A Theology of Work

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Preface

A number of evangelical authors have addressed the subject of work in recent years, including Andy Crouch, D.B. Hegeman, Tim Keller, Leyland Ryken, Tom Nelson, and N.T. Wright. While they have different perspectives in many ways, there are common themes among them. On the positive side, all of them come from the grand tradition of the Reformation, starting with Luther and going through Abraham Kuyper and Francis Schaeffer, which teaches a strong sense of calling, or vocation, to all types of work, not just "church work". This tradition includes the concepts of the creation mandate and the kingdom of God, which I will review here.

But these authors all also have a common approach which I think can lead some people astray. I will discuss this at length, but in a nutshell I think that they do not take seriously enough the "vanity" theme of Scripture.[1] This theme has its greatest development in the book of Ecclesiastes, but it is all through Scripture and cannot be chopped out of the Bible by ignoring or reinterpreting just one book. Any attempt at a comprehensive view of human work which ignores the vanity theme of Scripture must be deficient.

I first became engaged in the vanity theme while researching my book, *A Biblical Case for an Old Earth*.[2] I found that much of the debate on the age of the earth is based on a faulty understanding of the vanity theme. This faulty understanding does not belong to a "progressive" or "conservative" side; both sides equally seem to make the same mistake, but with different responses. As I argued in that book, a robust understanding of the vanity theme will help us to have both a healthier view of science and the world around us, as well as a healthier view of our calling to work in the world.

The perception of many modern people is that Christians who take seriously the vanity theme of Scripture will have no sense of vocation in this world, and will just want to wait around for a harp to play in heaven. That is not how the Bible treats this theme, and history is full of stories of heavenly-minded Christians who did a lot of earthly good.

Many Christians wrestle with the age-old tension about work— should we work in the hope that the fruit of our work will last forever? Or should we not work, because it will all burn up? I argue that these are not our only two choices.

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[1] Among these authors, only *Every Good Endeavor*, by Keller and Altsdorf (Dutton, 2012), explicitly discusses the book of Ecclesiastes, and addresses some of the basic themes.

[2] D. Snoke, *A Biblical Case for an Old Earth*, (Baker, 2006).

All of the books mentioned above, as well as this one, can be called approaches to re-establishing the "Protestant work ethic." That work ethic has come under attack in the past century. It is true that in some places, when the spirit of the Gospel was lost, all that was left was the work ethic, leading to an unhealthy society. But the work ethic is in the Bible; it was not invented by Protestants. And when it has been coupled with the work of the Spirit, it has led to truly transformational health in societies. Many historians, notably Max Weber, have shown that the wealth of places like Holland, Switzerland, and Scotland were not mere historical accidents, but directly connected to the work ethic of the people.

In this book I review a number of themes which are widely agreed upon in the evangelical world, going back to the Reformation and earlier. There is much good writing on the subject of work, and I am building on this body of work, not overturning it. This book is aimed not just at showing where people have gone wrong, but at giving a comprehensive picture of the Bible's teaching on work and vocation.

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Chapter 1. The Arc of History

The Bible teaches that there is an overall storyline to the history and the future of the world. This belief by itself already has enormous implications for our concept of work. As the French Roman Catholic historian Stanley Jaki has well documented,[3] the belief in a linear history, which goes from a start to a finish, played a direct role in the development of science and technology in that part of the world influenced by the Bible's teaching, which we now call the "West." It is a fact of history that many other cultures had high levels of calculational ability, but the Scientific Revolution happened only in the European and European-influenced parts of the world. Some might want to ascribe this to an innate superiority of Europeans, while others might want to say it was just an accident, but Jaki, building on the earlier historical work of Pierre Duhem,[4] has made a convincing case that the concept of linear time going from past to future, which is so intrinsic to the Western world view that we rarely question it, played a fundamental role in the development of science and technology.

Many cultures around the world had a view of history that was either static or cyclical. Such a view is quite natural, after all, given the cycles we see in nature such as day and night, the phases of the moon, and summer and winter. In a world view with a static or cyclical concept of time, the idea of "progress" is either impossible or pointless. While sophisticated calculations might be useful for appointing holidays based on the stars, if we are doomed to repeat everything forever, innovation is at best a parlor trick which lasts for a short time, and possibly even worse, an insult to the way one's ancestors did things. By contrast, the story of the Bible brought the concept of linear time to the cultures it impacted around the Mediterranean basin, which eventually included northern Europe and elsewhere. This concept of linear history led to an overall approach in which innovations were valued, and this affected not only philosophers but carpenters, stone masons, and millers, who built many of the devices needed for science to flourish.[5]

In our day, most people still have a view of time as linear, but the belief that history has a grand purpose from start to finish is mostly lost. The "secular" world view says that the world started in an accident, will muddle around for a while, and then will finally end in a whimper as all our energy sources are used up.[6] In this world view, our work is at best something to entertain ourselves or to bring monetary security for a short while.

Many evangelical Christians are drawn into this secular world view. While Christians may officially believe in the story of the Bible, in practice they often echo the

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[3] S. Jaki, *Science and creation: From Eternal Cycles to an Oscillating Universe,* 2nd edition (Gondolin Press, 2017).
[4] P. Duhem, *Medieval Cosmology: Theories of Infinity, Place, Time, Void, and the Plurality of Worlds,* 2nd edition (Oxford University Press, 1987).
[5] See. e.g., D. Sobel, *Longitude: The True Story of a Lone Genius Who Solved the Greatest Scientific Problem of His Time*, (Bloomsbury, 2002); S. Winchester, *The Perfectionists: How Precision Engineers Created the Modern World,* (Harper, 2018).
[6] For an earlyr, dramatic example of this world view, see H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine,* (Amazon Classics, 2017).

cynicism of the surrounding culture. The Western world is steeped in postmodernism, which rejects any "grand metanarrative," that is, any overarching explanation of the universe which applies to all people. The arc of history in the Bible is the grand metanarrative of all grand metanarratives.

Postmodernists fear that all grand metanarratives can be twisted to become the basis of oppression of others, forcing them into our story. Their fear is not without basis; certainly oppression has happened in the past which was wrapped up in grand metanarratives, such as the Nazi or Communist narratives of Progress. Therefore postmodernists restrict themselves (at least in principle) to "local" stories and are suspicious of all grander stories. But in so doing, they doom themselves to meaningless work and entertaining themselves. And it is not at all clear that a cynical focus purely focused on the here and now cannot also lead to oppression. Bored gang members with no ultimate hope can treat others as mere playthings; people with no stake in the future may find no reason to use great energy to oppose a tyrant.

The arc of history presented in the Bible can be summarized in four phases: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Glory. Each of these could generate an entire book on its own. Below, I summarize these, with a focus on the implications for our concept of work.

Creation

The Bible starts with a beginning: "the" beginning (Genesis 1:1). Regardless of whether one puts this creation at 4000 BC or 14 billion BC, a Christian has the world view that the universe is not a random bubble in a sea of particles; it is the deliberate creation of God who has personality and intent.

From this follow two premises that affect our work. The first is that the "stuff" of this earth is good, not bad, and therefore is worthy of our attention. The created world was declared "very good" by God when he created it:

> "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." (Genesis 1:31)

> "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving." (1 Timothy 4:4)

Although later in the biblical story we see a curse placed on the creation (discussed below), we never see a pronouncement that the created world is now "bad," nor are we taught that we live in another creation that has replaced the original good creation.

A second implication of the Bible's story of creation is that we have good work to do in this world. This is sometimes called the *creation mandate*, given to all humans in the first chapters of the Bible, Genesis 1 and 2. This mandate appears first in Genesis 1 at the creation of humans:

> "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have

> dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'" (Genesis 1:26-28)

The word "man" here in Hebrew is *adamah*, the root of the name of Adam, which is gender-neutral and can just as well be translated as "the human". When the writers of the Old Testament wanted to emphasize maleness, they used the word "ish," which can be translated as "adult male." The above passage goes out of its way to emphasize that both males and females are included in the creation mandate, with the refrain, "male and female he created them." Both men and women are to "subdue" the earth and to "have dominion over" the earth and everything in it.

One problem with the term "creation mandate" is that the word "mandate" can convey the sense of a command. The Hebrew in this passage, however, carries more of the sense of a blessing. It might be translated, "May you be fruitful and multiply…and may you fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion." In other words, the mandate is not a command to drudgery, but an opening of the gates to a world of fresh possibilities.

It does not come across strongly in English translations, but the Hebrew in this passage also has a sense of violent action. Humans are to "subdue" the created world. Even at this point in the story, when there is no mention of human sin, humans are put into a "fight." This sense of fight appears when the creation mandate occurs again in chapter 2 of Genesis:

> "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it." (Genesis 2:15)

Again, English translation does not carry the original sense of the Hebrew. The man is told to "work" the garden and to "keep" it. The word "keep" has the sense of "defend." (Our English word "keep" used to have this sense, as in the "keep" of a castle.)[7]

In *A Biblical Case for an Old Earth*, I argued that the picture of Genesis 1-2 is of a garden of God's presence surrounded by a world with lots of powerful, untamed forces, including predatory animals. I will not give that whole argument again here, but note one strong piece of evidence: the presence of the "great sea monsters" in Genesis 1:21. A word study of the Hebrew term for these creatures, *tannim*, shows that they were understood by the ancient Hebrews as dangerous reptiles with sharp teeth. If we are willing to discard our Sunday-school notions of Adam and Eve wandering in a world with only fluffy bunnies and friendly birds, we will see that although Adam and Eve had the Tree of Life which gave them eternal life, their life was not meant to be idyllic laziness; they had a struggle set before them, with the goal of conquering the world outside the garden, full of strange

[7] The creation mandate is also repeated in Genesis 9:1-2 and Psalm 8:6-8. Genesis 9:1-2 talks of the creation being in "fear" and "dread" of humans, again showing a conflict theme.

creatures, and to subdue it, at the same time defending and protecting what was already within their domain. Part of this work was to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28), that is, to have sex, bear children, and raise them, so that the community of humans would expand out from the garden as the population grew.

All of this was the mandate given to humans before they had ever sinned. We thus see that the mandate to work is not a result of sin; God gave them work to do right at the beginning. Further, the work given to them was not easy work with no conflict; God mandated that they would have to fight. God did not intend for people to fight each other, but the language of "subduing" the rest of the earth and "defending" the garden implies that the animals and the rest of nature would not just lie down and take commands easily.

The more I have looked at Genesis 1-2, and the more experience I have with walking with God and seeing his work in others, the more I have become convinced that God loves a good fight. We see this in Genesis 2, not only in the language of defending the garden, but in the very fact that God set the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the midst of it. God could have put this tree far away, unobtainable to them, or he could have made it putrid and undesirable. By putting it there as an attractive tree, and giving the command not to eat of it, God wanted them to fight and overcome their desires: "The woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes" (Genesis 3:6). The world was not a place of no conflict before they sinned, and it does not require our sin to bring an interesting plot to a story. God sends "tests" into the lives of everyone which he wants them to pass; for example, Jesus, the sinless one, was tested in the desert, and Job suffered not because of his sin but because, like Jesus, he was tested in his righteousness (Job 1:8-12).

From the creation story we thus have two elements of the mandate to work: our work will be *energetic*, overcoming forces that oppose us, even the forces of our own desires within us, and our work will *engage in the real stuff* of this world. Our picture of a saint should not be a person passively sitting and praying all the time. God does not call us to a "higher" life that separates us from the muck and mire, but rather one which fully embraces the created order; for Adam and Eve this included, at the very least, having sex, taking care of babies, and getting their hands dirty while gardening.

While I have emphasized the use of conflict language in Genesis 1 and 2, I also want to emphasize that the "dominion" over creation which Adam and Eve were given was not one of wanton destruction. Humans were put into the role of caretakers of their master's good things, not destroyers of it. This picture of people as caretakers for God is restated by Jesus in the New Testament in several parables, e.g. Matthew 21:33-41 and 25:14-29. This, of course, has implications for our interaction with the environment; we are not to pollute the world with waste, but rather to redirect what is wild to make it glorify God even more.

Fall

Most Christians are familiar with the story of the Fall into sin of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, which quickly led to a trail of murder and mayhem by their descendants in Genesis 4. The sin of Adam and Eve leads to the "Curse" language of God:

> "To the woman he said, 'I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.' And to Adam he said, 'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it," cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.'" (Genesis 3:16-19)

This change of affairs has global implications because humans were rulers over the world; if the king and queen fall, the nation is brought down. But we must be careful not to read into this story more than is there. Adam and Eve were not told that work and childbearing were created as something new due to the Curse; these already were mandates to them before they sinned, as we have seen. What we are told in this passage is that the woman's pain and the man's toil would be *increased*. A close look at the language of the curse on the woman shows that pain in childbearing would have existed even had they not fallen; the pain is "multiplied," that is, increased, not created as a new thing. In general, the curse language shows a strong continuity of the prior world with the later world. Adam and Eve are not placed in a newly created world; they are sent outward from the Garden into the pre-existing "outer darkness":

> "Therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man." (Genesis 3:23-24)

Many Christian writers over the years have taken the Curse of Genesis 3 and run with it, postulating the creation of whole new species of animals and plants, changes in the laws of physics to bring in the Second Law of Thermodynamics where there was none before, and in general, arguing for a whole new created order in which death and decay could now exist where they could not have existed earlier. This type of radical change of the created order just isn't there in the text of Genesis 3. The truly radical thing which occurs is in the relationship of humans and God; they are alienated from God, driven out from his presence, and that leads to their death. While in the presence of God, they had access to the Tree of Life which gave them eternal life, but now, without access to it, they are doomed to the pronouncement of God, "you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17). The implications of this separation are seen in Genesis 4, in the evil doings of humanity and the creation of culture opposed to God. There is no discussion in Genesis 4 of the world having new physical laws, new types of animals, or old types of creatures being radically changed from grass-eating to flesh-eating.

The implications of the Fall for our work are that the mandates to work and to raise children are made harder and more frustrating due to our sin, but those mandates are not curses; the creation mandate was a blessing from God given to people at the outset, in Genesis 1. The creation mandate is to use forceful energy to do work, raise children, and build culture, and is intrinsic to who we are as humans. When we come to Christ to follow in his ways, we do not turn away from engagement in this world, but rather, toward the work he has given us to do:

> "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2:10)

Redemption – God enters this world

The next step in the story is God's intervention in history to redeem people from the consequences of their Fall. This element of the story is already seen in Genesis 3. At the same time that God gives the Curse, he also says and does some things that imply *grace*. Grace can be defined as God giving people good things purely out of his own initiative, which they do not earn.

The first example of grace is right in the Curse itself, when God says to the serpent (who represents Satan), "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15). With the hindsight of later history, we see that this verse already hints at the coming Messiah who will defeat Satan, who was born of a woman but not directly the son of a man.

Another symbol of grace in this passage occurs when God makes robes for Adam and Eve from an animal which he has slaughtered (Genesis 3:21). The prefiguring of the shedding of blood to cover sin, which was eventually done by Christ on the Cross, may have been missed by ancient Hebrews reading this passage, but they certainly would have seen something that modern readers usually miss: when God gave Adam and Eve robes, he effectively "re-inherited" them. The robe given to a son was a symbol of inheritance, as seen in the story of Joseph getting a robe from his father Jacob, leading to jealousy among his brothers (Genesis 37:2-5), and the story of the prodigal son who forsook his home, but was given a robe again when he returned (Luke 15:22). God did not put Adam and Eve to death on the day they sinned. He allowed them to die, without the Tree of Life to sustain them, but he also maintained a relationship with them and did not revoke his original mandate for their work and building of a community.

As another marker of the beginning of the redemption story, we see in Genesis 4:25-26 the story of Seth, the son given to Adam and Eve by God. Seth calls on the name of the Lord, and his prayers are accepted by God.

The long story of Israel from the beginning of Genesis to the end of the Old Testament is the record of the continual intervention by God to redeem people. The story focuses on the nation of Israel because God's plan of redemption involves building a

community, a people, not just a set on disconnected individuals. The story involves people who are genetically related, in the line from Seth to Noah to Abraham to Moses to David, but also involves other people brought into the community from outside, such as Rahab and Ruth, who were Gentiles. God's people in the Bible are both the result of parents being fruitful and multiplying and the result of inclusion of those who say "your people shall be my people, and your God my God," as Ruth did (Ruth 1:16).

The high point of the story of redemption in this world is the story of Jesus, starting with his birth, known as the Incarnation, and leading to his death on the Cross, Resurrection from death, and Ascension to glory. The stories of the kings of Israel, most notably King David, are filled with allusions to the perfect king to come, such as the following:

> "But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone…" (Isaiah 9:1-2)
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> "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore." (Isaiah 9:6-7)
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> "I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession... Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him." (Psalm 2:7-12)

All of the earthly kings of Israel, including David, sinned and died, but Jesus, the Son of David and the Son of God, fulfilled the ideal role of redeemer represented by the kings.

