



# Are You Looking for a Job, a Career, or a Calling?

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Guest: Jeffery A. Thompson

**Shelley Hunter:** You're listening to the Faithful Career Moves podcast. I'm your host, Shelley Hunter, and this is a place where we talk to people who recognize the Lord's hand in their lives, and specifically in their careers.

Thank you for joining me on Episode Six of the Faithful Career Moves podcast. Today I'm talking to Jeff Thompson. He's a professor of organizational behavior at Brigham Young University and the co-author of a book about finding your calling in life. It's called, "*The Zookeeper's Secret*." In this book, Jeff answers the questions, is there only one true calling for you? Can you still find your calling if you choose to stay home? What if your calling doesn't pay enough to live on?

What I learned in talking to Jeff is that there's a difference between a job, a career, and a calling. Now, before we get to that, I want to make it clear that the purpose in talking to Jeff and frankly all of the amazing men and women that have been on the show or will be on this podcast, is not to stress you out.

Not to make you compare yourself to anyone or suddenly feel unfulfilled in your life, your job, your career, or your calling, but rather to simply inspire you to think about career moves from a faith-based perspective. Knowing that the Lord has a plan for you, it's already in place. You just have to partner with Him to figure it out.

I asked Jeff to take me back to the beginning of, "*The Zookeeper's Secret*" and what that even means?

**Jeff Thompson:** I actually gave a devotional at BYU about 10 years ago. It came earlier in my career than I expected, I thought, "I don't know if I have anything wise to say." It was a really frightening thing. I started thinking about my research on finding a calling in life, and that devotional was the first time I started looking at it through a spiritual lens.

As I did that, in preparation for the devotional, sort of a new vision of my research opened up to me and a new understanding that what I was studying was actually

deeply embedded in principles of the restored gospel. The devotional went over well and got a lot of inquiries, people wanting to talk to me about it. I recognized there was a hunger for the materials that I had presented.

I had never really set out to write a book, it had to do it to kind of take the foundation that I had laid in the devotional. Then, in partnership with my brilliant colleague, Professor Stuart Bunderson, who's at Washington University in St. Louis, we together wrote *Zookeeper's Secret*, which takes our research, specifically research on the zookeeping profession and talks about how the principles of finding a calling resonate with gospel truth.

Our goal in that book is to give a very practical view of what can you do. It's almost a workbook in a way, things that will help you gain a clearer sense of what your calling in life might be.

**Shelley:** Okay. How did you come up with zookeepers? I'm not even sure I knew that was a profession?

**Jeff:** Why zookeepers? When Stuart and I began to research together we knew we were fascinated with people who were very passionate about their work. We went out looking for a profession where people don't make very much money, so it's not just a job. Where people don't have a lot of upward mobility or get a lot of glory for what they do, so it's not a career. We wanted to find calling in its purity. Kind of on a whim, we started talking to zookeepers and it was this goldmine.

Zookeepers make almost poverty wages. A ridiculously low amount of money. You might think of them as the typical blue-collar worker who's not qualified for other work. 75% of the zookeepers we surveyed have a bachelor's degree, many of them have an advanced degree. They are highly skilled people with specialized knowledge, they make no money, they get no glory, they spend their days out in the cold, out in the heat, they're dealing with dangerous animals, they're dealing with really smelly animals, and doing unsavory things with unsavory substances that we won't talk about on a polite podcast.

It's backbreaking, and if the animal's sick, you're there in the middle of the night. As we're interviewing these zookeepers, we thought, "This is the worst job ever. This is terrible that people are subjected to this." Then we started asking them and surveying them about their job satisfaction and what their work meant to them, and they're off the charts. We have never seen another professional group that has a deeper sense of the meaning of what they do, and we just thought this is amazing.

The word that they kept using is 'calling'. Like, "This is my calling and I have to do this, and this is who I am."

Our project with zookeepers was to figure out what are the ingredients of a calling? If you strip out all of the otherworldly benefits, what makes it a calling? Some really important themes came out. What you'll hear in the devotional is that these main themes really are gospel principles. One was we called it hard wiring or a sense of finding out who I am, that's spiritual gifts.

