

CALLED FOR MORE: HOW THE DOCTRINE OF VOCATION PROVIDES COMFORT
AND PURPOSE FOR THE GRIEVING

BY

JUSTIN D. DIGMAN

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REV. DR. MICHAEL BERG, ADVISOR

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

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ABSTRACT

When a loved one passes, a void becomes apparent. The relationship where one once found love, purpose, and meaning is gone. Does the church have a doctrine uniquely equipped to address this sudden void? This paper will examine the effect of grief through doctrinal study combined with qualitative research from firsthand interviews. This paper aims to encourage pastors and laypeople to see the beauty of vocation, the realness of grief, the crosses bore in vocation, and how vocation uniquely applies to the bereaved. This paper examines if a proper understanding of vocation provides comfort and purpose to the grieving. This paper also intends to show that the doctrine of vocation makes ordinary interactions divine. Love, purpose, and meaning are not dependent upon one individual God has blessed us with; instead, it is found in serving whatever neighbor God places before us.

INTRODUCTION

Ministry to the bereaved always has one goal, to point the grieving to Christ. The pastor rightly offers Scripture such as, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin” (Heb 4:15 NIV11). The grieving need to know that someone understands the pain and hurt they experience. Pastoral care reveals Christ’s compassion and empathy. Jesus Christ gives hope amid grief. Therefore, the Christian does not grieve like one who has no hope because Christ promises eternal life and resurrection from the dead. Proper pastoral care for the grieving is found in repeating God’s promise of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:54–58). The greatest comfort we can give a bereaved person is the knowledge that their loved one is with the Lord, and one day they will see them again.¹ Once this comfort has been applied, then the content of this paper can be examined. The doctrine of vocation is a tool in the pastor’s tool belt to aid in ministering to the grieving. It is not a magic healing balm that can take away grief, and it is not where we draw our hope.

This author heard a common theme when facilitating a GriefShare group. Multiple participants stated that they had always been a wife, or a daughter, or a husband, or a mother, or a sibling. Now that their loved one died, they did not know who they were, and they did not know what their purpose was anymore. This paper attempts to address this exact concern.

1. John Schuetze, *Doctor of Souls: The Art of Pastoral Theology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2017), 170.

This paper is not a quantitative study. Any statistics used for emphasis should not be inferred as “inferential statistics to generalize results to a larger population.”² If the research presented correlates with other congregations and their grief ministries, that is a blessing. However, the research methodology of this paper looks at a particular ministry setting. The research aims to report the qualitative results of instruction on the doctrine of vocation.

Previous research on this topic has not been explored. The doctrine of vocation has been studied. Ministry to the grieving has been studied, but research on vocation’s application to the bereaved has not been conducted. Future research on this topic could be expanded by using a quantitative method or multiple ministry settings for a qualitative study.

The paper will not include a specific literature review section. Six in-depth interviews were conducted, and a literature review threatened to reduce the stories of those who shared their experience with grief. Literature from primary and secondary sources will be used in the discourse of the paper, with interviews utilized as if they were a primary resource.

This researcher found that each participant’s experience with grief was unique. Nevertheless, there were critical areas of commonality. Interviewees identified love, joy, purpose, and identity from their vocational roles. Literary research showed man’s deep need and desire for purpose. Each interviewee expressed challenges with finding purpose, identity, and joy when their loved one passed. The results from the instruction on vocation allowed for conclusions to be drawn on the usefulness of this doctrine for the grieving. Participant results gave evidence that validated the usefulness of teaching the doctrine vocation. Results also uncovered further applications from instruction on vocation that were unexpected.

2. Timothy Lincoln, *Qualitative Research: A Field Manual for Ministry Students* (Chicago, Alta Open, 2021), 4.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research for this project was completed with individual interviews. I spoke with six individuals who had all lost a loved one and had gone through a GriefShare group I helped facilitate.³ The age range of the participants varied from their mid-thirties to mid-eighties. All participants were Christian but came from a variety of Christian denominations. Participants were Lutheran, Catholic, Presbyterian, and Non-Denominational. Participants primary loss varied; it consisted of the loss of a spouse, sibling, child, or mother. The time frame for their loss also differed. Losses ranged from under a year to seven years.

Each interviewee was asked during their GriefShare program if they would be part of this research project. Once the topic was finalized, participants were contacted by email. An initial email was followed up by a text to confirm interest. Once confirmed the participants were informed that they would have one interview over Zoom. Once completing all the interviews, I would compose and send a short primer on vocation. An email would be sent with the primer on vocation, and a request for their feedback. Participants would answer pre-written questions regarding the short primer on vocation and respond to me over email.

Once participants agreed to be interviewed, I scheduled a meeting and sent an Informed Consent Form. The Informed Consent Form notified the interviewee how their information would be collected, how the information would be stored, and how confidentiality would be maintained in my thesis writing. I communicated that information would be collected by

3. GriefShare is a support group that uses video and printed material to support the grieving. Thirteen sessions are held aimed at educating and allowing opportunities for healing during the grieving process. The GriefShare group I helped facilitate was run during my vicar year in Asheville, NC.

recording the Zoom call used for their interview. Once recorded, I would create a transcript and store it on my personal device until my final thesis was submitted. Upon completing my thesis, it was communicated that any recordings or transcripts would be deleted and destroyed. I also informed the interviewees that the names they stated would be changed. In my thesis, they would be listed as participant # __. The Informed Consent form can be found in Appendix 1.

Interviews were conducted over Zoom. In an email, the interviewees were sent a link to join the scheduled Zoom call. Once the meeting began, I would click the “record” button on Zoom and proceed with the pre-written interview questions. Each participant was asked the exact same questions. My objective was to create a standardized interview process with results varying on the interviewee's personal experience with grief. The interview questions can be found in Appendix 2. I used the application Rev to transcribe the conversations. The transcription took place instantly and was reasonably accurate.

A short paper was sent to the interviewees one week after the final interview. The primer on vocation was written with the first interview results in mind. The paper was intended to show how education on vocation could be a helpful tool to evaluate the loss of purpose, joy, and identity from losing a loved one. The primer can be found in Appendix 3.

A second document containing four questions was attached to the primer. The interviewee was prompted to read the primer and answer the questions corresponding to the primer. The questions can be found in Appendix 4.

The responses to the primer on vocation were compiled and analyzed to find points of commonality. The effects of instruction on vocation are included in the body of the thesis.

MEANING

Where is meaning found? To write a paper that examines how vocation brings purpose and meaning to the grieving, an overview of where individuals find meaning is needed. Is meaning created or given? Is meaning something short-term or long-term? These questions form the basis for part one.

Meaning According to Solomon

If the topic of meaning is to be examined, a brief study of Ecclesiastes reveals how this section of Scripture addresses meaning. Meaning is laid out as the vital issue of the book, and the critical figure we will hear from is Solomon.⁴ “The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher. ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’ What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever” (Eccl 1:1–4). Solomon starts his biblical philosophy lesson with a bold claim, life is meaningless. Everything is **הֶבֶל**. The

4. The authorship of Ecclesiastes does not have consensus in biblical scholarship. The traditional view is that the Teacher identified in Ecclesiastes 1:1 is Solomon. This view sees the Teacher as an older Solomon looking back over his life when he fell away from the LORD; recorded in 1 Kings 11:1–13. This paper is written assuming that Solomon is the author.

definition for הָבֵל is “mist” or “vapor”.⁵ הָבֵל is like a puff of air from your lips it appears one second and disappears the next.⁶ NIV renders הָבֵל as “meaningless”.

Solomon develops הָבֵל as a theme throughout his book. Wisdom is meaningless (Eccl 1:12–18). Friends and earthly pleasures are meaningless (Eccl 2:1–11). Sexual intimacy is meaningless (Eccl 2:8). Work is meaningless (Eccl 2:17–24). Death is meaningless (Eccl 2:18–21). Suffering is meaningless (Eccl 4:13). Companionship is meaningless (Eccl 4:8–12). Riches are meaningless (Eccl 5:8–18). What does Solomon mean? Luke Thompson suggests, “The first thing we need to do to understand the words of the Teacher correctly, is to understand what he *is* and *is not* claiming about life, to define our terms.”⁷ When Solomon speaks of הָבֵל he is not saying that people will not experience feelings of purpose and meaning in different areas of their life. Solomon is making a truth claim that meaning cannot be established solely “under the sun” (Eccl 1:2).

Where Meaning Is Found

In 2017 Pew Research conducted a study asking a large sample size of Americans where they found meaning. The methodology used was sending a traditional open-ended question in a

5. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, Wilhelm Gesenius and James Strong, *The Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000), 210.

6. Mike Novotny, *Three Words That Will Change Your Life: The Secret to Experiencing the Joy of God's Presence* (Bloomington: Bethany House, 2020), 83.

7. Luke Thompson, *Your Life Has Meaning: Discovering Your Role in an Epic Story* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2019), 5.

survey.⁸ “Americans were asked to describe in their own words what makes their lives feel meaningful, fulfilling or satisfying.”⁹ The results revealed a pattern; the primary areas Americans found meaning were 1) Family, 2) Work, 3) Money, 4) Spirituality and Faith, and 5) Friends.¹⁰

In 2021 Pew Research conducted another study to find what makes life meaningful. In this study, the target audience was individuals living in seventeen advanced economies.¹¹ The research study was similar to the survey conducted in America. Researchers asked, “We’re interested in exploring what it means to live a satisfying life. What aspects of your life do you currently find meaningful, fulfilling or satisfying?”¹² A list of the most prevalent responses was derived by recording the median percent of particular answers. The result revealed a similar result to the American study. The areas individuals found meaning were 1) Family and Children, 2) Occupation and Career, 3) Material Well-being, 4) Friends and Community 5) Physical and mental health.¹³ The only area of difference was the prominence of “physical and mental health” in the study of seventeen advanced economies¹⁴, while the study completed solely in America had “spirituality” in the top five.

