**A Biblical Theology of Work**

Why do you work? What’s the significance of your work? That depends on the story you attach to your work. If the story of work is the story of achievement, then work is about making a name for yourself: obscurity to glory. If your story is the story of accumulation, then work is a means to comfort: poverty to privilege. If the story of work is the story of your making the world a better place, then work is the means of salvation, the journey from dystopia to utopia.

What story is your work telling? Who’s at the center? Is the story your work is telling a story that’s true? That’s the question we’ll be getting at over the next 13 weeks—and so we’ll begin not with your story, but God’s. Because in the Bible, God tells the true story of work.

If you didn’t give it much thought, you might think that story begins after the Fall, and ends when Jesus comes back. But that storyline paints work in a negative light. In fact, the story begins in the Garden of Eden, long before the Fall. And it continues in the New Heavens and the New Earth. And like all good stories, this story has at its middle both a tragic crisis and a glorious rescue.

God’s story of work is a story in four acts: Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration. God’s story of work is the key to understanding our own work. And even more importantly, the story of our lives. So let’s get started.

**ACT I: Creation**

It’s critical to understand that the story of work doesn’t begin with us. It begins with God. God is a worker. The Bible begins with his work. “***In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.***” (**Gen 1:1**) In the first two chapters of Genesis, we’re told seven times that God created; twelve times that he made something. And all of this creating and making is summarized as his work. “***By the seventh day God had finished* the work *he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested* from all his work*.***” (**Gen 2:2**)

Now it’s this fundamental truth, that the story of work begins with God, that helps us understand the next part of this opening act of work at Creation. Because the crowning moment of God’s creative work was not the creation of far-flung galaxies or the intricacies of DNA; it was the creation of human beings.

Like the rest of creation, we are the work-product of God. But uniquely in all creation, we’re made in the *image of God*. And whatever else that might entail, it means that we were created to be a reflection of God to the world, a re-presentation of God, in the world. We see it first in Genesis 1:28. “***God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth***” and up to that point, it’s the same as what he said to the birds and the fish and the animals. Like all the other creatures, we’re meant to reproduce. But God goes on. We’re not just to fill the earth. We’re to “***subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.***” We’re given work to do, and not just any work: work that reflects the very nature of God. God is clearly King over creation. And he says to human beings, rule over the world as my representative, my image bearer. And it’s only at *that* point that God declared his work very good, and rested.

In **chapter 2**, the nature of the work God’s given us comes into sharper focus. *Act 1, Scene 1* closes with God resting. But *Act 1, Scene 2* opens with God working again. Not the work of creation, but the work of ruling and ordering what he’s made. God plants a garden. Literally, a paradise. You might think of a well-ordered country estate. And he places the very first man there.

But this raises a question. How do you create a Paradise inside an already perfect world? Answer: God created a place perfectly adapted for *human* flourishing. And he put Adam there. Listen: “***The Lord God took than man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (2:15).***

Adam was to work and take care of the garden. Then, Eve is created as his helper. Literally, Adam and Eve were to ***tend the garden***, make it grow and flourish, and they were to ***guard it***, protect it from anything that spoil or harm it.

This is important because the work God gave Adam and Eve is the paradigm for all human work. To understand that, think with me for a moment about the Garden of Eden. It’s the place God designed for human flourishing. And there’s nothing like it on earth anymore. It’s home, where they live out their marriage and raise their family. It’s temple, where they meet with God. It’s the workplace, where they engage in the productive labor God gave them. You and I have never experienced what they did: a world in which the divisions and conflicts of interest between church and workplace and family didn’t exist.

And in that amazing world, their work was to take that garden-home-temple-workplace, and make it flourish, make it grow, protect it and nurture it, until the entire world, and not just that little corner, was a paradise. And why were they to do this? Because *they* were created in the image of God. Just as God created, they were to create. Just as God ordered and managed, they were to order and manage. Just as God created a fruitful and flourishing world, they were to protect and advance that flourishing and fruitfulness. Their job, as God’s representative, was to take what God had begun and carry it on—to show off *his* glory. The point wasn’t who *they* were revealed to be through their work; it was who *God* was revealed to be through their work. Because being made in his image, their work testifies to him.

Here’s the first lesson from our story, then. The original purpose of human work was the advancement of human flourishing *to the glory of God*. Our work, in whatever sphere we operate, home, church, workplace, is to show off the goodness and magnificence of his character as his image bearers. We do that as we cultivate the garden we’ve been entrusted with, for the flourishing of the humans around us, to the praise of God’s glory. In other words, work is first and foremost, worship.

**ACT II: Fall**

But of course, this isn’t a real story until something happens that throws everything out of kilter. And that brings us to *Act 2: The Fall*.

We don’t know how much time elapsed between the day Adam got his first job, and the day it all went wrong. But what’s clear is that one way of understanding what theologians call the Fall is that Adam and Eve fell down on the job. Remember, they were entrusted with the Garden, to steward it and to guard it. And on both counts, they failed. Satan shows up, the enemy of God and humans. And instead of protecting the Garden from him by throwing him out, they have a conversation with him. And by the end of that conversation, instead of stewarding the Garden, they try to use it for themselves, abusing their own authority and ruining it for everyone else.

