a businessman. However, God was deeply at work in him, using the circumstances of his business life to mold him into a father of faith. Going through the Preparation stage outside ones' area of call does not mean you are off course—about as many leaders go through *Outside Preparation* as do *Inside Preparation*.

### **The Valley of Wholeness**

For those who are prepared outside their area of call (*Outside Preparation*), the end of this stage is often a dry time where we begin to wonder if God has passed us by. Abraham's question to God is particularly poignant: "O Lord God, what will you give me, since I am childless...?" ([Gen. 15:2](#)). Abraham's life purpose

was about being a father, and yet at the end of Preparation he still had no child. As the years lengthen with no sign of our release, this is the point on the timeline where we are often most tempted to quit on our calling.

Instead of giving up in this *Valley of Wholeness*, Abraham hung on to God—and God answered. But He did more than that: the valley season became a key birthing place of Abraham’s call. In one of life’s great mysteries, God often forms the heart of our calling in our most difficult moments. The woman whose daughter is killed by a drunk driver starts Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), the rebel who spends most of his life in prison matures into a leader of reconciliation (Nelson Mandela), or the lawyer who goes to prison starts a prison ministry (Chuck Colson).

The heart of Abraham’s call was to be “the father of all who believe” ([Rom. 4:11](#))—the father of faith. He was the first human being to figure out that being right with God was about believing Him, not about rule-following or animal sacrifices. And here in the Valley of Wholeness was when Abraham first truly grasped that being call, by believing in what he couldn’t see happening: “He believed in the Lord, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness” ([Gen. 15:6](#)).

*“When I did the map, I realized, ‘Oh my! I’m so normal!’”*

Missions Leader

However, the Valley of Wholeness doesn’t always focus on wondering if God has passed us by. God also uses this brief stage (usually one to two years) to deal with marriage or relational issues, life balance, or secret sins that would derail us later in life. The Valley of Wholeness is about making us whole, and ready to be released into the next stage of our development.

In God’s economy, the valley times are crucial. During these seasons, our doing and accomplishment are lessened (sometimes through loss of our roles!) to make room for God’s inner work in our identity. Since what we have to give others flows out of our hearts, increasing Kingdom impact is always a function of heart transformation. *The depth at which you are transformed in your valleys is directly proportional to your increase in impact in your next stage.*

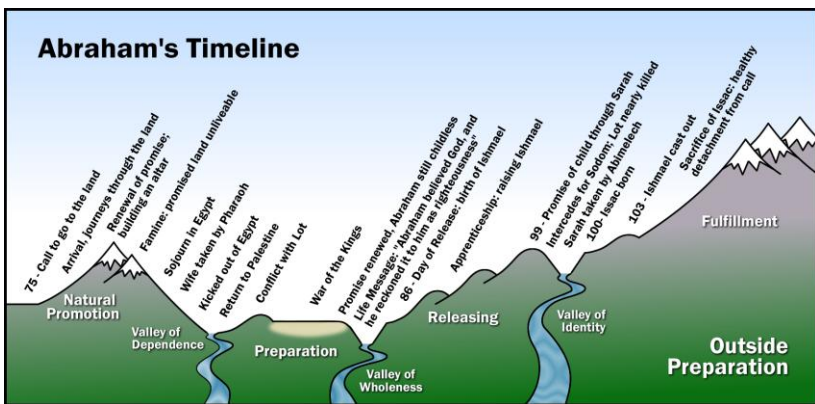
In his Valley of Wholeness, the message of faith grew greatly in Abraham. In the midst of darkness and turmoil ([Gen. 15:12-](#)



16), he learned that the promise would come through pain: his descendants would be enslaved and oppressed for 400 years. He learned that the fate of other nations was bound up with that of his descendants. And although he would not see the promise of a land in his lifetime, he covenanted with God to wait for it.

## The Releasing Stage

After 10 years of Preparation in Canaan, following his Valley of Wholeness, Abraham had his first child through Hagar ([Gen. 16:1](#)). The Bible does not tell us whether Ishmael was a mistake.



What is clear is that God incorporated it into His plan. When the pregnant Hagar fled from Sarah's anger, an angel met her in the wilderness and sent her back. For the next 14 years, Ishmael was the tool God used to teach Abraham how to raise a son.

During this *Releasing* stage, Abraham was an apprentice to his call. He was called as a father, and so he served a parenting apprenticeship. He got to watch Ishmael learn to walk and talk, to practice exercising discipline, to take him out to the herds and teach him about the animals, to show him the family business. Raising Ishmael taught Abraham the practical skills of fathering.

The Releasing stage is a time when we move into our call in a limited way. Sometimes it's in the same role but in a smaller sphere of influence, others in the sphere we're called to but in a smaller role. This apprenticeship usually lasts a decade or more.

Because we are moving into what we were born to do, the Releasing stage can look a lot like the next stage, *Fulfillment*.

Abraham may have thought he was already in his calling and that Ishmael was the child of promise, but in reality he was still under development. In the Preparation stage he had learned general competencies (like faith and stewardship), but in the Releasing stage he sharpened those general skills into the specific skills needed in his area of call. He was learning to command his household to keep the way of the Lord (see [Gen. 18:19](#)).

