

Faith at Work

The English ministry retreat this year pre-launched our five-year focus: using our vocations to advance the gospel. The retreat looked at how to bring God into our workplace, whether in selecting a vocation or job or company, in our work ethic, in our relationships with colleagues, etc. We will be talking much more about this over the next few years. To lay a foundation, this devotional explores several biblical texts related to work.

Day 1: Genesis 2:8-15 Work is intrinsically good

God created Eden good in all respects: the light was good (1:4), the separation of sea from land was good (1:10), the vegetation was good (1:12), the division of night from day was good (1:18), the fish and birds were good (1:21), the animals were good (1:25), it was all very good (1:31). Part of this idyllic arrangement was his assignment of a job to humankind: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (2:15). Within the biblical ethic, then, work is not bad. Nor even a necessary evil. It is a good. Not the highest good, certainly, but an intrinsic good. Mankind is designed for worship, for relationship, and also for work.

So whenever we finish a project at work or at home, and experience a sense of satisfaction in being productive, or in a job well-done, we confirm this truth. Obversely, when we struggle over unemployment, when we grow bored over a long period of inactivity, or get frustrated with obstacles to progress in some project, then, too, we confirm the truth of Scripture. We are made, in part, to work, and rightly find satisfaction in being useful and productive. We celebrate the goodness of God when we have jobs. Even when the particular job provides no special meaning, the opportunity to be productive rightly brings satisfaction.

Day 2: Genesis 3:16-19 Work is overlaid with bad

My first indoor job in high-school involved was in a machine shop, where my responsibility was to put a piece on a peg every five seconds. Once I could manage that successfully, I was promoted to putting a piece on a peg every four seconds. For forty hours a week. For an entire summer. To top it off, one machine was set up awkwardly, and required that I stick my finger into the machine to resituate each piece. The shop manager chose that opportunity to engage me in conversation, and the machine grabbed hold of my finger. A trip to the emergency room and I was almost as good as new!

The creation story of Genesis 1-2 leads directly to the fall narrative in Genesis 3. And this provides the other main component of the biblical perspective on work: it is debilitated by the curse. Work does not become a curse: the fall cannot undo creation. But the fall does disrupt and distort work, so that what was previously an unmitigated good is now frustrating.

The distinctive (not the sole) role of woman was to give birth, and to find joy in this role; now she suffers severe pain in the process (and that is only the beginning of an entire lifetime of parenting joy mixed with sorrow). The woman was also to be a partner to the man; now the two are locked in power-struggle, as she strives to control him and is instead controlled by him. Nor is the man spared: once a farmer in the divine garden, now he battles thorns and thistles to eke out an existence from barren ground, until he finally dies.

“Life sucks, and then you die”: that’s in the Bible. Whatever frustration we face at work – whether it is a pointy-haired boss, a catbert-like director of human resources, an unrealistic project deadline, conflict with colleagues, or a mindless tedium – this all confirms the truth of Scripture. So our experience confirms Scripture when we find enjoyment in our work, and also when we find frustration.

Day 3: Genesis 2:2-3 Limits on work

Despite the goodness of work, and even before the corruption of the fall, Scripture set limits on work. In six days, God created the heavens and the earth, and all that is within them. On the seventh, he rested. And he designated it to be special in perpetuity, holy, that we, too, might rest and rejuvenate.

This is so important, so central to biblical ethic, that God lists it as one of the ten most important guidelines for his people to follow:

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” (Exod 20:8-11; cf. Deut 5:12-15).

This point requires some qualification, however, in the light of the New Testament.

Jesus refused to observe the Sabbath rigidly. Against Jewish tradition (though not against Scripture), he defended his disciples’ (rather trivial)

right to fix themselves a snack (Luke 6:1-5). More significantly, he deliberately healed on the Sabbath (Luke 6:6-11). He insisted that human welfare is more important than strict Sabbath observance, and provocatively claimed authority over Sabbath law. The apostle Paul, too, appears to suggest that Sabbath observance may be a matter of personal conviction, rather than a lasting and binding requirement (Romans 14:5-6). However the details play out (and they are not all certain), one day a week off work – and away from email and cell phone – is not just a helpful pragmatic strategy, but also an important reminder that man does not live by work alone, and also by trust in God and by worship of him.