The intervention of God in the world in the whole story of the Bible, and the Incarnation in particular, show that God is deeply interested in the muck and mire of this physical world and not remote from it. He is not only interested in ideas and abstract spiritual concepts. The entrance of God into the world in the person of Jesus is known as the *Incarnation*. In a way that is probably impossible for us to understand fully, God put on human flesh, which means, to state the obvious, that among other things, that he ate food, went to the bathroom, did sweat work,[8] and had sexual desires:

[8] Some commentators have argued that the term for the work of Joseph and Jesus often translated "carpenter" is better translated by the generic term "builder," which in that day could refer to a simple day laborer or farmer, as in the Germanic word "bauer" or "boer," which literally means a "builder" but can refer to any type of laborer.

> "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. … Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people…. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." (Hebrews 2:14-17, 4:15)

Historian Peter Harrison[9] and others have made the case that Incarnation theology in the Middle Ages, well before the Reformation, played an important role in the development of science and technology; this was another crucial contribution to the culture from the Bible in addition to the sense of linear history discussed above. The views of Plato, which entered the church through the respected scholar Origen in the Roman Empire and his later follower Boethius, led the church to adopt a view that only the spiritual realities behind the physical things mattered, and that the mere physical was to be disdained. But the corrective role of the Bible itself brought the church back from this. If God himself took on human flesh, we cannot say that the physical things of this world are intrinsically degrading. This led monk-scholars in the Middle Ages to start to take an interest in studying things in the physical world.

The story of redemption in the Bible implies that there are two types of work in this world. One type is "subduing" the creation and "multiplying" in it, that is, creating a community, which people would have done even if mankind had never fallen into sin. Because of sin, there is a second type of work, which God himself engages in, which we can call *redemptive* work, to fix the problems caused by sin. This involves calling people into the community of God's people, that is, evangelism, and it also includes all the things we do to restrain evil and fix problems caused by it, such as police forces, judicial courts, addiction treatment centers, hospitals, and medical care, now that people are now subject to death without the Tree of Life. Not everything difficult is in this category; some difficult things lie in the category of the creation mandate, such as dealing with hurricanes, volcanoes, and carnivorous or parasitical creatures.

Glory

As discussed above, the Bible's history of this world has an end. The world as we know it does not keep going on forever. Jesus will return in glory and change things in unimaginable ways.

As I discussed in *A Biblical Case for an Old Earth*, many Christians have presented the picture of this glorious end state as going back to the garden of Genesis 2, and speak of redemption and glorification as "restoration" of what Adam and Eve lost. For example,

[9] P. Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science,* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Milton entitled his books *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, and Christians in the West have fallen into that mindset ever since.

While it is true that the face-to-face relationship with God that was lost in the garden will be regained, the Bible does not present a nostalgic picture of returning to the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were not meant to stay in the garden. As discussed above, they were meant to expand the dominion of God to the whole earth, multiplying, conquering, and filling it. The end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation, is not a return to a rural garden, but a great City. This "city of God" image runs throughout Scripture, symbolized by the city of Jerusalem in the nation of Israel.[10] In the last book of the Bible, the new order brought by the return of Jesus centers around a vast city with structures over 1300 miles high (Revelation 21:16). The language is in many ways symbolic, but it clearly teaches us that the end of history is not just going back to the garden—there will be a well-ordered society with millions or billions of people.

This viewpoint has enormous implications for our work. We are not just to pine for the good old days when people lived off the land in rural areas. We can embrace cities and structures and organization, fruitfulness and increasing population. Certainly we should not embrace every new thing just because it is new, and change in society can lead to good things being lost, which we ought to try to recover. But Christianity is not essentially backwards-looking.

[10] E.g. Isaiah 2:3, 65:18-19, Jeremiah 3:17, Joel 3:17, Micah 4:2, Zechariah 8:3-8.

Chapter 2. Continuity or Discontinuity?

As we saw in the previous chapter, the Bible ends with a picture of a new creation, called the "new heavens and the new earth" (Revelation 21:1). In that chapter I argued that there was no new creation of the world at the Curse in Genesis 3. But there *is* a new creation of the world at the end of time, when God says he will "make all things new" (Revelation 21:5). The book of Revelation is filled with images of the things of this earth being burned up and remade, unlike the story of the Curse in Genesis 3, in which not much changed physically. While we may debate the exact symbolism of these images the book of Revelation, there is no question that they imply something dramatically new. Some of the things that occur at the end of time in the Bible include the dead being raised,[11] the stars falling out of the sky and the sky being wrapped up like a scroll,[12] and the sea ceasing to exist.[13] In addition, according to Jesus,[14] marriage will be abolished; this is in great contrast to a major role of marriage in the creation mandate of Genesis 1-2, discussed above.

All Christians who embrace the Bible agree that this dramatically different end state of the world will come to pass. There are different views on how this transition will occur, though.

The differences between evangelical Protestant Christians on this topic can be summarized in regard to their views on a concept known as the *Millennium.* The question of the Millennium boils down to this: will there be a period of time in this world, as we know it, with the same physical laws and creatures as we know now, when people will reach a state of blessed perfection under the rule of Jesus? The view called *premillennialism* says yes, and says that this time period will come after Jesus returns in glory. In that view, Jesus will return and set up a kingdom here on this earth, and after some time, that kingdom will be changed to the glorious new heavens and earth.

A different view, called *postmillennialism*, says that Christians will conquer the powers of this world in such a way that the world is transformed in a continuous way into the earthly rule of Christ over all things. According to this view, Christ will then come back, and the world will then continuously transform into the glorious new state.

A third view, called *amillennialism*, says that there is no Millennium in either sense described above, with Christians controlling all power in this world. In the amillenial view, the church grows throughout the present world, but so do persecutions, until the time when Christ returns, at which point he ushers in the radically new heavens and earth.

Does it matter which of these views we hold? In one sense, no, because all Christians are ultimately optimistic about the end state of the world—Christ will be on the throne, ruling all people and all things.

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[11] Isaiah 26:19, 1 Thessalonians 4:16, Revelation 20:12-13.
[12] Isaiah 34:4, Mark 13:35, Revelation 6:13-14.
[13] Revelation 21:1.
[14] Mark 12:25, Luke 20:34-25.

On the other hand, there are important differences in the implications which are deduced from these views, rightly or wrongly, in regard to our work. Is our work in this world building the Millennial kingdom? To put it another way, does any of our work build the final state of heaven itself? Many postmillennialists would say yes to both of these questions. They tend to emphasize the continuity of the final new heavens and earth with the present world, in a single process that leads first to the Millennium in this world and then to the final state when Christ returns. In a sense, they say that you can "take it with you," after all—the best elements of culture that we create in this world will be with us in heaven.

There is Scriptural warrant for talking of the continuity of this world and the next. One verse is Revelation 11:15, which says, "Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "*The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ*, and he shall reign forever and ever." To understand this verse fully, we must have an understanding of what the "kingdom" is, which we will take up in Chapter 6. But without going into that yet, we can agree that this verse does point to some degree of continuity between this world and next. In the same way, the famous messianic verse in Isaiah 9, quoted in full above, says "Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore." This verse says that Christ's kingdom begins with his incarnation and has no end, continuing forever until all the nations are governed by him. Also, in 1 Corinthians 15:25-26, the apostle Paul says, "For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death." If we view Christ as reigning presently, as the Isaiah 9 passage indicates, then his reign is continuous with the future kingdom in which there is no longer any death.

But there are also many passages that emphasize the *discontinuity* between this world and the next. Some have been mentioned above—the images of the sky being rolled up as a scroll and the stars falling from the skies, and the sea being gone. There are many others. For example, the apostle Peter says

> "The heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly…the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." (2 Peter 3:7-13)

Some have argued that the fire which is associated with beginning of the new order is the fire of refining, not the fire of complete destruction. It is true that the image of refining of metal, which burns off the impurities and leaves behind the pure metal, is used throughout

Scripture to talk of our passing through the judgment of God. But one cannot move too quickly from this to ignore the great discontinuity Peter speaks of. The heavens will "pass away,"[15] and will be "dissolved," "burned up," and will "melt." Things that dissolve, are melted, or burned up may be re-solidified, but the transition from solid to liquid or vapor and back to solid is one of great discontinuity—this is technically called a "discontinuous phase transition" in materials engineering. This passage of also uses the language of a "new" creation, just as the book of Revelation does: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away…And he who was seated on the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new!'" (Revelation 21:5). If everything is new, and is called a new creation, and the old creation is said to have passed away, we can rightly speak of discontinuity.

It is fair to say that there is some degree of continuity of the present world with the next, but we should not downplay the huge degree of discontinuity which also will occur. In particular, the Bible is full of verses that tell us that we can't take anything with us from this creation to the next:

> "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal." (Matthew 6:19-20)
>
> "As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand." (Ecclesiastes 5:15)
>
> "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return." (Job 1:21)
>
> "For we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world." (1 Timothy 6:7)

The postmillennial view also runs into trouble with Bible verses which indicate that Christ could return at any moment, to the surprise to all people:

> "The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know." (Matthew 24:50)
>
> "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." (Matthew 25:13)
>
> "For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night… But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief." (1 Thessalonians 5:2-4)

If the return of Christ does not come until after Christians conquer the world, we do not need to keep watch for Christ's return any time soon, since we haven't conquered it yet.

[15] Jesus also says this in Matthew 24:35.

How does our work now connect to the future?

In contrast to the postmillennial view, the premillennial and amillennial views both agree that real peace in the world does not happen until Christ returns in the future. These two views have different understandings of how the church and the nation of Israel relate, however. We will return to discuss this difference in Chapter 7. But both views have often led to a pessimistic view of our work: nothing that we do matters except for evangelism, because nothing in this world will change until Christ returns, and after that eventually everything will be destroyed. A rejection of this pessimism is one of the appeals of postmillenialism.

Note that both a pessimistic view that rejects the significance of our work and a you-can-take-it-with-you postmillennial view are based on the assumption that there is no point to our work if the fruit of our work does not last forever. The pessimists believe it will not last forever, and therefore conclude that there is no point to work. The optimistic postmillennialists believe work is valuable, and therefore conclude our work must last forever.[16]

Are those our only options, then? Either a view that we are working on stuff we can take to heaven, or a pessimistic view that nothing we do with the stuff of this world matters? If we take the optimistic postmillenial view, does only our best work go to heaven, so that if we work on something that leads to a dead end, none of our work matters?

The Bible does not restrict us to these two options. To see the way out of this dilemma, we must understand the vanity theme of Scripture, which is the subject of Chapter 3. While we have not yet resolved the question of whether any of our work in this world lasts forever, the arc of history of the Bible discussed in the last chapter should cause us to lift up our eyes to the grand story which God is weaving in the world. We are part of that grand story, even if we do not see how works out:

> "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28)

[16] E.g., T. Nelson, *Work Matters: Connecting Sunday Worship to Monday Work* (Crossway, 2011); D.B. Hegeman, *Plowing in Hope: Towards a Biblical Theology of Culture* (Canon Press, 2020); A. Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling,* (Intervarsity Press, 2013).

Chapter 3. The Vanity Theme of Scripture

Many Christians dislike the book of Ecclesiastes. Just as Luther would have preferred not to have the book of James in the Bible, many Christians would prefer not to have the book of Ecclesiastes. Not being able to remove it, they sometimes try to write it off—I once heard a preacher call it "an inspired record of uninspired thinking."

The text does not allow us to do that, though. At the end of Ecclesiastes, the summary of the book says, "Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth." (Ecclesiastes 12:9-10) In other words, the speaker of the book, called the Preacher, is telling us wisdom and truth, not misguided, unbiblical thinking. If we believe Solomon originated the book, and there is good evidence for this,[17] then we need to take this as teaching from a person the Bible says was unsurpassed in wisdom. It should not surprise us that the deep words of a wise man may be hard to understand, at first.

Ecclesiastes is the canonical example of the vanity theme in Scripture: it opens with "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity!" Is that a non-Christian theme? Many would say so, but although the vanity theme is most fully exposited in Ecclesiastes, it actually runs all through Scripture. Many Psalms have this theme,[18] the book of Job is full of it (from the mouth of Job, who is upheld as saying "what is right" by God at the end of the book), the prophets take it up,[19] the New Testament authors take it up,[20] and Jesus himself speaks in these terms.[21]

The key word here is "vanity," which corresponds to the word *hebel* in the original Hebrew. It is difficult to translate. The NIV Bible translates this word as "meaningless." This gives the impression that the text is saying that there is no ultimate purpose in the universe, and that our work is pointless and purposeless, with no value. That is not what the Preacher is saying.

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[17] The book says that it is written by the "son of David, king in Jerusalem." (Ecc 1:1, 1:12), and that he became wiser and richer than anyone in Jerusalem before him (Ecc 1:16), and amassed gold and silver and slaves. This is a description of the life of Solomon. If it was not Solomon, then Ecc 1:16 contradicts 1 Kings 3:12, which says Solomon was wiser than all other kings of Israel.
One objection to the view that Solomon wrote this book is the language style. The original language contains many non-Hebrew words, which would not have been part of the Hebrew language at the time of Solomon. There are two possible explanations for this. First, it seems natural that Solomon, who was highly educated, would have used foreign words as a sort of language of intellectuals, just as today an educated person today might drop a French phrase. Second, the book was clearly edited by a later prophet, who put in the summary statement of 12:9-10, and may have updated the language. The Proverbial style of the middle chapters is the same as the book of Proverbs, which is directly attributed to Solomonic origin.

[18] E.g., Psalms 37, 49, 90, 102, and 103.

[19] E.g. Isaiah 40:6-8, Jeremiah 10:3.

[20] E.g., 1 Peter 1:24, James 1:10-11, 1 John 2:17, Romans 8:2-22, 1 Corinthians 2:6, 7:31, James 4:14.

[21] E.g., Matthew 5:18, 6:19-21, 24:25.

The most direct translation of the Hebrew word *hebel* is "weightless." The things of this world have no eternal weight. Other words for this concept are "empty," "unsatisfying," "transitory," "fleeting," "changeable," "frustrating," and "insubstantial." The things and people of this world are like "the grass of the field," "a breath," and "dust," as in the Kansas song, "Dust in the Wind:"

> I close my eyes only for a moment, and the moment's gone
> All my dreams pass before my eyes, a curiosity.
> Dust in the wind, all they are is dust in the wind
>
> Same old song, just a drop of water in an endless sea.
> All we do crumbles to the ground, though we refuse to see.
> Dust in the wind, all we are is dust in the wind.
>
> Now don't hang on, nothing lasts forever but the earth and sky.
> It slips away, and all your money won't another minute buy.

Another picture is sand grasped in your hand. You can't hold it—the harder you try to grasp it, the more it slips through your fingers. Nothing in this world satisfies. The more you try to hold onto it, the less substantial it is. It doesn't fill you up.

The author Ernest Hemingway traveled all over the world writing stories about foreign places. His philosophy of life was entirely worldly. He earned his fame by being someone who disdained the ordinary, somebody who was cosmopolitan and was bored with the commonplace. Yet in the end, he ran out of new places. Eventually, every place bored him, nothing was new. In one of his last stories, he wrote, "Eventually everything tastes like licorice." This is the message of Ecclesiastes—nothing in this world ultimately satisfies. The author runs through all the things which people feel will satisfy them—wealth, sex, fame, knowledge, power, and children and grandchildren. He had them all, and they didn't satisfy.

By contrast, the book of Ecclesiastes says that God is *not* vanity. The things of this world are changeable; God never changes. The world is temporary; God is permanent. Things are insubstantial; God is substantial. The things of the world are unsatisfying; God is satisfying. The things of this world are like sand which slips through your fingers, but God can be grasped and held. The Hebrew word which contrasts to *hebel* is *chabod*, which is usually translated "glory," but which more fundamentally refers to weightiness. God is weighty; the things of this world are weightless by comparison.

This is why the book of Ecclesiastes is not a book of hopelessness. The book does not present a view of a world with no purpose. It strongly states that there is a purpose, but that purpose is fully known only to God, while we humans see only "through a glass darkly." A pivotal verse for the book is the following:

> "He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

This is the tension that all people live with: we have eternity in our hearts—we know that there is something higher and deeper, yet we cannot see how everything in our lives fits into that. Over and over the book lands on God as the only solid ground:

> "I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it." (3:14)
>
> "For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear." (5:7)
>
> "Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him." (7:13-14)
>
> "Then I saw all 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 it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out." (8:17)
>
> "As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything."(11:15)
>
> "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil." (12:13)

It has often been said that all people have a "God-shaped vacuum." There is a hole in our heart that can only be filled by God. If we try to fill that void with anything else, we are frustrated. We want there to be something permanent in our life. If we put something impermanent at the center of our lives, we are either depressed when it changes and is lost, or we are constantly in fear that it will change and be lost. Only God is permanent; only God never changes; only God can satisfy that need.

Is this depressing?

