

Recognizing God's Fingerprints in Your Story

Harvesting Wisdom from the Experiences That Have Shaped You

Introduction

Some experiences carry lessons we desperately need to learn. But the lesson does not come to us simply because the experience occurred. We have to slow down, look back honestly, and consider what God may have been teaching us through it.

One of those lessons began taking shape early in my years at Los Alamos National Laboratory.

I had the privilege of leading a department that, when I arrived, was struggling. Over the next several years, we turned it into one of the most effective organizations at the laboratory. At one point, it was called the “shining star” of Los Alamos National Laboratory.

Because of that success, I was promoted to lead a completely different organization made up of highly educated technical professionals. I assumed that the approach that had worked so well with my first team would work just as well with this one.

It did not.

People became frustrated. Complaints were filed, and formal investigations were conducted into my leadership. For a time, I was not sure I would keep my job.

Thankfully, I had a supervisor who believed in me and helped me through that difficult season. As I began to reflect on what had happened, I realized where I had gone wrong. I had mistaken an

approach that worked well in one setting for the right way to lead in every setting.

What I had learned in my earlier assignment was not wrong. It simply was not right for these people and the challenges they were facing. I had entered the organization with too many assumptions and had not taken enough time to understand the people I was now responsible to lead.

Not long afterward, I was promoted again—this time to lead the Utilities organization of about two hundred people. I was determined not to repeat the same mistake.

Instead of arriving with answers, I spent my first two weeks meeting individually with each of the thirty-five leaders in the organization. I asked them:

“If you were in my position, what would you change?”

“What are our greatest strengths?”

“What are our biggest challenges?”

“What opportunities do you see that I may be missing?”

I filled pages with notes and looked for the concerns that surfaced repeatedly. Then I met with each leader again to make sure I had heard them correctly before making significant changes.

That organization went on to flourish. I had not suddenly mastered leadership. I had learned to enter a new responsibility differently. The earlier failure had unsettled an assumption I might otherwise have carried for years. Rather than walking in with answers, I had learned to begin by listening.

That season taught me something I have never forgotten:

Experience is not our greatest teacher. Evaluated experience is.
—Paul Stanley

This paper summarizes material developed more fully in the Crafted by Experience session of Discovering Your Life Purpose. For a deeper exploration of your experiences and the ways they may point toward purpose, please see the book or participate in the course.

Joseph Was Shaped by His Story

Joseph's life gives us a remarkable picture of someone shaped through experience.

He was still a young man when his dreams suggested that God had something significant ahead of him. He could not have known that the road there would include betrayal by his brothers, slavery, false accusation, prison, and years of waiting.

Yet Joseph continued to be faithful. In Potiphar's household and later in prison, he learned to carry responsibility. His integrity was tested, and his ability to manage people and resources grew. By the time he stood before Pharaoh, he had more than a dream. He had been prepared to help lead Egypt through seven years of famine.

Jeremiah once watched a potter reshape a vessel on his wheel. God used what Jeremiah saw to remind His people that they were still in His hands. Joseph's life reflects that same patient work. Even during the years when little seemed to be moving forward, God was forming something within him.

Near the end of his life, Joseph said to his brothers:

"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good."
—Genesis 50:20 NIV

Joseph did not pretend that what his brothers had done was good. He recognized the harm they intended and God's ability to redeem it.

Recognizing God's fingerprints in our story does not mean calling every painful event good or claiming to understand why everything

happened. Some things done to us are simply wrong. Other difficulties may result from our own choices. There may also be experiences we never fully understand.

Still, no part of our story is beyond God's ability to redeem.

Experience Needs Reflection

People can go through the same kind of conflict repeatedly without recognizing the pattern. We can move from one responsibility to another while carrying assumptions that have never been examined. Time may pass, but time alone does not necessarily make us wiser.

Growth requires reflection.

We need to consider what happened, how we responded, and what the experience revealed. We also need to decide what we will do with what we have learned.

I first learned a simple process for doing this from my mentor Paul Stanley, who adapted it from the Kolb Learning Cycle. Paul helped me see that evaluating an experience works best as a partnership with the Holy Spirit and, when appropriate, with people we trust.

The process has four movements:

Experience Reflect and Evaluate Conclude Implement

1. Experience—What Happened?

Begin by describing the experience as honestly as you can.

What actually happened? Who was involved? What decisions were made? What was the outcome?

Try to separate what happened from the meaning you immediately gave it. Our feelings and interpretations matter, but they may not tell the whole story.

The experience may be a success, a disappointment, a conflict, a season of waiting, or an unexpected opportunity. It does not need to be dramatic. Some of our most useful lessons are hidden in ordinary moments.

2. Reflect and Evaluate—What Was Happening in Me?

Consider how you responded. What went well? What would you do differently? What assumptions were you making? What reactions did the situation bring out in you?

When I looked back on my difficult assignment at Los Alamos, it would have been easy to concentrate on the complaints or on the ways I felt misunderstood. I needed to ask a harder question:

What was mine to learn?

That question helped me recognize that I had brought an old approach into a new setting without first listening to the people involved.

Reflection also helps us recognize what an experience has left behind. We may still be carrying gratitude, grief, resentment, or fear. Unless we notice what remains within us, it may continue influencing the way we respond long after the original event has passed.

This is where we invite God to search our hearts and show us what we cannot see on our own.

3. Conclude—What Can I Learn?

After reflecting on the experience, begin identifying what it may have taught you.