Day 4: Genesis 39:1-23 Career interruptions and the sovereignty of God

The Joseph story is so sensational that it became the subject of a musical: a youth is sold into slavery by his jealous siblings; despite his circumstances, he succeeds, until he is unjustly imprisoned, only to ascend again, this time as the chief administrative officer over the entire superpower Egypt. The primary point of the narrative, of course, is the sovereignty of God in bringing to fulfillment all his promises, both to the nation and to the individual(s) whom he chooses to lead the nation; a sovereignty which is at work, often behind the scenes, even when apparent circumstances seem the worst (as when Joseph was sold into slavery, or cast into prison). What initially seem to be disasters turn out to be pathways of divine blessing.

We must not apply the example of Joseph willy-nilly to our lives. Sometimes apparent disasters that befall our careers are actually disastrous. The sovereign God may use career misfortune to achieve spectacular outcomes in our careers; other times they are just unmitigated misfortunes, life in a fallen world. We cannot claim that just because Joseph prospered through disaster, so shall we. But we can trust in this, the primary message of the Joseph story: God is entirely sovereign, even in disaster, and works out his plan and achieves his goal for his people in the face of all obstacles, including massive and unjust career setbacks. How might this apply to obstacles or injustice that you face in your career?

Day 5: Nehemiah 1:1-2:10 For such a time as this ...

The new president of Gordon College, Michael Lindsay, wrote *Faith in the Halls of Power*, describing evangelicals who have attained elite positions in various fields, and how they use their positions to advance the gospel. Laura Nash, professor of business ethics at Harvard Business School, also wrote on this theme, *Believers in Business*, but reached the

disturbing conclusion that for many Christian executives, the only impact of their faith on their business practices is the effort to evangelize colleagues.

Nehemiah reached a significant position of influence, especially striking since he was a foreigner, a descendant of exiles conquered in war. While he could have become fully occupied with his heavy political and administrative responsibilities, he instead kept his eye on developments in his homeland of Israel, and risked both his career and his life to advance the gospel, intervening with the emperor on behalf of the exiles who had returned home. In the end, he secured a leave of absence, and the support of the emperor, to return to Israel and oversee the rebuilding effort. He saw his elite position not as something to be coveted for personal gain, but as a divine appointment through which he could advance the work of God. He risked it all to advance the plan of God.

Likely none of us will attain to a status comparable to Nehemiah's. But we can model our careers after his: not allowing success to distract us from the greater plan of God, but using our position to advance his work.

Day 6: 1 Corinthians 7:20-23 Upward mobility

An aspect of the American dream is the notion that any of us can rise above our parents' station in life, to become rich and famous. While this is vastly overstated – entrenched poverty is a more common experience than rags-to-riches – rapid social ascent can occur with a lot of hard work, and a little luck. But how hard should we strive in the pursuit of upward mobility?

Paul addresses this issue, in its most extreme form, in this passage: Should a slave seek freedom? Sure, he counsels, if it is possible, with reasonable effort. But if not, it is still possible to serve God in one's current social location.

Our social and vocational status in this world does not define us: what defines us is our status in the kingdom of God. And in the kingdom of God, we are both free (freed from sin, redeemed by Christ), and slaves (indebted to Christ who bought us with his own life). So slaves are spiritually free, and the social elite are spiritually enslaved (to Christ). We are defined not by our social or vocational status, but by our identity in Christ, simultaneously freed from sin and enslaved to Christ. Consequently, while we are welcome to expend a reasonable amount of effort to climb socially or vocationally, this must not consume us: our identity in Christ centers us, and ambition for his glory rightly drives us.