

Work: Toil and Trouble?

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Date: 01 November 2020

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[0 : 00] Okay, I'd like to go back to... Well, we'll be dipping into the passage we read together, but we'll also be just picking out some other verses from this book.

I love Ecclesiastes. It's a really great book. It's very realistic. It's quite often confusing.

It's quirky. It's provocative. It's insightful. It's mysterious. It's frustrating. And I believe it's all... It's meant to be all these things as part of God's Word.

And why do I say that? Well, because for one thing, God is complex, okay? God is really complex. I think very often we confuse the simplicity of trusting in God, putting our faith in God, which is a simple thing in many ways, with God Himself and making God simple and easy to understand.

We systematize Him. We want to control Him so that we know everything about Him. We want to know everything black and white with God. And I think sometimes that troubles us when we think about life and when we think about the complexity of life.

[1 : 27] And we need to remember that God is infinite. God is all-seeing. He's all-knowing. Every thought that every person has ever thought in their minds is known to God.

He's sovereign over this world. He is a God who is, by definition, love, who is just, who is sinless.

He's a God who's made up of three persons. You know, the complexity of that is so great that, you know, theologians have made up a word about it that's not even in the Bible to try and explain it, the Trinity.

He's one God, but three persons equal in power and glory. And this God, the Son, becomes man to make Him even more complex with a divine and a human nature.

Sinless man who then went to die in a cross. He is complex. Our God is a complex God. And we are made in His image.

[2 : 32] Man and woman in the image of God. And that makes us complex. And then we rebelled against God. So that image, with all its complexity, becomes even more confused.

So that sin and a broken relationship with God, which Thomas was speaking about this morning, makes for a messy, ugly and complex world.

And Ecclesiastes picks up on all of that when we read through it. And you know that the recurring theme throughout Ecclesiastes is life under the sun, you know, the meaninglessness of life under the sun.

Now a lot of commentators take the sections that deal with life under the sun as dealing exclusively with an attitude where God is taken out of the picture and it explains what life is, the meaninglessness of life without God in the picture.

And it does do that, but it's not exclusively that, because throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, life under the sun explains or speaks about life without God, but it also speaks about life with God having that same, or at least a degree of complexity and seemingly meaningless.

[3 : 59] See, he speaks about life without God under the sun, and you know that teacher takes the place of the person trying to find meaning without God. And we've seen some of the themes of that already, trying to master and control and find purpose in life.

They try it through the gaining of knowledge and wisdom, through the pursuit of pleasure, and John looked at that last week. And he also speaks a great deal about work, and about trying to find the meaning in life if you take God out of the picture in work, in a career.

And the conclusion he always comes to is, it's meaningless, it's pointless, there's no point in this. It doesn't seem to have any purpose. I'll come back to that. But even with God in the picture, life under the sun, because God is still in the picture as we live this world, not in heaven as it were, but under the sun, still remains complex.

Even as believers, we see injustice and frustration and mysteries, and there's so much we can't grasp, so much we can't control, like grasping the wind.

We can't do it, so much we battle with. And so we see that tension in the book of Ecclesiastes, but we know that it's always pointing us towards trust.

[5 : 25] We looked at that the second week. The conclusion of the book is, fear God and keep His commandments. And so we find that the writer is always dealing with life and finding and looking for God's redemptive wisdom in all the battles.

It always points towards that one great shepherd mentioned in the last paragraph of the book that we looked at. And as we trust in Him, as we trust in the great shepherd, He breeds life and perspective into our pursuit of knowledge, into our understanding of pleasure, and into how we make sense of work.

And we recognize, and the writer of Ecclesiastes recognizes the teacher that God is sovereign, He's in control, and gives purpose and meaning to all our pursuits, to all our pleasures, to all our seeking afterwards wisdom, and also to our work, and that there's going to be better to come.

So work is a great theme of Ecclesiastes, and nearly always it's called toil in the book. It's a huge theme. It's repeated.

There's multiple references to work and to toil, both in the context of God working, in the context of the frustration of work, and also in the context of the significance and the blessing of work.

[6 : 57] But it's nearly always spoken of as toil, as something that's frustrating and difficult. Now I think Ecclesiastes, therefore, and I will come to more direct references in a minute.

The book speaks into two, I think, two extremes that are prevalent in society and that can easily be embraced into our thinking as Christians, and we need to be aware of them and be aware of them in our lives.

So there's two extremes, really, sometimes when people think about work. One is that we live to work. That's the whole point of life, is to work and be employed.