If you dwell on this theme, do you find it depressing? If so, it is likely that you are "worldly," that is, you have your eyes focused on the things of this world. The more we lean on God himself as our firm thing, and the less we lean on the accomplishments we plan to do in this world, the more deep joy we will have. If we think that we will only be happy if we get this, or do that, we will continually be frustrated.

This picture does not contradict the grand picture of history which we surveyed in Chapter 1, the big picture of creation-fall-redemption-glory. God is at work in the world, leading it to an ultimate goal. We are not in a purposeless universe. But there are two deep truths which must balance this.

First, we do not, and cannot, understand how God is doing this. Ecclesiastes 8:17 says, "No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun.... Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it." From our perspective, many things seem to make no sense, and seem even to thwart the advance of the kingdom of God. Whole countries forsake the Gospel which they once embraced. Great Christian leaders die in accidents or by disease and are not replaced. Christians are killed off in mass numbers, and their deaths do not lead to the same results that the martyrs of Rome did (for example, the mass murder of the Huguenots in France or the Nestorians in central Asia led to a withering of the believing churches there). Promising young people die before they have ever reached their potential. People with great Christian gifts toil in obscurity and are never recognized by the church, much less the world.

This is where faith comes in. God is eternal, and has a grand eternal plan for all of history, which we mostly cannot see. The metaphor is sometimes used of a tapestry that we see only from the back. There are threads crossing each other in seemingly random patterns, and when we see these up close, we cannot make sense of them. But when we look at the front of the tapestry, from a distance, we can see the grand design of the whole. In the same way, the Bible presents the picture of God creating the kingdom of God in history, with everything appropriate in its place, but in a way that we cannot fully understand in this life. As we read above from Ecclesiastes, "He has made everything beautiful in its time…. yet so that [man] cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." We trust that there is a grand tapestry God is weaving of history, even though we are so close to it that we see only a few threads.

It is worth dwelling on the famous chapter of faith, Hebrews 11, describing the saints of the Old Testament:

> "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation… By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going…
>
> "These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city…
>
> "Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy— wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.
>
> "And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect."

These people are all characterized by not knowing what God was doing but trusting him anyway. They did not know the whole grand story of God's redemption; they did not even know as much as we know, namely the story of Jesus. They walked in God's paths even though they did not know where those paths went. They *did* know, however, that God had a grand and glorious future planned, his "eternal city."

This has immediate application to our work. Does your view of work allow for setbacks, and not only setbacks, but a complete undoing of everything you have worked for? Is your view that if you work hard, God will surely let you achieve your goals? This is the message of many Hollywood movies: if you believe in yourself, and never give up, you will eventually reach your dream. That is not the message of the Bible. You can fail in many things, and have no promise from God that you will succeed in anything. The grand promise is that *God* will win, that he will use all our efforts as threads in his tapestry, or to use another metaphor, as subplots in the grand novel he is writing. This is not depressing if your heart is fixed on God himself and not your own accomplishments, if he is the love of your heart.

The second deep truth that we must grasp in looking at God's grand plan is that the things of this world are not permanent. In Hebrews 11 above, all the people mentioned look forward to a new world; they were "strangers and exiles" in this world (11:13). Their "homeland" and "city" is not here; it is elsewhere. There is a continuous story from the creation to the future eternal kingdom, but it is not a story of establishing every step along the way as permanent. The Bible has many analogies for this process, namely things that have a type of continuity yet also great discontinuity. This world is like an unborn child who will emerge into a new life (Romans 8:22); like a seed that is buried and then grows into something big and new (1 Corinthians 15:42); like rocks that are melted and refined into pure metal (1 Corinthians 3:12-15); like a field which grows until the day it comes to fruition and is harvested (Matthew 13:30). We can think of other similar things: a caterpillar that is completely consumed in the cocoon to become a butterfly; a beautiful flower that sheds a dead husk. We can celebrate the cocoon and the husk without wanting them to be permanent and lasting; we can celebrate a child, without wanting the child to never go through puberty and grow up. Some things are lost, not because they are evil, but because they were never designed to be permanent.

This also relates directly to our view of work. We deeply want something permanent, and often we try to find that in our work—for example, I may want to make art that lasts for the ages, or I may want to make a name for myself that my family remembers forever; I may want to start a Christian movement that lasts for all generations. But only God is that permanent thing. All of what I do contributes to his grand plan, but much, even most, of what I do will be burned off and lost like the husk of the wheat of the harvest. If that depresses me, I have lost my focus on God as the one true permanent reality and solid ground.

The vanity theme is expressed throughout the Bible as a contrast between what is fleeting and temporal and what is eternal:

> **"**Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you." (John 6:27)
>
> **"**For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." (2 Corinthians 4:17-18)
>
> **"**For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." (2 Corinthians 5:1)

That which is eternal is our destiny if we are in Christ, because then we will see God face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12). We can rejoice in the hope, not be depressed about what is lost. As Paul says,

> "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." (Romans 8:18)
>
> "Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory...But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.'" (1 Corinthians 2:6-9)

To be fixated on the things of this world is to lose sight of the greater joy, to lose sight of the deep desire of our hearts for the truly permanent and eternal, which comes when I am fully in union with God himself.

Chapter 4. The Vanity Theme, Part 2

No one can seriously study the Bible and deny that the vanity theme is there. But there is debate among theologians about whether it is intrinsic to this world or a result of the Fall into sin by humans. Some would say that all of the vanity of this world is entirely due to sin—if Adam and Eve had not sinned, then the world would have remained as it was in the Garden, eternally.

The Bible does indicate that some of the aspects of the vanity of this world are due to the fall. For example, Romans 8:20-21 says

> "For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now."

Many of the words used here have negative sense, such as "bondage," "corruption," and "groaning," which indicate something that is not the way it should be. In addition, the book of Ecclesiastes says things like "this is a great evil,"[22] and "For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation."[23]

Much of the focus of the negative side of vanity lies in the observation all people die, just like the animals (Ecclesiastes 2:16, 3:19). This is clearly a result of the Fall, when God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden so that they could no longer eat of the Tree of Life. It raises a justice issue: if God gives the same result in the end to all, namely mindless death, then those who pursue evil are not treated any differently in the end than those who seek good. This is the main question Job wrestled with (e.g., Job 9:22). Job's friends wanted to argue that people are rewarded in this life according to their deeds, but as Job argued, even a brief look at the reality of this world shows this is not true. Throughout Scripture, the question is not "why do bad things happen to good people?" but, "why do the wicked prosper?" (e.g., Psalm 73, Jeremiah 12:1, Job 21:7) The only resolution of this problem is the final judgment of God. Both Ecclesiastes and Job land on this:

> "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil." (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14)

> "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth.
> And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another….be afraid of the sword, for wrath brings the punishment of the sword, that you may know there is a judgment." (Job 18:25-29)

[22] Ecclesiastes 2:20, 5:16, 6:1, 9:3.
[23] Ecclesiastes 2:23.

Both statements are based on faith, because the speakers have wrestled with and seen clearly how little justice there is in this world. We do well ourselves to look at this reality in the face. The Bible does not present glib optimism, but a sober prediction that evil will prevail in many places and times in this world.

We may also say that the aspect of vanity discussed above, that people "cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end," is at least partly related to human sin. Scripture talks in many places of God giving people over to darkness, blinding them. Even Christians see "through a glass darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Some of this inability to understand comes just from the fact that we have finite minds—God is fundamentally "inscrutable" (Isaiah 40:28, Romans 11:33). But we will one day "see face to face," knowing the mind of God much better than now.

Good vanity

But some aspects of the vanity of this world are *not* due to the Curse. Some vanity is fundamentally built into the way the world is. We see this in several things in creation from the beginning, before Adam and Eve sinned.

- *The cycles of nature*. Ecclesiastes locates much of the vanity of this world in the cycles of nature—what is done becomes undone:

> The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. (Ecclesiastes 1:5-7)

Temporariness, and the inability to fully complete something, are built into the cycles of this world: moth destroys and rust decays, water evaporates, winter cold kills plants. Yet these cycles do not appear at the Curse of Adam and Eve; they appear in Genesis 1. In the first chapter of the Bible, we see things that are later associated with vanity: the darkness which replaces the light, seen in the cycle of the sun; the battle of the sea and the land, which neither ever wins, and the food cycle of creatures eating and being eaten. As discussed in Chapter 1, this included the great sea creatures, or *tannim*, which would have been understood by all Hebrews as carnivorous; even if one believes there were no carnivores, the eating of green plants is another example of transitoriness. The "grass that withers" is a common expression for vanity in the Bible.

- *The marriage-fruitfulness pattern*. The pattern of male and female, man and wife, is central to the entire story of Genesis 1-3. Not only humans, but animals are intrinsically connected to this pattern. Yet Jesus tells us that such will not be so in glory:

> "The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection, and they asked him a question, saying, 'Teacher, Moses said, "If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother." Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to

> his brother. So too the second and third, down to the seventh. After them all, the woman died. In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her.'
>
> "But Jesus answered them, 'You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.'" (Matthew 22:23-30)

Jesus here says that something so central to the whole story of creation and our lives in this world, marriage, is temporary and not part of the future world of glory. The "cycle of life" in which species, including humans, give birth and then wither and die, is not permanent.

It is worthwhile to dwell on the reply of Jesus a bit. His response is not, "You are basically right in your conception of heaven as pretty much just like here, but you have made an error in this one aspect that will be different." Rather, his response carries with it the sense of "You are foolish for trying to apply present-day thinking to something so vastly different." They erred because they thought too small; they did not know the power of God. In the same way, while it is well to think of our future concretely, we must realize that it will be utterly different, something which "no eye has seen… nor the heart of man imagined." (1 Corinthians 2:9)

- *Testing*. It cannot escape our notice that Satan, represented as a serpent, was running around the Garden, talking to Adam and Eve and tempting them. In heaven there will be no evil spirits. Why then was Satan allowed to run around the Garden? His presence there was part of a "probation" of mankind. Mankind was put to the test. Later on in Scripture, we see other representatives put to the test by God and passing: Abraham is told to sacrifice his son, Job is tested by Satan with God's permission, Jesus is tempted by Satan in the wilderness.

The idea of probation involves temporariness. Being tested forever would be unlivable. The picture of Scripture is one of a temporary time of testing which ceases. Perhaps the most clear metaphor for this is the son who is disciplined by his father for a short time, after which he comes into his inheritance (Hebrews 12:5-11).

To understand this better, we can go back to the second chapter of Hebrews, which quotes Psalm 8, which says,

> "What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet." (Psalm 8:4-6)

The author of Hebrews takes "a little lower" as equivalent to "for a little while lower;" that is, mankind is temporarily below the angels. One day, the Bible says, we will rule over the angels and judge them,[24] when we come into our "inheritance." Jesus, as our representative,

[24] 1 Corinthians 6:3.

has gone before us in this time of testing and then to glorification, as the true son who paves the way for the adopted sons.

All of these elements—the cycles of nature, marriage, and testing—point to the temporariness of the world as we know it. Even if humans had never sinned, this world would not be permanent; it would be like the chrysalis of the butterfly, to be shed for something greater.

There is a sense in which anything made by God must be lesser than him. Even in the glory of heaven, the things which we encounter in glory will be less weighty than God himself. But Scripture teaches that there is an additional weightlessness of the present age, because it was not designed to last forever.

This applies to our work in the following way. It is very easy for us to think that if our work fails or is undone, it must be because of sin. If only I had not sinned, or my neighbor had not sinned, then my work would have succeeded or the things I made would have lasted. That is not necessarily the case. Sin can certainly lead to the destruction of things before their time, but built-in forces in this world can also cause decay and failure. A farmer may fail to grow a crop because of his own laziness, or he may fail because someone else has sabotaged his equipment. But he may also fail because an unexpected storm comes. Perhaps God sent that storm as a direct punishment for some sin of the farmer, but most likely not. As the story of Job shows, perhaps the storm is purely a time of testing of the farmer, as part of the probationary nature of this world.

Are only the works of evil people vanity?

Many verses with the vanity theme in Scripture talk of the wicked passing away like the grass. Many of us like to think that *their* works are vanity, but not *our* good works. But Ecclesiastes, and the rest of Scripture, does not exempt Christian works from the general vanity of the world. Ecclesiastes 1:18 says, "In much wisdom is much vexation"—the wiser we are, the more we see the how little we can control things. Ecclesiastes 2:18-19 says, "I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool?" One could paraphrase this for pastors—who knows whether the next pastor of this church will be a wise man or a fool? Even if you do good work, it may be undone by another person after you.

If we look at church history, we see great works of God which were led by great people, which eventually passed away. For example, the day of Pentecost was a great work, when thousands of people come to the Lord in the days after Jesus ascended to heaven. But in a short time, that group was dispersed by persecution; within a generation, Jerusalem itself was destroyed, and within two generations, the whole Jewish church had become nearly nonexistent. Later on, great monastic movements were set up by godly men like Augustine and Francis of Assisi, but by the time of the Reformation they had become corrupt. The Reformation, in turn, led to the founding of the Lutheran and Presbyterian churches, which then fell into decay, especially in Europe where they were founded.

Revival movements led by people like Wesley led to the Methodist church, which also fell into being a "mainline, nominal" church. Some people today feel that "evangelicalism" will suffer the same type of regression.

The book of Ecclesiastes tells us that the work of God endures forever, and no one can add to it or subtract from it. His kingdom is forever. The kingdom of God is advancing, and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. But God may use one tool or another at different times.

Will we change the world?

In the past few decades it has been common to have "youth rallies" in which we tell our Christian teenagers they should set out to "change the world." Then when they grow up, and don't change the world, they get depressed. Shouldn't we rather tell them that *God* is the world-changer?

Many years ago, when my wife and I had our first child, this teaching greatly helped my wife Sandy. She had just quit her job and was staying at home with our baby girl. Her hours were filled with seemingly "empty" and "unfulfilling" tasks of changing diapers, cleaning up messes, and sitting, feeding the baby. She began to get depressed. She began to think, "What am I doing this for? So that this baby girl can grow up and do the same thing? And what will she do it for? So that her daughter can grow up and do the same thing? It is an endless, futile cycle!" What brought her out of it was reading Ecclesiastes. Yes—it is a cycle. Yes, changing diapers is unfulfilling. But who says that office work is more significant, more fulfilling? An office worker will generate paperwork, so that other people can read that paperwork and generate more paperwork, so that other people can generate more, and so on. The modern feminist movement says that being a mother is empty and doing office jobs is fulfilling, but the reality is much different for most women. Almost all types of work seem to get undone and need to be redone over and over.

Ecclesiastes says, "Enjoy life, do what is good, and enjoy what the Lord has given you to do." Sandy got her focus off the idea of getting "fulfillment" from her work, and put her focus on God himself as the one who is fulfilling. And she found that she could simply enjoy being with her baby, enjoy the little laughs and soft hands. She, like all of us, simply had to ask, "Am I doing what is good? Am I obeying the Lord?" If she could answer that question "Yes," then she did not have to look to see some deep, permanent impact to her work. Ecclesiastes says that we need to set our eyes on God, do what is good, and enjoy what He gives us, and then we can fall into bed content at night.

Suppose a pastor has a congregation of mostly older and poorer people. Like my wife Sandy, this pastor may ask, "What is the impact of what I am doing? I am putting my life's work into people who are too weak to build the kingdom themselves? These people will simply die off; none of them have the gifts for evangelism or teaching that will cause my church to grow. Is all my work just vanity?''

The answer is yes, our work in this life is vanity. Instead of asking if we are making a permanent impact, we should instead ask, "Has God called me to this work? Am I doing what is good?" The Bible tells us to fix our eyes on Jesus, not the permanence of our work, or the value that society puts on it, even when it is good work. When we stop trying to see lasting permanence in our work, we can simply enjoy it as something we can do well, and trust God to build His kingdom. As the apostle Paul said, we can "live a quiet life, work with our hands, and do good."[25]

All of the above discussion will be uncomfortable for people who see themselves as the leaders of great, earthshaking Christian "movements." Many evangelical leaders talk in terms of grand, sweeping movements that will change the world in a short time. This can lead to a sense of failure when the world doesn't change, at least, not as fast as we hoped. But as documented by James Hunter,[26] the movements that really did change the world started with people simply discussing ideas with their friends. Martin Luther, for example, was part of a broader, widespread discussion of the Bible taking place in his day, and his initial desire in nailing his theses to the Wittenberg door was simply to debate topics of interest locally.

In our society we have an ideal that our work should "fulfill" us, and by this we often mean that our work should be something that "makes a difference." Therefore we become depressed when something undoes our work or when we don't see much effect of our work; if we do see good effects, we can become tense and fearful that something will undo our work. The Bible says that we can be fulfilled by God alone.

The vanity theme is presented as deep wisdom in the Bible, in its deepest wisdom books. We must wrestle with it, and become wise ourselves to see the joy which it offers. Any approach to thinking about work which has not wrestled seriously with this deep and prevalent theme in Scripture has missed the whole counsel of God by a wide mark.

