

## Work

- Understanding Work
- Getting Work Wrong
- Redeeming Work

*Bill walks into his boss's office one day and says, "Sir, I'll be straight with you, I know the economy isn't great, but I've got three companies after me, and I'd like to respectfully ask for a raise."*

*They haggle for a few minutes, and the boss finally agrees to give him a 5 percent raise. Bill happily gets up to leave.*

*"By the way," asks the boss as Bill is leaving his office, "which three companies are after you?"*

*Bill replies, "The electric company, water company, and phone company."*

Work. It's a huge part of life – most of us will spend something like 90,000 hours at work during our lifetime, with many working 50 or more hours per week, according to a Harvard Business School survey.<sup>1</sup>

Work can be satisfying and good and uplifting. It can give us a sense of identity and purpose and dignity. But that's not everybody's experience. Work can be frustrating or disappointing or even demeaning. Just before COVID hit, even though employment was at its highest levels in years, more than half of US workers were unhappy in their jobs, according to Forbes magazine.<sup>2</sup>

Work is such a big part of life, and for the most part we need to work to participate in society. So how should we think about work as Christians? How does the Bible shape our expectation of work, and what it is for, and why we work?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://blog.rescuetime.com/work-life-balance-study-2019/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackkelly/2019/10/25/more-than-half-of-us-workers-are-unhappy-in-their-jobs-heres-why-and-what-needs-to-be-done-now/#56e8f0562024>

Well as we open Psalm 127 this morning, we'll hear the Psalmist's reflection on work, and particularly the attitude we bring to it. So why don't we pray and ask God to speak to us through his word?

*Heavenly Father, as we open the Bible this morning, will you teach us about work. Help us to understand our role as workers and participants in your creation project, and teach us to live lives that honor you in everything we do. We pray this in the name of Jesus our saviour, Amen.*

## **Understanding Work**

So remember we are in the middle of our series about the Psalms of Ascent, the psalms that were the soundtrack for Jewish pilgrims as they went up to Jerusalem each year for the festivals. The first psalms we looked at were more about the journey – that was Psalms 120-125. Now from 126-131 they are more about life in the Promised Land, life in Zion, life lived in the presence of God.

So as we open Psalm 127, I want to ask you a question. What is it about work that is good? In other words, what makes for satisfying work? Why do we need work? And what happens when work is bad? How do we get work 'wrong' as humans?

Solomon, the author of Psalm 127, reflects on work like this:

<sup>1</sup> Unless the Lord builds the house,  
the builders labor in vain.  
Unless the Lord watches over the city,  
the guards stand watch in vain.  
<sup>2</sup> In vain you rise early  
and stay up late,  
toiling for food to eat—  
for he grants sleep to those he loves.

In Psalm 127 we have a picture of a city, a community. There are builders, working on construction projects. There are guards, guarding the city walls. And there are people 'toiling for food to eat' – perhaps that's a picture of farmers, or perhaps other people working hard in order to have enough money to feed themselves.

It's a picture of society, right? Different jobs all contributing to make society work. If there were no construction workers, we wouldn't have houses to sleep in. If there were no soldiers, or police then our houses wouldn't be secure. And because construction workers spend the day building houses, and soldiers spend the day guarding, they can't be farmers as well – they need someone else to produce the food that we eat. And so we need farmers and truck drivers and shop owners... This little snapshot in Psalm 127 represents all the different kinds of work that we need in order for society to flourish.

Work is nothing new. In fact, work is built into the fabric of creation, because we have a God who is creative. The first act that takes place in the Bible is God 'creating' the world – God is like the builder in v1 of our Psalm. He builds his creation, pieces it together, over 6 days. And Genesis 2 calls what God did in creation 'work.'

<sup>2</sup>By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. <sup>3</sup>Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. (Gen 2:2-3)

In creation, God was at work.

And in creating humans, God made us to be like him – to be creative, to work at bringing order to the world, to work at making it productive, not just so that we could eat but so that we could flourish in the good creation that God made for us.

<sup>15</sup>The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. (Gen 2:15)

Along with Eve, men and women together were given to the 'work' of populating the earth and making it their home (Genesis 1:28).

So we see from the start of the Bible that 'work' is a good thing. As humans, we have a creation mandate to work, if we can put it that way. Work is built into who we are, and how we live in this world, and how human society flourishes.

But as much as work can be good, the goodness of work has been distorted by

human sin, and again we see that right in Genesis 3 at the time that Adam and Eve sin in the garden of Eden.

As part of the curse, God says this about their work:

“Cursed is the ground because of you;  
through painful toil you will eat food from it  
all the days of your life.

<sup>18</sup> It will produce thorns and thistles for you,  
and you will eat the plants of the field.

<sup>19</sup> By the sweat of your brow  
you will eat your food  
until you return to the ground... (Gen 3:17-19)

The joyful, good work of looking after the world and tending it, becomes painful toil. Work is now characterized by thorns and thistles and the sweat of your brow. What was created good becomes distorted by human sinfulness.