8. The open-ended question was included in a survey conducted from September 14 to 28, 2017, among 4,867 U.S. adults on the American Trends Panel.

9. Pew Research Center, *Where Americans Find Meaning* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2018), 5.

10. Pew Research, *Where Americans Find Meaning*, 6.

11. Pew Research Center, *What Makes Life Meaningful? Views From 17 Advanced Economies* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2021), 4.

12. Pew Research, *What Makes Life Meaningful*, 4.

13. Pew Research, *What Makes Life Meaningful*, 4.

14. The seventeen countries represented in the survey: Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, France, Greece, Germany, Canada, Singapore, Italy, Netherlands, Belgium, Japan, United Kingdom, United States of America, Spain, South Korean, and Taiwan.

The consensus from both studies is that people find meaning through relationships. The relationships are with people, particularly family, friends, and careers. The connections are also with objects or things, such as wealth. However, when a relationship is lost does this impact meaning? Viktor Frankl provides an avenue to discussing this issue.

Frankl was a psychiatrist whose methodology of logotherapy rose to national attention following World War II. Frankl's firsthand research details his life as a Jewish man surviving four concentration camps including Auschwitz.¹⁵ As a psychiatrist, Frankl observed the human psyche in a place of death and suffering. Through the lens of his experience, he articulates a book on what kept people alive and how life had meaning even in the midst of a German extermination camp.¹⁶

Viktor Frankl states that "The true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche.... The more one forgets himself—by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love—the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself."¹⁷ This observation focuses the attention of the individuals outside of themselves towards others. Meaning is found in loving others. Frankl systematizes how he perceives man's pursuit of meaning.

There are three main avenues on which one arrives at meaning in life. The first is by creating a work or by doing a deed. The second is by experiencing something or encountering someone; in other words, meaning can be found not only in work but also in love.... Most important, however, is the third avenue to meaning in life: even the helpless victim of a hopeless situation, facing a fate he cannot change, may rise above himself, may grow beyond himself, and by so doing change himself. He may turn a personal tragedy into triumph."¹⁸

15. Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), IX.

16. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 1.

17. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 110–11.

18. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 145–46.

The categories for meaning are helpful but there is a difference within Frankl's avenues. Avenue one and two focus the individual outside of themselves to find meaning and purpose. However the last avenue, the avenue of suffering, pushes the individual to look inside of themselves. Frankl states, "When a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he will have to accept his suffering as his task; his single and unique task. He will have to acknowledge the fact that even in suffering he is unique and alone in the universe. No one can relieve him of his suffering or suffer in his place. His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden."¹⁹ This is a dark place to be alone, tasked with your sufferings.

According to Frankl tragedy is an opportunity for individuals to find meaning. However, a problem arises when an individual meaning is in the response to suffering. If meaning is contingent on one's response to suffering, what value is created? Does endurance matter? Why should an individual respond and endure suffering? Frankl attempts to argue this point by defending the value of all human life. Frankl highlights where the elderly can find value. Frankl says, "It is true that the old have no opportunities, no possibilities in the future. But they have more than that. Instead of possibilities in the future, they have realities in the past—the potentialities they have actualized, they meaning they have fulfilled, the values they have realized—and nothing and nobody can ever remove these assets from the past."²⁰ While reflecting on past adversity and seeing the triumph gives purpose, there is still a problem. People will die. The logical conclusion is dark. If life's purpose is to endure suffering and reflect on it, it would be better to be dead with no suffering than alive with suffering.

19. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 77–78.

20. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 151.

Solomon makes this point in Ecclesiastes. “I saw the tears of the oppressed and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors and they have no comforter. And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive. But better than both is the one who has never been born, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun” (Eccl. 4:1–3). Suffering under the sun is meaningless.

When a relationship no longer exists, such as being a spouse or child. When an individual is no longer an employer or employee or loses their material possessions, what happens to this sense of meaning? Is meaning found in how they respond to adversity? How can there be any sense of meaning if there are only fleeting memories? Luke Thompson identifies this issue.

A time will come when the mother and father stop valuing their children, if only at death. And the meaning they derived from their lives of valuing their children will die with them. That’s short-term meaning. And, often enough, this is what we mean when we say our life has meaning. We have created relationships with things, jobs, and other people that make us get up in the morning, make us have purpose and goals to strive for and make our lives feel meaningful. But this is short-term meaning. It’s only there only so long as that person (or another) is actively valuing.²¹

If meaning is only found by actively valuing someone or something, “short-term meaning” is the only sense of meaning people will experience. If meaning is contained to past events and how someone responds to adversity this meaning dies when the individual dies.

Short Term Meaning

The Pew Research studies, and the work of Viktor Frankl demonstrate that people find purpose in short-term meaning whether that is relationally or in one’s response to life’s circumstances. Is

21. Thompson, *Meaning*, 8.

short-term meaning a bad thing? Finding meaning in family, friends, and marriage is a good thing. Solomon’s words in Ecclesiastes encourage the listener to do so. While Solomon speaks of how meaningless life can be, he also praises aspects of life. He praises companionship when says, “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken” (Eccl 4:9–12). Solomon praises work and short-term meaning,

This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them—for this is their lot. Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God. They seldom reflect on the days of their life, because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart (Eccl 5:18–20).

How can Solomon call life meaningless and then describe relationships with people and things as good? Meaning in life depends on one’s perspective. Does life consist only under the sun? Will its purpose be לְנֶפֶשׁ, like an exhale on a cold day? Or is there more? Is there life “beyond the sun?”²²

The final verses of Ecclesiastes reveal how Solomon determines meaning. “Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil” (Eccl 12:13–14). The goal of humanity is to fear God and keep his commandments. The reason for doing so is that God will judge. Solomon is looking ahead to

22. Thompson, *Meaning*, 135.

something that changes his perspective and view on life. Life is meaningless under the sun, but a life with the future in mind changes perspective and gives meaning.

What is the future judgment? It is the last day, judgment day. The time God promised to gather his children to himself in eternity. How can anyone have confidence of how God will judge? Confidence is possible because Jesus fulfills the command to “fear God and keep his commandments” for us. The Messiah from Solomon’s line won life and eternity. Old Testament believers who longed for his coming and all New Testament believers who see the complete picture of a Savior now have meaning in Christ.

Tremper Longman III gives a helpful summary on how Jesus is the answer to the meaninglessness in Ecclesiastes. “Jesus Christ is the one who redeems us from the vanity, the meaninglessness under which Qohelet²³ suffered.... Jesus has restored meaning to wisdom, labor, love, and life. After all, by facing death Jesus conquered the biggest fear facing Qohelet. He showed that death is not the end of all meaning, but the entrance into the very presence of God.²⁴” Short-term meaning is therefore enveloped by eternity. Suffering is enveloped by eternity. C.S Lewis summarized how future glory or “life beyond the sun” impacts human suffering. “They say of some temporal suffering, ‘No future bliss can make up for it,’ not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory.’²⁵”

We see things differently with eternity with God in mind. Thompson suggests, “Now you truly experience things from a different perspective, seeing how interrelated and networked

23. Longman uses this pseudonym for the “Wise Teacher” in Ecclesiastes who I have referred to as Solomon.

24. Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 40.

25. C.S Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 64.

everything is in the universe as part of God's overarching story of love and redemption."²⁶

Eternity dictates the present, and this is where a connection to the doctrine of vocation is found.

26. Thompson, *Meaning*, 135.

VOCATION

The research presented has shown where individuals find meaning. It has also introduced the difference in finding meaning in view of eternity versus finding meaning apart from eternity. A study of the doctrine of vocation will connect where individuals find meaning with how God works in these relationships. This section will examine the history behind vocation, the realms of vocation, and how God operates through vocation.

History

The term comes from the Latin word *vocare*, which means “to call”. Martin Luther lived within the medieval system which taught that only the clergy had a calling from God.²⁷ Vocation was viewed as a call to monastic life. The one with a vocation would worship, pray, and perform clerical duties. The peasant, the farmer, and the blacksmiths were all necessary for medieval society; however, they were not “called”. The priest and nuns used their office to seek their salvation, as well as praying and performing functions for the salvation of others.²⁸ While the clergy was responsible for carrying out divine tasks, the rest of society carried out ordinary,

27. Berg, *Vocation*, 26.

28. *LW* 37:364.

mundane tasks. However, Martin Luther changed the church's view with his teaching of vocation.

Luther widened vocation beyond the clergy and showed that all had a divine vocation. Before Luther could broaden the scope of vocation, he had to address the error found in the vocation of the clergy. People were entering the monastery to make themselves righteous. Luther explains,

These monastic orders, foundations, and sects have been maintained and perpetuated with the idea that by these ways and works men may seek and win salvation, and escape from sin and death, they are all a notorious, abominable blasphemy and denial of the unique aid and grace of our only Savior and Mediator, Jesus Christ. For “there is no other name given by which we must be saved” than this, which is Jesus Christ [Acts 4:12]. And it is impossible that there should be more saviors, ways, or means to be saved than through the one righteousness which our Savior Jesus Christ is and has bestowed upon us, and has offered to God for us as our one mercy seat, Romans 3[:25].²⁹

The problem with the monastic institutions was their view that righteousness could be acquired in performing a clerical vocation. Luther taught against this view by correctly explaining the Scriptures teaching on righteousness.