[25] 1 Thessalonians 4:11.
[26] J.D. Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World,* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

Chapter 5. Why Work?

In the previous chapters, we looked at the broad theme of Scripture that nothing in this world lasts forever, and much of our work may not even last long at all. Our focus needs to be on God himself as the only thing that can satisfy our desire for permanence.

If the work we do may not lead to anything lasting, then why work? Some people take Ecclesiastes as telling us to pursue a life of nihilist hedonism: just eat, drink and be merry until we die. But the Preacher doesn't say that. He says, in essence, do good work which is pleasing to God, and enjoy what God gives you:

> "There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?" (2:24-25)
>
> "I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man." (3:12-13)
>
> "Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God." (5:18-19)
>
> "I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun." (8:15)

There is a negative tone to the Hebrew word translated as "toil" here; this reflects the Curse of God on all of our work in Genesis 3:17-19. But every one of these verses also connects work with joy, and every one of these verses connects this enjoyment of work with God. Seeing God as the only permanent thing frees us up to enjoy our work for what it is—a simple joy—instead of trying to find ultimate meaning in our work (or in our pleasures). Once we have that settled, we can see several reasons to work, from the Bible's perspective. The following four sections summarize these reasons.

We work because God has made us to enjoy work

As discussed in Chapter 1, the creation mandate was given before humans had ever sinned. Work is not a punishment; it is what we were made to do. Paul puts it this way:

> "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2:10)
>
> "It is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." (Philippians 2:13)

Sometimes Christians don't connect the "good works" in these passages (which they think of as religious duties) with good work (that is, a job), but the Bible makes no such distinction. Good work is a "good work."

These passages, and the book of Ecclesiastes, tell us to enjoy what we do *now*, not to always be looking down the road to what happens next. To live with our minds fixed on eternity is not to live constantly looking down the road, but to treat each moment as a part of God's eternity.

One problem with keeping this perspective is that all work involves planning. We imagine a table and make plans to make that table. We imagine a new church and make plans to organize it. It therefore becomes natural to make plans with longer and longer looks into the future—we plan to make a table factory that will last and perhaps be inherited by our children; we plan a church movement that will impact the nations.

There is nothing wrong with planning or long-term strategy. But a sound perspective on the vanity of this world means that we must hold these plans lightly, with an open hand, so to speak, and not a hand which is clutched tight. James said,

> "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit'— yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.'" (James 4:13-15)

Similarly, Jesus said in Sermon on the Mount,

> "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble." (Matthew 6:25-34)

These passages are not telling us to make no plans at all, but they do tell us to take all plans with a grain of salt. We should not be frustrated if our plans are undone.

C.S. Lewis made a nice distinction in his writings between the "complex good" and the "simple good."[27] The complex good is when something good comes out of something bad, such as when God uses evil people to bring about his plans: "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good."[28] The simple good is when we see an immediate way in which to make something better and pursue that. Only God can make a complex good come about; if people try to do short-term evil so that good may come about, it is rightly condemned as "ends-justify-the-means" morality. We cannot take up an ends-justify-the-means approach to morality because, unlike God, we cannot see the end from the beginning.

The same approach applies to our work. We pursue the simple good, the immediate good, in our work. We may look down the road to try to strategize about more complicated goals, but we cannot sacrifice the simple good for those ends.

Another way to put it, then, is that we work because God has created us to make plans and to pursue them, but we can only be happy if we accept that God may overrule those plans.

We work because God remembers everything we do

There is a great difference between permanence and remembrance. We would like to find eternal permanence in our work, but we can't. Instead, we can connect to that deep desire for the eternal when we realize that God *remembers* our works for all eternity. The Final Judgment is not just about punishment of evil. It is also very much about remembering what was truly good, and vindicating those who worked for good. Even though none of us can say that our good work outweighs our sin, it is nevertheless a constant theme of Scripture that God will not forget when we have actually done good, and will reward us:

> "Vindicate me, O LORD, my God, according to your righteousness, and let them not rejoice over me! (Psalm 34:24)
>
> "For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do." (Hebrews 6:10)
>
> "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5:13)
>
> "If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward." (1 Corinthians 3:14)

This is the idea of "treasures in heaven." Jesus tells us not to store up treasures on this earth, where they can decay (that is, be subject to the temporariness and vanity of this world) but to store up treasures in heaven which are eternal.[29] He is not saying to trade

[27] C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain,* reprint (Harper Collins, 2001).
[28] Genesis 50:20.
[29] Matthew 6:19-20.

one type of stuff for another type of stuff, as though when we get to heaven, God will give a big mansion to people who did many good things, and a small mansion to those who did just a few. Rather, God's approval is its own reward. Our good deeds will be remembered forever, and that gives them an eternal significance that outweighs any physical permanence we might want.

We work because laziness is a type of injustice

We cannot ignore the obvious fact that work is necessary for life, for most people. There is nothing demeaning about working for money to buy the groceries and pay the rent. It is part of our calling in life to work to support ourselves and our family, and if we have abundance, to help others in need. If we make others work for us (including by using their taxes) when we could support ourselves, we are oppressors. The apostle Paul has harsh words for those who are lazy and do not support themselves and their families:

> "For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living." (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12)

> "But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." (1 Timothy 5:8)

The book of Proverbs has similar harsh things to say about the "sluggard."[30]

We work because God uses everything we do in his grand tapestry of history

When we take our eyes off of finding some thing which will fulfill us in our work, and fix our eyes on God as our only solid thing, we find the ability to rest in God's plans, even though we don't know exactly what those plans are. We should be encouraged by the knowledge of the grand sweep of history outlined in Chapter 1; we should lift up our eyes to see that we are not just mice scurrying to stay out the way of the secular powers of our day, but citizens of an eternal kingdom which is advancing.

We will discuss what we mean by the "kingdom of God" in Chapter 6. At this point, we just note that the book of Ecclesiastes does *not* say that everything in this world is random and unplanned; far from it. The picture the Bible gives us is that God is eternal, and has a grand eternal plan for all of history, which we mostly cannot see. As discussed in Chapter 3, history is like a tapestry of many threads made by God:

> "He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

[30] E.g., Proverbs 6:6-9, 1-:26, 13:4, 15:19, 21:35, 21:25.

Therefore, we can trust in the hope that God will have beautiful things out of what we do, not because our specific work has great permanence, but because it will be used by God in the whole story.

The concept of "calling"

The leaders of the Reformation in Europe promoted the idea of a *calling* to work, but this concept has been much distorted over the years. Many people think that a calling is a special message from God to find some type of work that is perfectly fulfilling to me. This view relies in large part on living in a society with many options for work. For most people throughout most of history, there was no such choice: you did what your father did, or you did what your master commanded. Even today, for many people work is primarily for the purpose of making money to live. The Reformers, and the Bible, would affirm this as a calling. Everyone who does good, honest work to make a living is fulfilling a calling of God. To reject honest labor because you are holding out for a "higher" type of work, making others support you until you find the perfect job, is narcissism.

The idea of "higher" callings, or "spiritual" callings, comes from a longstanding pagan theme in Western culture that makes a sharp separation between mental activity, which is often equated with spirituality, and physical activity, which is viewed as dirty and low. This has sometimes been called a "sacred" versus "secular" distinction, but even in our day, when very little is considered sacred, we still treat jobs which involve mental work as higher than physical labor. Similar distinctions are made in other pagan traditions, as well, such as in India, where higher castes rise above physical labor. The Bible knows nothing of this; there is no type of honest work which is too low for a Christian; our master Jesus removed his outer garments and washed his disciples' feet.[31] He deliberately did this to set an example for us. In the Christian view, the spirit inhabits both mind and body, and our full mind and body are given to God to glorify him.[32]

Of course, there is nothing wrong with trying to get a job with more pay and less drudgery. The apostle Paul said, "Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity."[33] If we have abundance in our work and more money to spare, we can bless others in many ways.

As a reaction to the cultural pattern of always trying to get higher in a career, some Christians deliberately have turned jobs with manual labor. This can still be a version of the trap of thinking that some jobs are of a "low" type; we just reverse the order. So, for example: turning down a job in a corporation to work as a barista in a coffee shop, because you don't want to "sell out," is silly. On the other hand, turning down a job in a corporation because you want to invest more time in developing a skill in art may make sense if you really have talent. Turning down a job in a corporation to be a pastor or church worker

[31] John 13:1-14.
[32] Mathew 22:37, Romans 12:1-2.
[33] 1 Corinthians 7:21.

because you have seen that you are having a great impact in church work may make sense. Turning down a job in a corporation to be a pastor, even though you really don't like spending a lot of time dealing with people's problems, because you think being a pastor is more spiritual, is a recipe for disaster.

Working with great energy

The Bible does not just say that we should work, it says that we should work *well*, with energy. In other words, we should pursue excellence. Paul says,

> "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ." (Colossians 3:23)

Paul here echoes Ecclesiastes:

> "Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going." (Ecclesiastes 9:9-10)

Some will react against the words, "there is no work or thought or wisdom in Sheol, where you are going." Is the Preacher saying here that there is no eternal life? No, the word *sheol* in the Old Testament is a generic term for the place of the dead, where they have no influence on the things of this life. The end of Ecclesiastes clearly teaches God's final judgment of the dead, when people are brought into account, and the writer (or editor) of Ecclesiastes would not have switched theology within a mere three chapters. The statement in this passage is that we should work with all our might while we have our time in the sun, that is, in the present, and not waste that moment with laziness.

Christians are to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and the indwelling of the Spirit is always connected with *energy* in the Bible:

> "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." (Acts 1:8)

> "For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control." (2 Timothy 1:7)

> "See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft." (Exodus 31:3)

As this last verse from Exodus indicates, the power of the Spirit is not just for mental work and preaching, but for craftsmanship and all types of good work. By contrast, the book of Proverbs castigates not only the lazy person who does not work, but also the one who works with less than heartily:

> "Whoever is slack in his work is a brother to him who destroys." (Proverbs 18:9)

Jesus also chastises the one who is lazy and doesn't take risks in his work:

> "He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness." (Matthew 25:24-30)

Many would apply this to church work, or evangelism, but Jesus is giving a general principle. God expects good, solid work from us. This doesn't mean working to exhaustion or the detriment of our health, as will we discuss in later, but it does mean giving God our best.

One of the terms used for this concept in the Bible is *fruitfulness*. From the beginning of Genesis, where God says "Be fruitful and multiply," to the words of Jesus, "By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit" (John 15:8), the Bible gives a picture of God's people as abundant and overflowing. This fruit comes in many forms. It comes out as the fruit of the Spirit in our character (Galatians 5:22-23), in the fruit of people we add to the church by evangelism, in the fruit of children raised and taught, and in the fruitfulness of actual harvests and good work. Paul says that we are to bear fruit in *every* good work:

> "Walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God." (Colossians 1:10)

The picture of fruitfulness in the Bible is always one of overflowing fruits, supplying not only our own needs but those of others. Abraham, Job, and others had flocks overflowing and used these to bless those around them. If we are just putting in our time, producing the minimum fruit we think God will allow, we are like the servant who buried his talent in the ground.

Connecting to history

In Chapter 2, we looked at two contrasting views: the pessimistic premillennialist or amillennialist, who finds no point in vigorous work other than evangelism, or the postmillennialist who thinks that we can take the products of our labor with us to heaven. We are now in a position to consider a third way.

Both of those views are founded on the underlying presupposition that the only reason to do any energetic work is if the results of that work will endure forever. The optimistic postmillennialist says they will, and therefore we should work to build heaven

on earth; the pessimistic premillennialist says they won't, and so places little value on any work except evangelism. Ecclesiastes, and the rest of Scripture, reverses this assumption. If we accept that the fruits of our work do not last forever, we can work energetically in the moment because that is what God has created us to do; God will remember our deeds and use them in his grander plans, the outcome of which we see only dimly now. If we want to find permanence in the fruit of our work, we will tend to either give up in despair, or we will live in anxiety, always trying to keep what we have going.

If we adopt the perspective of Ecclesiastes, it reduces considerably the stakes for deciding which view is correct about the end of history. If we don't need to see the value of our work in the degree of permanence of our contributions, we can take a more objective look at the texts of Scripture and be open to what they say.

While much is open to debate on the details, overall, Scripture teaches *both* themes, namely that the kingdom of God advances to fill the earth, and also that opposition to that kingdom increases, with increasing persecution of the church. This is taught perhaps most clearly in the parable of Jesus:

> "He put another parable before them, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?" He said to them, "An enemy has done this." So the servants said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" But he said, "No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'
>
> "Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.' He answered, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.'" (Matthew 13:24-29, 36-43)

This parable teaches clearly that both evil and good coexist until the end of the age, which Jesus equates with the final judgment. Both good and evil grow. This meshes with another theme in Scripture, often neglected in Western theology but developed extensively in Chinese[34] (and ancient Roman) theology, that it is normative for all Christians to expect persecution and suffering in this world:

[34] *Faith in the Wilderness: Words of Exhortation from the Chinese Church*, H. Nation, ed., (Kirkdale Press, 2022).

> Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." (2 Timothy 3:12)
>
> "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him." (Romans 8:16-17)
>
> "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." (James 1:2-4)

The Bible does not present suffering and persecution of Christians as a failure or a thwarting of God's purpose, but as used by him in his grand tapestry. There is no reason to expect that this does not continue until the end of this world; indeed, the depictions of the "anti-Christ," or "the beast," or the "man of lawlessness"[35] seem to indicate an especially bad time of persecution near the end. Our work cannot therefore be predicated on the expectation of victory over all the powers of this world.

While the postmillennial view may seem to lead to optimism and energy for work, if we take a realistic look at the world, this view can lead to depression. What if most of my work is mundane paper pushing just to get enough money to pay the bills? What if I am a garbage collector whose primary duty is to burn things up? What if I am a farmer who produces food that people will eat and turn into waste? What if my evangelism is rejected by everyone I know? I may admire a few heroes such as Martin Luther, Martin Luther King, James Maxwell, or J.S. Bach, depending on my tastes, but my work is nothing like theirs. Most of my work seems to go nowhere or gets undone by forces beyond my control.

Yes! says the Preacher of Ecclesiastes. Cheer up, your work is less permanent than you thought. Be a blooming flower in the sun, or a hanging red apple waiting to be picked, fruitful now and not preserved in formaldehyde for the future.

On the other hand, a pessimistic premillenial view says we should just hang around, with no energy for good work, waiting for Christ to return. To this, Ecclesiastes and the rest of the Bible responds that God made us to do good work with zeal, and even when that work is undone or fruitless, God uses both the ups and the downs of our work in the grand story of his kingdom.

Summary

At the beginning of this chapter, we asked, "Why should I work, if none of products of my work will be permanent?" That question has a lot in common with the question the apostle Paul addressed, which many people still ask today: "Why should I do good, if God can use even evil works as part of his grand story of grace and redemption?"[36]

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[35] Matthew 24:12, 2 Timothy 2:3, Revelation 13:11-18.
[36] Romans 6:1.

Paul's answer in that passage was essentially, "Do good because that is who you were made to be." You were made to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit and united to Jesus, as an obedient child of the Father. He created good works for you to do, and you will find joy in doing them, not because you create a permanent change in the world, or because the world applauds you, but because God sees and knows and remembers, and enjoys our good work and its fruits along with us.

Chapter 6. The Kingdom of God

The previous chapters have taught us that we do good work because it is good, not because it creates something permanent. But that still leaves open the question, "What is good work?" We have discussed how all types of good work are callings for Christians, not just church work. But we can ask a different question. Is there any overall priority of some types of work over others, for the church? Should we expect that our gifts and callings will tend to favor some types of work over others? If I have an abundance of financial resources, what types of work should I give my money to? Would it be okay, for example, to take my tithe money and give it to a scientist?

This idea of prioritization of effort by the church is controversial. If I don't prioritize your type of work, you may be offended. We all want to think that we are doing the most important type of work, or else that all work is equal. How dare anyone claim to be doing work that is more important than mine?

There is a difference between higher-priority work and "higher" work. Think, for example, of an army. The purpose of an army is to occupy land through use of force. There are many types of jobs in the army, all of which aid this effort. All of those jobs are honorable, and officers of high rank oversee each type of work. But the work of soldiers on the front line is the most directly connected to the mission of the army. Someone must actually fight the enemy and occupy the land. In a typical army, less than 10% of the personnel are combat-ready to be able to do this. The rest of the army works in support: supplies, transport, administration, medical care, music and entertainment for good morale, and so on. While every one of these jobs is a calling in the army, not all are as high priority as the soldier on the front line. No one would argue, for example, that an army could operate with 100% of its personnel in marching bands and 0% ready for combat on the front lines. It could, however, operate with 0% in marching bands, although it would probably lose morale over the long run.

Jesus gave us a prioritization when he said, "Seek first the kingdom of God"… and told us to treat other things, such as food, drink, and clothing, as less important.[37] This immediately raises the question, "What is the kingdom of God?" The idea of the kingdom of God pervades the preaching of Jesus—the terms "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" are used 83 times in the Gospels. In this and the next few chapters, we will examine the concept of the kingdom of God.

