

**DISCOVER YOUR CALLING**



“It would be crazy to throw a poem to a drowning person. But when a person is drowning in meaninglessness this book could be exactly what he or she needs. Everyone is trying to figure out what to do with the rest of their lives. Almost everyone struggles with this. Most realize that this is not a once-and-it-is-done-forever event in your life but a lifelong process. Dr. Tan has masterfully provided both theory and practice for this. It is seasoned delightfully with generous personal reflections, quotations, and Scripture. I commend this book to anyone wanting some practical help in making sense of their lives.”

**R. Paul Stevens**

Chairman, Institute for Marketplace Transformation;  
Author of *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work and  
Ministry in Biblical Perspective*; *Work Matters*; and  
*Taking Your Soul to Work*

“This is a book that takes one of humanity’s greatest questions ‘What is my purpose?’ and provides some framing and activities to help each person discover his or her calling. I love that the focus is on the one doing the calling—God; and that it is biblically rich. I also enjoyed the emphasis on discerning one’s vocation in community, a necessary corrective to the oft-quoted: ‘Follow your heart’! Soo-Inn is wise, and a natural teacher, and this book will give you hope at any stage of your life, as you seek to know His will for your unique abilities and passion. Thoroughly recommended!”

**Kara Martin**

Lecturer, speaker, and author of *Workship: How to  
Use Your Work to Worship God*, and *Workship 2: How to  
Flourish at Work*

“As a pastor, I’ve been asked how I discovered my calling. I would reply, ‘If I tell you how I found my calling to the pastoral ministry, will you share with me how you found your calling to what you are doing now?’ Could one be called to be a sales agent, a civil servant, or a homemaker? We attach a glamorous mystique to those in the Christian ministry, but is that biblical?”

“Tan Soo-Inn helps us understand that calling by God to our vocation in life is for everyone. Though he spells it out in memorisable steps, the path of discovery is not as easy as ABC. Still, the author, drawing upon his personal experience, and the writings and examples of fellow pilgrims, points us in the direction of finding and fulfilling our God-given mission. A must-read book for all who want to finish well.”

**Rev. Dr. David W. F. Wong**

Leadership Mentor, Finishing Well Ministries

“With enthusiasm and Scripture-saturated wisdom, *Discover Your Calling* is a true encouragement to everyone who hopes to live fully, glorify God, and serve as a vehicle of God’s grace in the world. Life today moves so quickly, with kaleidoscopic variety and mediated connectivity, that we are all challenged to slow down, listen to God, and discover our gifts, burdens, and stories. Soo-Inn Tan’s wise and practical suggestions for doing so are blessings for disciples of all ages, in all times.”

**Susan S. Phillips**

Sociologist, professor of Christian spirituality,  
and Executive director of New College Berkeley;  
Author of *The Cultivated Life: From Ceaseless Striving to  
Receiving Joy*

“Truly a teacher at heart, Soo-Inn clarifies the oft-misunderstood issue of calling in an extremely personal and practical way. For sure, there are many aspects that determine and affect our callings and kingdom assignments. Yet, Soo-Inn masterfully weaves these into an easy-to-understand volume. *Discover Your Calling* is a delightful companion for anyone serious about living purposefully for the Lord.”

**Henson Lim**

Founder, Archippus Awakening

“A book’s success is not measured merely by the number of copies it manages to sell. More importantly it is measured by how well the author is able to fulfil the stated purpose for writing the book. Going by this criteria, I consider this book a big success. My friend Dr. Soo-Inn Tan’s purpose for this book is ‘to provide biblical and practical help for those who want to discover what God may be calling to do with their lives.’ He has ably done that in a relatively short number of chapters.

“For any Christian who seeks to know his or her specific calling in life, this book will definitely be a great help and clear guide. It is biblical, personal, practical, and motivational. It will surely add light to your understanding, fire to your soul, and passion to your heart regarding your specific calling in life.”