Two Kinds of Righteousness

The pre-reformation church misguided individuals to look to themselves to work out their own salvation and win righteousness.³⁰ The error in striving for righteousness is that Christians who look to be good enough for God realize how incapable they are of being righteous. God’s law shows how righteousness is earned. “Fear God and keep his commandments” (Eccl 12:13). The command from God is, “Be holy, because I, the LORD your God, am holy” (Lev 19:2). This is

29. *LW* 37:363–64.

30. James Kittleston, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 89.

not possible. Therefore, self-created righteousness is always lacking and damning. Righteousness must be apart from the law (Rom 3:21). Righteousness must be given.

Early in his career as a professor, Luther wrestled with the concept of righteousness.

For I hated that word “righteousness of God,” which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner. Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, “As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!”³¹

Luther learned through the study of Scripture how a God who demanded righteousness could welcome sinners. “And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith ... Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me.”³² As Luther lectured on Psalm 72, he presented righteousness as a quality that was given. God gave the declaration of righteousness to believers so they could be in his presence.³³ The Reformer retaught what the Apostle Paul taught in Romans,

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering.

31. *LW*:34, 336–37.

32. *LW*: 34, 337.

33. Kittleson, *Luther the Reformer*, 89.

And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom 8:1–4).

Jesus Christ fulfilled the law in place of the sinner. The righteousness he earned is freely given through faith. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph 2:8–9). Luther and the reformers taught that sinners were justified in God’s sight by grace through faith in Christ. Justification is not being righteous enough to earn salvation; salvation is freely given.

Luther explained righteousness in two ways; alien righteousness and proper righteousness.³⁴ Alien righteousness is the complete, perfect work of Christ given to believers through faith. Proper righteousness is the work of the believer as they produce fruits of faith. Proper righteousness does not apply to being made right with God. Proper righteousness is how the Christian is called to live out of thanks to God for his grace.

As Luther wrote to his friend George Spalitin on the topic of righteousness; he described the peace a believer had in the alien righteousness of Christ.

Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin. You have taken upon yourself what is mine and have given to me what is yours. You have taken upon yourself what you were not and have given to me what I was not. Beware of aspiring to such purity that you will not wish to be looked upon as a sinner, or to be one. For Christ dwells only in sinners. On this account he descended from heaven, where he dwelt among the righteous, to dwell among sinners. Meditate on this love of his and you will see his sweet consolation. For why was it necessary for him to die if we can obtain a good conscience by our works and afflictions? Accordingly, you will find peace only in him and only when you despair of yourself and your own works. Besides, you will learn from him that just as he has received you, so he has made your sins his own and has made his righteousness yours.³⁵

34. *LW* 31:299.

35. *LW* 48:12–13.

Luther instructed George Spalatin to look outside of himself for righteousness. Only then would he see the love of God as Christ became sin for him and gave him righteousness (2 Cor 5:21). The correct teaching of justification—how the alien righteousness of Christ is given to the believer—resulted in the correct teaching of vocation. Vocation is not where righteousness is earned, it is the sphere where proper righteousness is carried out. The Christian is called to bear fruit.

Vocation is not Justification

Since the sinner is justified by grace through faith, how is the Christian called to live? God's word reveals, "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2:10). Carrying out good works and being saved are two different things.³⁶ Gustaf Wingren fittingly says, "Vocation is most purely and really served when through the gospel it has become clear that vocation has nothing to do with salvation. God receives that which is his, faith. The neighbor receives that which is his, works."³⁷ Vocation is not justification.

Vocation is being God's tool, equipped to carry out good works for the sake of our neighbor. Gustaf Wingren explains, "God doesn't need your good works, but your neighbor does."³⁸ The call of a Christian is to carry out the command to love one's neighbor. Michael Berg summarizes the impact of Luther's teaching on vocation. "In vocation an ethical

36. LW 37:364.

37. Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 14.

38. Gustaf Wingren, *The Christian's Calling: Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Edinburg: Mulenburg, 1958), 10.

reorientation occurred. Good deeds were no longer in a vertical or (offered to God) but in a horizontal one (done in service to his neighbor). Luther was curved inward, looking for justification. When God curved him outward, he saw a righteousness outside himself. Now curved outward Luther also saw his neighbor, perhaps for the very first time.”³⁹ The radical change in Luther’s vocation teaching was a neighbor-centered ethic. The point of good works is that they help someone, one’s neighbor.⁴⁰ Who is our neighbor? What particular areas of life are we called to serve our neighbor? Luther answers these questions by laying out the God-given realms individuals are called to serve.

Realms of Vocation

Luther taught that God’s call of vocation was found in three estates: the church *ecclesia*, the state *politia*, and the household *oeconomia*.⁴¹ Luther taught that *ecclesia* was the realm of vocation for all Christians, not just the clergy. The universal priesthood found in Peter’s letter emphasizes the *ecclesia* call is for all. Peter says, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet 2:9). The priests of the Old Testament could only come into God’s presence through the blood of a sacrificial lamb. Now all Christians now have access to

39. Berg, *Vocation*, 21.

40. Veith Jr., *God at Work*, 38.

41. Gene Veith Jr., *Working for our Neighbor*, (Grand Rapids: Christian’s Library, 2016), 6–8.

God through the blood of true Passover lamb, Jesus Christ. All Christians are called to share the message of the Gospel, and all can serve God in accomplishing important spiritual work.⁴²

The second realm in which Luther taught all Christians had a calling was *politia*. This realm included earthly government but expanded beyond. The duties of a citizen, a local elected official, or a high-ranking government position are vocations. In the book of Romans, Luther finds biblical support for *politia* as a God-given realm. “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God” (Rom 13:1). Our modern definition would use terms such as “society, or, better yet, culture or community.”⁴³

The third realm is the *oeconomia*, the home. The latin *oeconomia* reveals that Luther’s definition involves the vocation of family and work. While today we might distinguish the realms of family and career, sixteenth-century society did not. Families functioned as a unit in the home and economically.⁴⁴ The biblical basis for family and work as divine vocations are found throughout scripture. In the Garden of Eden God established marriage and with it the blessing of family. “The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him’” (Gen 2:18). After God created Eve he brought her to Adam. Adam responds by saying, “‘This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called “woman,” for she was taken out of man.’ That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen 2:23–4). God called Adam and Eve to

42. Veith Jr., *God at Work*, 19.

43. Veith Jr., *Working for our Neighbor*, 7.

44. Berg, *Vocation*, 28.

reproduce and multiply within the blessing of marriage. God planned to bless humanity from the beginning through families.

Gene Veith Jr. summarizes God's blessing of the family, "God could have decided to populate the earth by creating each new person from the dust, as he did Adam.....God calls men and women together and grants them the unfathomable ability to have children. He calls people into families, in which— through the love and care of the parents—he extends His love and care for children."⁴⁵ The function of the family is thus a divine institution from God.

Work, too, is divine. God established work in the perfection of the garden of Eden. "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (Gen 2:15). Divine purpose was created in accomplished work. In his teaching on Jesus' sermon on the mount, Martin Luther explored the divine vocation set before every Christian in their work.

If you are a manual laborer, you find that the Bible has been put into your workshop, into your hand, into your heart. It teaches and preaches how you should treat your neighbor. Just look at your tools—at your needle or thimble, your beer barrel, your goods, your scales or yardstick or measure—and you will read this statement inscribed on them. Everywhere you look, it stares at you. Nothing that you handle every day is so tiny that it does not continually tell you this, if you will only listen. Indeed, there is no shortage of preaching. You have as many preachers as you have transactions, goods, tools, and other equipment in your house and home. All this is continually crying out to you: "Friend, use me in your relations with your neighbor just as you would want your neighbor to use his property in his relations with you."⁴⁶

The vocational realms are neighbor focused with blessings from God. Gustaf Wingren—a twentieth century Swedish Lutheran scholar—summarizes the function of the realms of vocation. "It is only before God, i.e., in heaven, that the individual stands alone. In the earthly realm man always stand in *relatione*, always bound to another. From this it is clear that every Christian

45. Veith Jr., *God at Work*, 14.

46. *LW* 21:237.

occupies a multitude of offices at the same time, not just one: the same man is, for instance, father of his children, husband of his wife, master of his servants, and officeholder in the town hall.”⁴⁷ Vocation stretches across multiple realms, and vocation is relational. The human becomes a co-worker with God. Luther referred to this work as serving as God’s mask.⁴⁸

Masks of God

The unique way that God operates is that he hides himself to reveal himself. This appears paradoxical, yet this is the way God chooses to work. The reason is twofold. First, finite creatures are unable to comprehend God fully. Secondly, the full glory of God is unbearable.⁴⁹ In the Old Testament, the interaction between Moses and God shows the need for God to veil his glory. After a conversation where Moses calls on God for strength and assurance, Moses asks to see the full glory of God. “Then Moses said, ‘Now show me your glory’” (Exod 33:18). But this was not possible; the full glory of God would be unbearable. God tells Moses, “But, he said, ‘you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live’” (Exod 33:20). Instead, God passes by Moses, allowing him to see his back. God does not reveal his full glory visibly; God chose to reveal his glory by declaring his name. “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Exod 34:6). The name declared showed God’s essence.

47. Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 5.

48. *LW* 14:114.

49. Berg, *Vocation*, 49.

Another example of God hiding himself is God's interaction with Elijah. Elijah was in a challenging situation. The rulers of his land had rejected the true God and promoted the worship of Baal. The prophets of the LORD were being slaughtered for proclaiming the truth. In a moment of desperation and despair, Elijah calls out to God to kill him. God would not allow this, instead he brought his presence to comfort Elijah.

The Lord said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave (1 Kgs 19:11–13).

God reveals himself to Elijah not in the powerful wind, the earthquake, or the fire; instead, it is in a whisper. God's glory is hidden in his Word, which gives Elijah strength.⁵⁰

Daniel Deutschlander summarizes the way God operates in the biblical narratives of Moses and Elijah. "In the case of Moses and Elijah, as so often in the Bible, God dealt with his servants by hiding his glory. He dealt with them best and he dealt with them most effectively by hiding under the apparent weakness of his Word proclaimed in the midst of suffering."⁵¹ This is how God chooses to be revealed.

The way God operates should not surprise us because God is found where we least expect him. When searching for God, the mind thinks of majesty, mighty acts and powerful signs. Instead, God shows his power in what appears to be weakness.⁵² In the cross of Christ, God draws near. "God takes our misery and suffering so seriously that he was willing to take it on

50. Daniel Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross: Reflections on His Cross and Ours*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2014), 116.

51. Deutschlander, *Theology of the Cross*, 116.

52. Deutschlander, *Theology of the Cross*, 118.

himself.”⁵³ God is nailed to a cross. Jesus Christ, true God, and true man, humbles himself to save sinners. Deuschlander teachers, “It is at the cross, in lowliness and suffering and humiliation, that we see our salvation and not apart from it. It was in the Suffering Servant (Isa 53) that God revealed himself and gave himself for us. It takes our breath away!”⁵⁴ Salvation is found in Christ. It isn’t pretty and thank God it isn’t. Christ on the cross is the only way.

God also hides behind ordinary means in how he interacts with his creation. He draws close to his creation through seemingly ordinary things. An example is the Bible. While a large book doesn’t look all that impressive, something incredible occurs when God’s word is read. The Holy Spirit is at work. The Spirit breathes life through the Word. The Spirit brings God’s saving promises to the ear and impresses them on the heart. In the waters of baptism, it doesn’t seem extraordinary when some water is sprinkled, and the triune God’s name is read: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Yet at Baptism, God promises to be active and present, connecting the believer to the saving work of Christ by faith. It appears normal when a pastor reads the words Jesus spoke on the night he was betrayed, and the altar has some paper-looking pieces of bread and small individual cups of wine. Yet the communicant receives bread and wine, body and blood, poured out for them for the forgiveness of sins. It pleases God to use ordinary means to accomplish extraordinary work.⁵⁵

If God hides himself to draw close to his creation, God working through vocations makes sense. Vocation is a mask God uses as he approaches sinners. While the individuals receiving love and care may only see a believer, God is present, hidden behind the mask of a Christian

53. Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 31.

54. Deuschlander, *Theology of the Cross*, 124.

55. Berg, *Vocation*, 49.

carrying out their vocation. An example Luther used to illustrate God at work in the ordinary was the act of changing a diaper. While the task seems small and smelly, God actively uses the parent to love and care for his dear child. In a seemingly unglamorous way, God hides and is present loving through individuals. Even in the simple changing of a diaper.⁵⁶ A humbling realization is, “In our vocations we work side by side with God, as it were, taking part in his ceaseless creative activity and laboring with him as he providentially cares for his creation.”⁵⁷

Bearing the Cross

While being a co-worker with God is a privilege, vocation is not purely sunshine and roses. Jesus explained that anyone who wants to be his disciple has a challenging task. “Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me’” (Luke 9:23). What is the cross? The cross is denying oneself, crucifying one’s own wants or desires for the sake of others, but the sacrifice is daily. Veith Jr. explains, “The cross doesn’t just signify suffering; the cross is also an instrument of sacrifice. The word “daily” suggests that this passage refers not so much to martyrdom but to the everyday, routine acts of self-denial that take place in vocation.”⁵⁸

Luther instructed further on the theology of the cross in his Heidelberg disputation.

Luther says, “The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it.”⁵⁹ With this

56. LW 45:39.

57. Veith Jr., *Working for our Neighbor*, 3.

58. Gene Veith Jr. and A. Trevor Sutton, *Authentic Christianity: How Lutheran Theology Speaks to a Postmodern World* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 168.

59. LW 31:41.

thesis, Luther teaches that for God to make us holy and right, he brings us to nothing. Someone who is good and pleasing to God cannot be self-created; rather, our sinful flesh needs to be brought to the cross. There God creates *ex nihil* out of nothing.⁶⁰ In our baptism, God kills the sinful nature and gives the new man. Robert Kolb explains, “We have been put to death once and for all in our baptisms, but in the mystery of the continuing force of evil in our lives, the rhythm of daily repentance leads us again and again to the cross, to die and to be raised up.”⁶¹ The crucifying of the flesh is not a one-time action. God consistently gives crosses removing our dependence on ourselves and causing us to trust solely in God. Bearing the cross is a part of the daily Christian life.

Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, shares why we bear the cross, “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). The saving sacrifice of Christ compels us to live by faith.

What does bearing the cross in vocation look like? Gustaf Wingren explains, “For each ought to live, speak, act, hear, suffer, and die in love and service for another, even for one’s enemies. A husband for his wife and children, a wife for her husband, children for their parents, servants for their masters, masters for their servants.”⁶² Therefore the place we bear the cross is in our vocations.

60. Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 129.

61. Kolb, *Pastoral Luther*, 56.

62. Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 120.

In my interviews with Participant #6, I found a clear connection between bearing the cross and vocation. While she does not use the terminology of “vocation” or “bearing the cross” her story shows how God calls the Christian to bear crosses.

I had given up my whole life for my mom to take care of her. I'd given up my friends, I've given up my work, the dreams I had for what ministry I thought I was gonna be involved in.... In the care process, it helped me to know that this is what God was asking of me. This is what my season in life was supposed to be. And even on the hard days where I felt like, honestly I felt like I was in prison, that I had done something wrong ... my faith held on. I could go cry in my room to God about whatever hurtful things she had just said, or boundaries she had just bulldozed or whatever. And then he'd give me what I needed to get back up and keep going. And if you'd asked me at the beginning how long I thought I could last, I would've told you only a few weeks; come to find out it lasted about six years.⁶³

Participant 6's example shows what it means to sacrifice for the sake of another. Without realizing it, she was serving as a mask of God, bringing love and care to her mother. The work was not easy; it was demanding. It caused a reliance on God in prayer. God granted the strength to endure, and God accomplished his work through her.

Vocation is not Imitation

An individual's suffering is unique, just like their vocation. In vocation, we do not have the same function or the same goals to accomplish. Gustaf Wingren speaks to the special character of each believer's vocation. “The local character of vocation shows the same contrast with imitation. He whose conduct copies some pattern seeks to act independently not only of the time, but also of the place. Vocation means that those who are closest at hand, family and fellow workers, are given by God: it is one's neighbor whom one is to love. Therein vocation points toward a world

63. Participant #6. Anonymous interview by author. Zoom call. October 17, 2022.

which is not the same for all people.”⁶⁴ The doctrine of vocation is hand crafted for each Christian.

Veith Jr. emphasizes God using individuality of vocation as a blessing. “The doctrine of vocation has to do with the mystery of individuality, how God creates each human being to be different from all of the rest and gives each a unique calling in every stage of life. Thus, you have particular talents, which you are to understand are His gifts.”⁶⁵ No matter someone’s age, job, or intellect, God has a unique calling designed for them from eternity. Their vocations are filled with work for God and sacrificing love for others. Even non-Christian writers perceive that God creates unique tasks for his creation. Viktor Frankl states “Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment which demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus, everyone’s task is as unique as is his specific opportunity to implement it.”⁶⁶

64. Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 149.

65. Veith Jr., *God at Work*, 54.

66. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 109.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

With a framework of meaning and vocation, the qualitative interviews are presented. The interviews evaluate if the assertions found from the authors study of meaning and vocation are also true for the grieving individual. In this section, I will detail the responses regarding purpose in vocation, joy in vocation, and identity in vocation. The stories from participants will reveal the role of faith in their grieving process, the impact on one's identity from the loss of vocation, and how the grieving found purpose. Applications will be examined regarding the pastoral application of the doctrine of vocation and the response interviewees had to the teaching of vocation.

