Called: The Crisis and Promise of Following Jesus Today

In a world packed full of distractions and mixed messages, a book like this is both welcomed and needful. Mark Labberton—author, professor, seminary president—in his book *Called: The Crisis and Promise of Following Jesus Today* at once provides both sober assessment and clear challenge to the ultimate question about what it means to be a follower of Christ…in this chapter of human history, especially as those in exile.

Here are a set of Book Notes that will give you an overview of what lies within.

Title: ***Called: The Crisis and Promise of Following Jesus Today***

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Book Description:

The most urgent call upon God's people is to live as followers of Jesus. The most indicting critique against the church is as simple: its failure to do so. As the leader of an evangelical theological seminary that trains men and women as leaders for the church and society, Mark Labberton writes: "People ask many questions about how their lives relate to the world. What are our lives in this world about? What are we to make of being human? Why are we here? Is there a reason we are alive, and, if so, how would we know what that is? These questions are brought on at times by beauty and joy, but also by the daunting facts of our own lives or of the world around us. We look around in doubt, in pain, in suffering. These are human questions asked throughout history by those inside and outside the church." We long to renew our hope for a world broken and hurting. And it is we, God's people living in the power of the Holy Spirit, who are called to become this hope and flourish while in exile. Here is the crisis: we are made and redeemed for this calling, but it slides through our fingers. Here is the promise: living and practicing who and why we are is our Christian vocation whenever and wherever we may be. Will you answer the call?

Book Quotes:

Although God clearly provides gifts for ministry, greater influence comes through character, the fruit of God's Spirit. Charisma, winsomeness, popularity, charm, cleverness can matter. The greater testimony, however, comes from a character shaped by the love of Jesus, consistently demonstrated in ordinary action. LOCATION: 77

The kingdom of God is always intimate but never small. This is what drew and draws people to Jesus. It all turns, however, on our response to Jesus' two words: "Follow me." This is the primary call of God that creates and defines the church. We bear authentic witness to God's love when we demonstrate Jesus-following lives. But too often, we don't. The gift we are meant to be is neither available nor received. Meanwhile the world needs a church that actually lives its call. Urgently. LOCATION: 80

The God made known in Scripture and incarnate in Jesus Christ desires flourishing people in a flourishing

world. This is God's intent and commitment, and God created humans to flourish by collaborating with him in that endeavor. Sadly, the narrative of the Bible includes how God's divine desire is subverted by the very human beings God created as partners to reflect God's image and steward creation. Even more, however, it tells the long story of how God relentlessly pursues us in faithfulness and love. LOCATION: 116

Though the kingdom is God's work by the Spirit, we are not spiritual mannequins—a form without life. We are meant to be active, willful, fruit-bearing agents of that kingdom. The Spirit enables us to live both as ourselves (in honesty and humility) and beyond ourselves (in love and sacrifice). LOCATION: 126

The heart of God's call is this: that we receive and live the love of God for us and for the world. This is the meaning of the two great commandments, that we are made to love the Lord our God with all we are and our neighbors as ourselves. The Bible as a whole, and Jesus in particular, reveals what such a life looks like. LOCATION: 131

God's call encompasses the foundational purposes of our lives and also guidance for life's concrete work and activity. Calling isn't just a category for those who pursue some form of recognized ministry; it's about God's desire for all of our lives as ambassadors of God's kingdom. This is our primary call. This primary call for all of us leads naturally and secondarily to God's call for each of us. LOCATION: 154

If the narrative character of Scripture conveys anything to us, it underlines that God is not a deity of ideas and forms so much as the God of love and relationship. LOCATION: 177

The first and second commandments taught by Jesus—to love God and love our neighbor—are our calling. They guide the enactment of life as God intends it to be lived. We find our lives by losing them in these particular ways. We lose our lives, and gain them too, in the action of laying them down in worship and love. LOCATION: 181