Everything revolves around that in our life. Everything else is secondary to work and to our career, our identity, our worth, our purpose, our passion, our relationships, our rest, our pleasure, all serve this driving ambition to work, to work, to work, and we can be addicted to work.

We can be workaholics. So that is one extreme, isn't it, that we find in society that people live to work. They are workaholics. It's the main ambition and the main drive in their lives, and if it was taken from them, they would completely collapse.

[8 : 22] The other extreme is that people work to live. That it's simply a necessary evil, that it's a means to an end, that we just work from week to week to get a wage in order to spend it on our pleasure, because that's our real passion.

So that, you know, we can work, we can live to work, or we can work to live. And if you're working just to enjoy the rest of, so it provides the necessary resources for the rest of your life, then you'll dread Monday mornings and you'll live for Friday, because it's the necessary evil that you need to go through to get to the end of the week.

That's why I think, and many people do have that, even if they don't think it, we'll have that philosophy. That's why so many people do the lottery, so that they will not have to do this necessary evil from week to week, but they will have enough money just to enjoy life and the pleasures of life, which of course Solomon, or the writer, the teacher, speaks into also.

But neither of these extremes are biblical, or what God has for us. Neither of them are fulfilling, neither of them are balanced, because they both leave God out of the picture, either living simply to work, or working just so that you can live.

So how does Ecclesiastes speak into this theme? Well, he speaks into this theme by reminding us, well, should I, actually, I'll just slightly broaden it here at this point, is he does speak about work being good, okay?

[10 : 11] And that comes from his understanding of God and the character of God, and that we see that God, right from the very beginning, in Genesis 2, chapter 2 verse 2, if we have that screen, I think I've got that text on the screen, we find there on the seventh day, God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done.

And we see also that the writer to Ecclesiastes, I've got quite a few verses, it's just because it's working and jumping in this theme through the book, as you do not know the way of the spirit comes into the bones and the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.

So there's that creation link between the God who works, and even the mystery of that as the writer speaks of it here.

And we recognize therefore that work in and of itself is intrinsically good. It's an important thing because God is a worker. God in the beginning was a landscape gardener.

God in the person of his son, Jesus Christ, was a carpenter. They worked. Now isn't it interesting that Jesus worked for 30 years?

[11 : 32] None of his joinery remains. We don't know any of the cabinets that he made, any of the stools, any of the chairs. Nothing remains. You would think the Son of God would have somehow kept these amazing works of God, but no, they've gone.

But yet he ennobled work by being a carpenter. God in the beginning created the glorious work of creation. And of course, in Christ we find that he himself describes his work, Jesus, or his coming and his salvation as work in John 17.

For I finished the work you gave me to do. So there's this sense in which God is a working God, and he's working in a way that's allowed you all to come this evening through providence, through enabling you all to be here, enabling us to be here.

That is God's ongoing work. So work is good because God works. And we are his image bearers, aren't we? And therefore we see and we know from the Bible that work is good because work was part of the perfect world before the fall in Genesis 3.

You know, we're not just made for the weekends. We're not just made for pleasure and for holidays abroad. It's not just a necessary evil. We were created to be workers.

[12 : 57] It's critical to our DNA. You know that when the privilege of work is taken from you.

And all of our work in God's economy is good. All work is good. There's not a gradation of work in God's eyes, whether we're shop assistants, cleaners, homemakers, doctors, teachers in the academy.

No calling is intrinsically higher before God because God has given us all. And God has given that diversity of work. And we need work. Unemployment is not a reasonable and good economic price to pay for a civilized society because we are made to work.

So work is good. Work under God is good. And Ecclesiastes makes that clear at different points, which I'll mention.

But what maybe is folk highlighted well in Ecclesiastes is our work is also cursed. Our work is cursed. Sin introduced toil to our work so that in the passage we read in 2, chapter 2, maybe in verse 20, 2 and 23, what a man, what has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath his sun.

[14 : 23] For all his days are full of sorrow. His work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. And there's that recognition in Ecclesiastes that sin brought thorns and thistles into the concept of work.

We work, God said, under his judgment by the sweat of our brow. It's a battle. It's a struggle. We have competing desires. We're faced with laziness and with pride and with opposition.

Dignity can be removed from work. Slavery is a result of the sin of greed and humanity's desire to oppress others.

And many different sinful tendencies make work toil. The word is just a word that speaks about heaviness and toil and difficulty.

And so Ecclesiastes recognizes that work is toil. And it recognizes beyond that, that it's futility if you take God out of the picture.

[15 : 31] I hated all my toil, verse 18, in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who comes after me. And who knows if he'll be wise or a fool?

So he recognizes that we can be out of control of what happens to the fruit of our labor when we die. And it seems meaningless.