At the onset of the Releasing stage, God frequently moves leaders in Outside Preparation quite suddenly into their area of calling. Just as David moved from fugitive to king in a matter of days, and Moses was transformed from an unknown shepherd into a national leader virtually overnight, this *Day of Release* may quickly come when we least expect it.

Often a sponsor plays a crucial part in this transition. In the same way God sent Barnabas to recruit Saul and Aaron to look for Moses, your Day of Release may arrive in the form of a leader who seeks you out and promotes you into the place God has prepared you for in secret.

### **The Valley of Identity**

There is one more major transition to navigate before we move into the Fulfillment stage. After 13 years in Releasing, God returned to Abraham to renew the call ([Gen. 17:1](#)). This *Valley of Identity* was a time of both excitement and crisis for Abraham. He had grown content to think of Ishmael as the child of promise, yet God suddenly returned to challenge that assumption, forcing

*“[The timeline] made sense of things I once thought were senseless suffering.”*

Non-Profit Executive

Abraham to rethink who he was. For 13 years he had believed he was the father of the promised child, and now God was saying that child was still to come. And after 27 years of trying and failing to have a son with Sarah, to hear God say his aged wife was going to get pregnant sounded like a joke.

Abraham laughed out loud when he heard it. But God played along with the joke by instructing him to call the promised son “Laughter” (Isaac).

Despite his laughter, Abraham immediately obeys the command to circumcise his household ([Gen. 17:23](#)). It is amazing how quickly he shifts his thinking to align with God's. Abraham's faith is shown in that even though what God said sounded ludicrous, he still acted on it. In that moment, he fully became (in his being) the father of faith he was called to be. And since God's inner work is always a precursor to what he does outwardly, that faith soon becomes reality in the form of Isaac. In other words, when Abraham becomes who he was born to *be*, he begins to *do* what he was born to do.

The Valley of Identity is an intense season. In the space of a little over a year, Abraham hears God reaffirm the promise, has to completely rethink his identity as a father, hosts the angel messengers, intercedes for the righteous in Sodom, relocates to the Negev (valley transitions are often associated with geographical moves), and has his wife taken again by Abimelech. Each of these circumstances pushes Abraham deeper in his ability to walk in faith. The outward crisis produces inner depth.

During this valley God gives both Abraham and Sarah new names to signify that change that is taking place inside them. Abram (exalted father) becomes Abraham (father of many nations). In effect, God is saying, *You now have a new identity.*

Putting the finishing touches on our identity in God is what the Valley of Identity is all about. It often begins when a role we've put our identity in is taken away. Through this loss, we reach the place of honestly saying, *God, if my dreams never come, you alone are enough for me.* This healthy detachment from our call gives us the freedom to pursue it without the call itself becoming a mistress that competes with God for our affections.

In the process, God finishes incarnating in us the Jesus we were made to transmit to the world. Once that inner work is complete, our new identity soon brings the outward work of our life mission to birth. For those in Fulfillment, *doing* the task or role we are called to means everyone we touch is touched by the Jesus in our *being*.

Abraham's intercession for Sodom shines a light on how we come into this new identity. It represents a change in how Abraham sees himself before God.

God says, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed?” ([Gen. 18:17](#)). In other words, God is choosing to relate to Abraham in terms of who he is called to be. The incredible thing is that Abraham then puts on the full measure of how God sees him for the first time, *and relates to God as if he is that person*. In that identity, the one in whom all nations will be blessed, Abraham dares to stand between God and the city-state of Sodom and call for blessing even if there are as few as ten righteous people there.

One of the key tasks of the Valley of Identity is putting on the full mantle of our calling identity. We must choose to believe that we *are now* the person we have hoped to be all our lives. We are no longer preparing and practicing—now we are doing our life's work.

Our ability to wear this identity is most easily seen in how we present ourselves. Just as Jesus called himself “the bread of life” or Paul took the title of “Apostle to the Gentiles,” we must be able to publicly name the fullness of who we are in our call. Our human fears and false humilities are exposed through how difficult it is for us to simply call ourselves what God calls us.

The final act in Abraham’s Valley of Identity is the casting out of Ishmael ([Gen. 21:9](#)). Abraham was greatly distressed by his wife’s demand for him to finally choose a single heir. Then God shows up again, reaffirming the promise and comforting Abraham about Ishmael’s future. The next day, Abraham makes his final choice to put all his eggs in one basket and believe his legacy will come through Isaac.

## **Fulfillment**

The ending of the Valley of Identity ushers in the *Fulfillment* stage of Abraham’s calling journey. He functions in the role he was called to and prepared for, as a father to the child of promise. He is a blessing to whatever nation he is in (see [Gen. 21:22-23](#)), and he has become a father of faith in a truly world-changing way—in fact, three different major religions call him a father! The original promise he received decades ago, that all the families of the earth will be blessed through him, has come true.