Our calling has become encrusted, buried under layers that lack significant evidence of life. Viral cat videos seem to touch our humanity and longing more than many church services do. I have felt caught in this vortex. The temptation in the church is to bring in more clowns and light the sparklers, but the real solution is what the Bible declares is our calling: to live out genuine love that shows up in the face of real need. LOCATION: 189

Perhaps the deepest truth is that the church has lost its way in the world. What's more, it doesn't know it. LOCATION: 258

And I too often find the church to be a place of deep disconnection and disappointment. For all the reasons just named, we are indistinguishable and irrelevant far, far too much of the time. As I drive by church buildings and read Christian magazines and go to Christian websites, I'm struck by what feels like the presence of an ecclesiastical-industrial complex rather than the aroma of Jesus Christ. LOCATION: 308

With grace and hope, the church is to inherently and commonly seek and love the forgotten, the unseen, the undesirable, the uncool. We need to do so with unexpected, tangible love, displaying counterintuitive compassion (including enemy-love) and demonstrating a capacity for magnanimous forgiveness, mercy and justice. LOCATION: 312

The people of God must face this crisis: the church is losing its mission in the world. The root of the problem lies not outside the church but inside: we're failing to live our calling in specific ways that we need to acknowledge and understand. LOCATION: 381

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, neighbors and enemies, we are to seek to live out the grace and truth of Jesus. This is our

vocation, our calling. Today. LOCATION: 436

The full vocation of the church is to follow Jesus in the declaration and enactment of the kingdom. This involves all we are and all we have. It's a call into nothing less than God's work of re-creation, in which all things will be made new. LOCATION: 467

We have allowed and contributed to a dominant secular culture that has now engulfed us and in which we are ever more fully the minority. We are a declining cultural force against countervailing pressures of spiritual decline. The church of Christendom is fading and flailing. LOCATION: 536

Living our call in exile involves adjusting to very different circumstances and reading the signals of our environment and culture very differently. It means choosing to give ourselves to those around us with fewer and different expectations, not as settlers but as guests or visitors. We don't whine about the world being the world. We are instead called to love it out of the integrity of our lives, without making our love dependent on its changing. "Seek the welfare [or shalom] of the city, . . . for in its welfare you will find your welfare," is the instruction of Jeremiah 29:7. "If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?" Jesus said. "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:46, 44). LOCATION: 538

Cultivating a spirituality for exile means learning to live inside-out. It isn't a mere interior spirituality, and the endpoint isn't just spiritual survival. Living as faithful strangers in a strange land means providing an essential good for the benefit of the surrounding people or context. LOCATION: 565

Promised Land spirituality expects it all and expects it now. Exilic spirituality has to make peace with the partial rather than the whole. In contrast to the Promised Land—which has a kind of comprehensive beneficence, a sense that all things could somehow be right (even if not yet fully so)—exilic life is shaped out of remnants. The temple is gone, but prayer is still available. The vessels are desecrated, but our bodies are a vessel for God. The national rituals are no more, but rhythms of mind, body and spirit can lead us to see and feel and know now "in part." LOCATION: 592

Jesus does not say, "Believe me," but rather, "Follow me." If we are going to pursue God's call, it's an act of trusting and following—of behaving and living in ways that reflect our life and purposes. We aren't saved by our actions, but we are saved for our actions to become those that make God's life in Jesus Christ visible. LOCATION: 692

All over the world, leaders are in crisis. At a time of extraordinary local and global change, any leader paying attention knows that things are not like they have been and won't be like we have imagined. What things will be like, however, will be an expression of leadership, even though most leaders have little or no idea where to go or how to lead in such a time as this. LOCATION: 880

Hence the need for leaders. Today more than ever, leadership isn't first and foremost a formal role. It's rather a personal capacity to exert vision and passion that enables others to join in a common effort. Such leaders are needed in every domain of life. They don't hold the resolution; they hold the capacity to draw others into seeking and working toward one. They may have a title and job description, or they may simply be influencers. LOCATION: 886