And I want us to think about that for a moment. There are many ways that the goodness of work can be undermined by human selfishness. Whether it's businesses that exploit workers in the pursuit of profits; businesses that exploit the earth's resources, or pollute the environment; companies that promote unhealthy work hours, or refuse sick leave; factories that put workers in unsafe environments... And they are still the *legal* businesses. There are many other *illegal* businesses that profit from human misery and human trafficking.

Work can be so good, but it also has its difficulties. And we find ourselves in a tricky position as both sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, but also as children of God. In our fallenness, we contribute to the problem – we are selfish and undisciplined and ungodly at times.

But in Christ, hopefully we seek to redeem our work and to do it to the glory of God, and out of love.

So we're going to look again at Psalm 127 again and think about how we get work wrong, and then how we can redeem our work.

## Getting it Wrong

So come back to Psalm 127:1-2 with me, because the Psalmist highlights three ways that we can 'get it wrong' in our work.

The first example is about building: (v1)

Unless the Lord builds the house,  
the builders labor in vain.

I've never built a house before, and I haven't had much to do with the remodeling of the church – most of the decisions were made before I got here. But the normal way to build a house is to buy some land, get an architect to draw up plans, submit those plans for approval, and then hire contractors.

That's the normal way to build a house.

But Psalm 127 says that way of building misses a step. It misses the fact that all our plans should be submitted NOT to the town council for approval, but to the LORD.

This is a psalm of Solomon, it tells us. Solomon is the one who built the house of the Lord – the temple in Jerusalem.

But do you remember that it was originally his father, king David, who had wanted to build the temple for God. We read about it in 2 Samuel 7. Basically one day David decided to build the temple, but God had other plans. That night God spoke to David through a prophet and said to him:

Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? [...] <sup>7</sup>Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers [...], "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" (2 Sam 7:5-7)

We can make all sorts of plans in life, business plans, life plans, building plans, plans to plant churches and grow ministries, but what is the warning here in Psalm 127?

If we build it without the Lord, we labor in vain.

PAUSE

What are the big projects on your horizon right now? Have you invited God into those projects, in prayer, asking him for wisdom, guidance? Are they plans that honor Him, plans that will allow you to use your God-given talents to serve your family, and the church, and the wider community? Are you building with God as the architect and foreman and inspector of your project?

That's one of the ways we can go wrong in our work – seeking to build empires without regard to the Lord.

The second is about who we think is in control of this world. The Psalmist causes us to take notice of the watchman in the second part of v1:

Unless the Lord watches over the city,  
the guards stand watch in vain.

In ancient societies, the night watchman was the town security guard. They stayed awake watching for danger, so that the people in the city could sleep without worrying about their physical safety.

There is something very assuring about having locks on your doors, and home security, and a policing system that keeps us safe, as well as armies that protect our national interest. In a world distorted by sin, we need to be vigilant about our safety. Praise God that where we live is relatively safe.

I have friends in South Africa who have high fences around their houses, who don't stop their car in certain neighbourhoods and who live in fear each night that people will break in and take not just their possessions but their lives... That is the reality for many people around the world.

But can we ever really shut out the danger? One of Solomon's great sins was to amass military might – horses and chariots from Egypt. In his wealth, he believed that he could purchase safety, that he could safeguard his own interests, that he could control the nations around him...

We know how that story ended. Within generations, Solomon's empire was torn to pieces, its people decimated.

Psalm 127 reminds us that our safety doesn't come because we have security systems in place. We can sleep at night because it is the Lord who never slumbers or sleeps (Psalm 121), and he is the one who watches over us.

PAUSE

The third mistake we can make in work, is working compulsively because we think that our material success is entirely up to own efforts...

But what does the Psalmist teach?

In vain you rise early  
and stay up late,  
toiling for food to eat—  
for he grants sleep to those he loves.

The image is clear, isn't it? The person who wakes up early, and who works long hours, toiling for food to eat – *eating the bread of anxious toil*, as the ESV puts it.

I don't know about you, but I've had periods of my life where it has been hard to sleep. Where the worries and pressures of work weigh on your mind late into the night, because there is just so much to get done. And we worry that if we don't do it, then it's all going to fall apart. I'm sure some of you have had jobs like that...

But this is the third example of what it looks like to go about our work without reference to God. Working under the assumption that God is functionally disinterested in your day to day, functionally unable to make any difference, functionally uninvolved in your 'work'.

Even as Christians, we can find ourselves working this way. I'm reading a book with some other pastors at the moment which has a chapter about pastors who get caught up making plans and working hard and neglecting to rest.

Hilary of Poitiers, one of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century church fathers, wrote that we can have 'a blasphemous anxiety to do God's work for him.' I think that means not trusting

that God can achieve what we've set out to achieve, and so we overwork because of the feeling that God isn't with us.

Hilary said that attitude is blasphemous. Eugene Peterson says it is prideful:

“The relentless, compulsive work habits... which our society rewards and admires are seen by the psalmist as a sign of weak faith and assertive pride, as if God could not be trusted to accomplish his will.”