They're very tuned in to the fact that they are good with animals, they love animals, they can communicate with animals, spiritual gift. The second thing was a sense of purpose or service. They are with their animals every day, face to face. They know who they're helping, and they have this deep sense of stewardship, there's another gospel principle, the sense of having your flock that you care for. Then the third thing that we heard was really surprising because I didn't expect it in a secular environment, that the third major theme was destiny.

This was meant to be-- Every zookeeper talks as if they're the luckiest person in the world because everything worked out, I ended up where I was supposed to be. The funny thing is, none of them used religion. No one talked about God. They did talk about a sense of, "This was kind of cosmic or it was magical, I felt led, fate smiled on me." Obviously, what they're talking about, if we believe that they're children of God and this is divine guidance, that Heavenly Father does intervene in our lives and gives us the experiences in our day to day life that propel us where we need to be, even if we have no idea ourselves where that is.

Those three elements and we called them passion, purpose, and place for nice alliteration. Passion is your spiritual gifts. Purpose is your stewardship. Place is your destiny where Heavenly Father has led you, and those three themes seem to resonate every time we study calling in any environment,

**Shelley:** Passion, purpose, and place. Okay, I like that. My focus in creating this podcast and the website has been really to help people recognize the Lord's hand in their careers. I think you made an important distinction that I want you to go back to, if you don't mind is that you distinguish between a career and a calling?

**Jeff:** I'd actually just like to add one more distinction to that list. In my field, we talk about jobs, careers, and callings. There is a pretty clear distinction in the academic literature. A job is an economic transaction, fair day's work for a fair day's pay, so people with a job orientation are really in an exchange with their employer. A career is about belonging and reputation.

People with a career orientation are focused on advancement and establishing themselves and their reputation and feeling like they are part of an organization where they're trusted and respected. A calling is different in that a calling is an other-oriented pursuit of work that is intrinsically meaningful. If you have a sense of calling in your work, it's not that the money and the respect doesn't matter. It means that you've got this additional element where you're going to work in order to bring some good into the world that doesn't revolve around your own self-interest and your own benefit.

**Shelley:** I love that. One of the reasons I was really drawn immediately to the book, you narrow in really quickly on the idea that a stay-at-home parent might also be fulfilling their calling in staying at home. Can you elaborate on that?

**Jeff:** Absolutely, yes. My personal agenda for writing the book and for talking about this topic is to demystify the idea of a calling. We've really I think, bought into the notion that a calling is for special people, that a calling is mystical and you can't

control it. It's just something that happens to you if you're lucky. That idea really is entirely contrary to what the original definition of calling is.

The first person to talk about a professional calling was Martin Luther, clear back in the protestant reformation. His definition was, "A calling is using the gifts God has given you to serve people wherever you are." If we're going to adopt that more traditional definition of a calling, then absolutely in fact, what could be a higher calling than building a family, than building a home, using your unique personal gifts, and being the kind of mother or father that only you can be. That's much more in line with what Martin Luther's original intent was for what it means to have a calling in life.

**Shelley:** For the last few years, so many women have come to me who have been stay-at-home parents, and they have said, "I need to go back to work, but I have no skills." I heard it so often that quite honestly, that is why I felt like I had to do something broader than just counsel each woman one at a time. I believe that time spent at home is part of your career development.

**Jeff:** Absolutely. When I think about the stories that we tell in our book, particularly stories about working mothers who then reengage with the workplace, in no case can I think of one of those stories where the individual is not surprised that the gifts and abilities they have led them somewhere they did not expect to go. In almost every case, and I must say that's also true for the men that I talk about in my book as well.

There is a sense of surprise and rightness about finding your calling where it builds upon your natural gifts, and also the skills that you have developed in life. I hear that. I definitely hear that notion of, "I don't have any skills, I'm not special. There's nothing about me that's unique." That's false doctrine. We can go right to the scriptures and the doctrine of spiritual gifts which says that the moment that we tell ourselves we have nothing unique to contribute, we're denying a part of our divinity.

