

A Theology of Work

Someone once did a calculation of the amount of hours we on average spend on various activities and then worked it out in terms of a 75 year life. It looks like this in the average life. Of your 75 years – you will spend 6 years travelling, 6 years eating, 7.5 years dressing, and personal grooming, 9 years watching TV, .5 years worshipping and praying – 23 years sleeping – 19 years working. That's over a quarter of your life.

And yet in spite of the prominence of work in our lives, Christian preaching often gives very little attention to it. I spent all of my youth hearing weekly preaching, and I do not recall a single sermon series on the topic of work.

It's as if many Christians believe that work is simply a means to an end: a means to get money, so as to pay our bills and give to the Lord. Or perhaps work is another mission field to evangelise our neighbours. But beyond that, many Christians have thought very little, or heard very little on the biblical view of work.

But your work is not merely a means to an end; it has many ends. Work is where you will fulfill some of your dreams, and it is also where you will endure deep sorrows. Work is where you will serve people, society, the nation, and the world. Your work can also damage the common good and harm society. People will also serve you in work, and people will harm you in your work. Probably most of the people you will meet will come through work, and there you will often meet mentors, and become mentors.

Work is where you will find, hone, and develop skills, gifts and talents. Some work is dehumanising and soul-destroying and will not do that for you. Some work will provide you and others with food and shelter. But there is also unpaid work: preparing food, tending to the children, mowing the grass, volunteering in your blockwatch.

Our work is a massive part of our lives, and our work shapes us. In many ways, it becomes a major part of our identity, so that, even though I think we tend to overdo it in South Africa, there is some warrant for meeting people and asking them, "What do you do?"

But for the Christian, there are all sorts of questions that we should be asking about our work. Is work part of the curse? Will Heaven free us from work? What does our salvation change about our work? Is my job my calling? Are all jobs honourable? What should be my motive for working as a Christian? Is ambition for promotion wrong? Is it wrong to want to earn more? How should a Christian relate to a harsh and unkind boss? How should Christian employers treat their employees? Should we use the Basic Conditions of Employment Act or Scripture, or both? What about ethical dilemmas? Should you lie if your boss tells you to? Should you do jobs for casinos, for abortion clinics, for gay weddings? And then there is the difficult issue of gender. Should Christian women be career women? Is it right or wrong to work outside the home?

These are the sort of questions that we need to tackle as we study the topic of work in this series. To begin with, we need to lay a good foundation. We need to understand the Bible's theology of work. In the four phases of biblical theology – creation, fall, redemption, restoration – we will see four truths about work. To do that, we will need to begin at the beginning, in Genesis.

I. God the Worker Created Work

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. 3

Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. 4 And God saw the light, that *it was* good; and God divided the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first day. (Gen. 1:1-5)

Now we could go through all of the six days, but for the sake of time, let's jump ahead to the end of the sixth day.

Genesis 2:1 Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. 2 And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. 3 Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made. (Gen. 2:1-3)

Here Creation is three times called, "God's work". God Himself is a worker. This stands in stark contrast to the false gods of the nations, who never work. In fact, in Greek philosophy, work was servile, and the enlightened life was one of complete freedom from labour and pure contemplation. Consequently their gods were complete sluggards, layabouts and idlers with nothing better to do than toy with man and make his life miserable.

But the living God is a worker. That does not mean He works as we do, gets tired as we do, and rests as we do. God's work and God's rest are unique to God. But what we can see is that work is not a punishment, nor a curse, because it is true of God Himself.

In fact, on the sixth day, we read that God gave man the task of work.

27 So God created man in His *own* image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. 28 Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Gen. 1:27-28)

15 Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. (Gen. 2:15)

Of all creatures, only man was made in God's image. God then gives man some tasks, but notice the first words, "And God blessed them". These tasks are, in fact, gifts. Work is not a punishment, but a gift. The first thing God tells man is to be fruitful and multiply and fill the Earth. Up to that point, this is the same command given to the birds and the fish and the animals. We're meant to reproduce.

But then God says something which is unique to man. We're to "subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth ."

Man is given work, and it is a work like God's. It is a work of creation. We do not create *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, as God did. But we are sub-creators. We are to take God's existing creation, and reshape it and tame it and develop it and use it.

But what was there to tame and subdue in an already perfect world? Well, remember that even though the world was not cursed, that doesn't mean the whole world was a garden. Only the garden was a perfect place for human flourishing and human life. The world was uncursed but still untamed. The work given to Adam and Eve was, extend the garden across the globe. Tame the whole world. Bring my beauty, my order, my design to the whole world. You will need a lot of people to do that, so have many children, and make sure they have many children. Progressively, cultivate the world to be a home for you all.