**Pastor Kee-Hing Lam**

Associate Pastor, Skyline SIB Church, Kota Kinabalu;  
Pastor to Malaysian indigenous leaders

“Many have written about vocational discernment. Some focus on biblical principles. Others focus on practical guidance. However, few provide both in a balanced way. This book is that rare gem that blends both! Dr. Tan Soo-Inn exquisitely weaves together biblical insight with clear guidance as to what steps are needed to discern one’s calling. You will also be refreshed by the stories of real people, including the author’s, in their journeys of vocational discovery. I recommend this book wholeheartedly.”

**Lisman Komaladi**

General Secretary, Fellowship of Evangelical Students,  
Singapore

“No one wants to live life without purpose or meaning. Or live life in parts: finding joy in a corner of life, but having the rest walled off in drudgery. But how do you find this illusive meaning? Soo-Inn Tan offers remarkable insight into this journey for discovery, drawing on his own story. He doesn’t take us to simple, pat answers. Rather, he prepares the reader for the continuing challenge and joy of a lifelong walk with Jesus Christ across all aspects of vocation. I highly recommend this for those at any stage of the journey.”

**Albert M. Erisman**

Retired Boeing executive; Author of *The ServiceMaster Story: Navigating Tension between People and Profit*, and *The Accidental Executive: Lessons on Business, Faith, and Calling from the Life of Joseph*

“Soo-Inn Tan is a man of deep character who has journeyed closely with God through the mountaintops and valleys of life. A gifted Bible teacher, he’s a wise,

sensible practitioner—a trustworthy guide for discovering one’s vocation no matter your stage of life.

“This book provides biblical and down-to-earth support for all women and men who seek to better understand how God is shaping their lives. It demystifies the discernment process by reinforcing three vital vocational habits: paying attention to abilities, burdens of the heart, and critical incidents of one’s life—what Soo-Inn refers to as the A-B-Cs for deciphering calling. Soo-Inn’s writing moves quickly, but do not be fooled; this is no superficial treatment. As you work through this important book, you will find yourself changed.”

**John R. Terrill**

Executive Director, Upper House, a Christian study center on the University of Wisconsin—Madison campus, USA

“What is my life purpose? What is my calling?”

“I often hear these burning questions when I come alongside others. Soo-Inn Tan—a dear fellow whole-life mentor in the Lausanne Movement—gives us helpful tools in this book. Rooted in the Scriptures, practical, it draws honest lessons from his own life. As an A-B-C book it guides us to God’s calling through our Abilities, Burdens, and Critical life incidents. I wish I had this book earlier, as it has deepened my hunger for Him who has called us into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

**Ole-Magnus Olafsrud**

Chair, Younger Leaders Generation mentoring team,  
The Lausanne Movement

“This book offers wise, biblical, and practical insights to help Christians discover their sense of life purpose. Rooted in God’s calling to follow Jesus and to serve Him with our unique gifts, Soo-Inn Tan provides a spiritually and relationally grounded approach. It deserves thoughtful reflection by young adults, retirees, and everyone in between.”

**Jeffrey P. Greenman**

President, Regent College

“I’m over fifty, and this book was written just for me! I want to be focused and effective at living out my calling. I’m grateful for Pastor Soo-Inn’s biblical, practical teaching.

**Dan Elliott**

Editorial Director, Tyndale House Publishers

“All of us have a yearning to understand where we belong in this world. As Christians most of us understand or believe that God has a purpose for each of us and has gifted each of us differently—both so clear in Scripture. But discovering our unique giftedness and discovering where God calls us to use those gifts eludes so many. Soo-Inn Tan provides here a simple and effective “A-B-C” framework to help each of us seek clarity in our calling. This has been the investment of a lifetime for stewardship of my own life—and I am thankful for Soo-Inn’s own gift of clarity.”