**Shelley:** Can you share some of those stories from the book.

**Jeff:** One individual in her quest to reengaged professionally developed a blog and a web platform where she drew women together, women of faith in particular. I think that started as a labor of love and then has grown into a professional pursuit that has opened all sorts of opportunities for her.

Another woman that I talked about in the book as her children grew older had a desire to engage professionally but really didn't know what she had to offer. She ended up volunteering, I think for the school district or some aspect of city government. One thing led to another and appointments and elections later, she's now a bonafide public servant.

In both of these cases, these were not career paths that these individuals had charted for themselves. It was more following what the Spirit directed in terms of, "What's the next step? How can I engage? How can I try out something new?" In both cases, it started with volunteering a non-employed effort to serve.

**Shelley:** Right. I was just writing a blog post on how to translate your church service into something that goes on a resume. I feel that's going to be uncomfortable for people to think, "I was serving in this capacity to serve, and now it feels a little bit wrong to write that I am an instructor that does A, B, C, and D."

**Jeff:** Yes, it feels we're trying to monetize our church service. I think the way I would react to that is through a story of a dear friend of mine who had served as a stake president in other church capacities. He was elected to be the president of a huge professional association in my field, and he was terrified. He had never done anything like that before, but he conducted his first board meeting for this professional association.

Afterward, several people came up to him and say, "How did you do that? The way that you ran that meeting, your ability to draw people out." He talked about how it was just an awakening of how relevant his church service was in teaching him skills that really made him better in a professional environment. All of those years of council meetings and presidency meetings and teaching classes and ministering to people.

All of those skills that we're developing are the same skills that organizations need. We get really good at them when we use them in our service. I think Heavenly Father gives us these opportunities to serve not just to bless other people, but to develop ourselves. I would encourage women, in particular, to not feel any sense of guilt or hesitation to claim those skills that they developed through service and hard work.

**Shelley:** I totally agree with that, obviously, but also the fact that you said, "to claim those skills." I love that. Through this book, have you had people come to you and say, "I have no idea what my calling is?"

**Jeff:** The interesting thing is when we wrote that book, I really had college students in mind. I was thinking about 20 somethings who were launching and trying to figure out where they were going to. By far our largest response has been from mid-career people.

**Shelley:** I'll bet.

**Jeff:** Some of whom are almost there and they think there's zoning in on it and the book spoke to them in explaining their journey. Others who are midway through their lives trying to figure out what they want to be when they grow up, and who are looking just for some guidance on how to think about and how to prepare to look for a calling later in life.

**Shelley:** I think it's going to evolve. I think maybe 10 years ago, I might have thought, "I think this is my calling." Now 10 years later, I feel like, "No, that was a part of it. It helped me prepare for what I'm doing now." That probably 10 years from now further, I may rethink that again.

**Jeff:** Yes, that's such an important point, and I want to go back to the mystique of calling. We tend to look at it as a destination. "I found it, I'm at the end of the rainbow. Everything now makes sense." Calling is not a destination. A calling is a process of learning how you can serve. I think as you're on that path to refining and defining what it is you have to offer and to whom, you're in your calling. It may look very different at different stages of your life.

One of the stories I tell in the book is about a stay-at-home mom who developed a music career, but she definitely felt she was called as a mother. She definitely feels she's called as a songwriter now later in her life, and that is absolutely consistent with the notion of a calling. It's not an endpoint that you reach. It's a journey of seeking new and better ways to serve.

**Shelley:** I feel I'm growing through this podcast because I've been quite focused on the career part of the continuum you mentioned, the job versus career versus calling, and truly with a goal of helping people be self-reliant, but also fulfilled and enjoy what they do. In the book, you repeat the goal of service, a great deal, and with much less focus on the financial side.

**Jeff:** Of course, we need money. There's always going to be that job element to our employment. If we spend eight to 10 hours of our days on work, and the only reason we're doing it is to make money, I feel we're diminishing what our Heavenly Father intends for us in terms of learning how to be good servants, good ministers to our brothers and sisters, many of whom are the people we work with.