What is the kingdom?

The first question we must answer is, "What is the kingdom?" Is the kingdom of God a set of ideas? An ethereal entity in a spiritual plane? Is it a place, a location on earth? Is it a set of things, for example, cultural artifacts? Is it a governmental political structure?

[37] Matthew 6:33.

Many books have been written on this topic, but we will miss the point it we do not see that the kingdom of God is *people*. The whole Bible is about people, real people in space and time, not ideas or propositions, and not the physical stuff of this world which is, as we have seen, vanity. People think ideas, and people make stuff, but the kingdom of God cannot exist without the people who produce them. The kingdom is also not a place, although the people of God have to live somewhere, and the relation of the people of God to the physical land where they live is important.

The kingdom of God is fundamentally the community of people who follow God as their king. The Bible often describes it as a kingdom of nomads. From the beginning of the story of the Bible in Genesis, God calls people to leave their homes and travel to other lands, starting with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who traveled about raising sheep, to Joseph, who led them into Egypt, and Moses, who led them around in the desert. They then conquered the land of Canaan, where they lived for many years, but not long afterwards, they were dispersed into exile in Babylon and other nations. Hebrews 11 describes all the saints of the Old Testament as strangers and exiles in this world, and sets them up as an example for Christians, who also have their true home in another place than this world.

When the Israelites lived in the land of Canaan, the kingdom of God looked a lot like other kingdoms of this world. Although God initially set them up with no royalty, and himself as their king with the prophets as his spokesmen, at the time of Saul and David they asked for a king, and God appointed one for them. The time of relative peace in the latter part of King David's reign and in the reign of King Solomon, while relatively short in duration, is a foreshadowing, or typological symbol, of the final peace of the people God in glory. The earthly king David foreshadows the true king, Jesus, and the land of Israel foreshadows the ultimate rule of God's people over the whole earth. (Christopher Wright is especially eloquent on this subject.[38])

The nation of Israel was eventually conquered and dispersed among the lands of the Babylonians, once again becoming strangers and exiles in practice. While at one level, this was a failure of Israel, it also set up a new paradigm for the kingdom of God: a community of people living among other peoples, infiltrating other nations, bound together not by a location but by their allegiance to God. The synagogue system where Jews met to hear the Scriptures became the model for the Christian church,[39] which sprang from the Jewish nation. Just as God used a sinful desire of the people for a king for his own purposes, he also used their exile due to sin to set up a new paradigm. Although he eventually sent many

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[38] See, e.g., the discussion of the Old Testament land laws in C.J.H. Wright, *An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today*, (Intervarsity Press, 1983), and *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Intervarity Press, 2013).

[39] There has been debate about whether the proper model for the church is the Temple, or "tabernacle," of the Old Testament or the synagogue. The Temple could be in only one place, and represented God's direct presence, while synagogues existed in every town. The letter of James directly calls the church a "synagogue" (James 2:2); this word is sometimes translated as "assembly" to blunt the apparent "Jewishness" of this passage. The letter to the Hebrews clearly teaches that our Temple is now not on earth, but in heaven (Hebrews 9:23-24). Historically, it is well established that early churches modeled themselves after Jewish synagogues.

of them back to their original land, he encouraged the Jews to build communities in the lands where they lived among others:

> "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." (Jeremiah 29:5-7)

The books of Daniel, Nehemiah and Esther show how Jews in exile engaged fully with the powers of the nations in which they lived. These books show that although the kingdom of God was embodied in the physical nation of Israel for a time, the kingdom of God transcends that physical nation. The kingdom was God's people, visited by him and protected by him, wherever they lived.

In the New Testament era in which we now live, the kingdom of God is still embodied by real communities of real people. There is no individualistic religion in the New Testament—all of the people of God are gathered into communities which worship and meet together. The New Testament writers explicitly make a connection of the Church with the older community of Israel. The Gentile church is a continuous outgrowth of the people of God in the Old Testament:

> Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace…you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:11-22)

This passage by the apostle Paul clearly says that there is no divide between the nation of Israel and the present church—there is one story, "one man," not two different stories of God's people. Peter says the same:

> "You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." (1 Peter 2:5-9)

The people of God are the kingdom of God—a holy nation—wherever they live and whatever their ethnicity.

When does the kingdom start?

In one sense the holy nation, the kingdom of God, existed from ancient times, being embodied in Israel. In another sense, Scripture talks of the kingdom of God starting with the coronation of the King, that is, at the advent of Jesus. One may say that the nation of Israel before Christ was the kingdom of God in nascent form, that is, the "pregnancy" of the kingdom. The book of Revelation gives this picture:

> "And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness." (Revelation 12:1-5)

It is beyond the scope of this book to give a full exposition of the symbolism of the book of Revelation, but the main symbols here are obvious: the woman in labor with a crown of 12 stars is the nation of the 12 tribes of Israel; the one whom she bears who will "rule the nations with a rod of iron" is Jesus, the king; the language of the king who rules the nations with a rod of iron is taken from Psalm 2, a messianic Psalm quoted often in the New Testament in reference to Jesus. After Jesus ascends to his throne in heaven, the women is pursued by the devil and flees to the wilderness, in what seems to be a clear reference to the Diaspora of the Jewish nation after the destruction of Israel in 70 AD.

The name Messiah (which is translated into Greek as the "Christ") means the king.[40] Jesus at first refused to be known by the title of Messiah/Christ, because he did not want to take up the role of the king which the people imagined he would take, namely a conquering warrior. But he eventually did take it up and affirm his position as the true king of Israel.[41]

Jesus could therefore speak of the kingdom of God being "at hand," that is, ready to begin, and "among you," because he, the king, had come. While there was continuity of his reign with the old kingdom of Israel, there was also something truly new. The new king brought a new covenant, that is, new terms of relationship with the king.[42] The Old

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[40] "Messiah" literally means "anointed one"—Israel's kings were set apart by anointing, that is, by a prophet or priest pouring oil on their heads. Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit (who is often represented by oil/anointing in the Scriptures, e.g. Isaiah 61:1, Zech 4:3-6, 11-12) in the presence of John, the last of the prophets.

[41] Matthew 16:16-20.

[42] Hebrews 8:6-13, Jeremiah 31:31-34, Luke 22:20.

Testament scholar Meredith Kline has amply shown[43] that the whole structure of the Bible is based on the Middle Eastern concept of a treaty of union with a sovereign king.

[43] M.G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority,* 2nd edition (Wipf and Stock, 1997).

Chapter 7. The Growth of the Kingdom

We may say that the kingdom in Israel before Christ was like a seed planted that had not sprouted, and that with the advent of Christ, the kingdom sprouted into a green plant. Continuing this analogy, the kingdom is growing, but has not yet reached fruition, at which point it will bear fruit which is harvested. That point in time will come at the "end of the age," when Jesus returns to judge the nations and set up his fully realized kingdom. Therefore we continue to pray, "May your kingdom come," because the full fruition of the kingdom is not yet here.

This picture of a growing kingdom which starts at the time of Christ and increases until a future fullness is given in many places in Scripture. In Chapter 3 we have already looked at the harvest imagery used by Christ to refer to the end of the age, when the kingdom has reached fruition:

> "He put another parable before them, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?" He said to them, "An enemy has done this." So the servants said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" But he said, "No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, "Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn."" (Matthew 13:24-30)

Note the connection to vanity theme: a great part is "burned up;" there is a connection of the plant before the harvest to the fruit gathered after the harvest, but it is a radical transformation, similar to the transformation of the caterpillar into a butterfly.

Another image used by writers in the New Testament is that of a marriage: we are presently "engaged" to Christ, and at the end of the age there will be the wedding supper, followed by the "consummation" of the marriage—the full joy of being in the presence of Christ as his Bride:

> "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish." (Ephesians 5:25-27)

> "Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready." (Revelation 19:7)

> "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." (Revelation 21:2)

In the culture of the ancient Near East, the time of engagement was viewed as a real marriage, and in the same way, we can say that we are already truly married to Christ, but the marriage has not been consummated, just as we can say that the kingdom is already truly here, but not fully.

Other images in Scripture give the picture of the kingdom growing until has it reached its fullness:

> **"**He put another parable before them, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.'
>
> **"**He told them another parable. 'The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened." (Matthew 13:31-33)

Both of these pictures are of something with a small start (a tiny seed or a small lump of yeast) which is nevertheless living and active, and which grows until it has reached completion, or fruition.

Old Testament pictures of the growth of the kingdom

This image of growth of the future kingdom until it reaches fullness is also given by prophets in the Old Testament. The book of Daniel also gives the picture of the kingdom of God starting at the advent of Christ, after the nation of Israel already existed. This requires some attention to the symbolism of the prophecy, which is explained by Daniel:

> "You saw, O king, and behold, a great image. This image, mighty and of exceeding brightness, stood before you, and its appearance was frightening. The head of this image was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its middle and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. As you looked, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.
>
> "This was the dream. Now we will tell the king its interpretation. You, O king, the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, and the might, and the glory, and into whose hand he has given, wherever they dwell, the children of man, the beasts of the field, and the birds of the heavens, making you rule over them all—you are the head of gold. Another kingdom inferior to you shall arise after you, and yet a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth. And there shall be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron, because iron breaks to pieces and shatters all things. And like iron that crushes, it shall break and crush all these. And as you saw the feet and toes, partly of potter's clay and partly of iron, it shall be a divided kingdom, but some of the firmness of iron shall be in it, just as you saw iron mixed with the soft clay. And as the toes of the feet were partly iron and partly clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly brittle. As you saw the iron

> mixed with soft clay, so they will mix with one another in marriage, but they will not hold together, just as iron does not mix with clay. And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever, just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. A great God has made known to the king what shall be after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation sure." (Daniel 2:31-45)

We see in this passage, first of all, that Daniel predicts a new kingdom which is future to him; that is future to the kingdom of Israel known in Daniel's day. If one follows the imagery of the book of Daniel carefully, it is clear that this kingdom, which is represented by the stone that breaks apart other kingdoms, appears in the Roman Empire. Daniel clearly says that the golden head is the Babylonian kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar, which appeared at the time to be invulnerable. The second kingdom which arises after him (Daniel 2:39) is the kingdom of the Medes and Persians, which overthrew the Babylonians in Daniel's lifetime. Some have argued that these were two separate kingdoms, but the book of Daniel clearly treats this alliance as one joint kingdom (Daniel 5:28, 6:8, 8:20). This kingdom was supplanted by the kingdom of the Greeks under Alexander the Great, which is clearly indicated in the prophecy of Daniel 8, which introduces the Greeks as the goat (Daniel 8:20) whose kingdom is broken into four parts. The history of these four parts, given in surprising detail in Daniel 11, is clearly that of Greece. The fourth kingdom, which supplants Greece in the land of Israel, is Rome. At that time, the kingdom of God enters the world and shakes apart all other kingdoms.

The description of this kingdom matches that in the New Testament: a growing kingdom: the stone starts small, as an outsider, but then "the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth." (Daniel 2:35)

The same picture is given by Isaiah:

> "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this." (Isaiah 9:6-7)

Note, again, that the kingdom is prophesied to be future to Israel, with the advent of the king (Jesus), and also that it will "increase" until it is "established."

Crashing the gates of hell

Consider also the oft-quoted words of Jesus:

> "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18)

Many have used this verse to debate the role of the Pope, but note what this verse teaches about the kingdom. First, Jesus talks of a future "building" of the church. As we saw in the previous chapter, the church is the embodiment of the kingdom today. The word "church" used in this passage by Jesus is the Greek word *ecclesian*, which means "the gathering of people," i.e., the "community."

Second, in this passage, Jesus says that his church is on the march, not retreating. It is not hell which is on the attack, but the church. A gate is not an offensive weapon, it is a defensive one. Hell is cowering behind its gates, defensively, while the church batters against the gates, which cannot stand against the onslaught of the church. It is a conquering kingdom.

All the above images give the picture of a kingdom which starts small but is growing and thriving, with a time future to us when it reaches its fullness. We should have an overall optimistic view of the church, which as we have seen, is the kingdom of God, the people of God. We should not think of ourselves as mice scurrying to keep out of danger in someone else's world, but as agents of a conquering kingdom. One could say that the kingdom of Israel was like partisans operating in France in World War I before the D-Day invasion, the advent of Christ was like the D-Day invasion when God broke into this world with power, we are now engaged in a difficult mopping-up operation as the invading kingdom expands its domain, and the end of the age will be like the unconditional surrender of Germany and Japan. As the hymn proclaims,

> This is my Father's world. O let me never forget
> That though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.
> This is my Father's world: the battle is not done:
> Jesus who died shall be satisfied, and earth and heaven be one.

How does the kingdom grow?

Many commentators agree with the picture of a growing and expanding kingdom which I have given here, but there is disagreement about what that growth looks like. Does the growth of the kingdom mean growth of political power held by Christians? Growth of the land controlled by Christians? Growth of the wealth of Christians?

As discussed in Chapter 6, the kingdom of God is *people*. The growth of the kingdom consists of people from every tongue, tribe, and nation being added to the people of God. One cannot miss this emphasis in the book of Revelation. What does the book of Revelation celebrate in its glimpses into heaven? Cultural artifacts? Acquisition of land? Political power? No, it celebrates *people*:

> "And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth." (Revelation 5:9-10)

> **"**When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been. (Revelation 6:9-11)
>
> **"**After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!' Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?' I said to him, 'Sir, you know.' And he said to me, 'These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'" (Revelation 7:9-17)

In Revelation 5:9-10, it is *people* that are ransomed, and *people* that are a kingdom. In Revelation 6:9-11, we see that the consummation of the king occurs when "the number of their brothers is complete"—the number of people brought into the kingdom, who die in the name of Christ.

The global nature of the kingdom

Revelation 7:9-17 echoes the words of Jesus in several places which connect the consummation of the kingdom, or "end of the age," with bringing in the full number of people from all the nations:

> "And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." (Matthew 24:14)
>
> "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20)
>
> "Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.'" (Luke 24:46-47)
>
> "So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?' He said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has

> come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.'" (Acts 1:6-8)

Note that Luke 24:46-47 implies that the Old Testament Scriptures used by Jesus teach that the Gospel should go out to all nations. Missiologist Ralph Winter[44] and Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright[45] have developed at length the theme in the Old Testament that the nation of Israel had a mandate to preach to all the nations. This is seen, for example, in the blessing given to Abraham at the founding of the nation of Israel:

> "And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:2-3)

We also see this universal scope to the nations in the Psalms, such as the following, among many references:

> "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you. For kingship belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations." (Psalm 22:27-28)

> "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!" (Psalm 46:10)

> **"**Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth." (Psalm 67:4)

There is also a theme in the Psalms and prophets of God judging the nations, but this also points to the universal scope of the God's rule: God has the same standards of right and wrong for all people, and judges them all with equity and justice.

The primary way in which the nations were to be reached under the Old Covenant was by adding them to the physical nation of Israel. The book of Ruth, for example, is entirely about the process by which a Gentile is converted to the faith, being added to the people of God. The genealogy of the Old Testament ancestors of Christ in the book of Matthew goes out of its way to mention the inclusion of foreigners, including Ruth who had been brought into the kingdom:

> "Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the

[44] R.D. Winter, in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement,* 4th edition, R.D. Winter and S.C. Hawth (William Carey Library, 2009).
[45] C.J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Intervarity Press, 2013).

> father of David the king, and David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah." (Matthew 1:2-6)

Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth were all non-Israelite women by birth, and Uriah was also a foreigner, a Hittite (and likely his wife Bathsheba was, as well).

Israel was meant to be a blessing and a sign to the nations, but often failed in that mission. Nevertheless there were times of great witness to the nations, such as the time of Solomon, when kings and queens came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, or the times of Joseph in Egypt, Daniel in Babylon, and Esther in Persia, when God brought great fame to the Jews, leading many people to investigate just what these Jews believed.

In the New Testament era, the Gentiles are brought in with much greater numbers. The Apostle Paul speaks of the mystery which was unknown to the Jews of how the Gentiles would be brought into the kingdom.

> "This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel." (Ephesians 3:6)

Much of the debate in the New Testament is about how this shall happen. Many early Christians felt that the pattern should be the same as in the Old Testament, with Gentiles joining themselves to physical Israel and following its laws. But God clearly revealed to the church that the New Covenant brought in a new order, with new patterns.[46]

It cannot be missed that the focus in the New Testament is on bringing people into the kingdom. There is no lengthy discussion of setting up governments, creating cultural artifacts, controlling land, establishing schools of philosophy, etc. All of those things are good and natural activities of people, getting passing mention in the New Testament, but the focus is on actual people with names, and how they come into the kingdom.

[46] E.g. Acts 10:9-16, Hebrews 8:13.