In Fulfillment, our focus moves from doing to being, and from accomplishing great things to finding success in the success of others. For instance, Abraham goes to great lengths to find the right wife for Isaac, to ensure Isaac's success in life. When we finally get to function in the place we've been shooting for all our lives, a strange thing happens: suddenly, doing great things ourselves becomes less a focus, and helping others achieve their dreams grows in importance.

Like Abraham, we begin to think beyond our lifetime, to leaving a legacy in others. The story's focus shifts to Isaac, and Abraham rejoices in his son, "...an old man and satisfied with life..." ([Gen. 25:8](#)). The Fulfillment stage brings fulfillment; and those in it can truly say, "Everything that happened in my life has prepared me for what I am doing now."

### **Abraham and You**

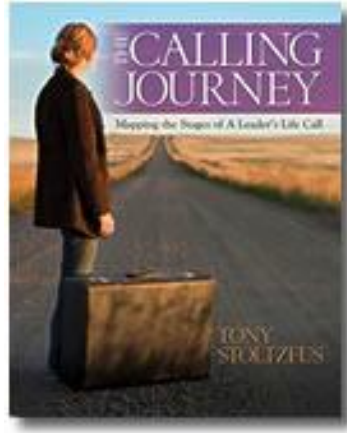
While your calling is different than Abraham's, the process you'll go through to reach it is not. Most leaders pass through the same series of stages, with God doing similar things in each stage along the way.

It took Abraham 25 years to move from his original calling to Fulfillment. Along the way, there were moments of promise and intimacy along with periods of difficulty; times when God's hand was obvious alongside seasons where his activity was hidden. Through all the ups and downs God was there, leveraging every life experience to make Abraham into the man he was born to be.

God is doing the same with your life. The beauty of the timeline is that it can help you understand the ways of God in building leaders more clearly, especially in the difficult, desert times. The Calling Journey has a lot to teach about the work of God in your life!

## Creating Your Timeline

Want to map your own timeline? The book *The Calling Journey* (available through [www.Coach22.com](http://www.Coach22.com)) will walk you step by step through the process. It includes an in-depth chapter on each stage or valley, timelines and life stories of historical leaders like Mother Teresa and William Wilberforce, and biblical timelines of Moses, Paul, Joseph, David, and Jesus. To show what the journey looks like in today's world, we've also profiled how dozens of contemporary leaders from all walks of life have met God along the way.

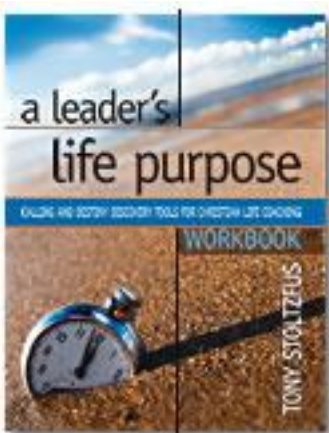


## Special Offer

To get you started, here's a special offer on the book. Go to [www.Coach22.com](http://www.Coach22.com), enter the coupon code "timeline" at checkout, and you'll receive an extra \$2.00 off our lowest price.

## Companion Books

If you aren't as clear as you'd like to be on what your call is in the first place, don't despair! For many leaders, God only fully



reveals the call in the latter stages of the timeline. For help in discovering and clarifying your life call, the companion volume, *A Leader's Life Purpose Workbook*, features over 60 self-discovery exercises that reveal your passions, dreams and values, what your innate design says about your purpose, and much more. With tools for clarifying core values, identifying your audience and influence style, and developing a

personal calling statement, you'll come away much more equipped to understand where God is taking you in life.

### **On the Web**

At [www.TheCallingJourney.com](http://www.TheCallingJourney.com) we've created a free, interactive Timeline Builder tool that lets you input the seasons of your life, create a personalized calling timeline, and print it out. You'll also receive a short report on your current stage which provides hints on how to engage God well in that season of life.

Your life story has meaning. It is a story of redemption, unfolding according to God's purpose, and it displays with amazing clarity how God can take even the things that were meant for evil in your life and transform them into good. So explore your timeline—you'll be amazed at how much of God is in your story!

## About the Author

As a seasoned adventurer on the calling journey, Tony Stoltzfus has visited little known countries and brought back stories from afar. His own journey includes high points like traveling the country with a band, selling tens of thousands of his books, starting several businesses and running the largest training school in the Christian coaching field. It has also taken



him through valleys like losing his life's work, leaving dreams and destiny roles behind and the pain of broken relationships. Through it all, the message he brings back is that God is there, leveraging every experience to prepare us for our destiny.

As a pioneer in Christian leadership coaching, Tony has developed thousands of coaches, co-founded an international training school and created a wide range of leadership resources used around the world. He is the author of eight books, including the best-selling [Coaching Questions](#), and many training courses built around innovative adult learning strategies. In his own coaching practice he specializes in helping senior ministry and business leaders engage God at a deep level in the midst of difficult transitions and finish well on the calling journey.

Tony operates Coach22, an on-line [coaching bookstore](#), and offers training events through [CoachingWorkshops.net](#). He currently lives with his wife of 24 years and two teens in Redding, California, and is part of the Bethel Church community.