Leaders with vision are more than people with hope. Many have hope, but few have vision. Vision is hope with commitment and energy. The church in exile needs those who have vision grounded in the hope of the grace and love of Jesus Christ, who are gripped by a clear engagement with the world around us, who are drawn together with other followers and who are ready to exercise transformational leadership. LOCATION: 892

In sum, our vocation involves becoming wise leaders. Biblical wisdom is the truth and character of God lived in context. When all three of those elements converge, we have the makings of wisdom. LOCATION: 935

Our first vocation is to be the beloved. The primacy of God's unearned love alone makes this possible. We live as the beloved, the treasured. This vocation is pure gift. Whatever the human context or circumstances surrounding our birth, our life is a cherished gift to be signed with God's love. This is the vocation of living as a beloved one. To live into this and to allow this to frame and to hold us in all our days is to live into our first thing. LOCATION: 979

My vocation can be discovered only in the context of our vocation. It only makes sense that it would be so, since belovedness is never isolated or singular. We discover and live our belovedness in Christ with and for one another. This is what church means. LOCATION: 1010

Life in the beloved community is often more broken than healed, more confusing than clear, more divided than one—but it is of the very essence of our identity and vocation. We live as the beloved, and we rehearse what that means in the communion of others who share it. LOCATION: 1029

Authentic discipleship delivers us from a compartmentalized life. Rather than having a life with segments and partitions—divisions between sacred and secular, personal and public, image and reality—we're called to one whole and integrated life. LOCATION: 1069

The one thing every Jesus follower needs every day is always the same: wisdom. In other words, we need an understanding of God's vision in action that will make a kingdom difference in people's lives. LOCATION: 1132

Here are some guiding assumptions: Wisdom is God's truth and character lived in context. Jesus is God's wisdom. That's who and what wisdom looks like. Our world needs wise disciples who form wise communities, who live wisely in the world. That is, in all the local and global dimensions of life and society, our world needs disciples who show up in every aspect and place of life and ministry—not with a fix-it mentality but with the humble and courageous vocation to listen, to see, to engage, to act and to love. LOCATION: 1143

Wisdom means living the counterintuitive, countercultural life of Jesus in the midst of all the lives, relationships and places God loves. Naming wisdom this way places it in real time and does so with life-altering implications. It means the church doesn't celebrate just the good news of eternal salvation but also the good news that the same God who died for the world's redemption also offers life-giving love on ordinary days in places of comfort and of desperation. LOCATION: 1147

Seeking a call that evades suffering is a decision neither to follow Jesus nor to live in the real world. How can we read the Gospels and hear Jesus say, "Take up [your] cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24), and believe that isn't for us? Suffering is not the goal of following Jesus. It will, however, be a consequence, because it's a call to love the real and suffering world. The "cross" we take up isn't an accident of circumstances but a willful choice to imitate the love of Jesus, who took up his cross out of love and calls us to do likewise. LOCATION: 1222

The vast percentage of people who suffer in the world today do so because of circumstances they didn't choose and can't control. LOCATION: 1243

Call is primarily about who we are and what we do all the time. Call isn't measured by outcomes—how much we achieve or accomplish—but through the process of following Jesus in and through it all. In the end, call is about continuous formation into the likeness of Jesus Christ far more than it is about finding direction or getting a job. "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33). LOCATION: 1325

The primary call on our lives is to follow Jesus in all we do—this isn't a secret God hides and has to be coaxed into divulging. LOCATION: 1354

We live our narrative from the biblical narrative. Our story of call is of a piece with the long, varied stories of God's call to people throughout the Bible, and it is amid the communion of saints past and present who have been caught up in the great drama of God's faithfulness and love. Our call is both the same—common because God is the shared source—and unique—distinct because we're different. LOCATION: 1400

The sacred/secular divide has continued despite a theology to the contrary. As a consequence, "call" is still the domain of the "sacred" role of the public Christian leader and not the language used for those whose energies are spent in "secular" forms of work. This is a travesty, since it suggests that 98 percent of the Christian world is "just working" rather than seeing what they are doing as an enactment of God's call. LOCATION: 1486