Right away they know they’ve blown it. The boss, God, shows up to inspect their work, and they’re hiding in a back office somewhere. Now we all know what it’s like to get a sub-par performance review. And some of us know what it’s like to get fired. But what Adam and Eve get is worse than either of those. They’re kicked out of the Garden, but they’re not relieved of their responsibility. They’re still accountable to represent God; they still must work. But the conditions of their work have radically changed: the world where they work is now cursed because of their sin.

In Genesis 3:17-19, three things happen to Adam and Eve’s work, and to ours, because of the Fall. **First**, it becomes *toilsome*. “***Through painful toil you will eat… all the days of your life***.” This is so basic to our experience of work that it’s hard to imagine what work must have been like before. After all, even a job you love has at least some aspect to it that’s tiresome, tedious, even painful. We know what needs to get done, but we either lack the ability or resources to do it, like there’s some conspiracy to make our work hard. There is a conspiracy. In a fallen world, work is toilsome.

But it’s not just toilsome. **Second**, it’s *futile*. Even though Adam will painfully toil in the ground his whole life, the cursed ground under his feet “***will produce thorns and thistles for you and you will eat the plants of the field***.” Futility. Fruitlessness. His aspirations will constantly outstrip reality, and try as hard as he can, that will never change. Inside the Garden, the result of work was the expansion of utopia. Outside the Garden, our work never produces utopia; not even close. The very ground is cursed.

What we find is that these two aspects of work in a fallen world—that it’s futile and toilsome—run smack up against the assumptions of the modern world. As Tim Keller observes, “[***Our generation] insists that work be fulfilling and fruitful, that it fully fit [our] talents and [our] dreams, and that it ‘do something amazing for the world,’ as one Google executive described his company’s mission***.” (Keller, 93). Sounds great. Problem is, that’s not the world we live in.

So we’re tempted to give up on work entirely. To grow cynical, or opt out. But that’s not really an option. Because there’s a **third** thing that happened to work at the Fall. What had been a free act of worship is now a *compulsory* act of survival. **Verse 19: “*By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken*.**” In the Garden, Adam did not have to work in order to eat. God had planted an orchard, and everything Adam needed was there for the taking. But now there is an urgency, a compulsion, to work. As Paul said, “***If a man will not work, he shall not eat***.” (**2 Thess. 3:10**) It’s not that work has now become bad. It’s not that work is punishment. It’s that in a fallen world, toilsome, futile work is relentless. Like it or not, we must work. We cannot escape it, except in death.

**Gen 3** is *Act 2. Scene 1* in the Fall. But the crisis in the story is not just about the change in our work conditions. It’s also about a change in us, the workers. In a fallen world, fallen workers no longer use their work to worship God, but to worship idols instead.

*Act 2. Scene 2*. One of the first pictures of work we’re given outside the Garden is the contrast between the descendants of Cain and the descendants of Seth, the son of Adam who replaced Abel, since Cain killed him. And what we see is that work builds culture. Cain’s descendants develop agriculture and music and metallurgy. And all of that is really good. But what the narrative also tells us is that the descendants of Cain are *defined* by their work; their *identity* comes from their work. In contrast, the descendants of Seth, the godly line, aren’t associated with work at all. Instead they are defined as those who “***began to call on the name of the Lord***.” The point isn’t that worshippers of God don’t work, but rather they aren’t *defined* by their work.

This idolatry of work comes into sharp focus as the story marches on. In **Genesis 11** we read: “***Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, ‘Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.’ They used brick, instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.***’” (**Gen 11:1-4**)

Just like in **Genesis 4** with the descendants of Cain, the work here is ultimately culture-building. They develop technology, they build a city. They’re pursuing human flourishing. That’s all good. But they want something else too. Identity. They want to make a name for themselves. And they want to do it apart from God, through their work. In fact, they want to do it in contradiction to God. God said to fill the earth; their desire is that they “*not* be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

How far from the Garden we’ve come. What began as a means of saying “Look at God” in worship has become a means of saying “Look at me!” The image bearers have become curved in on themselves, as Augustine put it, seeking to reflect their own glory to themselves, rather than God’s glory back to Him.

And I want you to see that this idolatry has at least two different, and sometimes simultaneous expressions. On the one hand, some of us are tempted to define ourselves directly *by our work*, our accomplishments, our success. On the other hand, others are tempted to define themselves by their *freedom from work*, their leisure, their hobbies, their recreation. Michael Lawrence, who wrote this class, observed that when he lived in DC young people came to town to change the world: the idolatry of work as identity. He now lives in Portland, where young people go, as he says, to retire, a very different epicenter of work-avoidance and the idolatry of freedom from work as identity. But the two are really just the opposite sides of the same coin: an idolatry that defines our identity by our relationship to work, rather than to God.

The end of the Babel story is that God comes down and judges their idolatrous worship of work. And that same judgment is what all of us deserve. But praise God, that’s not where the story of work ends.