Purpose In Vocation

Humans have been created to find purpose vocationally. Luke Thompson explains the purpose of human life in service to others. He writes,

God sums up the ultimate purpose of human life beautifully and clearly in his two Great Commandments: love God above all and love your neighbor as yourself. Notice: Just as the essence of marriage is other-focused, the purpose of human life is other-focused. Humans were created to love, to serve, to care, to be of benefit, and finally-just as God does- to find delight in bringing good into others' lives.⁶⁷

67. Thompson, *Meaning*, 76.

Acts of service, love, care and other-focused were clear when speaking to interviewees. Each connected a sense of purpose with the relationship they were grieving. Interviewees were asked, “Did being with your loved one bring you a sense of purpose?” Participant #1 said this about their spouse, “Yes, absolutely. She was my best friend, not just my lovely wife ... I had a confidant. I had the companionship. I had the love. I had someone who trusted me. I had someone who together with me, cared about raising our children right... We would do everything together unless we were doing things.”⁶⁸ Participant #4 shared her purpose in being a wife, “Oh yeah. It was like my whole life helping him, finding what he needed, making sure he had what he needed, being there, you know, it was all, it was all about him.”⁶⁹ Participant #5 shared this about her husband, “We were each other's lives. Retiring together and having those wonderful years in retirement before he passed just solidified that sense of purpose.”⁷⁰ Participants #1, #4, and #5 spoke at length about love, companionship, and clear purpose found in being with their spouse.

Participant #3 said, “A sense of purpose, absolutely. To be a mother was a gift and a dream.... I was responsible for his wellbeing from the time he was born, physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. You know, I felt it was a vocation to be a mother and encompassing all of those responsibilities. Yet at the same time, drawing so much pleasure and joyfulness from that experience.”⁷¹ Participant #3 without prompting highlighted a correct understanding of the vocation of a mother. She found a clear connection with motherhood and purpose.

68. Participant #1. Anonymous interview by author. Zoom call. October 10, 2022.

69. Participant #4. Anonymous interview by author. Zoom call. October 12, 2022.

70. Participant #5. Anonymous interview by author. Zoom call. October 12, 2022.

71. Participant #3. Anonymous interview by author. Zoom call. October 11, 2022.

Participant #6 shared this about her mother, “I think she's the reason I felt my purpose in life was to make others' lives better. Because I always was looking to make hers happier or hers better. I was always trying to make her laugh, even as a little kid doing silly things just to get her out of whatever mood she was in from the stress from her work or whatever was going on.”⁷²

Participant #2 expressed her answer differently than the rest of the participants. She stated that her brothers-in-law were like siblings. However, she focused on a sense of purpose in aiding her sister's grief as their husbands passed.⁷³

Five participants shared memories that connected a sense of purpose to be with their loved ones. One participant shared a sense of purpose in aiding the immediate family in the loss she was grieving. Participant #1 stated that he found meaning in being a confidant and husband.⁷⁴ Participant #2 shared how she found meaning in being a sister and being a friend to her grieving sisters.⁷⁵ Participant #3 relived the joys of motherhood and the importance she found in it.⁷⁶ Participants #4 and #5 shared how they missed their purpose in being a wife.^{77 78} Participant #6 shared the companion she found in her mom. She fulfilled her purpose in life by helping others. When Participant #6 served as her mother's caretaker, she said it fed into the purpose she already had.⁷⁹

72. Participant #6 interview.

73. Participant #2. Anonymous interview by author. Zoom call. October 10, 2022.

74. Participant #1 interview.

75. Participant #2 interview.

76. Participant #3 interview.

77. Participant #5 interview.

78. Participant #4 interview.

79. Participant #6 interview.

Joy in Vocation

The natural result of purpose found in vocation is the joy experienced within vocation. It is impossible to capture the overall joy participants experienced in their vocations. Therefore, the research question asked participants to share stories that would give a glimpse. None of the participants struggled with this question; all participants shared multiple stories.

Participant #1 shared the joy of raising children with his spouse, the quality time they spent traveling, and the pleasure of seeing his spouse thrive in the business world. One joy Participant #1 shared was the dedication he saw in his spouse. “People described her as very dedicated. It just kind of thrilled me that people cared so much about her because I cared so much about her. Another thing that comes back as, as a memory is just her, her spiritual dedication and how when I was preaching nobody else in the whole congregation seemed to have the same attention as she did.”⁸⁰

Participant #2 emphasized the joy she experienced in family gatherings with her brothers-in-law. “Allan⁸¹ was a brother-in-law that came into the family first and Allan was probably five foot eight. All a bundle of energy and fun and laughter. And he was witty. ... My other brother, Michael was intense. So, the two of them together in a setting were just interesting to be a part of, observing just how the two of them interacted and how it changed the entire immediate dynamics; it just was very rich.”⁸²

80. Participant #1 interview.

81. All names mentioned throughout the interviews have been changed for the sake of anonymity.

82. Participant #2 interview.

Participant #3 shared, “The joys of being a mother gives you a sense of yourself, an affirmation of yourself, and your purpose in life. It’s a wonderful experience.”⁸³ She then shared a memory, “I was lucky enough to spend time with Anthony and his son at his apartment during the Christmas season. We went out, and Anthony bought the biggest Christmas tree he could find. We decorated that together. Then on Christmas day, the last day that we ever spent with our son, Anthony, we spent in his apartment cooking Mexican food for Christmas dinner.”⁸⁴

Participant #4 highlighted the joys she found in her daily life with her husband, “We had this wonderful routine every morning that we get up and I’d be making the coffee, and he’d be making me a fiber shake. And then we’d go get in the hot tub. We always had a hot tub, and we’d sit there and he’d pray in the hot tub and then we’d talk and just enjoy the sun coming up and, you know, that whole thing. It was wonderful.”⁸⁵ Participant #4 also shared joy in seeing her husband’s accomplishments as a surgeon, the satisfaction in raising children together, and the quality time spent traveling.

Participant #5 found joy in her husband's presence and help. “He did a lot of stuff around the house. He helped me. He’d help with the laundry, the grocery shopping ... wherever he could help.... So, when he passed, it was like, you know, now I don’t have that friend to talk to. The one who knows when it’s time to aerate the yard, you know, have certain things done for the winter.”⁸⁶

83. Participant #2 interview.

84. Participant #3 interview.

85. Participant #4 interview.

86. Participant #5 interview.

Participant #6 identified the act of giving gifts bringing her mother joy. “I'd send special care packages and special notes and letters and music and books and DVD's.... I thought my mom would like this, so I'm gonna send this to her and hope it has the same impact. And then when I became her caretaker ... I would still try to do things to make her life better.”⁸⁷

While the participants' stories do not get the time and attention they deserve in this short thesis, a general theme was apparent. These participants loved their spouse or parent or child, or sibling. While grief may have flooded back at moments, and the scars of missing their loved one were felt again, participants showed joy in their vocations. When this source of joy and purpose is lost, the challenging and unnatural process of grieving begins.

Faith and Grieving

Participant #1 offered an astute observation concerning the grief a Christian experiences. He gained this perspective from working as a GriefShare facilitator. “Everyone grieves a lot of the same kind of ways. And probably, the first emotion that many of them feel, probably the majority, is loneliness. Suddenly I'm alone. If it's a spouse, it's really, I'm alone. But even if it's a child, I, I'm alone. I expected my child to be there. ... It [grief] comes in waves. Everyone relates to that. It'll come in waves, and all feel their waves.”⁸⁸

While the ways people grieve are the same, the grief itself is unique. Grief is built off the unique love, joy, and purpose experienced with a person. C.S Lewis, in his short book following the death of his wife, identifies that losing a loved one is like an amputation, a part of you feels

87. Participant #6 interview.

88. Participant #1 interview.

cut off.⁸⁹ Grief is intense, and it is not a seven-step process to recovery. The idea that there is a way to check boxes to remove the pain and suffering experienced is a lie. H. Norman Wright, a leading Christian grief therapist, says, “Most of us have never been taught about the process and normalcy of grief no wonder we struggle.”⁹⁰ Since grieving is filled with pain and suffering, the natural reaction is to avoid it or try to get through it quickly.⁹¹ Avoiding grief is especially prevalent in the American culture, which stresses the avoidance of minor inconveniences. Avoiding grief isn’t possible.

Participants detailed the struggle and journey of grieving. Wright aptly summarizes the grief journey and the challenges mentioned by the interviewees. “When you enter into grief, you enter into the valley of shadows. There is nothing heroic or noble about grief. It is painful. It is work. It is a lingering process. But it is necessary for all kinds of losses. ... Emotions that seem out of control and often appear in conflict with one another. With each loss comes bitterness, emptiness, apathy, love, anger, guilt, sadness, fear, self-pity, and helplessness.”⁹²

Vocation helps us see why grief is so painful. If God promises to work through individuals, then it makes sense that losing someone is debilitating. The one being grieved was a primary conduit God used to bring joy, love, compassion, intimacy, and companionship. God was working through them. Missing your loved one is missing God at work through them. How did the participants handle this loss?

89. C.S Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Seabury, 1961), 47.

90. H. Norman Wright, *Experiencing Grief* (Nashville: B&H, 2004), 1.

91. Veith Jr. and Sutton, *Authentic Christianity*, 112.

92. Wright, *Experiencing Grief*, 5.

A critical factor in each participant's grieving process was their faith. Participants responded to the question, "In what ways has your faith helped you during the grieving process?"

Participant #1 said,

The first help is, the obvious one. There's no doubt in my mind that my grief is personal. By which I mean, it's not about my wife, it's about me without my wife. She's with the Lord. And so that part of it is not why I grieve. Why I grieve is because the Lord has given me a path to take that is uncomfortable. And in that path, the comfort comes from remembering that he doesn't abandon me during this ... I've gotta look back and say, Jesus lives, he's with me, forgives me because I need that forgiveness. The other is the realization that I know in the end faith works because I know where it ends (heaven).⁹³

Participant #1 highlighted the comfort found in confidence in the resurrection and where faith ends. Participant #2 echoed the comfort in the resurrection and added an illustration of faith.