**Don Foster**

CEO, Orphanon Biologics

“For a generation contending with change and confusion, both inside and outside the church, gaining a clearer sense of identity and purpose from God’s perspective is essential. This book introduces us to a process for clarifying very specifically what God is inviting each of us to be and to do. Soo-Inn Tan weaves together a rich combination of his own personal experience, biblical wisdom, and insights gained from many of his favourite authors. Numerous writers (including myself) have attempted to do something similar, but very few have succeeded as well as Soo-Inn Tan in so few pages. It is the condensed wisdom and popular presentation that make this book so valuable. Easy to read, but also thoughtful and practical.”

**Alistair Mackenzie**

*Author of Soul Purpose:*

*Making a Difference in Life and Work*

## BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR

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**DISCOVER YOUR CALLING**

THE  
**A**

**B**

**C**

**OF VOCATIONAL  
DISCERNMENT**

*Soo-Inn Tan*

GRACEWORKS

*Discover Your Calling: The ABC of Vocational  
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22 Sin Ming Lane

#04-76 Midview City

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Tel: 67523403

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Website: [www.graceworks.com.sg](http://www.graceworks.com.sg)

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## FOREWORD

*Who am I?*

*Why am I?*

*What am I to do with my life?*

These are the questions for everyone everywhere, whether we ask them consciously or not, whatever our circumstances may be.

Finding people who will give honest answers to these honest questions is harder than most of us imagine—and this is only complicated by the reality that all of us are wounded people living in a wounded world. And sometimes, very sadly, the church does not help as it could and should, and it ends up wounding us too.

For most of 2,000 years the meaning of calling has been controversial, which is almost tragic. As central as it is meant to be in the common life of ordinary people, because of the dualism which has long afflicted the church—in a thousand different ways rupturing the whole of Christian discipleship, fracturing the coherence that we all long for—we are disposed to making

some parts of life more important than others. Even worse, we are disposed to believing that God is like us, i.e. that he has called some things “clean” and some things “not clean”, some things holy and some things not holy, that some things we do with our lives honors him, and that some things are “less-than”, falling short of God’s intention for his most serious followers. In some traditions of the church, it is only those who have “religious” work to do who have “vocations”; the rest must simply choose their work. And from my observation, the church all over the world stumbles over this. Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant, in our very different ways we cannot get this right.

Rather than having a theological vision that sees all of life mattering to God who is the Creator and Redeemer of all of life—in Abraham Kuyper’s great words, “every square inch of the whole of reality belongs to Jesus who alone is Lord”—more often than not we have compartmentalized life and faith, assuming and insisting that one is more “secular” and one is more “sacred”. Simply said, the biblical vision is this: be holy in all that you are, in all that you do.

I remember a conversation in a summer school class at Regent College where we focused on

“vocation” for the week. Doing my best to make the conversation honestly global, drawing on readings and stories that represented the whole world, we made our way through the days, listening to each other, learning from the best people I know. On the last morning, a woman from the other side of the world came up to me in the mid-morning break. It was our first conversation, and I was glad to know more. She told me that she had been plagued by a conundrum for years, and thought that I had answered her question. Of course I wondered what it was! “I have never been able to figure out the relationship between my ‘Christian life’ and my ‘life.’” I looked at her, wondering what she had learned. “They’re the same, aren’t they?” She smiled, and I smiled with her, glad that she had found the coherence she longed for—because of course they are the same.

In this new book by Soo-Inn Tan we are invited to think through why these questions matter for every son of Adam and daughter of Eve. *Who am I? Why am I? What am I to do with my life?* Widely read, the author draws us into his own pilgrimage in “discovering your calling”, gracing us with the thoughtful voices that have spoken to him through the years, giving clarity and confidence in making sense of his own vocation.

He has lived his own life well, with a holy self-consciousness thinking through his own answers, reading the best books, and learning from the most trusted teachers.

The longer I read, the more sure I was of listening into the story of a calling incarnate, a vocation made flesh in the life of the author—from his own discernment through the years about the work of his life, into the years of his wide reading on the nature of calling. Even to read what he has read would be its own wonderful education!