Let me sum this up with our second lesson. The problem with our work is that we’ve lost the connection between God, work, and worship. Sometimes it’s that we debase work—and don’t see it as worship of God. Sometimes it’s that we idolize work—and worship it (and ultimately ourselves) instead of seeing it as an *act* of worship, worship of the true God. We’ve lost work as worship of God.

**ACT 3: Redemption**

Act 3. Redemption. God became man. Jesus was born of the virgin Mary. His earthly, adoptive father, Joseph, was a carpenter. And presumably, Jesus learned and took up that occupation as well—until the day came for him to take up the work for which he came. When his cousin, John the Baptist, saw him and declared, “***Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world****.*” (**John 1:29**) This was Christ’s true work—to be the Redeemer. To pay the penalty for sin through his death on the cross, and to rise from the dead, so that all who repent and believe in him can be forgiven of their sins, redeemed from the curse. And he did it. **John 17: “*I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.***” Then John 19: “***It is finished***!” (**v. 30**)

It’s popular these days to talk about redeeming culture, redeeming work and the workplace. And it’s entirely understandable, because redemption is what Christ came to do, and redemption changes everything. But we will never understand the story of work correctly unless we understand that while *people* are redeemed, work is not. For Christian and non-Christian alike, work remains toilsome in this fallen world. It remains futile. It remains compulsory.

So what difference then does our redemption make for the story of work? It doesn’t change the play—but it does change us, the actors in the play. And that change is crucial.

**First**, redeemed people *repent* of idolatrous attitudes toward work, because their identity is no longer in work but in Christ. Listen to Paul work this idea out in **Colossians 3**. “***Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory***.”

The gospel changes what our hearts are set on, because our identity and security is now in Christ. Later in the chapter, Paul applies this directly to the world of work. **Verse 22**: “***Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.*** (Work-avoidance and identity through leisure, repented of). ***Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving***. (work idolatry, identity through success, repented of).

The gospel doesn’t change the conditions of your work. It changes the condition of your heart. Which leads to a second development.

**Second**, because they’ve repented, redeemed people once again *worship* God through their work. **Colossians 3:17**. “***Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him***.” In fact, Paul himself goes back to Genesis to describe the change in the redeemed worker: “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” Eph. 2:10.

That’s lesson #3: People are redeemed; work is not. But because we are redeemed, work is no longer about our name, about our glory. It’s about his name and his glory. Because we are redeemed and are recreated anew as God’s work product, our work, with all its compulsory, toilsome pain and futility, can once again be offered freely as worship—because that work itself is *God’s* work product. He worked it up in advance for us! Our work is important mainly because it shows off *God’s* work in us.

And that means that there’s one more act in this story.

**ACT 4: Restoration**

In **Romans 8**, Paul speaks not of the redemption of work and culture, but of the liberation of Creation. He’s talking about the New Creation, when Jesus comes back. **Verse 19**: “***The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God***.”

Paul had **Genesis 3** in mind when he wrote that. Subjected to frustration, futility, the bondage of decay. That’s our world. But the day will come when the conditions of work will change once again. No longer toilsome. No longer futile. No longer compulsory. Instead, glorious freedom. Brothers and sisters, the end of the story of work is that God is going to make all things new. A world without curse. A world where thorns no longer infest the ground and painful toil is no more. Freedom, not compulsion; glory, not death.

And when that happens, work won’t disappear. Why would it? It preceded The Fall. It will outlast it as well. It will be restored to its proper context, and that context is the Seventh Day Sabbath rest of God. In **Hebrews 4** we read that for the people of God, we have God’s Sabbath Rest waiting for us—and that our Rest was foreshadowed by the Sabbath day of rest and the Promised Land—a land of Rest. So what does that Rest look like? Listen to Moses describe it in **Deuteronomy 6**. “***When the Lord your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give you—a land with large flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.***”

That’s no picture of life without work. It’s a picture of freedom, of abundance. Work that’s satisfying and fruitful. That’s what work is going to be in the New Heavens and New Earth, of which Israel in Deuteronomy 6 was but a dim picture. A glorious freedom, in the perfect rest of God, to once again use our gifts and talents and creativity and energy to tend the Garden, to grow the City, and to know the satisfaction of work well done.

And when that happens, not only will work have been restored to its proper context, but work will once again and forevermore be engaged for its proper end: the glory of God. This is the vision of **Isaiah 65**: “***Behold I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind….They will build houses and dwell in them, they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people, my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. They will not toil in vain, or bear children doomed to misfortune, for they will be a people blessed by the Lord…***”

That vision is fulfilled in **Revelation 21**, as the nations bring their splendor into the New Jerusalem, the Garden which has become a city, the city of God where he dwells with his people. Here is the end of the story of work, an end that is really a new beginning. For all eternity, our work, our creativity, our industry, our labor, will bring forth splendor. But that splendor will not be spent on ourselves, it will not be used to magnify our name. The splendor of our work will be to the glory of God.

Brothers and sisters, if we don’t understand the story of work, then our work will be in vain. We’ll assume that work is an end in itself. We’ll assume that it’s an evil to be minimized or a god to be worshipped. But when we understand the story of work, we understand that the end of work is God. That will change our work now. And it will energize our work forever. We’ll spend the next 12 weeks putting this story to work.