Chapter 8. The Future of the Kingdom

In earlier chapters we discussed two opposite poles of thinking about the future of the world, which may be called optimistic postmillenialism and pessimistic premillenialism. When we think about the future of the kingdom of God, these schools of thought once again come into view. What is our "hope"? The Bible places great emphasis on hope for the future. The Apostle Paul said that the three great character attributes are faith, hope, and love. Many Christians spend a of lot time talking about faith and love, but not so much on hope. Can we be hopeful about the future?

The persecution theme

Postmillennialism says that the kingdom of God conquers this world, creating a golden age called the Millennium. All of the optimism expressed in Chapter 7 might seem to support this view. But as discussed in the past few chapters, although the Bible gives a glowing picture of the growth of the kingdom, it also gives a consistent message of persecution until the end. Over and over, the New Testament tells us that there will be no end of persecutions, and that the mark of Christians generally is to endure suffering for the faith. Besides the passages mentioned earlier, there are many more:

> "Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you." (John 15:20)
>
> "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)
>
> "When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." (Acts 14:21-22)
>
> "So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come." (Hebrews 13:12-14)
>
> "But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed." (1 Peter 4:13)
>
> "Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets….Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets." (Luke 6:22-23, 26)
>
> "Jesus said, 'Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children

and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life." (Mark 10:29-30)

Note how all of these passages give no end date for when persecutions in this world cease; rather, they all speak of persecution as the norm for Christians. The last five passages quoted above make a direct contrast between the present age, which has sufferings, and the age to come, when we will have eternal life and no suffering.

This teaching is surprisingly controversial, given how prevalent it is in the New Testament. Many churches hold to the idea of a "pre-tribulational rapture," by which they mean that God's people will all be taken directly to heaven at some point, avoiding the worst sufferings of this world before Christ returns. Other churches, with a postmillennial mindset, envision a future age in this world in which the God's people rule over the nations before Christ returns, and so must suppose that the persecutions end when Christians begin to rule. The simplest way to understand the above passages, however, is that persecutions and tribulation occur for Christians right up until the return of Christ, and in fact may become most intense right before he returns. The following prophesy of Jesus gives support to this view:

> "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." (Matthew 24:9-14)

The long prophesy of Jesus in Matthew 24 has, of course, been the subject of great debate, and it is beyond the scope of this book to exposit the entire passage.[47] But in this section of the prophesy, it seems clear that the "end" which must be endured to, through persecutions, is also the "end" which comes when the Gospel is preached to all nations. In other words, at the same time that the kingdom is growing by reaching people from every tongue and tribe, it is also undergoing persecution and trial.

We thus have in the New Testament, side by side, the picture of a conquering kingdom growing and advancing, and the picture of a suffering, persecuted people. We can reconcile these two pictures by remembering that the kingdom of God is people, not

[47] In a nutshell, my view is that Matthew 24:4-14 are general remarks about the future, namely things that should not make Christians believe the end has come, namely wars, rumors or wars, famines, earthquakes, persecutions, and false prophets. These, Jesus says, are not to alarm us, but to be expected as normal. After speaking of the "end" in 24:14, Jesus then digresses in 24:15-28 to discuss the specific tribulation which will occurred 70 AD, at the destruction of the Jewish Temple by the Romans (the "abomination of desolation", a standard term for the capture of the Temple by pagans). The application of 24:25-28 to the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD is often overlooked by modern Christians not familiar with the history and significance of that event, but it has huge importance as the end of the Tempe worship Israel for all time. This discussion of Jesus regarding the Temple relates to his remark which spurred the disciples to question him, namely, that not one stone of the Temple would be left on another (24:1). Jesus's point here is that the disciples should *not* view this as the return of Christ (24:23). In 24:29-44, he then returns to discuss the "end" referred to in 24:14, following the general tribulation discussed in 24:4-14.

structures, things, or land. If we viewed the kingdom as primarily consisting of worldly power and wealth (the things the kingdoms of this world are concerned about, which as we have seen, the Bible calls vanities), then we would have to conclude either 1) the persecutions will end when Christians control everything, which seems to contradict the Scriptures which tell us to always expect persecution, or 2) the kingdom of God fails and does not grow after all. But if we view the kingdom as people, we can see that the witness of suffering is often the tool that God uses to bring people into his kingdom. In the metaphor of the kingdom as a growing plant, it is sometimes the pruning of the vine which God uses to make it more fruitful.

There is a connection between the persecution theme and the vanity theme in the Bible. Both tell us that we should not rest our hopes on success in this world—either for ourselves personally, or for the church movement of which we are a part. God's kingdom advances, and people are added to it, but it may often not look like success from the perspective of the world.

How many of the young Christians who set out to change the world take this persecution theme seriously? Yes, there have been times when church movements have grown rapidly and visibly, and even had success in worldly terms. Yet often, in the hindsight of history, these have been some of the most corrupt periods of the church—worldly success was bought at too high a price in sacrifice of integrity, in not confronting the sins of their generation or using morally compromised means to gain success. Even times of true spiritual revival have shifted focus in later years to worldly ends; for example, the Reformation in Europe, which began on the basis of widespread, true concern for spiritual matters, shifted over time to a focus on work and wealth as ends in themselves, leading many later historians to characterize Calvinism as entirely concerned about worldly wealth. If we evaluate the success of our church movement as having "all people speak well of us," then we fly in the face of the words of Jesus who says that such occurs only for false prophets.[48] Godly church movements *will* fail to be popular with many people, even to the point of hatred and mockery.

How tangible is the future kingdom?

Those who hold to a future millennium, whether of the postmillennial or premillennial variety, which is distinct from the final glory of heaven, often do so because the Bible gives many verses which depict the future kingdom of God in very concrete, physical terms. The following are just a few such passages:

> "But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken." (Micah 4:4)
>
> "Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried on the hip. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be

[48] Luke 6:26.

> turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you; the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; they shall come up with acceptance on my altar, and I will beautify my beautiful house…
>
> "Instead of bronze I will bring gold, and instead of iron I will bring silver; instead of wood, bronze, instead of stones, iron. I will make your overseers peace and your taskmasters righteousness. Violence shall no more be heard in your land, devastation or destruction within your borders; you shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise.
>
> "The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give you light; but the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun shall no more go down, nor your moon withdraw itself; for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended." (Isaiah 60:4-7, 17-20)
>
> "Thus says the LORD of hosts: Peoples shall yet come, even the inhabitants of many cities. The inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, 'Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the LORD and to seek the LORD of hosts; I myself am going.' Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'" (Zechariah 8:20-23)

These pictures of the future kingdom include gold, iron, spices, flocks of animals, gardens with trees and vines, cities with highways, people going back and forth between cities, and so on. Because this is such a concrete picture, and because it is given by the Old Testament prophets, many premillennialists believe that there will be a future time when the Jewish nation of Israel will rule in this earth.

Postmillenialists rightly note that verses such as Ephesians 2:11-12 show that the church is the inheritor of the promises to Israel, and that the church and Israel are one kingdom in two phases, not two distinct kingdoms.[49] From this they conclude that there will be a time in this world in which the church will have cities, vines, gold, etc. They tend to emphasize the continuity of this future kingdom with the final kingdom of God which begins at the return of Christ—Christ comes to sit as the king on the throne which has already been set up for him. Thus postmillenialist authors such as Andy Crouch and Tom Nelson deduce that we take the stuff of this world with us to the future glorious kingdom.

There is clearly some degree of similarity with the present world and its final glorious state. Not only the Old Testament prophets, but also the book of Revelation uses

[49] Some object to this view as "replacement theology," which they see as saying that abandons his promises to the physical descendants of Abraham. More properly, Reformed theology teaches that Ephesians 2 the rest of the New Testament teach that messianic Israel is a subset of the kingdom of God, not abolished but united to the Gentile church, with whom they share the promises. There is no need, in the standard Reformed view, for messianic Jews drop Jewish ethnic identity and adopt purely Gentile culture.

similar concrete language to talk of the future glory of the kingdom, with city streets, trees, and rivers:

> **"**Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, 'Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.' And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed— on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. … And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass.
>
> "And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.
>
> **"**Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever." (Revelation 21:9-14,21-27; 22:1-5)

Jesus, similarly, talks of eating and drinking in that day:

> "I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." (Matthew 26:29)

In his parable of the minas (Luke 19: 11-27), Jesus also teaches that people in heaven will be rewarded for good work in this life by having more work to do in heaven: one faithful servant was given charge over ten cities, and another five cities, when the Master returns to judge them.

We can conclude that we will be people who do stuff, eat and drink, and have places to go to. Many people think of eternal life as either some kind of ethereal non-being, or else the caricature of sitting around on clouds, with nothing to do but play a harp. Both of those images are very far from the Bible's picture of heaven. We should be encouraged that we will not be bored in heaven!

Yet as we discussed in Chapter 2, we cannot overlook the discontinuity with the present age which also appears in these pictures. In both the Isaiah 60 passage and the Revelation 21 passage, there is no day and night, because there is light all the time from the Lord. If we take a concrete view of these passages, we must conclude that nature will be radically changed, since much of our present natural order relies on darkness. As another example of discontinuity, Revelation 21:1 says there will be no sea. In our world, the sea is crucial for the water cycle and the balance of life.

The apostle Paul deals with this issue of continuity plus discontinuity in his lengthy discussion of the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:

> **"**But someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?' You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. For not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory.
>
> **"**So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body." (1 Corinthians 15:35-44)

On one hand, Paul says that we will have a "body." We will not be disembodied, ethereal ghosts. On the other hand, our body will not be like our body here; it will be a "spiritual body." The connection between the two types of body comes in the image we have discussed several times: the seed which is destroyed but has continuity with the later plant. There is radical change, yet connection.

We can conclude that we will have a sense of identity, of being ourselves as distinct persons, and will not be submerged into some ethereal All, even as we are radically changed. As Job put it,

> "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another." (Job 19:25-27)

The New International Version of the Bible translates the last phrase, "I, and not another." It will be me seeing God, not a reconstructed me with no memory of my life here. Yet at the same time, life will be radically different, in an unimaginable way. We don't know what it all will look like, but we know that we will be persons who are like Christ:

> "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him." (1 John 3:2)

"More real"

One of the best pictures of this continuity-yet-discontinuity is the picture of heaven in C.S. Lewis' book, *The Last Battle*. As the characters explore that world, they find things that are like apples, and yet not quite the same—they are "true" apples, of which all earthly apples were shadows or copies. The country they travel in is like England, yet not—it is the way England should have been, in some ideal sense. C.S. Lewis used the phrase "more real" to describe the concreteness of heaven. It is radically different, not because it is less than physical, but because it is more than physical. In his book, *The Great Divorce*, the blades of grass in heaven cut through the feet of the people from earth, who are less substantial, less real, than the grass in the new kingdom. Another analogy is that the transition from this world to the next is like a person watching a movie on television, which seems to be reality, but then when the program ends, he looks around and realizes that it was just a dim copy. In the same way, we have all had the experience of dreaming a dream that felt entirely real, yet when we woke up, we instantly knew that the real world was "more real."

As we saw in Chapter 3, anything that is not God himself cannot be worth displacing God from our attention. Even in heaven, we will not worship the things there, whatever they look like, since that would be idolatry. From this, one might conclude that the things of heaven will also be vanity. But the Bible does not talk this way. The vanity of the things of this world does not simply consist of the fact that they are non-God. There is an additional diminishment, which is their transitory nature. God did not create the things of this world to last forever. As discussed in Chapter 2, even if Adam and Eve had never sinned, this world would have been a temporary testing place before the final, eternal kingdom. The things of heaven, by contrast, have an eternal nature:

> "We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." (2 Corinthians 2:18)
>
> "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal." (Matthew 6:19-20)

It is not only the presence of sin in this world (thieves), but also the natural processes of this world (rust and moths) which make things temporary. Rust is built into the chemical processes which are governed by the basic laws of physics of the whole universe. Insects are built to eat things.

In some way which we cannot fully understand, the things and places of the future kingdom will be more substantial, more real, in the language of C.S. Lewis, than the things of this earth. This is related to the fact that there we will see God face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12). In his direct presence, the things of life themselves take on more of the substantiality of God.

All things new

Although the kingdom of God is about people, the people of the kingdom have a place to live stored up for them in heaven which is solid and concrete, tangible and enjoyable. Does this mean that we can focus in on these aspects?

I once heard a well-intentioned pastor preach on John 3:16, which says, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." He give the exposition that the phrase "God so loved the world" means that God loves the physical earth, the stuff of this world.

One can certainly say that God enjoys his physical creation, but this verse says nothing of the sort. The word translated "world" here is the Greek word *kosmon*, which refers to the world of people, what we might call the "cosmopolitan order." The word for the physical earth is *ge* in Greek (from whence we get the word "geology"). Far from saying that God is fixated on maintaining this physical order, John 3:16 says just the opposite: that God prioritizes people, and the mission of his Son was to save people and give them eternal life.

This adding of people to his kingdom is not one-dimensional. People form communities, and communities do lots of stuff and make stuff. Good communities make their physical locations better. But the stuff never supercedes the people themselves.

As we have seen, the kingdom of God is a living, growing entity consisting of the community of God's people throughout the ages. It is not tied to one land nor one nation. It grows even as it is persecuted. At the end of time, when the full number of God's people has come in, Christ will return for the harvest, and the kingdom of God will enter an utterly new stage of permanence.

In Revelation 21:5, God says he will make "all things new." All *things* are new, but the people are *not* new—the people are the same people who entered the kingdom in this world. The people have new bodies, but they themselves are still the same people. The continuity of the kingdom is that the people of God *are* the kingdom, and they have eternal life.

If the people are the same, it stands to reason that some of the aspects of their cultures will be with them, just as their various languages will be there, as it is written in Revelation, every tongue and tribe and nation. Your identity is intrinsically connected to your culture, especially your birth culture. But we can't equate this with saying that our accomplishments or treasures in this world, which make up part of our culture, will provide any significant addition to the eternal things of the age to come. We can say that everything we have done for God's kingdom in the here and now, whether successful or not by the standards of this world, will be remembered by us and by God. The things we do form part of the relationship we have with God and with each other, and those relationships last forever.

Chapter 9. Can We Be Too Heavenly Minded?

Some churches have backed off from talking about the future of the kingdom because of the perception in our culture that those who become "too heavenly minded" are "no earthly good." This accusation goes back at least as far as Karl Marx, who argued that religion focused on an afterlife is an "opiate of the people," because the powers of this world can get the poor and oppressed to accept their lot and not agitate against it, waiting for heaven instead. Over the past century, this led to a division between churches that pursue the "social Gospel," focusing on helping people with physical problems and lack of justice in this world, and those that preach the "future hope," working to get people right with God spiritually and ready to stand before God in his judgment.

Of course, how we think about this depends crucially on how real we think the hope of the kingdom of heaven is. If we don't really think there is really a resurrection of the dead, or if we think that it will be ethereal and wispy, then this world will dominate our attention. On the other hand, if we really believe that an eternal future life awaits people, how empty it would be to give people a few better years in the present life, while they throw away an eternity of joy! As Jesus said, "What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?"[50]

But in the history of the church, we find that being heavenly minded actually doesn't make people less concerned about helping others. When the future hope of heaven has taken hold in a society, Christians have made great strides toward relieving suffering and making things better in this world. In the Roman Empire, Christians ended the spectacle of murder as entertainment in the arenas, and took in discarded children from the rest of society, even going to the trash heaps of cities to find babies thrown away by others. In the middle ages, Christians set up the first hospitals and universities open to anyone, not just to the rich. In the Reformation, Christians organized national programs to feed and educate the poor, bringing literacy to nearly 100% of the population of their countries. In the late 1700's, the Abolitionist movement, led by people like William Wilberforce and John Newton (author of the song, "Amazing Grace"), became the first anti-slavery movement anywhere in the world, and by the early 1800's, they succeeded at making Great Britain abolish the slave trade within its domain. Later, evangelical missionaries set up hospitals and schools around the world, creating the infrastructure used by many countries up to today. The story of evangelical missions is not one of unmitigated success—there are well known stories of misguided attempts—but the overall impact was strongly positive.[51]

These people saw no contradiction between their work for the poor and their hope in the future kingdom of God. It was only in the late 1800's when a split between the two began. At that time, many Western churches began to lose their belief in heaven and

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[50] Matthew 16:26.

[51] See, e.g., M.J. Manala, "The impact of Christianity on sub-Saharan Africa, *Studia Hist. Ecc*., volume 39 (Pretoria, 2013); Olajutemu Olatunbosun Kunle, "The Long-Term Impact of Christian Missionaries on Human Capital: Evidence from Nigeria," https://tinyurl.com/yxyjz2qb, and A. Spencer, "How Christian missionaries changed the world for the better," (tifwe.org/how-christian-missionaries-changed-the-world-for-the-better).

embrace the modernist, secular thinking that was sweeping through European and American culture. With no hope of heaven, all that was left for these churches was the social Gospel. In reaction to that, many churches that still held to belief in the Bible and the hope of heaven feared that embracing the social mission too strongly would make them indistinguishable from those churches that had abandoned the teaching of the Bible altogether. This led to a de-emphasis on social works. Even so, evangelical churches to this day still support a great number of social helps around the world such as hospitals, schools, adoption of abandoned children, and disaster relief.