"Faith is like an umbrella, a blanket enveloping us and guiding us.... Without faith I am not the person I am."⁹⁴ Participant #4 similarly highlighted the comfort her faith brought her as she trusted that God was with her during this grief.⁹⁵

Participant #3 said, "Faith helped immensely. I can't even imagine not having faith, because I can remember I was so grief stricken.... I used to just pray, Lord, please take this grief from me, because it just felt crushing.... And after one year, somehow, he did. It was almost like the light came on and I was able to be thankful for having been a mother as opposed to being crushed by the grief."⁹⁶

Participant #5 stated, "If I didn't have my faith, I probably would not be here.... My faith got me through it—knowing that this is God's plan and God will never put you through anything

93. Participant #1 interview.

94. Participant #2 interview.

95. Participant #4 interview.

96. Participant #3 interview.

you cannot handle. And knowing that I will see him [her husband] again, this is what God promised us. The profound belief that I have that that's going to happen enables me to be able to go on.”⁹⁷

Participant #6 highlighted a section of scripture that brought her comfort as she grieved. “The thing that I've been able to hold onto the most is about God's timing being perfect.... It didn't matter what I would've done or didn't do, what I could have said or didn't say, it wasn't gonna change because God already had the number of her days written out. It's what Psalm 139 tells us that God's timing is perfect. If God said, ‘this was the day and the hour’.... That was her day. That was her time.”⁹⁸ The comment Participant #6 makes regarding the “what ifs” is insightful. It could be easy for guilt to arise during grieving. The bereaved cannot live in the realm of “what if’s”. If they do, grieving will turn into a hellish nightmare of unending possibilities. It is wise to step back, like Participant #6, and know the time when God called them home was perfect.

Faith was vital to all these participants. All Christians should aid the grieving by pointing them to the object of their faith. Those attempting to minister to the grieving should not point the bereaved to their faith as the thing that brings them comfort. This inherently causes someone to become a navel gazer. What should be done is point the grieving to Jesus Christ. “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin” (Heb 4:15). The specific promises the interviewees identified are all useful for ministry to the grieving. Participants identified the comfort is found in God’s promises. Comfort those who mourn with the promise of the

97. Participant #5 interview.

98. Participant #6 interview.

resurrection. Assure the hurting Christian that Jesus Christ is the one who forgives sin and is with the grieving as they suffer.

While the promises of God brought comfort to participants, they did not remove the new reality. They now experience life without their loved ones.

Identity in Vocation

Interviewees articulated a clear sense of purpose in their vocations of husband, wife, mother, or sister; a sense of identity was tied to purpose. Many defined themselves according to the vocation they had. When they lost this vocation, what happened to their identity? Each interviewee was asked, “Who are you now that your loved one is gone?”

Participants #1, #3, #4, and #5 all expressed a sense of losing their identity. Participant #1 spoke about the challenges of being alone. “It is still hard for me to figure out, who am I now? Because, in so many ways, you're still the same person. I still am a retired pastor and none of that changes. So, what does it mean that now I'm alone?”⁹⁹

Participant #3 said that the loss of identity was not immediate but was felt gradually. “Eventually, I did [feel a loss of identity]. I don't think immediately when I lost him, but you know, eventually, I did feel a loss of being his mother, the importance of being his mother, and the pride that came from having him as my son that was gone.”¹⁰⁰

Participant #4 spoke about the initial shock and the continued challenge in rediscovering her identity. “You know, I think the first year I just kept thinking over and over...I can't believe

99. Participant #1 interview.

100. Participant #3 interview.

you're gone. You know, it felt like a band aid being ripped off and it was just such a shock.... I've got so much stuff to figure out. I'm just at the beginning of figuring it out, because I always identified as his wife not really as me, you know.”¹⁰¹

Participant #5 shared that the loss of a spouse was like losing part of herself. “It was always Daniel and Susan, Susan and Daniel. So, when he passed, just being Susan is like, well, who is that? Because I don't know who that is alone. I mean, there are remnants of that old person there, but it's certainly not the same person. Losing someone that was such an integral part of my life was, was just like losing part of myself. Who do I call? What do I do? How do I handle this?”¹⁰²

Participants #2 and #6 did not speak of losing identity. Participant #2 shared, “But did my identity change? I would say not dramatically.”¹⁰³ Participant #6 said, “I think the only identity that was really removed at losing my mother was that of a full-time caregiver. I mean, I'm a caregiver at heart.”¹⁰⁴ Later in the interview, she shared her reasoning for why she did not lose her identity as a daughter.

When I first heard the idea of losing your identity, where it came to who I was as a person, I'm like, well that doesn't make sense to me. I'm still my mother's daughter. She's not here physically, but that doesn't make her not my mother anymore. And that doesn't make me not her daughter anymore, that never changed for me. I mean, I can understand if it had been a spouse. They think, I'm no longer married anymore, you know, I'm no longer a wife anymore. That would make sense. But as a daughter, you don't really lose that identity. I understand some people feel that they have and they do. And some people go to the extremist saying that they're an orphan when they've lost both their parents. But I don't see it that way.

101. Participant #4 interview.

102. Participant #5 interview.

103. Participant #2 interview.

104. Participant #6 interview.

After further questions she identified a potential reason for why she didn't experience a loss of identity. "I was always seeing how much I was like her. I am my mother's daughter. There's so much of her reflected in my personality in, in even facial expressions. The things I do, the way I do them are because that's the way she taught me and showed me how to do them."¹⁰⁵ She saw the characteristics of her mother in herself still today, which aided in not experiencing the loss of identity.

The interview evidence indicates that the extent one experiences a loss in identity is tied to the specific vocation. Those who were a spouse or parent indicated a sense of losing identity. Those with the vocation of a child or sibling did not express the same feeling of losing their identity.

Baptismal Identity

Michael Berg offers insight on guiding individuals to their true identity. "'Who am I?' is a fair question we all ask of ourselves. Perhaps it is better to ask, 'Who has God made me to be, and to whom has God called me to serve?' You are valuable not because of your last name, your salary, or position but because of Christ: first in your baptismal identity as one redeemed by Christ crucified and second as a coworker with God in his economy of love."¹⁰⁶ Identity is not tied to one's vocation but to what God says about the believer. God proclaims his view of believers through the words of the Apostle John. "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that

105. Participant #6 interview.

106. Berg, *Vocation*, 29.

we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1). No matter the vocational loss experienced, nothing can take away the identity of being a child of God.

Martin Luther identified the distinction between the identity of being a baptized child of God and finding identity in one’s vocations.

Thus I can speak differently about my vocation and my activities...for I am not only a prince or the head of a household, a man or a woman, who administers an office or vocation as the others also do; but I am also baptized and washed with the blood of Christ. This has nothing to do with my station or calling in life. For Baptism does not make me a prince, a subject, a husband, or anyone else; but it does make me a Christian. Furthermore, I also have the Word, which tells me that Christ died and rose again for me. This same Word makes no one a priest, a monk, a master, a servant, etc.; but it does create a heart that receives God’s grace and is cleansed by faith. This is what it means to be and remain in Christ. Then they may preach to me what they please; I adhere to the fact that I am baptized, not to my life and my vocation but to the Man called Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁷

Baptismal identity means that one’s true identity does not change as vocations change. This is critical to teach those who are grieving. Losing someone that does not mean God does not love you, care for you, or value you. That’s the farthest thing from the truth. Those grieving must be assured that they are still extremely valuable; they are God’s child; that is their identity.

Instruction On Vocation

Following the in-depth interviews, participants were sent a short instructional paper on vocation. The paper is found in Appendix 3 titled *Primer on Vocation*. The paper's purpose was to introduce the doctrine of vocation and teach how the neighbor-centered ethic gives purpose and meaning to everyday life, even without a loved one. The results from the instruction were largely positive. Four of the six participants expressed a new understanding of vocation; the

107. LW 24:220.

teaching impacted how they saw their everyday life. All six participants focused on service to others as a way they found purpose. All participants expressed their service to others as a way that God was serving through them.

Participants #1 and #3 correctly articulated the teaching of vocation. Participant #1 said, “My vocation is how God works through me in my life. It changes when someone significant to my vocation has died.”¹⁰⁸ Participant #3 expressed her view on vocation in a similar fashion. Both seemed to already have the concept of God working through their vocations and understanding the extent of vocation. While the teaching on vocation did not provide a new perspective, it allowed them to evaluate the new vocations they were called into.

Participant #2 found that the teaching of vocation helped her to see further value and purpose in the callings she was given. The concept of a “call” helped her view her role as a sister differently.

I had not considered that through the death of my brothers-in-law, I had received a calling. It was and still presents as natural to me to contact my two sisters, send them cards of encouraging words, cry when they cry, laugh with them, include them in events, spend time with them, and in general “be a sister” to each of them. Thinking of this as a calling is a unique perspective for me to take. In doing so, I realize that God “calls us” in various seasons of our lives and that to receive such a call is a privilege; though not always initially appreciated or viewed as one.¹⁰⁹

Participant #4 found that a full understanding impacted her identity and how she views God working in her life. “A big part of my identity is being the family's mother. I am looking forward to seeing what God does for my family.... I believe God is healing my family by my presence in their lives, providing stability and love.”¹¹⁰

108. Participant #1. Response to Primer. Email. November 11, 2022.

109. Participant #2. Response to Primer. Email. November 20, 2022.

110. Participant #4. Response to Primer. Email. November 6, 2022.

Participant #5 expressed how the teaching of vocation gave her a new perspective. She said, “As a Catholic my perception of vocation was limited to the priests and nuns and missionaries who were openly devoting their lives to the service of God through others.”¹¹¹ The primer on vocation allowed her to see past interactions with greater purpose and reoriented future interactions.