Why does this matter—whether we are in Vancouver, in Singapore, or in Washington DC? Several years ago I spent a weekend with a group of men at a weekend retreat, one focused on the meaning of vocation. From Friday night through Sunday morning, we labored together, reading the biblical text, doing theological reflection, analyzing the culture and its messages about the work of our lives, and listening to the stories of faithful, thoughtful, visionary folk who see their vocations as integral, not incidental, to the *missio Dei*. When I had finished my last presentation, a group of guys walked up to me and asked if I would meet one of their friends, someone they had invited to the weekend. “Of

course,” and so we talked for a while. He was British, had lived in New York City through his adulthood, and had spent the years of his working life in “the space where business and technology meet”. Then he said, “I have been serious about my faith since I was in university, wanting what I believe to be worked out in what I do. But I have always felt that the church thought my choice to be in business was ‘second-rate’, a bit less serious than if I had done something more ‘Christian’ with my life. I want you to know that a wound in my heart has been healed this weekend.”

Yes, sometimes, very sadly, the church ends up wounding us too. We need to be better, we need to do better. And that is why my friend Soo-Inn Tan has written his book, and it is why he has lived his life. I hope many people in many places find their way into learning from this gifted teacher.

**Steven Garber**

Professor of Marketplace Theology, Regent College; Author of *The Seamless Life: A Tapestry of Love and Learning, Worship and Work*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Vocation is pursued in community. I thank God for Bernice who not only reminds me of who I am and what I am called to do, but who sacrificially cares for me as we seek to follow Christ as husband and wife.

I want to thank Don Foster, whose generous sponsorship helped give birth to this book. I am grateful to him and to all our other friends in Seattle for their support and encouragement through the years.

Finally, I want to thank all those who have allowed me to walk with them through the years. Your vocational faithfulness has made it all worthwhile.



## INTRODUCTION

William Damon in his book *The Path to Purpose* writes about the importance of helping young people discover their life purpose:

Purpose endows a person with joy in good times and resilience in hard times, and this holds true all throughout life. Adolescence and emerging adulthood are particularly affected, however, by the presence of purpose, and purposeful youth ... not only avoid the risks of self-destructive behaviour but also show a markedly positive attitude that triggers an eagerness to learn about the world.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, if a young adult understands that his or her life has purpose and has some idea what that purpose may be, it motivates him or her to work at the other aspects of his or her life. It makes sense therefore that we should help young adults begin the journey of discovering what the Lord may be calling them to do.

However, it is not just the young who need to be helped to discover their callings. Pastor

Kee-Hing Lam is committed to helping those 50 and above discover or rediscover their life purpose. He writes:

I am absolutely convinced that your second half can become the most productive, meaningful and fruitful phase of your life .... However it will not happen automatically! It will only happen when you have discovered your Life Purpose and intentionally use your gifts, talents and resources for helping and blessing others.<sup>2</sup>

With better healthcare, more of us will be living longer. And as Lam has mentioned, our later years could be the most significant years of our lives. The fact that our energy levels at that chapter of life may not be the same as when we were younger makes it even more important that we have clarity as to what the Lord has called us to do, so that we can invest our energies strategically. Indeed, studies on ageing have shown that “one of the prime predictors of health and well-being in old age is whether a person continues to be purposeful.”<sup>3</sup>

It would seem then that clarity about one’s life purpose is important at every stage of life. Followers of Jesus will understand that our life

purpose is given to us by God Himself. It is what He calls us to do. It is our vocation.

Central to the many Christian interpretations of vocation is the idea that there is something—my vocation or calling—God has called me to do with my life, and my life has meaning and purpose at least in part because I am fulfilling my calling.<sup>4</sup>

The subject of calling is a big one and this book is not an attempt to answer every question about vocation. Its goal is a more modest one. This book is an attempt to provide some biblical and practical help for those who want to discover what God may be calling them to do with their lives.