How being heavenly minded can make you more useful for earth

Why did belief in heaven lead so many past Christians to *embrace* a social mission, rather than take the attitude expected by Karl Marx, to ignore the problems of this world? There are several reasons:

- First, a person who has *no fear of people*, who fears only God, is not afraid to "speak truth to power." The Bible has many stories of people who walked into the presence of a king or other authority and said what needed to be said, knowing that they might be put to death, but confident that God would raise them. Moses walked into the court of the Pharaoh and said, "Let me people go" when they labored under slavery; the story of the Exodus became a major inspiration for American slaves in the nineteenth century. The prophet Nathan accused King David of adultery and murder to his face, in the kingdom of Israel, saying, "You are the man!"[52] Esther walked into the presence of the emperor of Persia uninvited, to plead for justice for her people.[53] The apostles refused to stop preaching about Jesus when commanded by their government, saying, "We must obey God rather than man."[54] The friends of Daniel, when faced with death by fire, said, "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods."[55]

More recently, those who stand up to governmental tyranny in China have the same foundation. Pastor Wang Yi of the Early Rain Church, facing imprisonment for standing up for freedom of religion, wrote

> "I believe that this Communist regime's persecution against the church is a greatly wicked, unlawful action. As a pastor of a Christian church, I must denounce this wickedness openly and

[52] 2 Samuel 12:7.

[53] Some have pointed out that the book of Esther does not name the holy name of God anywhere, but the entire story revolves around the belief of Esther and her uncle Mordecai that God would providentially watch over the Jews: "If you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14)
Other commentators (e.g. Iain Duguid, *Esther and Ruth*, (P&R Publishing, 2017) have argued that Esther and Mordecai acted selfishly and meanly until nearly the end, because Esther's "contest" was essentially a parading of women to become prostitutes. But it is likely that in the system of that day, Esther had very little choice other than suicide when the army soldiers came to round up all the most beautiful women for the king.

[54] Acts 5:29.

[55] Daniel 3:17-18.

> severely. The calling that I have received requires me to use non-violent methods to disobey those human laws that disobey the Bible and God. My Savior Christ also requires me to joyfully bear all costs for disobeying wicked laws.
>
> "But this does not mean that my personal disobedience and the disobedience of the church is in any sense 'fighting for rights' or political activism in the form of civil disobedience, because I do not have the intention of changing any institutions or laws of China. As a pastor, the only thing I care about is the disruption of man's sinful nature by this faithful disobedience and the testimony it bears for the cross of Christ.
>
> "As a pastor, my disobedience is one part of the Gospel commission. Christ's great commission requires of us great disobedience. The goal of disobedience is not to change the world but to testify about another world."[56]

Note that the probability of success in changing the world did not figure into Pastor Wang Yi's willingness to stand up against worldly powers. His actions, and the actions of those like him, might change the world, but they might not—none of us can predict the future of the kingdoms of this world.

- The same spirit of hope means that a person with a strong faith in "another world" is *not discouraged by setbacks*, knowing that God wins in the end. By contrast, those whose only hope is in this world can lose energy when it looks like their side is losing. If our only hope is in "changing the world," we can be sorely discouraged when it doesn't change. Many a young person has set out to change the world, to fix the problems created by older generations, only to find after a decade or so that the problems of this world run deep, and often a good change leads to bad, unintended consequences.

- Another reason why belief in heaven actually makes a person better for this world is that a person with a strong hope in that future life *doesn't need to cling tightly to the riches of this world*. A person whose only hope is in this world will feel pressure to cling to riches and status tightly, to make a nest of safety, while a person who has riches in heaven can overflow with generosity. In fact, Jesus used this as a test of whether a person really believes in heaven, and cares about God's opinion more than anything or anyone in this world:

> "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Luke 12:32-34)

Many a person has professed belief in God and the existence of heaven, but has testified oppositely by his or her lack of generosity.

Jesus directly connects lack of fear, and trust in God, with generosity and care for others. He does not make giving to the church or to good causes a legalistic rule that we

[56] As quoted in christiandailyreporter.com/faithful-disobedience.html.

must fulfil as a duty. Rather, when we are freed from fear, we no longer have a tight heart and a tight wallet.

Summary

Many people work out of one of two motivations, both based on the same core belief and core desire. In our core we want to grasp onto something permanent and eternal. We often believe that our work can be that thing, that we can "make our mark" or "change the world." Some people believe that they are doing that, and become frustrated at opposition and setbacks, which inevitably come. Others conclude that they are not doing anything of lasting impact, and so settle into merely putting in their time, seeing no value in their work.

Earlier in this book we have used the metaphor of a tapestry that God weaves of history, in which every thread has a purpose, but we cannot see it until we step back from it; in this life we often are mystified. But the Bible doesn't leave us in complete ignorance about that larger picture. It presents a picture of the kingdom of God advancing in this world, along with persecutions, and a glorious new creation, which will be concrete and solid, like this world, but in many ways far different from it. The two connect because the people of the kingdom in this world will be the citizens of that future land.

We do well to see our work in this greater context. Our work is intimately connected to the people and the priorities of the kingdom, yet the fruit of our work is not that permanent thing we desire. God himself is, and he is the one who directs the history and outcome of his kingdom. God does things in moving his kingdom forward that mystify us at times. The Bible promises that setbacks, suffering, and persecution are to be expected in the history of the kingdom, until the new creation. Yet when we lift up our eyes to see what we do know of God's kingdom, it allows us to press on with hope.

Chapter 10. What Should We Work to Accomplish?

At the beginning of Chapter 6, I posed the question, "Is some work higher priority for the church than other work?" Since Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom of God," this took us into a length discussion of the concept of the kingdom of God. We can now return to the question of priorities.

When the Pharisees came to Jesus and asked, "Which is the greatest commandment in the law?" they were not just asking out of curiosity. As in most of their interactions with him, they were presenting a trap. The trap was this: to say that one command is greater than others could be taken to imply that some commands are unimportant. But to a lover of God's law, how can one say that any command is unimportant? Some Jewish teachers taught that every command was equally important, so matter how small. Thus, for example, tithing the mint from a garden was a duty, and those who neglected that duty were insulting God. Could Jesus be trapped into saying some of the law was not important, thus appearing to not uphold all the law of Moses?

In some cases when presented with a choice between two sides in a political battle, Jesus refused to endorse either side. But at other times he clearly picked a side, though not perhaps in the way people expected. For example, he clearly sided with the Pharisees in their affirmation of the resurrection of the dead as opposed to the Sadducees, who denied life after death. He also clearly sided with those who agreed to pay taxes to Rome instead of with the Zealots who believed in non-cooperation with the occupying government. In this case, Jesus also took a side: he affirmed that there is a priority to God's commands.

> "But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?' And he said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.'" (Matthew 22:34-40)

Later, he affirmed the same idea of prioritization, talking of the "weightier" matters of the law:

> "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others." (Matthew 23:23)

As we noted at the beginning of Chapter 6, he also said that we should seek "first" the kingdom of God.

The notion of prioritization of some things over others is therefore not foreign to the Bible. Can we apply this to our work? Are some types of work more important than others? What if I don't do the most important type of work? My pride doesn't like the idea of other people doing higher priority work than I do.

Priorities for the church

Let me start with a hypothetical example. A group of people want to organize a new church; perhaps it is the first church to exist in a new prairie town, and there are no other churches for hundreds of miles. They pool their resources and money. What do they do first with their time and money?

Could we imagine that they start by spending their money on paying the salary of a full-time portrait painter? Or a full-time scientist? Clearly, they will have a priority on public worship, and will prioritize finding a preacher. Subsequent priorities may be those who assist in worship, such as music leaders, evangelists who preach the Gospel to those outside the church, those who help in administration and organization of the church, those who disciple and counsel individuals and teach classes to children and adults, and those who lead in acts of mercy of the church, such as ministry to the poor. In thousands of churches throughout the world, I doubt that there are any that employ full-time scientists, and at most only a handful that employ full-time ballerinas, painters, or electricians.

Is this a terrible error in judgment by churches, favoring some jobs over others? Or is it an implicit recognition that a church, as the church, has priorities that favor some jobs over others?

Church practice and church culture reflect to a large degree the fact that the Bible does give priorities for the work of the church. High priorities for the church include the following four areas:

• *Public worship* is a top priority.

It has been the universal practice of the church throughout history to prioritize public worship, but in the last century in the West it has become common for people to claim that they can be Christians without attending public worship. It is therefore worthwhile to spend some time building the case from Scripture that public worship of God is a high priority.

We can begin with the end of the Bible, the book of Revelation. It is impossible to miss that the focus of the entire book is the worship of God in heaven. The prophetic/symbolic passages all occur as visions seen by John in heaven amidst grand scenes of worship. These visions of events serve to show the sovereignty of God over history, as another tribute to him in the worship.

The book of Revelation clearly shows worship as the ultimate end state of people in the presence of God. This is summarized in the first question and answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, written during the English Reformation in the 1600's:

> Q: What is the chief end of man?
> A: The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

In sum, the ultimate purpose of all people and all things is the worship and glorification of God. It stands to reason that if this is the ultimate main goal, it is also a high-priority goal now. It connects us to eternity; although much may pass away as vanity, worship is stepping into the presence of the Eternal, an activity that will not cease.

We can then go backwards in time to the Old Testament and ask, what was the high point and central focus of the life of all of Israel? Of course, it was the worship at the tabernacle and the Temple in Jerusalem. Thus the book of Revelation and the Law of Moses form bookends to the Bible which focus on the centrality of worship of God, with the sacrifice of Christ central: prefigured in the shedding of animal blood in the Temple and centering on Jesus as the Lamb of God who was slain for our sins, in the book of Revelation. Does it stand to reason that what has highest focus at the beginning and end of the kingdom would have low priority in the middle?

The centrality of the Gospel of redemption through the sacrifice of Jesus in worship in these bookends finds its present manifestation in the centrality of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Christian worship in this middle stage of history. The significance of the Lord's supper is another argument for the high priority of worship: this sacrament is the high and holy thing before which the church trembles:

> "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread….
>
> "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died." (1 Corinthians 10:16-17, 11:27-30)

The Apostle Paul assumes in this passage (and in the surrounding context of his letter to the Corinthians) that the church meets regularly to worship and to participate in the Lord's Supper. It is not an optional ceremony that symbolizes the sacrifice of Christ; it *is* our "participation in the blood of Christ."

Jesus summarizes the work of the Father by saying, "But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him." (John 4:23). What God "seeks" is worshippers.

It is common among modern American Christians to say that all of life is worship, presumably drawing this from the Apostle Paul's words in Romans 12:1, where he says that presenting our lives to God is a spiritual act of worship. But while we may say that all the actions of our lives are a type of worship, it would be the furthest thing from Paul's mind to say that our daily deeds replace public worship! Paul, as we have seen, assumes that the Christians he wrote to were engaged in regular public worship which included the

sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and spent pages discussing how to do this in an orderly way. The early church, as we read in Acts chapter 2, met "daily" for the activities of worship, "devoting themselves" to the breaking of bread in the Lord's supper (Acts 2:42-47).

• A second priority is *preaching of the Gospel,* both to those inside and to those outside the church

In 1 Corinthians 2:2, Paul says that he "decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Most commentators agree that this does not mean that Paul literally emptied his brain of all knowledge except the crucifixion. But it does mean that Paul felt that all other things paled in comparison to the Gospel, in the same way that Jesus said that we should "hate" all other things and people in comparison to him (Luke 14:26).

Many people say "actions speak louder than words," but in the Bible, words have an enormous importance. In his letter to the Romans, Paul says

> "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!'" (Romans 10:14-15)

Similarly, Jesus says

> "And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." (Matthew 24:14)

The Gospel is "proclaimed," not just acted.

While all believers speak of the Gospel, Paul speaks of a special role for those who make a full-time job of preaching:

> "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching." (1 Timothy 5:17)

Paul's term "honor" here almost certainly refers to payment, just as the command to "honor" parents refers to financial support of them in their old age.

Preaching the Gospel is not synonymous with evangelism to outsiders. Both believers and non-believers need to hear the Gospel. The more we understand the Gospel, the more we understand that it is lifegiving for all our lives, not just a front door to the church.

• Another priority is *training in righteousness* of children and adults.

The Great Commission, which many take as the mandate for the church's priorities, is arguably a mandate for training in righteousness, that is "making disciples":

> "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'" (Matthew 28:18-20)

"Teaching them to obey all that I have commanded" is often called "discipleship" in evangelical churches.

It has sometimes been debated whether this mandate should be central in the church's life, but its position in the New Testament leaves no doubt that it had crucial importance: the last words of Jesus in Matthew, repeated again as his last words before leaving earth, at the beginning of the book of Acts.

The Bible as a whole is full of imperatives to obey God, especially for parents to teach their children to obey God's commands. A proper understanding of the Gospel puts no wedge between preaching the Gospel of grace through Christ's sacrifice and teaching people to obey God's commands. To have faith in God is to have faith that his commands are good and that obeying them is good for us. Those who are forgiven and redeemed are those who humble themselves before God, and there is no greater humility than to bow before God's right to command us.

• Finally, direct *help for the poor* is a priority.

The New Testament is full of commands to help the poor, and stories of the church doing this, not only as individuals, but corporately (e.g. Acts 2:45, 1 Corinthians 16:1-2). Harsh words are reserved for those who have no concern for the poor (e.g. James 2:15-16). The Levitical priesthood in the Old Testament also played a corporate role in helping the poor. (Deuteronomy 14:28-29, 26:12-13)

Helping the poor is therefore not just an individual responsibility, but a mandate to the church as a corporate body. This makes sense because individuals can often be manipulated by those asking them for help, while presumably in many heads put together there is more wisdom about how to actually help someone. Helping the poor also visibly demonstrates the redemptive character of God.

We can summarize these priorities in the two commandments which Jesus ranked as the highest (Matthew 22:37-40): love God with all our hearts (worship) and love our neighbors (preach the Gospel, teach righteousness, help the poor).

Giftings versus priorities

Some people will be offended by what I have just written. Saying that the church should put a higher priority on some types of work more than others can offend people who are not doing work listed here as a high priority. Many essays and books have argued

that full-time Christian ministry is not a "higher" calling than other types of work such as being a scientist or artist.

Although there are good points to be made in rejecting a sacred versus secular hierarchy, as someone who has been in academic nearly his whole life, I view these objections with a degree of cynicism. Academics like to think of themselves as doing really important work. They resent the church viewing people like pastors, missionaries, counselors, and others in "full-time Christian ministry" as doing work more important than their own!

Nevertheless, some critiques of the prioritization of "Christian ministry" are correct. First, if we think that God only honors people doing "spiritual" things and not things that engage with the physical stuff of the earth, we have missed how much God values the physical stuff he has created. As we have seen, God created all of the physical stuff of this world as good, and values our engagement with it. That is one reason why helping the poor physically is a priority for the church in addition to what might be called work in the area of ideas, such as preaching the Gospel and training in righteousness. The inclusion of the physical sacraments in worship also drives home this point.

Those who object to a prioritization of "Christian ministry" are also correct in saying, with Luther and the Reformers, that Christians are not ranked in importance based on whether they pursue "higher" callings—all Christians have a calling from God to do good work in whatever they do. As we discussed in Chapter 5, a distinction between "sacred" and "secular" callings is not biblical.

Gifts versus callings

This brings us to the notion of *gifts* versus *callings*. A gift is something I can do well. A calling is a match between what a person can do and what needs to be done. Both aspects are important. If I can do something really well but nobody needs it, it is probably not my calling. For example, perhaps I can braid my nose hair really well. That doesn't mean that is my calling in life.

Some people think that a calling is a special spiritual experience only given to a few people. Others think that only those who do church work have a calling. By contrast, the Bible's perspective is that all Christians have a calling to their work—God has "prepared good works in advance for us to do."[57]

But suppose I am just starting out in life. What type of work should I pursue? This is often a struggle for people who have gifts in areas that are not high priorities for the church. For example, a person may have great talent at science, engineering, athletics, or art. Perhaps that person might also do well as a church administrator, though not as strikingly well. Which should he or she choose to do as a career?

[57] Ephesians 2:10.

In general, many people are "over-gifted," that is, they have the ability to do more than one thing well, sometimes more good things than there is time in life to do. God often pours out his gifts abundantly. People with many gifts often fret because they can't develop them all. Thus, for example, a woman might be able to be a good mother, a good administrator, and a good novel writer. If she decides her calling for a period of time is to be a good mother and to give the other things lower priority, both her own desires and society may tell her that she is wasting her talents. But the fact is that for many people, there simply isn't enough time to do everything well that we could do well, without overworking ourselves.