If I can just share a little personal example, and I raised it in the book. My first corporate job was an absolute misery to me.

[laughter]

**Jeff:** I really was unhappy, I couldn't find any sense of meaning, and what I did was what most people do, which is I put my head down and did the bare minimum and withdrew, waiting for something better to happen. That was the stupidest thing I could have done. Looking back, if I could go back and advise my old self, I would have told myself, "Okay, you don't like it here. There's a lot of problems in this organization, you're unhappy. Probably other people are too."

What can you do to make life better for other people? Can you look outside of yourself and try to serve?" I think a couple of things would have happened to me. I might have been a little bit happier because I'd been less absorbed, but professionally speaking, more importantly, is when I am focused on serving and helping other people, it brings out the best in me. We can only discover our gifts and our skills in helping other people. I believe that.

I was missing opportunities to show myself and to show other people what I was capable of. Yes, I think in any work that we do, if we adopt the lens of saying, "I'm here to serve, I'm here to help people. I'm here to build things," we're going to be happier and we're going to be better at what we do and it's going to open new doors for us that we maybe didn't expect.

**Shelley:** What do you say to people who asked the question, "Okay, fine. How do I find my calling?" Obviously, they can read the book, but can you give us just a little teaser to somebody who needs more help in this area?

**Jeff:** Sure. One of the first things I do with my students who come to me with that question is say, "Okay, let's rewind and go back to childhood. What did you play as a kid? When no one was telling you what to do, how did you play?" Kids are vastly different in what they're drawn to. Some children are studious, they love reading books, others are storytellers. They love engaging with people and captivating people.

The example I use in the book is a student who comes to my office and says, "There's nothing special about me. I don't have any unique gifts." I asked, "What did you do as a kid?" "Well, I played sports." "Okay, what sports?" "Well, I liked soccer." "That's interesting. You're talking about a team sport rather than an individual sport, is that accurate?" He said, "Yes, I guess I was a team sports person." [laughs] I said, "Okay, were you in a league? Tell me about your soccer experience." He says, "Well, I know I would just go around and gather people together, gather my friends together to play. I go knock on their doors."

It pretty quickly became clear, as we talked about this, that as a child, he was a community organizer. He was the one who was going out and knocking on doors. The thing about our spiritual gifts is they manifest themselves early. They feel natural to us, and consequently, we undervalue them because they seem like it's normal. "Well, of course, I do this, anyone would do this," but they wouldn't.

I think going back to childhood and owning those interests and the things you were good in gives some really important clues about the types of activity you're likely to both be good at and enjoy doing. Another thing that I do in the book is encourage people to engage in some activities where they're talking with a lot of other people and doing some collective reflecting. There's an exercise called the reflected best self exercise where you ask people to tell you when they've seen you at your best, that's a really powerful exercise.

You're not asking for critical feedback. You're asking people to share the moments that they saw you doing what only you can do in your way and that can be revelatory.

**Shelley:** That's a really good question. Okay, going back to the three P's you mentioned passion, purpose, and place, now, would you suggest that people evaluate where they are right now and see if there's something missing? Or I'll add a fourth p to this, it's time to pivot.

**Jeff:** [laughs] Very good. I like that P. You use the word evaluate, and I'm a little worried about the word evaluate because what I want my students and people who read my book to do is to engage and ask themselves questions, not to feel like they've failed. All of us are in the process of crafting our calling. Yes, I would have people consider each of those three areas. In the book, there's actually an exercise where you draw a map of where those three things overlap in your life.

Think about the childhood inventory, what's my passion? What have I always been good at? What do I love to do? Purpose, think about who I can help. I'd really encourage people to not think grandiose like far-flung purposes. You don't have to go to India or Africa to make the world a better place. It starts with your family. It starts with your community, and then you work outward as your circle gets a little larger.