Chapter 1 presents the case for the concept of personal callings. Chapter 2 seeks to explore how one may actually go about discovering one's calling. Chapters 3 to 5 look at three indicators of calling: Ability, Burden, and Critical life incidents. Chapter 6 looks at the various contexts where vocation can be practised. We will see that our vocation is important but that we build our lives not around vocation but around the God who calls

us. In “Putting It All Together”, you will find the various principles of vocational discernment integrated as a guide for someone to embark on a journey of vocational discovery.

Each chapter is built around three sections. The first section, “Life”, gives some incidents from the author’s life that led to his reflecting on the subject of that chapter. The second section, “Lessons”, gives an overview of key biblical material and insights in the literature on the subject of the chapter. A last section, “Living it out”, is a closing exhortation and provides practical handles for how to live out the implications of the chapter.

This book is offered with the hope that it will help more of us to say at the end of our lives:

I have brought you glory on earth by  
finishing the work you gave me to do.  
(John 17:4)



# 1

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## What Is Calling?

*Why am I here? When we can't answer that daunting question, we drift through life, which becomes a succession of loosely linked episodes.<sup>1</sup>*

## LIFE • LESSONS • LIVING IT OUT

In my final year of dental school, I began to believe that I was called to be a pastor, not a dentist. I have always believed that God calls each of us to different work and I never saw church-related work as more spiritual than other work.

Still, I had to deal with the fact that I was now beginning to feel that I was called to pastoral work. This was a crisis of faith because for the first time in my life I had to pay a price for following Christ.

First, by giving up dentistry, I was giving up a job that promised a generous income, something that was very important for baby-boomer diaspora Chinese like myself. More importantly, my parents would be against such a change. They had sacrificed a lot to put me through dental school.

I didn't want to disappoint them. Therefore, I had to take a long hard look at my Christian faith. It had to be true for me to make this

drastic change in my life trajectory. After a few months of intense reflection, I concluded that the Christian faith was indeed true. Jesus was my Lord and Saviour. Consequently, I had to do whatever He wanted me to.

Next, I had to think through what “calling” meant. After much study of the Bible and extensive reading of key books on the subject, I concluded that God does indeed call us to different life missions. I also came to the conclusion that following one’s calling is an expression of stewardship, a principle laid out in 1 Peter.

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.  
(1 Peter 4:10)

The question, then, was what vocation would allow me to be the best steward of the gifts and abilities God had graced me with? In particular, was I called to the pastorate?

## LIFE • LESSONS • LIVING IT OUT

The first mission given to humankind was: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.” (Genesis 1:28a) This was a mission that neither Adam nor Eve could have done on their own. Each had a unique contribution to make to conceive the children who would “fill the earth and subdue it.” This seems to be the divine pattern. God has a mission, He raises a community to be servants of that mission, and the different members of that community have different roles to play in the pursuit of that mission.

In the New Testament God raises His church to serve His purposes. Paul compares the church to the human body that can only function when the different parts play their respective roles (1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:15–16). We see here the same pattern at play. God has a mission. He raises up a community to serve that mission. Different members of that community have different roles to play to fulfil that mission. All followers of Jesus should be committed to God’s mission to be witnesses to Jesus and His

work (Luke 24:48) but each of us has different assignments for that mission. We have different callings.

The terms “vocation” and “calling” can be used interchangeably. “Vocation” is just a Latin word for “calling”.<sup>2</sup> It begs the question, who is calling whom to do what. And the answer is this: God calls His people to serve Him and assigns each of them their unique personal missions. Calling begins with God. Indeed, our first call is the call to follow Him.

## **The Primary Call**

Our journey to discover our own unique calling must begin with recognising that our first call is to follow Christ.

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Mark 8:34)

This primary call encompasses all of life and is true for all followers of Jesus throughout their lives.