The original purpose of human work was the advancement of human flourishing to the glory of

God. And we will come back to this next week, but one of the way to evaluate the work you do is to ask, does this enable humans to flourish as God purposed for them to do? Does this bring good into the world, and restrain evil?

But unfortunately, as we know, we did not remain in an obedient relationship with God. Believing the lies of Satan, Adam and Eve broke the only rule that then existed, failed the only test that was given: do not eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That then leads us to the second biblical truth about work.

II. Man's Fall Brought a Curse Upon Work

17 Then to Adam He said, "Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat of it': "Cursed *is* the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat *of* it All the days of your life. 18 Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, And you shall eat the herb of the field. 19 In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread Till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; For dust you *are*, And to dust you shall return."
(Gen. 3:17-19)

Work was never a punishment. In fact, work was one of the gifts of God to man. But now with the fall, the nature of work changes. We can notice three changes in work.

First, work now becomes toilsome. "In toil you shall eat of it" "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread." Work is now going to be hard. It is no longer a paradise with trees abundantly yielding their fruit, and easy to prune and pick. Now it will be hard ground, and a scorching sun, and thirst and physical pain. Some jobs are more enjoyable than others. Some jobs are more demanding than others. But what you can not escape in this world is that work is now hard, tiring, and difficult.

And when it isn't too difficult, it can be too boring.

Second, work now becomes frustrating. Verse 18 informs Adam that his work will not always bring the results he planned: 18 Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, In a cursed world, your work does not always succeed. Things go wrong. Crops fail. Markets collapse. Companies retrench. Robots replace humans. Human error messes things up. Disease, natural disaster, calamities, accidents, famines, droughts, pestilences can destroy what you attempt to build.

And not only so, but mankind's sin is part of the frustration. We now work with and work for and work among people full of sin. It's bad enough to deal with co-workers given to gossip, moodiness, claiming credit for success, shifting blame for failure. And as we'll see in a later message, people either tend to make an idol of work, or they tend to be idle at work. Then there is greed, deceit, fraud, pride, laziness, criminals, evil governments, dishonest customers and clients and suppliers.

The third change in work is that it becomes compulsory. 19 In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread Till you return to the ground. Never again until the eschaton will man eat without working. Now work becomes compulsory to survive. 10 For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. (2 Thess. 3:10)

26 The person who labors, labors for himself, For his *hungry* mouth drives him *on*. (Prov. 16:26)

People dream of escaping this compulsory nature of work, they scheme as to how to emancipate themselves from the unrelenting, daily demand of work. But the Bible frowns on those who wish to get rich quick, and promotes ongoing, steady work.

Becoming more Christlike in our work means absorbing these realities. Our work is given by God, so long as it promotes the glory of God in human flourishing. We should expect that work will be

toilsome, and frustrating and compulsory. Nothing has gone wrong with your life when you experience these three. You're not doing something wrong, and you shouldn't immediately assume that there is another job out there which won't be toilsome, frustrating and unrelenting.

But there is good news.

III. Christ's Work Redeems Workers

When Jesus came, one thing was certain: He was a worker. Of course, He first worked with His adopted father as a carpenter, likely making ploughs and yokes for farming. But as He entered His full-time ministry, He keeps referring to His work:

Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work. (Jn. 4:34)

"I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; *the* night is coming when no one can work. (Jn. 9:4)

In His Priestly prayer, Jesus prayed 4 "I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. (Jn. 17:4)

And on the Cross, He shouts the victory words: "It Is Finished!"

Now what did Christ's work on the Cross mean for our work? Did He remove the curse? Is work no longer going to be frustrating, toilsome and compulsory? Are we free to not work, or does work again become as it was in the Garden?

No, because the beginning of redemption is not God redeeming work, and redeeming the Earth. God first redeems people. He saves us as individuals, and in saving us gives us new hearts, and new enablements. What does that look like?

First, when you are saved, Christ gives you a new motive for your work,

17 And whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. (Col. 3:17)

23 And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, 24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. (Col. 3:23-24)

Whatever it is you do, so long as it is honourable work that benefits man and is in line with God's purpose in Genesis 1, you can do it for God and to God. Work becomes part of worship. You can consecrate the small and big tasks to God, doing them with Him in mind. You write the sales pitch for Him. You design software ultimately to please God with your effort. You land the plane, draw the design, write the copy, calculate the numbers, school the child, make the meal, administer the human resources, fix the device, to the glory of God. Our salvation means we have a higher motive than just pleasing a boss, or keeping a job, or making money, or getting a promotion. Love now lies at the root of what we do, and love is by far the greatest motivator of all.

Second, when you are saved, Christ gives you a new method for your work.