We take nothing with us. Ecclesiastes 5 speaks about that, you know, as he came from his mother's womb, he shall go on again naked as he came and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand.

You know, there's that without God in the picture, you just, you're born. You go to school, you grow up, you work and you die. But you don't take any of it with you. You die as naked as you were born.

There's not anything to take. And there seems to be a deep futility and a deep meaninglessness about that. There's a weariness. The toil of a fool. Ecclesiastes 10 wares him for he does not know his way to the city.

[16 : 36] I love that verse. It's a great verse, isn't it? You know, when God's out of the picture, well, why are people working? Where are they going with it? Do they know what direction they're going in? And he's making clear as he unpacks life without God in the picture that if we base our lives ambition and identity and worth on work and achievement, our existence is anxious and fragile because there's no guarantees apart from anything else.

Why bother other than spend and be spent? Well, we're all going to return to dust. We'll all be forgotten. And it can be a hugely lonely pursuit to think like that.

So again and again, with God out of the picture, he says, Heville, Heville, it's meaningless. We can't understand it. We can't grasp the meaning of it.

We can't control it. And it leaves us frustrated. Working so easily without God become abused, stripped of value, uncoupled from its end product, dehumanized.

But work is good. Work is cursed. But work can also be redeemable. And we know that that is the purpose behind what is being spoken of in Ecclesiastes.

[18 : 05] There's that great sense in which as we see the reality of our own sin and our own brokenness and our need for the one that God sent, then we come to know Christ.

We recognize that the major work of our lives is to believe in the one He sent. To believe in the one shepherd that's spoken of at the end of this book.

To believe so that we can fear the Lord and obey His commandments because Jesus has done it in our place. And wisdom therefore takes us to that point where we can see that work is inherently good and important.

It gives us a new perspective because as he says there in chapter 3 and verse 10, we've got eternity in our hearts.

We still cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end, but we've got eternity in our hearts. And when we focus our attention on God and on who He is and on His purpose as far as we can see, that His grace in our lives changes everything and gives our work, dignity and purpose.

[19 : 22] We can appreciate the sovereignty of God over life and over work. There's many things that we don't understand. That's true.

And he speaks about it in that verse there. He also speaks about it here in verse chapter 8. Then I saw the work of God that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun however much. Man may toil in seeking. He will not find out even though a wise man claims to know he cannot find it out.

And so there's this sense in which even as believers there's much about God's work and there may even be much about our work that we don't fully understand.

But we recognize that he is sovereign and he is controlling all that's happening in this seemingly chaotic world. And you've got that visually in the book, in the passage we read, because the book seems to be quite chaotic.

I've seen some different commentators try to plan it all out and say, this section's about this and then next. It's very difficult to see that in the book. It all seems to be higgled to, piggled to, moving from God and then moving away from God and moving back to God.

[20 : 33] But then chapter 3 verses 1 to 8, you get perfect rhythm. Time for this, time for that, time for this, time for that, time for this, time for that.

And you know that great passage that Pete Seeger made famous many years ago into a song, Turn Turn, time for everything under heaven. And it seems to contrast the chaos of this world without God.

You've got this picture of ordered rhythmic reality where God has made everything beautiful in His time.

It's almost like we get a glimpse into God's purposes. For us, much seems chaotic, but God says, no, I know everything I'm doing.

There's a time for absolutely everything. And that is God's business. And there seems to be there a reminder for us that in the midst of the chaos of our lives, God's sovereign purposes are being outworked.

[21 : 47] To the end, the Bible goes on to explain beautifully in the New Heavens and the New Earth. So our work is redeemable when we come to Christ, when we recognize His sovereignty, and when we recognize the value of what He says about work. But the toil does remain.

There's much in this book and much in our own experience, which I think it's helpful to be reminded of, that when we get up on a Monday morning, it's not all sunshine and smiles as Christians in our lives and our workplaces.

But deep-seated honesty about this book. We remain sometimes with deep questions. There's a lot of injustice in the workplace. There's a lot of frustration, sometimes opposition.

It can be tough. You can have a really boring job. And it's still God glorifying, but it can be utterly dull and boring, unsatisfying, seemingly insignificant by the world's standards, full of thorns and thistles. You might as a Christian be questioning God and say, why am I getting my dream job? Why am I getting everyday supersonic fulfillment from my work?

Because I'm a Christian, I should. Thorns and thistles. They will always be there for us in this life. There will always be battles. We may never get our dream job. We may struggle in a dull and seemingly insignificant job.