At the very least, our job is a setting for our call to live and work as a disciple. We go to work called to speak and act as someone who follows Jesus. The integrity of our work, the honesty and diligence of our labor, the commitment to fairness and justice, the intention to serve with humility and competence—these are all outgrowths of embracing the responsibility of our workplace as a Christian. LOCATION: 1503

Everyone's work is a setting for their call as a disciple, but not everyone's work may be their calling. Lots of people work simply to do what they can to make money to sustain themselves and others. This is a good thing. Doing work is a healthy part of our human experience. It's a good use of our time and of our physical and emotional health. It's part of our stewardship of the earth, of our mind, of our bodies. LOCATION: 1511

The very process of spiritual formation is itself God's call on us. Seeking God's transformation in our lives is both the process and the end. Following Jesus is not a destination; we do not arrive. We wake and live and sleep and wake again to follow another day. This is the extraordinary spiritual road trip that disciples have always known and that all disciples must discover anew. LOCATION: 1554

Each and all of God's people are called to live as followers of Jesus and to let it show in who we are and in what we do. The "called" are not a special subset who have certain tasks and functions in certain settings. The called are all of God's people living and serving throughout the world, in every country and town, in every neighborhood and home, wherever we can be found. It is our voice and touch, in mutuality and in individuality, lived and offered, that can make God's presence tangible to others. We are God's plan. As the body of Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are to be the primary display of God's character and of God's purposes in the world. God uses all the means God chooses, but God's people are those upon whom God vests the most. LOCATION: 1579

Stepping into our calling means living in a fresh daily encounter of God's love in Jesus Christ. Following requires staying in close touch. It means keeping our sights clear when so much can distract us. But it also means living into the adventure of abundant life that Jesus longs for all of us to have. C. S. Lewis captured this well in his sermon "The Weight of Glory" when he said, *Our Lord finds our desires not too strong but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he can't imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased*. The crisis of following Jesus is that God's people fool about with far lesser ambition and settle in the slum when we are offered a holiday at the sea. That holiday is God's flourishing life—for us and for the world. LOCATION: 1589

Bob was a finish carpenter who lived to make things. It was his craft, his art, his joy. What it didn't have was any particular connection to the God he worshiped, or so he thought. He made his money to do carpentry by working at a bank as a midlevel executive. He did his job at the office to pay for what he did later in his

workshop. Carpentry was, as Bob said, “his” time. No family responsibilities, no work, no pressure, just artistry. I remember the day he told me he had just begun to ask God what his artistry had to do with being a disciple. That was the start of a new day. It eventually led him to taking on two teenage boys as assistants in order to pass on to them what he knew and loved. He taught them everything he could about wood, design, technique—but even more about beauty and the God who made it. The art, he later said, was even more beautiful now because it had moved from being a privilege he hoarded to a gift he shared. LOCATION: 1604

Whatever specialized and distinctly suited job or task or role God may give us, following Jesus is the first call and what should matter most. The church in Western culture is submerged in a context with endless choices that drive us to maximize self-interest at every turn. For the sincere Christian, this can easily move to an assumption that we’re stymied in following God until we find that one special job or partner or activity that we think most satisfies God and us. God gives generously and wants to use us in the wide array of settings. Sometimes, maybe often, this can include guidance in where and how we might use God’s gifts to better serve the body of Christ and to live as witnesses in the world. But whether that does or doesn’t happen, we already have the call that matters most: “Follow me.” If we don’t do that, a secondary call will not be what it was intended to be anyway. We need to get first things first. LOCATION: 1631

As disciples, we can seek our particular call to serve in a specialized context, but it will really matter only if we do so in light of God’s greater call to live as disciples in every context. This reveals that call is a matter of character more than of circumstances, of substance more than of form. Be a musician. Be in business. Be a manager. Be an architect. Be a parent. Be a politician. Be a friend. Be a pastor. But, above all and in all, be a disciple of Jesus. LOCATION: 1642