22 Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. 23 And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, (Col. 3:22-23)

With Christ as our motive, we can now do what we do with sincerity. We can do it heartily, meaning "from our souls". We want to do our best work; we want to produce excellence, we want

God to be pleased with the result. Slothfulness, apathy, shortcuts, bare minimum work are not how we should work. Like a Joseph, our work should commend us for promotion and advancement. Like a Daniel, we should find favour because of our faithfulness and excellent spirit.

Now while the book of Proverbs tells us that diligence brings advancement and reward, those are general principles, not meant to explain every circumstance. While diligence will generally and normally bring reward, Ecclesiastes and Job also show that you will suffer, you will face unfairness, you will be forgotten, others unfairly promoted over you. People will steal your work and steal your recognition. Sometimes you will suffer under an unjust and harsh manager who will simply be cruel.

So even though you have a new motive and a new method, that does not mean work will stop being toilsome and frustrating, and compulsory. What that awaits is the fourth and final thing the Bible reveals about work:

IV. In Heaven, Work Will Be Restored to Its Glory

19 For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected *it* in hope; 21 because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. (Rom. 8:19-21)

Paul tells us that the whole world waits for its deliverance from the Curse. Death, pain, sorrow, entropy will one day be removed. According to verse 20, this futility in our work was put upon the Earth as part of the final plan to drive men to the hope of the Gospel, and to final resurrection. The Earth itself will experience resurrection, and as it rises, it will discard thorns and thistles, work that makes no return, the demands we work or we will not eat.

Instead, first in the Millennial kingdom, and then finally in the Eternal State, we return to working because it is part of being in God's image, part of being image-bearers. We work not to stay alive, but because it is fulfilling and enjoyable.

Look at the future description of work:

17 "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; And the former shall not be remembered or come to mind. 18 But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; For behold, I create Jerusalem as a rejoicing, And her people a joy. 19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem, And joy in My people; The voice of weeping shall no longer be heard in her, Nor the voice of crying. 20 "No more shall an infant from there *live but a few days*, Nor an old man who has not fulfilled his days; For the child shall die one hundred years old, But the sinner *being* one hundred years old shall be accursed. 21 **They shall build houses and inhabit them; They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. 22 They shall not build and another inhabit; They shall not plant and another eat;** For as the days of a tree, *so shall be* the days of My people, **And My elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands. 23 They shall not labor in vain, Nor bring forth children for trouble; For they shall be the descendants of the blessed of the LORD**, And their offspring with them. 24 "It shall come to pass That before they call, I will answer; And while they are still speaking, I will hear. 25 The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, The lion shall eat straw like the ox, And dust *shall be* the serpent's food. **They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain,**" Says the LORD. (Isa. 65:17-25)

Look at what is absent: weeping and crying, labouring in vain, labouring and another stealing that labour, any form of hurt or destroying.

Look at what is present: joy, long age without the body declining, enjoying the work of their hands.

Work is fulfilling, joyful, invigorating, successful, and voluntary.

And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. (Rev 22:3)

What will we do in Heaven?

There will be thousands of different ways to serve God on the new earth. Certainly the new earth will not be burdened down with evil systems that exploit and destroy men, and all that will be gone. But does that mean we will not pursue arts, and technologies, and discovery, and innovation, and exploration? There is no reason to think that a resurrected people on a resurrected earth will not exercise their faculties, talents, reason, curiosity, imagination, affections, artistic ability to spread the glory of the Lord across the globe as the waters cover the sea.

24 And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it. 25 Its gates shall not be shut at all by day (there shall be no night there). 26 And they shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it. (Rev. 21:24-26)

We will subdue a perfect Earth for the glory of God, beautifying what is already beautiful, making it more and more beautiful, from one degree of glory to the next, advancing further and further in our expressions of how beautiful and glorious our God is. Did you ever consider the meaning of that prophecy in Isaiah 9:7: “Of the increase of His government there shall be no end”. His rule will extend and extend as His under-rulers shape and beautify and order things to be more and more reflective of Him.

Creation, fall, redemption, restoration is the story of the Bible and so it is the story of work. God the worker gave us the work of sub-creation. But in our rebellion, we now have added toil, frustration, obligation, and our own sin. Christ redeems us and gives us new motives and methods for work. But we will wait for the kingdom and for the eternal state for work to again be perfectly enjoyable, fulfilling, invigorating and joyful.

Perhaps you need to re-shape your view of work. Perhaps you need to embrace the realities of work in a fallen world. Maybe you need a reminder that Christians work for a different purpose and in a different way. And we all need the encouragement that a day is coming when our talents and gifts will be put to perfect and fulfilling use.