I never recognized that my life and relationship within family and how I lived those relationships were my vocation and the means through which I could serve God. And as I look back and think about my long, blessed marriage to my husband as my vocation ... through my husband I experienced the love of God and vice versa. It makes me all the more grateful for the years I had with him. And it also puts me in much more awe of God and his miracles and how skillfully and purposefully he put the plan for my life into play.¹¹²

Participant #6 reflected similar sentiment to Participant #5. She shared that the instruction on vocation helped her see God at work in past interactions and gave a new purpose to future service. She said, “I never thought of vocation in this context. I always thought of it as a ministerial calling. I never saw loving others as a vocational calling. When I gave her [mom] a bath God was loving her through me. Every time I picked up a treat or gift to bring home to her to make her smile and feel loved. Everything I said and did for her, God was there to love my mom through me.”¹¹³ It is liberating to know that God is working with the Christian as his mask. It is freeing to learn that when a loved one dies, vocation does not die with them. Instead, losing one vocation leads to the expanse of other vocations.

111. Participant #5. Response to Primer. Email. November 12, 2022.

112. Participant #5 response to primer.

113. Participant#6. Response to Primer. Email. November 28, 2022.

Exploring Vocations and Purpose

When a primary avenue for joy and purpose dies, where do the grieving find joy and purpose?

The responses showed that participants expanded their vocation to new realms. Previous relationships also grew. Participant #1 shared a story highlighting a new avenue for finding joy and purpose.

I met a woman who was an atheist, and it started this way. I didn't even know her yet, [but learned] she had just lost a child.... I started to suggest spiritual comfort. I don't know how I said it. And she said, "No, I tried church, but it didn't work, I'm an atheist." Okay. So now she's an atheist, I played cribbage with her, big deal. Fast forward, we've become friends.... It[the friendship] is just driving me to prayer that I can somehow at least open up the conversation and ask her along the way, "what did you mean that Christianity didn't work? You tried it, but it didn't work."¹¹⁴

Participant #1 sees the ability to witness as a vocation God has equipped him for in this stage of life. Participant #1 also shared, "One of the things that has happened is an increased joy in giving and wanting to help others."¹¹⁵ He stated a new ability to empathize with those who are hurting, a greater awareness of the homeless and those in need, and he is eager to give. A neighbor-centered focus has brought him joy and purpose. Participant #2 also emphasized the service of others. She shared the different vocational realms God has called her.

At this time I am the same person with the foundation of the Word of God and the comfort of resurrection remaining even more steadfast. I am still a sister, daughter, wife, etc. However, the ministry of GriefShare has brought me in touch with others whom I likely would not have met; yet alone shared deep and personal information. It has been a blessing to me on a personal level as I have grown close to others in our church and those who are new to me. In fact, this level of closeness with others is intimate as deepest fears and greatest joys are shared through tears by facilitators and participants.¹¹⁶

114. Participant #1 interview.

115. Participant #1 interview.

116. Participant #2 response to primer.

Participant #3 also shared that focusing on serving others connected to the gifts God had given her.

Oh, I definitely feel that God gave me the talents to be with people. I felt that hospitality is my gift and I'm able to interact with other people easily, that I'm approachable. He has given me the talents, the words, the disposition, the emotional development or the emotional maturity to do that. It's all God-given, the ability to be able to be that to other people. So it's important to me what I can be to other people. I find satisfaction and maybe affirmation and in that.¹¹⁷

A wonderful way that Participants #1, #2, and #3 have expanded their vocation to a neighbor in need is by serving as GriefShare facilitators. GriefShare is a program built to guide the grieving with Christ-centered material. Through video seminars, group discussions, and a personal workbook, GriefShare addresses components of the grieving process. Each week facilitators lead a discussion and work to create an environment that comforts the mourning.

Participant #4 spoke about how her view of the vocation of motherhood expanding. “I probably talk to my son just about every day and my grandchild, maybe that's stretching out every other day. And I'm in contact with my daughter, that's out in California. But I think that the whole purpose of my life now is to be a mother and help my children. So that's what I do.”¹¹⁸

Participant #5 gave an exciting story of how she saw God at work through her. Driving through her neighborhood, she noticed a couple whose dogs were barking and pulling their owners' leashes hard. She learned why. A big mother black bear was approaching. She quickly drove her car between the bear and her neighbors and got them safely into her car. She connected how this experience tied closely to God giving her a purpose. She said, “That [the black bear encounter] made me feel like I had a purpose that God put me there in that spot.... It was so

117. Participant #3 interview.

118. Participant #4 interview.

good that I was there for them. Things like that where I could take someone out for their seventy-fifth birthday, or bring someone sick flowers, or do something nice for my sister that makes me feel that I'm sharing what God has given me.”¹¹⁹ What she says next perfectly illustrates why vocation is a worthwhile subject for grieving. “It [bear encounter] was a very obvious example but I think there probably are less obvious examples [of God working] in the course of the day that maybe I don't recognize.”¹²⁰ She was correct. Following the instruction on vocation she shared a new perspective on everyday life. “I am amazed at how masterfully God has and is guiding me through my grief of losing my husband. And while doing so, he is also directing me towards ways to continue my vocation of showing Gods' love for mankind...I am realizing that the daily little things I do are part of the great plan which God has for me to move forward. I am seeking his advice more than ever.”¹²¹ The “daily little things” now have divine purpose. God is at work.

Participant #6 shared the fresh perspective she gained learning about vocation. “God has given me a job to help provide for the needs of intellectually disabled or special needs people. I am part of a ministry that cares for sex-trafficked women. God is having me love those he brings into my life, being the hand and feet of Jesus. I'm the same person it's just now that others receive my love, time and attention.”¹²² Serving her new neighbors has divine implications; she is serving as the hands and feet of Jesus.

119. Participant #5 interview.

120. Participant #5 interview.

121. Participant #5 response to primer.

122. Participant #6 response to primer.

The response to the primer on vocation showed that the doctrine of vocation brought comfort in the fact that God wasn't done using the grieving to accomplish important, divine work. The teaching of vocation fills life with purpose found in relationships. The loss of someone allows for new vocations and new neighbors to be served. While this is all true, it would be naïve to say that this teaching is the perfect silver lining to losing someone. All the participants would rather have their loved one's back. Reunions will happen, but not until heaven. Until then, God has given neighbors to love.

CONCLUSION

The final thoughts will attribute the beauty of vocation as a tool for the grieving. This section will also highlight shortcomings of my research, areas for future research, and suggestions for further study.

Final Thoughts

The research presented has shown that short term meaning is found relationally. While the loss of vocation presents a clear attack on purpose and identity, a proper understanding of vocation helps those who grieve. It shows God at work. God works in the ordinary to accomplish his task of bringing love to one's neighbor. Therefore, the loss of vocation does not remove meaning in this life. Short-term meaning is found as vocations shift to new realms and new neighbors. Short-term meaning is valuable, because the Christian has long-term meaning. They will inherit heaven one day. While they wait, God calls them to work for their neighbor.

Teaching a baptismal identity is key to aiding those struggling with identity loss. Sons and daughters of God look for value and purpose from God. God calls the Christian a priest and equips Christians to carry out the good works he prepared in advance for them to do. Vocations demonstrates that God accomplishes incredible things through ordinary people, doing ordinary tasks.

The results from my research showed the usefulness in teaching vocation. The interview following instruction on vocation allowed four participants to articulate how the teaching impacted their daily interactions in a new way. The two participants who already had a stronger understanding of vocation did not gain a new perspective but shared how they were encouraged by the focus on vocation. Vocation allowed these Christian to gain a more thorough understanding of how God is at work.

The research presented attempted to bridge the gap between the study of vocation and ministry to grieving. Since no previous research has been attempted on this topic, I hope my work provides a starting place for other seminary students or pastors. Truthfully, I pray that more pastors read the beauty of vocation and bring the freedom of this doctrine to their people. Reading Gustaf Wingren's *Luther on Vocation* opened my eyes to the beauty of Luther's neighbor-centered ethic and is a tremendous resource to all looking to learn more about vocation.

As the baby boomer generation shifts to the geriatric age, pastors and other Christians will face the task of equipping God's aging saints with purpose and meaning. Can vocation be a useful tool? I pray it is. When the number of widows grows in your congregations, when the shut-in lists grow longer and longer, when the grieving member asks, "why am I still here?" how will you respond? The doctrine of vocation offers a valuable tool. There's no age limit on serving your neighbor. The church would be wise to utilize the older saints and give them opportunity to serve. Waiting on heaven isn't your vocation. Heaven is coming, and the day will be glorious but until then God still has divine good to accomplish. He has called the bereaved for more.

For Further Study

There were areas of study that could not be covered in a short pastor's thesis. Here I will indicate ways my study could be improved for future use.