I'd have them think about the purpose. What are the needs that are calling out to them? Then lastly, this destiny piece is so important. What has happened to me in my life that points me in a direction? The irony here is that often our destiny or our place comes precisely from the worst things that have ever happened to us.

**Shelley:** Yes, dang it. I know.

**Jeff:** Yes, I have so many stories of people who found their calling because of tragedy, or illness or adversity or seeing someone that they love go through a trauma. Those horrible experiences are also ways that Heavenly Father has entrusted us with knowledge and understanding that might allow us to serve in unique ways.

**Shelley:** That is the challenge when you are going through something like that to come out on the other side and one day look back and say, "I see the purpose in this."

**Jeff:** Exactly.

**Shelley:** Tell me, Jeff, have you found your calling?

**Jeff:** [laughs] Yes, absolutely, but it wasn't easy, and it wasn't quick. I mentioned earlier that I had a corporate career that was really miserable for me. Getting my PhD, it seems like that should have propelled me in the right direction. I had a lot of adversity in my PhD. My advisor who was going to lead me to my academic promised land, he drowned.

**Shelley:** What?

**Jeff:** One day, he's there and the other day, he was gone in this freak accident. I almost quit my PHD program. I was like, "This should be working out more easily."

**Shelley:** Right.

**Jeff:** That stuff shouldn't be happening if I'm on the right path.

**Shelley:** Right.

**Jeff:** I stuck it out and gosh, it's a long story, but I would say it probably wasn't until I gave that devotional. I'm 42 years old at that point where it's like everything locked in and I thought, "Okay, I see it now."

**Shelley:** Yes.

**Jeff:** "I see that I'm using my gifts. I see that I am serving a purpose. I see that I'm where I'm supposed to be." Being a professor at BYU, the fact that I get to talk about stuff I love. I've learned that I'm pretty good at holding people's attention in the classroom and engaging them. I'm helping young people prepare for service-oriented careers and I'm in the place I want to be. I got to BYU in a way I never could have predicted. [laughs] I feel really blessed but I don't want to say that as, "Oh, look at me, I figured out."

**Shelley:** Right.

**Jeff:** What I want to say is, you're on your path as long as you are questing to find where you can best serve, you're on the path. I suspect there are more things for me to learn and maybe I'll get an even crisper sense of what I meant to do. My major goal is to not have people feel intimidated by the idea that pursuing a calling in life. I believe, and maybe it's naive, I believe it's within the grasp of every one of Heavenly Father's children to discover sometime during their life, at least some level of what they're meant to do to bless other people.

**Shelley:** Can you tell me a leap of faith that you had to take to get where you are now in your career?

**Jeff:** My dad was a teacher. I love my dad, but I did not want to be a teacher because my [laughs] dad was a teacher so I tried to pursue a business career. At one point I was thinking about a law career, I was thinking about a foreign diplomacy career and just none of those things were going in the right direction. One day I was in class in the MBA program, and I was asked to give a presentation. I'm standing at the board with chalk in my hand, these were back in the chalkboard days.

I'm diagramming something out and talking to my classmates and all of a sudden I realized, "I am so happy right now." I love doing this and it was this moment of clarity that I realized I had been suppressing this thing because I thought I didn't want to be my father. That moment, I had to own up to the fact that maybe I needed to think about a PhD and that was terrifying, had not been in my plans.

I'm so glad I did it and in fact, if I can just weave in one more piece of advice with that, you have to take risks. Go back to school, volunteer in a place where you're not sure you're qualified. Do something that's out of your comfort zone. That's what the leap of faith is, and we can't grow or discover until we're willing to do something scary.

**Shelley:** Jeff, what is an unexpected blessing that you couldn't see for yourself when you had the courage to make this move?

**Jeff:** Here's a funny one. [laughs] I have I always talked to my students about taking these leaps and getting out of their comfort zone. About 10 years ago, I recognized some hypocrisy in myself because I'm always talking about this but there were a couple of things that I had always wanted to do and was afraid to do. I love theater. I love musical theater. I wanted to learn to sing, but I didn't like my voice and I just loved the idea of getting onstage.