The vocation of every Christian is to live as a follower of Jesus today. In every aspect of life, in small and large acts, with family,

neighbor and enemies, we are to seek to live out the grace and truth of Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

As a follower of Jesus, I am responsible for various roles that I undertake as an expression of love for God and neighbour. They include responsibilities to church (Romans 12:3–8) and family (Ephesians 5:21–6:40), to nation (Jeremiah 29:7), friends (John 15:15–17) and work (Colossians 3:22–4:1). As followers of Jesus, we are to faithfully carry out the tasks that sustain the responsibilities assigned to us. Therefore we do not wait until we are sure of our calling before we live out our lives as followers of Jesus. At all times we are to love God and neighbour in all spheres of life.

## **Our Special Call**

Above and beyond our regular duties, however, we are also called to a mission that is specific to each one of us. Klaus Bockmuehl describes this special call:

[T]here is, in addition to his or her general (creational) and the special (salvational) assignments, the individual vocation of a Christian to his or her own, separate, personal life work. It comes as a calling to some activity that not every human being

and not every Christian believer is called to, but which is assigned to this particular person.<sup>4</sup>

Gordon T. Smith explains the relationship between our primary calling and our unique personal calling:

[F]or each individual there is a specific call—a defining purpose or mission, a reason for being. Every individual is called of God to respond through service in the world. Each person has a unique calling in this second sense. We cannot understand this second meaning of the call except in the light of the first. When we fulfil our specific vocation, we are living out the full implications of what it means to follow Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

We see this concept of a personal specific calling in God's call of Jeremiah to his prophetic ministry (Jeremiah 1:4–10). God brought Jeremiah into existence because He had a particular assignment for him. Jeremiah had been set apart “from all other uses to a specific use.”<sup>6</sup>

If the call of Jeremiah connects calling with creation, Paul, in the New Testament, connects calling to salvation.

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. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:8–10)

The New Testament teaches that we are saved through faith and that we are saved so that we can do work that God prepared in advance for us to do.

Our vocation is grounded in the self that from eternity God has willed that we be. Our calling is to become that self and then to serve God and our fellow human beings in the particular ways that will represent the fulfillment of that self.<sup>7</sup>

## Definitions

I like VantagePoint3's definition of the personal call:

God invites us to live and serve out of who we are, a vocation or way of life unique to who we have been created and are redeemed to be.<sup>8</sup>

Here are a few other useful definitions of one's personal call:

Your ... mission here on Earth is one that is uniquely yours, and that is:

- a. to exercise the Talent that you particularly came to earth to use—your greatest gift that you most delight to use;
- b. in those place(s) or setting(s) that God has caused to appeal to you the most;
- c. and for those purposes that God most needs to have done in the world.

Richard N. Bolles<sup>9</sup>

Central to the many Christian interpretations of vocation is the idea that there is something—my vocation or calling—God has called me to do with my life, and my life has meaning and purpose at least in part because I am fulfilling my calling.

William C. Placher<sup>10</sup>

A personal mission statement is a defined, written and constantly revised expression of your unique expression of personal and human vocation that captivates you for service in the world for life. It is more than career and remunerated occupation. It is that service for which we believe we are sent, and sent by God Himself.

R. Paul Stevens<sup>11</sup>

I like the fact that Stevens says that a personal life mission statement, his term for calling, is “a constantly revised expression”. It frees us from the need to chase a final and absolute certitude about our calling. It does encourage us to grow in self-knowledge as we move through life, and part of that knowledge is a growing understanding of what might be our unique contribution to God’s purposes in the world.

Do note that there is no specific command in the Bible to discover one's calling. However, if the Bible teaches that each of us has unique callings, it makes sense then that we should grow in our understanding of that calling. For many, the first step is to come to the realisation that we each have our unique roles to play in God's purposes.

The first step for some of us in discovering our unique purpose will be to accept that we have one; that I as an individual have a unique part to play in God's unfolding story.<sup>12</sup>