The result is anxiety, sleeplessness, and in the end, the psalmist says, that work is in vain. It destroys you in the process. You work to eat but your work ends up eating you...

### **Redeeming Work**

So if we know what we get wrong in our work, how do we set about making work good again? How do we redeem our work, as Christians, as God's people in the world, as those who are called to stand out and make a difference, and as those who are put here in the world to point people back to the good God who loves them? How do we redeem our work?

The first thing to note is that, if we are in Christ, that is, if we have put our faith and trust in Jesus and given our life's direction over to him, then we *have* been redeemed from our sinful nature, and its slavery to sinful patterns of being in the world. 2 Corinthians 5:17 reminds us that when we are in Christ, we are a new creation. [On screen?] That means in the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, we can choose godly patterns of living in the world. We can live, for the most part, according to the way that God created us to live, and that means we can approach work with the right mindset.

So a redeemed pattern of work is possible.

And our work is not separate from our life in Christ, but it's guided by it, it's part of our life in Christ.

If we've been reading the Psalms of Ascent closely, we'll acknowledge that as Christians our whole life's journey is one where we travel towards God. He is part of our journey, overseeing our journey, protecting us along the path. When we

find ourselves in wilderness places, he is not absent. When we find ourselves in dry places, we trust that he brings the rain in season. That's the soundtrack of our lives as pilgrims in the world.

If that's true, then we need to remember that God has a trajectory for this world. When God created the world, he had a plan. And God is faithful to that plan, progressing it in every generation. God is building a house – a dynasty, a royal family, a people who belong to him. That was the promise that God made to David back in 2 Samuel 7 – you won't build a house for me, said God. I will build a house for you.

And God has been faithfully building that house since creation. Our lives, our salvation, our place in the world – they are all part of God's building project, as he redeems his creation in Jesus Christ.

We can build all sorts of things in this world, but if they don't contribute to God's great building project, then they are in vain. If we build little empires, little armies, they might look big in the eyes of the world, but God's house is the one that will stand forever.

So as Christians, we need to ask ourselves – how does my life fit into God's plans?

Ephesians 2:10 says that:

“we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

What are the good works that God has prepared in advance for you to do? It might be to work in business, or in a school, or in a hospital. It might be to be a stay-at-home mum – the second half of Psalm 127 has a lot to say about the value of having kids and the blessing they are, and perhaps how good parenting is a better inheritance for our kids than the legacy of absentee, workaholic parents... But I'll come back to that next week.

I think there's a particular question for people who have retired from full-time work. How do you use your time to keep building God's kingdom, with the strength you have in the stage of life that you find yourself in?

The Apostle Paul says:

<sup>23</sup> Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, <sup>24</sup> since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

There is something beautifully freeing about these verses. It was written to slaves who would never profit from their labor. They wouldn't accumulate an inheritance. But Paul teaches them to see their greater inheritance in heaven.

It means that even in a bad work situation, there is a way to go about the work in a godly manner. And the demeanour you bring, as someone transformed by the Holy Spirit, as someone who wears the fruit of the spirit like a uniform – that will get noticed. That will lead to opportunities to tell people about the kingdom that you are working for... That will bring redemption to otherwise godless work.

And finally, when we work according to the Lord, it means we'll be able to find peace in our work, whatever it might be. God built the sabbath into the creation story, probably not so much for himself but for us. Because we need to balance work and rest. And God has made the universe such that we can sleep at night, and the universe won't fall apart. Our businesses won't fall apart. Our staff teams won't fall apart.

Yes, we can and should work hard while we're at work, but at the end of the day, God builds the house. God is the one bringing all things in heaven and earth under the Lordship of Jesus Christ – and he will be faithful to that plan.

Whatever we do in life, it's our job to live as God's people wherever we find ourselves in the world. It's our job to live amongst the lost, reflecting the character of the God who redeems, and calling others to join in God's work. That is our true occupation in Christ, our true 'work'.

Will you pray with me that God would lead us into that 'work'?

## **Further Prayers – Joanna Bidwell**

Eternal God and Father, by whose power we are created and by whose love we are redeemed: guide and strengthen us by your Spirit, that we may give ourselves to your service, and live this day in love to one another and to you; through Jesus Christ your Son and our Lord.

Lord, thank you for your word that was preached clearly and faithfully today. We pray that in whatever season of life we are in, that we would work as if we are working for you, we thank you for your abundant grace shown to us in Jesus and that we would give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord.

We pray for our upcoming Prayer Meeting, on Tuesday evening. May we consider it a joy and privilege to meet together online to pray with each other and for each other. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Father, thank you for answering prayers in the way you have concerning the wildfires that have ravaged much of California. Thank you for the removal of the recent Red Flag weather warning and for the numerous other fire companies from other states and countries who have joined our Fire Fighters in their effort to contain the fires and for the downgrade of local evacuation orders to evacuation warnings.

We continue in prayer for those still evacuated from their homes, for those who have lost their homes and for the families and friends of those who have lost their lives. Lord please bring comfort, peace and safety to all affected.

We pray all these things in the precious name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who reigns now and forever more. Amen