[23 : 19] But if we do it to God's glory, and if we thank Him for the privilege of being able to work, then it's as absolutely as significant, you know, as the President of the United States' work, bad example. The toil remains. But we also can know tranquility as Christians.

And that's the difference what we find glimpses of throughout this book. And it says it again and again, actually, look at chapter 2 verse 24. Now this is repeated a lot of the times in the book.

There's nothing better for a person than that you should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. It's still toil, but it's to find enjoyment in it. This, I also saw, was from the hand of God for apart from him, who can eat or who can have enjoyment. And that's repeated again and again throughout the book. That phrase is repeated, eat and drink and enjoy even the toil.

There can be, you know, it speaks about finding rest and quietness, finding purpose and balance. I'm not going to go through all the references. Being thankfulness, having joy, or you can take the New Testament, maybe fulfillment of all these verses, Colossians 3, 23, whatever you do, work heartily as for the Lord and not for men. So there's that recognition that there can be for us tranquility in our work.

And we can understand that because of who God is and what he has done for us in our lives. So whatever you do, whatever you find that is your employment, is your work in life, however far it is from your ideal or from your longing, do it for his glory.

[25 : 26] Do it with the recognition that is his eyes on you. This is an illustration that I can't really remember. It's always bad to start an illustration you can't remember.

But I remember somewhere reading a long time ago about the very fine stonework that is done at the very top of maybe cathedrals, which nobody sees really fine detailed work that stone masons do.

And someone asking one of the stone masons, why do you bother doing it so beautifully when it's hundreds of feet up and no one ever sees it? Because you know, it wouldn't have been seen in many days.

And they said, well, because we're doing it for the glory of God. And that in itself becomes a valuable motivation for whatever we do.

God is our witness. So I say to you, as I have to say to myself, whatever you do and work, do it well. Do it honestly. Do it consistently.

[26 : 35] Help others in the workplace. Be different because you don't grumble and complain and long always for Friday. I know it can be ideal, it can sound idealistic. It can sound impossible.

But it's taking a God perspective into a secular environment that should make a difference. Whatever that work is that we do it for the glory of God as believers, because we have put our trust in Jesus Christ, who has finished the work God gave him to do on our behalf.

So as we conclude, we're reminded of, I think, two things that work will not always make sense. It will not always go the way we want, just as life went either.

Heav'n, meaningless, trying to grasp the wind, trying to understand and control everything that's happening in our lives and in this world in which we live. But we need to believe there's a time for everything because God is sovereign and in control.

We need to fight against the need to always be in control, but to leave God, His rightful place of sovereignty. In all we do, even in our unemployment, recognize that we can still work.

[27 : 56] It might not be employed work, but there's maybe things that we can do and serve. But always recognize that we were made to work. We're not made to be on skiing holidays and always relaxing.

It destroys us. We were made, pleasure was given to us as a balance for the work we do, but it should never be the meaning of our lives, but it will not always make sense.

But also remember that the fear of the Lord changes everything. That is putting our trust in Jesus Christ. He's the great shepherd. Love Him. And love your work. And love your neighbor in the workplace. Love your enemy in the workplace.

Pray about your work. Pray for your bosses. Pray for the people you're really struggling with. Pray in your studies, and I include studies, I see students here tonight, I include your studies as part of your work, calling this point.

Pray about the difficulties that you're going through just now. Pray for your attitude in the workplace. Pray that you don't necessarily just think and act the same way as everyone else, who just longing maybe sometimes for Friday, or who are so obsessed with work that it's their whole life.

[29 : 14] Show them that you have another important perspective in your life. Be prepared for toil, but also expect tranquility when you trust the living God. Bring grace into your workplace.

And remember, your calling is just as important as anyone else's calling by God's grace. Every bit as important as any other job.

Let's pray. Father God, help us to understand your will and your way. Help us to understand your truth. Ecclesiastes is so difficult, Lord, and I confess that this evening. And there's much I don't understand in the way it's written.

But as we take it as a whole, we pray your Holy Spirit will teach us from it, that we would see its central message. We would see sometimes the complexity and the seeming confusion of it all, but it would drive us to trust you more and to look for the great deep gems that are within it that draws towards Jesus.

So may we honor you in our work, may we recognize it's not always going to be plain sailing, but it will be toil, at least until you come again. Then it will be beautiful.

[30 : 35] And remind us that you, every single second of each day is under your sovereign care. And everything is beautiful in its time because nothing is randomly evil or dark.

But all will be, all will stand and everything will stand before you. And we will see more clearly than all the things that confuse us and challenges and bring questions into our hearts.

So help us to see that more clearly. We pray tonight for Jesus' sake. Amen.