- A qualitative study allowed me to dig deep with six individuals who experienced grief. Ideally interviews would have been conducted in person but Zoom proved to be a viable interview method. Knowing all my participants ahead of time allowed for the ability to dive deeply quickly. While there were many positives to my research method, a fault in my interview methodology was failing to establish a baseline of knowledge of vocation before instruction. Another fault in my qualitative study was the limited ministry settings explored. My study examined one group of individuals who had all completed a GriefShare program. Would results be different if this study was presented to individuals who did not go through a GriefShare program? Would it be possible to interview multiple demographics in multiple locations?
- A quantitative study may yield more takeaways for future researchers. The method of interview, instruction, and reaction to material presented, allowed for a viable measurement of the impact of vocation. If this could be produced on a larger scale, applications would be able to be made across ministry settings.
- The study of meaning I provided was meek and feeble. A further researcher would be wise to research the history of existentialism and its founding fathers. If my research could be done over, I would perform a comparative analysis on the wisdom literature of epicureans, stoics, nihilists and analyze it against the wisdom literature of the Scriptures. This would allow for an in-depth study of meaning.

APPENDIX 1. INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research. My name is Justin Digman, a senior at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. I am conducting this study as part of my senior thesis project (TH3300) on the topic of how the doctrine of vocation provides comfort and purpose to the grieving. This project is in partial fulfillment of my MDiv degree. You have been invited to participate in this research because I believe that you can provide valuable information on the topic. I will be asking you questions about how grieving. The interview will last approximately 1 hour.

Your involvement in this research will be shared in the following ways: My research will take your feedback and remove any personal identification. Your name will be expunged from my recordings, and the personal names you share will not be revealed. Instead, my research will list you as “participant # ____”.

If you agree to the audio recording of the interview, the recording will be deleted after the research project is completed. An additional email will be sent to you when the recordings are deleted.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you may choose not to answer any or all questions. You may fully withdraw from the interview at any time and the information that you provided will not be reported in the research.

“By signing this consent form, I acknowledge that I have read and understood the above information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study under the conditions described.”

Name : _____ Date: _____

“I furthermore agree to the audio recording of this interview and understand that the recording will be deleted upon completion of the research project.”

(initials) : _____

APPENDIX 2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Who is the person you are grieving? What do you find yourself grieving?

Did being with your loved one bring you a sense of purpose? If so, could you share ways it did?

Can you share some memories/stories of your loved one that brings you joy?

How would you describe being a (Husband, Wife, Mother, Father, Son, or Daughter?) What changed about being a husband, wife, brother, or sister when your loved one died?

Describe how grief had an impact on your identity during the grieving process. Who are you now that your loved one is gone?

What characteristic of your loved one do you want to pass on to others, so they are always remembered?

In what ways has your faith helped you during the grieving process?

What brings you joy in your current day-to-day life?

What gives you a sense of purpose in your day-to-day life?

How do you believe that God is using you for a purpose?

APPENDIX 3. PRIMER ON VOCATION

As a soon-to-be pastor, do I have anything wise to tell you about grief? I don't. I have little knowledge of grief from the school of experience. I've never lost a child. I still have my parents. My close friends are all alive. I wake up next to my wife every morning, so I cannot empathize with your grief. I have never felt the loneliness of an empty bed that had been filled for years. I've never broken down on a holiday as I'm the only one around. I've never had a birthday on the calendar that brought me pain rather than joy. I am not qualified to tell you about grief, so I won't.

Grief is raw. Losing a loved one is like an amputation. A part of you feels cut off.¹²³ What I can do, is show that there is someone empathetic to you. He cares about your pain and grieving. It isn't a pastor, a GriefShare facilitator, or a family member. It is your Savior. The shortest verse in the bible shows you His empathy, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). As your Savior wept at the tomb of his dear friend Lazarus, he showed that death is not easy. Grief is normal. Death is unnatural. Yet he does something to fix it. Jesus defeats death with death itself. Jesus carries the sin of the entire world to the cross. There Jesus shows he cares because death no longer wins. There will be a resurrection from the dead. There will be heavenly reunions with those we lose on earth. Until then, how do you carry on when you were called someone's daughter, wife, husband, mother, or father? When a primary avenue for joy and purpose is lost, what next? My prayer is that this paper will give you comfort and hope. As you read, I pray your

123. C.S Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Seabury, 1961), 47.

takeaway is that God is not done loving others through you. He is not done using you to accomplish his purpose, even in the aftermath of loss.

Two questions gave the majority of interviewees pause: “Who are you now that your loved one is gone?” and “How is God using you for his purpose?” The teaching of *vocation* brings comfort and purpose to this very question.

The word vocation comes from the Latin word *vocatio*. In the most literal sense, the word means “a calling”. God has specific callings that are good and divine! God’s word reveals his intent to bless the world through vocations. One realm of vocation is families and marriages.¹²⁴ The role you have been given as a mother, father, daughter, son, husband, brother, or sister is God-given. Every human being has been called by God into a family. God could have populated the world by making each person like he made Adam from the dust. Instead, “God chose to bring forth and care for new life by means of a family.”¹²⁵

God works through you to bring joy, love, compassion, intimacy, and companionship. God brings purpose in these relationships. This is your vocation. You are served by God as he brings these same blessings to you. I got to hear it in your voice. The memories you shared were filled with joy. It was obvious that when your loved one(s) were around, God was clearly at work. On earth, God used you to love _____ and God loved you through _____. Now God doesn’t need you to love them anymore. Here is what I mean, you no longer have to bear the cross of making sacrifices, give up your time, and put your desires to death for the sake of your loved one. This was how you showed love and how God loved through you. God was at work when you made sacrifices for their well-being and put their needs before your own. He

124. See Psalm 127:3–5, Ephesians 5:21–33, Ephesians 6:1–2

125. Gene Veith Jr., *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), 78.

loved _____ as you daily put your own wants to death in service to them. They were the exact person God wanted you to love. This “cross” is over because your loved one is face to face with their Creator. They have perfect divine love and attention because they are served by God himself.

The way you loved them brought purpose. If you miss loving your wife, you also miss God loving you through your wife. If God brings love through our relationship as parents, children, or spouses, who are you now that your loved one is gone? Does God view you as less because you no longer have this blessing? Absolutely Not!!! Hear what the apostle John says about you, “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1). This is our identity. While being a parent, spouse, sibling, or child may comprise a vocation for part of our time here on earth, it is not our identity. Our identity is God’s child.

Who am I?” is a fair question we all ask of ourselves. Perhaps it is better to ask, “Who has God made me to be, and to whom has God called me to serve?” You are valuable not because of your last name, your salary, or position but because of Christ: first in your baptismal identity as one redeemed by Christ crucified and second as a coworker with God in his economy of love.¹²⁶

This quote gives a frame of reference for vocation. God’s calling to you as a parent, spouse, sibling, or child was to provide you the opportunity to serve and show love. While the realm of your vocation may change, God is not done loving through you.

It is not for our own reputation that we love. It’s not loving enough to earn God’s favor. Jesus frees you from trying to work to make yourself right with God. This is impossible! My thesis advisor said, “Am I good enough for God?” the answer is no, but Christ makes it yes (2 Cor 1:19–20)..... I am free from finding value in all the wrong places because I have value in

126. Michael Berg, *Vocation: The Setting for Human Flourishing* (Irvine: 1517, 2020), 25.

Christ.”¹²⁷ Now what? We are free to show love by serving our neighbors. Gustaf Wingren put it this way “God doesn’t need your good works, but your neighbor does.”¹²⁸

The persons you serve may no longer be your spouse, child, sibling, or parent. But God will place people in your life to be served by you. He promises too. The Apostle Paul puts it this way, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2:10).

God uses you. He uses the gifts and abilities you have been given to bless others. Whether through your activity in the church, a friendship you form with others, or your relationships through your work, God works through you. He may even use your experience with grief to bless others.

- Think of the widow who just lost her husband and is grieving. Has not God uniquely equipped you to serve with comfort and affirmation that she is not alone?
- Think of the mother who never dreamed of burying her child. Has not God equipped you to listen and carry a cross no one wished to bear?
- Think of a friend whose parents can no longer care for themselves. They struggle to know what to do and the decisions to make. Has not God equipped you to empathize and serve them?

The examples are endless. I can’t give you a list of all the ways God is using you, and I can’t tell you who is all served by you. It would be impossible. Vocation brings comfort in knowing that God is not far away in the heavenly realm, occasionally checking in on his people. God is active! God is active in loving others through you. This brings a sense of purpose to the regular ordinary tasks. God isn’t just served in the spectacular he loves to love through the ordinary.

127. Berg, *Vocation*, 16.

128. Gustaf Wingren, *The Christian’s Calling: Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Edinburg: Mulenburg, 1958), 10.

While vocation helps us to see God at work, I want to be clear. The doctrine of vocation is not a perfect silver lining. I can't say that loving others is the perfect replacement for missing your loved one. It isn't and never will be. Serving in your vocations will not heal this scar. You will always bear it on earth. But heaven is waiting. There will be no scars, just perfect divine love, attention, and heavenly reunions. Until then, we serve in our vocations, equipped to accomplish God's work. God will love others as he loves through you.

APPENDIX 4. QUESTIONS RESPONDED TO ON PRIMER

What about vocation struck you?

How is God using you for his purpose?

Who are you now that your loved one is gone?

Can you share specific stories or experiences where you believe God loved your loved one through you?

Are there any questions you have regarding the paper, or additional comments you would like to share?

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