I caught myself in the moment. I thought if, "I am going to authentically teach this, I need to show that I'm willing to step out of my comfort zone."

**Shelley:** Right.

**Jeff:** It took me years, but I finally mustered the courage to go to a voice teacher and to audition for a little community, tiny community production where I actually got cast, and it's changed my life. I now do theater pretty regularly. I perform with the Hale Center Theatre, both here in Orem and in Sandy. It just opened a new world to me. The most surprising thing about that is it makes me a better teacher. I really feel like I was guided to do something that would help me serve my students better.

I am a better storyteller in the classroom and a better listener than ever was. I've learned to be more authentically expressive. So surprising to me that this thing I wanted to do but was afraid to do has actually enriched so many aspects of my life when I thought at the time, that was it was just going to be a goofy hobby.

**Shelley:** Yes.

**Jeff:** It's really become an important part of my professional identity.

**Shelley:** I love that intersection.

**Jeff:** That's really what we're talking about, Shelley. A calling is that intersection that eventually comes but only if you're brave in trying to get right.

**Shelley:** Okay, my final question, how have you seen the hand of God in your career?

**Jeff:** In a truly amazing way. I teach in the Masters of Public Administration program. If I could maybe put in a plug here, many of the people I see who are pursuing their calling come to the Masters of Public Administration program at BYU. We have an evening program for mid-career people, and we have many stay-at-home moms who are ready to go back into the workplace.

Their leap of faith is to study public administration, which prepares them for working in their communities or nonprofits or government, et cetera. Anyway, that's the sandbox that I play in. It's so perfect for me. I did not know that the Masters of Public Administration existed before I came to BYU 17 years ago. I was a business professor. I was focused on preparing people for corporate careers and my dream was to get to BYU and teach MBA students.

I had a couple of opportunities to come out and interview. In both cases, it was a disaster. For so many reasons, it was painful. It didn't work out. I had people who were opposed to my candidacy in a way that felt very personal. It was one of the biggest trials of my life to feel like I know I want to be at BYU teaching, MBA students and Heavenly Father won't let me. Then out of the blue, a few years later, the MPA program, the Masters of Public Administration program, reached out to me and I almost turned them down.

I thought, "That's not what I do. I'm a business guy." I went and interviewed and the angel sang. I started presenting my research, and these people got me and understood me in a way no one else had. I am so blessed to be exactly where I'm supposed to be, but I had no idea that was the right place.

**Shelley:** I love that. Thank you so much for sharing this and for writing the book and for being on this show today.

**Jeff:** Thank you. I really appreciate the work that you're doing, you're raising such important questions. I really hope your listeners take courage and decide to have the patience to go on this quest and trust that a pattern will emerge.

**Shelley:** Thank you to Jeff for joining me on this show. I'm going to make this recap brief. If you want to dig more into finding your calling, then read the book, *The Zookeeper's Secret*. At the end of every chapter, you get a mini homework assignment to help you apply the concepts to your own life which I think is super helpful. Now, here's the two money shots, the two big ahas for me.

In talking about the stay-at-home moms who returned to work, he says, "In no cases, were the individuals not surprised that their gifts and abilities led them somewhere they did not expect to go." I believe that and I love that. The second thing is a hard one. The idea that some of the worst things that happen in your life are preparatory for finding your calling.

I know from experience that these are often things we would never choose to go through ourselves, but there is purpose in it beyond what we can see for ourselves. Take heart if you're somebody going through a struggle right now. I could go on, but let's leave it at that and just remind you, if you're a stay-at-home mom who wants to or needs to go back to work, there's a guide for you on my website.

Also, check out the show notes for a reference to Jeff's book and a few other resources he shared with me as well. It is all good stuff. Thank you for joining me on the Faithful Career Moves podcast. It's my hope that listening to this episode will inspire you to think more broadly about how your career and your spiritual journey intersect.

If you like that idea and want others to have a similar epiphany, then please share this podcast on social media, leave a review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen to podcasts or leave a comment on the website. Doing so will help others find this content as well.