What did you discover about yourself? What did you learn about the people involved? What did the experience show you about God?

Our conclusions need to be considered in light of Scripture and wise counsel. A painful experience can lead us to conclusions that feel reasonable but keep us from moving forward.

Someone who has been betrayed may conclude, "No one can be trusted." A healthier conclusion might be, "Trust should be given carefully, and I need people in my life who have shown themselves to be faithful."

The first conclusion allows the wound to shape the future. The second carries forward the wisdom without giving the wound that much authority.

4. Implement—What Will I Do?

A lesson begins to shape us when it changes the way we live.

We may have something to celebrate or someone to thank. We may need to forgive, acknowledge a failure, repair a relationship, or change the way we approach a responsibility.

After my difficult assignment at Los Alamos, I did not merely decide that listening was important. When I entered the next organization, I met with its leaders, took careful notes, and checked my understanding before making major decisions.

The lesson became part of my life because I acted upon it.

This process can also help us prepare for what lies ahead. When our children were young, Denise and I sometimes talked with them in advance about how they might respond in compromising situations. We wanted them to think before the pressure arrived.

We cannot anticipate everything, but we can enter important moments better prepared.

What Your Story May Be Showing You

A single experience may teach us one lesson. When we look across many years, larger patterns often begin to appear.

We may recognize abilities that developed through repeated responsibilities. A difficult season may have given us compassion for people facing something similar. Certain kinds of work may consistently bring us satisfaction, while particular needs continue to stir something within us.

These are some of the nuggets we are looking for.

They do not provide a complete map of the future, but they may help us understand how God has wired us and what our experiences have prepared us to do. Purpose often becomes clearer as we notice these threads running through our story.

We can learn a great deal from other people, but we cannot simply adopt their path as our own. God is shaping each of us differently. Part of discovering our purpose is learning to pay attention to the particular ways He has been at work in our lives.

We Do Not Always See Clearly on Our Own

Some experiences can be evaluated through prayer, Scripture, and journaling. Others are best processed with someone we trust.

When emotions are strong, our view can become narrow. We may minimize our responsibility, take responsibility for something that was not ours, or see the experience only through our disappointment.

A trusted person can help us notice what we are missing. They may ask a question we have not considered, challenge a conclusion that is keeping us stuck, or help us recognize growth we cannot yet see.

When helping someone evaluate an experience, we should resist the temptation to tell them too quickly what their story means. Thoughtful questions usually serve them better. The companion paper *Coaching with the Questions of Jesus* offers a fuller framework for conversations like these.

Some experiences involving trauma, abuse, or deep loss require time and appropriate care. We should never pressure someone to find a

lesson in pain they are still trying to survive. God is patient with us, and we should offer that same patience to one another.

Putting It into Practice

Choose one experience you are currently living through or one from your past that continues to influence you.

Set aside time to work through the four movements of the Learning Cycle. You may want to write as you reflect, pray through what surfaces, or invite someone you trust into the conversation.

Do not feel pressured to find a dramatic meaning. The nugget may be a person you need to thank, a familiar pattern you need to recognize, a conversation you have avoided, or a change you know it is time to make.

What matters is that the wisdom does not remain buried.

Closing Reflection

When I look back on my difficult season at Los Alamos, I can now recognize things I could not see at the time. I remember the supervisor who believed in me when my confidence had been shaken. I can also see how the experience exposed an assumption about leadership that needed to change.

What felt for a time like the possible end of my work at Los Alamos became part of my preparation for what came next. That is one of the ways I have learned to recognize God's fingerprints—not because He spared me from a painful experience, but because He met me within it and helped me learn.

You may still be living in a part of your story that does not make sense. Do not force an explanation before its time. Remain faithful where you are, and keep your heart open to what God may be forming.

In His hands, even what was painful need not be wasted.

Companion Papers

This paper is part of a companion set addressing different ways people grow.

Investing Your Life in Others: The Quiet Work of Walking with People as They Grow explores the relationships through which we help others develop.

Coaching with the Questions of Jesus: An Invitation into Clarity, Discernment, and Wholehearted Response considers how thoughtful questions help people see clearly and decide what to do next.

Helping People Grow: Learning to Give and Receive Truth with Grace addresses encouragement, correction, feedback, and difficult conversations.

For a deeper exploration of experience and purpose, see *Discovering Your Life Purpose*.

Appendix: A Short Guide to Evaluating an Experience

These questions are starting places, not a checklist. Choose the few that seem most helpful for the experience you are examining.

Experience—What Happened?

- What experience do I want to examine?
- What actually happened?
- Who was involved, and what part did I play?
- What was the outcome?

Reflect and Evaluate—What Was Happening in Me?

- What went well, and what would I do differently?
- What assumptions or reactions influenced me?

- What am I still carrying from the experience?
- What might God be helping me notice?

Conclude—What Can I Learn?

- What did I discover about myself and the people involved?
- What did I learn about God?
- What truth from Scripture helps me understand the experience?
- Is there a lesson or pattern that may matter for my future?

Implement—What Will I Do?

- What is there to celebrate or be thankful for?
- Is there anything I need to acknowledge, forgive, or repair?
- What needs to change?
- What specific action will I take?

A Final Question

What wisdom is hidden in this experience that God does not want me to lose?

Source Note

The four-part process presented here was taught to Jerry by his mentor, Paul Stanley, who adapted it from David A. Kolb's work on experiential learning. See David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*.

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