When considering what I am called to, I need to overlay my sense of my gifts with my sense of God's priorities. These priorities include both the priorities of the corporate church, discussed above, as well as individual, family, and societal priorities. As discussed in Chapter 5, I need to consider what I need to do to support myself and my family. But beyond these priorities, I may be called to work on what helps my society as a whole, even if it is not specifically church work. This is the creation mandate, discussed in Chapter 1.

Having a sense of calling is therefore not (at least, not usually) about hearing a mystical voice tell us what to do. It involves sober-minded judgment assessing the optimal mix of all of the following:

- What is *possible* for me? If I am five feet tall, I am probably not called to play in the National Basketball League. Despite all the movies that say you can do anything you want if you just believe, godly humility demands realism about our talents.
- What do I *like* to do? To do anything well usually requires thousands of hours of training and preparation. Do I like some type of work enough to put in this type of time? Doing something just to get the applause of the world for success will not sustain us in the long run, if we don't like the work itself.
- What do other people *affirm* I do well? This is sometimes called the *external call*. Calling is not just about what I feel. A true calling is confirmed by other people, especially in the church.
- What *needs* to be done? There are high priorities for the church, as discussed above, and high priorities for society in general, such as helping others live and flourish. My calling is not just about what I like to do to make myself happy. If everyone just did what they liked most, we might have a glut of video-game testers and no sanitation workers.

If all of these considerations lead me to believe I am called to do something, then there is a sense in which the "believe in yourself" rhetoric of the movies has some merit. If I am convinced God is calling me to a certain type of work, I should pursue it with all my might, until God closes the door. At the same time, I should hold my plans lightly, and allow that God may redirect me. As the letter of James says, in the spirit of the vanity theme,

> "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit'— yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring." (James 4:13-14)

If God redirects my plans, it doesn't mean I was wrong to try something. God will use all our work, even our abortive attempts, in his grand tapestry of history. But until he redirects me, I do well to pursue training and excellence in what I believe I am called to, with all my might. Failing at some effort does *not* mean you were not called to try.

Chapter 11. Church Priorities and the Creation Mandate

As discussed at the beginning of Chapter 6, the church as a whole is like an army with a mission to conquer an enemy. Those who actually fight are fulfilling the mission of the army in the most direct way, and it would be silly to say that the army could function with just marching bands and no front-line soldiers. But at the same time, those who fight on the front lines could not fulfill their mission without a large support network, including those who transport them, those who organize and provide supplies, those who collect information and make strategies, those who train new soldiers, those who repair and prepare equipment, those who purchase the equipment, those who work to provide physical and psychological health, and much more. In the same way, the church needs a wide array of gifts to fulfil its central mission. The Apostle Paul says this explicitly in his analogy of the Body of Christ with many parts—the head, the hands, the feet, the private parts, etc.[58] Some parts play more of a direct role—after all, hands usually are more directly engaged in creative work than anuses—but all are needed. This same principle is given in a story in the history of Israel: in 1 Samuel 30:24, when an army went to battle, those who went into battle and those who stayed to watch the baggage all shared equally in the credit of the army and its spoils.

This division of labor does not just apply to different ministries inside the church. If we thought so, we might think that the sum total of the value of work of people other than pastors and teachers consisted of the time they spent volunteering for a church, or in the money they gave to a church. But this is not Paul's point in his picture of the Body of Christ with many parts. Each body part has a function which it does to its fullest, not just part time or on the side. We are to work for the kingdom of God in our main effort, not just a few hours per week as a volunteer or with a small part of income given to the church.

We need a larger picture of what makes up the support system of the church as a whole. Much of this work can, and indeed ought, to be done in organizations other than the church proper, but still should be viewed as work for the kingdom of God.

Let us look at a few examples. To have a place of worship that honors God and to have homes and offices that are safe and good for humans, people in the church (as well as other people) need architects to make good designs, construction workers and contractors to organize construction work, companies to make the materials used in construction, people who transport those materials, bankers who arrange financing of such large endeavors, and more. To help the poor as well as to allow all people to flourish may involve medical care and all kinds of support people for the medical system, economic planning, and political action to fix systems that hurt the poor. To properly disciple and teach people means not just education on Bible knowledge but giving people wisdom about the world God has made, respecting their minds as part of their whole beings. (It can be argued that the wisdom tradition started by Solomon led directly to the scholarly tradition of the

[58] 1 Corinthians 12.

Jewish people, which exists to this day, having been picked up by the Christian monks of the Roman Empire, who then founded the Western-style university system.)

This short list already shows that a great number of activities support the mission of the church even while they are not done by a church directly. We can therefore affirm that many people have callings from God to do good work that is not church work, in the sense that they are not directed in their work by church leaders.

Uniquely Christian work versus common grace

In Chapter 1, we discussed two types of work, namely "redemptive" work to fix what sin has broken, and "dominion" work which people might have done even if the human race had never fallen into sin. In both categories, there are some types of work that Christians would do in a way that is uniquely Christian, and other types of work that they could do alongside non-Christians.

Christians have a unique approach to much redemptive work, because they believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is crucial for true redemption for all people. Helping the poor, for Christians, is part of a holistic approach that includes discipleship for a person's whole life. It makes sense, then, that much of this type of work would be done directly under the oversight of churches, or other organizations run entirely by Christians. Also, in the area of dominion work, we can include worship as something we were always meant to do. This also clearly is an activity that makes sense to do through churches and specifically Christian organizations.

But there are other activities that Christians can agree with non-Christians to do, on the basis of a common set of moral principles that doesn't have to include the entire Christian world view and belief system. This is sometimes called *common grace*. For example, police work and the court system are types of redemptive work, opposing and stopping evil people from oppressing others. Although this type of earthly justice ultimately gets intertwined with our beliefs about what is right and wrong, many non-Christians share with Christians the same desire for safety from criminals and other types of oppressors.

In the area of dominion work, Christians might do some things differently, because how we think about God affects how we think about everything in the world, but non-Christians participate in the creation mandate as well. This type of work is aimed at human flourishing as well as caretaking of the earth. At a very basic level, this includes things to keep people alive and healthy: producing food, clothing, and homes, education to help people function in society, transportation, communication, and infrastructure to make it easy for people to interact, medicine, and all the engineering that goes into enabling these activities. It also includes work to keep animals, plants, and ecosystems healthy. Christians ought to feel comfortable pursuing work in these areas alongside non-Christians, as long as the priorities of the church are not neglected on the whole. This type of work is not "lower" work, even though it has lower priority as a church activity.

Work beyond the merely necessary

All of the work discussed in the previous section might be called "necessities." But some dominion work is also for goals that aren't strictly necessary to keep people and creatures alive, but which nevertheless is important for them to flourish. These types of activities include entertainment, art, and science.

If people don't have access to movies, athletic events, or concerts, they will not die. But the case can be made that if they never have any entertainment, they will not "flourish." People everywhere in the world, in all generations, have wanted to let their emotions out in shared experiences, whether joyful fun, sadness in narratives of tragedies, or passion in rooting for competitors.

The word "entertainment" has bad connotations for some people. Historically, many Christians over the centuries have rejected acting, drama, and fiction as a types of deception or falsehood. This was also in part because much of the popular entertainment appealed to people's sinful lusts, such as morbid lust for death in the Roman circuses and Nordic sagas, or scantily clad actresses who doubled as prostitutes after theater shows. But fiction is not intrinsically non-Christian. The Bible records several examples of endorsed fiction, such as the story of Nathan to King David (2 Samuel 12), the Song of Solomon, and the parables of Jesus. Some Christians in history have limited Christian fiction to only allegories, because these examples are allegories. But even fiction that is not allegory can teach something true about the world.

We can also include sports as entertainment without making that a negative term. Sports can be viewed as theater in which the players portray conflict, allowing peple to engage and share the emotions of anger and zeal without actually maining and killing each other.

Art is not always "entertainment," but it also creates shared experiences of people, which we may call expressions of "creativity." It can make us look at the world in a different way, for example, to appreciate either beauty that we have not noticed, abstract beauty in pure concepts, or to see hard truths we might have ignored.

Science is another example of human creativity—in particular, expressing curiosity about how things work and what is generally true about the world. Math and philosophy are similar, asking about what is true in general.

A society could operate without entertainment, art, math, philosophy, and pure science, but it would be a diminished society. We can see an example of this type of dominion work in the story of Adam naming the animals, in Genesis 2. Adam could have kept himself alive without naming the animals. But he expressed creativity in coming up with names, and this presumably also involved curiosity to understand something about the animals before naming them. Adam's work was not merely gardening to make food to

stay alive. He was given the mandate to learn about the creatures, and to go out into the world outside the garden to find even more creatures and things to learn about.

We thus see that there are many types of work that Christians can do alongside non-Christians that are not "church" work, which nevertheless are honorable callings which belong to the general creation mandate of God. That doesn't mean that I should work halfheartedly if I am not working for the church directly. Far from it! As discussed in Chapter 5, we are called to work well, with great energy, in whatever God calls us to do.

It also doesn't mean that church work is more lasting than other work. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, good church work can be undone just as much as other good work in this world. Disasters happen, decay can set in to a church as well as other institutions. We work to do good now, and leave the future in God's hands.

Freedom and constraint

In general, the Bible gives us a picture of great freedom for God's people to choose what they do, while at the same time having constraints given by God, which tell us we cannot do just anything. The archetype of this is in the garden of Eden, when God gave Adam and Eve many fruit trees and bade them to freely eat, but also told them that they could not eat from one tree. People have chafed against any restrictions on their freedom ever since, but the laws of God are not a suffocating blanket of thousands of rules. God's constraints can be summarized in just ten commandments.

In the same way, in our work, Christians have great freedom to choose different work to do, but we are not free to do it just any way. Christians are called to do everything they do for the glory of God, in his way. It is an unfortunate result of the sacred/secular divide that many Christians feel that when they are doing "secular" work and not church work, they can do it entirely following the ways of the world. They effectively have a split personality, a Christian persona when participating in church activities, and a worldly persona when doing work outside the church.

If we start to see all types of honorable work as for the Lord, we should not have this type of split personality. That means, among other things, that we pay attention to the constraints that God has put on our work. These constraints can be grouped in the following three categories:

• 1. *Ethical behavior*. This is probably the most obvious, that we must not break God's moral laws in our work, for example, in backstabbing coworkers to get ahead, falsifying reports, lying about the safety of a product, using sexual enticement to sell products, etc. In some workplaces, such are so common that Christians stand out quite a bit by not engaging in such things.

• 2. *Questioning prevailing paradigms.* This is probably the hardest area for Christians working alongside non-Christians. We can be very attuned to not breaking ethical rules, but still adopt the prevailing assumptions of our coworkers without question,

because such assumptions just seem obvious in that context. For example, perhaps in the television industry, the prevailing ethos is to use gratuitous nudity and to use God's name in vain as a curse word. Should a Christian participate in that? In the area of science, the prevailing assumption may be that nothing miraculous can ever occur, and so the origin of life must have occurred through mechanistic processes. Can a Christian question that? In the area of psychology, the concept of sin as an objective reality is largely rejected.

In general, questioning the prevailing assumptions of your education and workplace can make you feel stupid, an outsider. To question commonly held assumptions doesn't feel heroic at the time, although often in later generations those who question them are treated as heroes. (Think of those who led the Reformation, the Scientific revolution, or the Abolition movements, for example.)

The bottom line is that if we are to be faithful to God, we must have the attitude that we may run up against the assumptions of our culture, even strongly held ones, even to the point of losing our job or being otherwise persecuted. Jesus said,

> "Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets…Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets." (Luke 6:22-23, 26)

This can be easier to bear when we fully embrace the lesson of Chapter 1, that we have eternal Glory ahead, and the lesson of Chapter 2, that we cannot be too strongly attached to success in this world. We must hold things lightly in this world, even jobs we love or which give us influence in society. The book of Hebrews says that followers of God are "aliens" and "strangers" in this world, with our eyes fixed on something greater:

> "These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city." (Hebrews 11:13-16)

If I think that I must have this job or that job, there is no end to the amount of compromise I will make to keep that job, whether ethical compromises, or just keeping my head down and not questioning the prevailing views that everyone believes.

It also needs to be said that those doing "church work" also need to make sure not to blindly follow the ways of the world and their culture. Many church leaders implicitly follow a business model of the church, treating it as a money-making institution aimed at providing programs and entertainment to people in exchange for their donations, and hiring employees who can maximize that earning potential. The paradigm for the church in the Bible, however, is a *family*. Families operate on a completely different premise—no one

is left out, decisions are made to help family members that come at great cost, and so on. And the church's "target customer" is God himself, who we want to please, not people. And churches, like individuals, may find it hard to say things based on biblical truth that go against the prevailing assumptions of our culture, not wanting to lose face.

• *3. Remaining a faithful member of God's community of people.* There is an intrinsic tension for a Christian in the workplace, between the command of God to do our work well, with as much excellence as we can, and our need to be part of the family of God. Many a Christian, whether working for the church or a non-church calling, has justified becoming a "workaholic" on the basis of wanting to do work as well as possible. Many workplaces, such as medicine, academics, athletics, or the high-tech industry, do their best to create an atmosphere of everyone striving as hard as possible, putting in as much time as possible, to compete and win.

Against this, not only Christians, but many non-Christians, have seen the need for *work-life balance*. Focusing on any one thing to exclusion is a short step away from idolatry, in which something which is not God himself consumes our attention.

The Sabbath

One constraint on work that the Bible teaches directly is the Sabbath law. The Sabbath law commands work for six days (as opposed to laziness), but it also commands rest and worship one day a week, a turning away from our work.

Some churches teach that the Sabbath law is not for today, appealing to the apostle Paul's words, "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath."[59] or, "One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind."[60] In the context of these verses, Paul was primarily focused on legalistic fights within a church; he doesn't give a ruling one way or the other on these issues, but instead focuses on how we treat each other in regard to debatable matters. In his day, there was great debate about how "Jewish" the church should be; whether church members should follow all of the detailed rules defined in the Jewish Talmud and by the Pharisees, or whether they should follow the spirit of the Law, with less attention on traditional elements.

The question for us is not whether we should try to adopt traditional Jewish practice of the Sabbath, but whether the spirit of the Sabbath law has elements which are universal, applying not just to Jews but to all people. A strong case can be made that it does. First, the grounding of the Sabbath law is not in the idea of being a separate people, as in the case of the kosher food laws, but in two universal principles. The first is based on the Creation of God in Genesis 1-2: we rest one day in seven because God set down this pattern in his Creation of the world, long before the nation of Israel existed:

[59] Colossians 2:16.
[60] Romans 14:5.

> "For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." (Exodus 20:11)

The second reason given for the Sabbath is based on a justice issue, that those who work seven days a week are oppressed:

> "Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. 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, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day." (Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

The implication is clear: to work seven days a week without break is to be an oppressed slave. Why would we wish that on ourselves? The New Testament is filled with admonitions to not live like slaves, but as free people (e.g. Galatians 5:1, 1 Peter 2:16).

Jesus, when confronted about the Pharisee's rules on the Sabbath, did not overturn the principle, but instead condemned legalistic versions of it. Against this, he said

> "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27)

Sabbath was "made for man"—that is, it was meant to be a blessing. It was not meant to be an obscure, burdensome regulation.

Even if you are not convinced that the Sabbath is a pattern for Christians today, you should be able to see that a pattern of rest is normative:

> "So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his." (Hebrews 4:9)

If even God rests, can we do better than him by working ourselves constantly?

Many Christians over the centuries have also pointed out that "rest" does not mean frenetic activity to pursue games and entertainments. Rest means what it sounds like: rest, which could be a nap. Some of this time of rest is well spend in fellowship with other Christians, pondering the things of God, and worshipping him, but even those activities should not become so draining that we have not really rested.

Keeping the Sabbath is part of a larger mandate to be an active participant in the community of God's people. It is impossible to miss the many places in the New Testament in which the writers tell people to do something with "one another." For example, the letter to the Hebrews says

> "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." (Hebrews 10:24-25)

If your job tempts you or demands of you to skip church or to skip meeting with other Christians, you are working too hard. This can lead to a tough decision for some people. Some people honestly feel that they can't keep a job if they don't work long hours and skip church and rest. For these people, it might be the case that they need to get a new job. As discussed above, if we think that we absolutely *must* have some particular job, or *must* have a certain level of success, we are veering toward idolatry, and not holding everything in this world lightly.

Jesus clearly allowed for exceptions to the Sabbath law when he allowed for acts of *necessity* (such as eating) and acts of *mercy* (such as healing people) on the Sabbath. A good case can be made for some Christians working, say, in hospitals, keeping power plants running, or as police on Sundays (or at least, on some type of rotation). But we must also be careful not to make such exceptions such large loopholes that we justify just anything we want to do on the Sabbath. Our hearts easily deceive us into making more and more exceptions.

Also, we should consider not just whether we are resting, but whether we are making others work for us. The fourth commandment quoted above says not just that you should rest, but also "your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you." In many cases, we do not have the authority to tell others not to work. But in some cases, in our society, we can employ others effectively as servants who wait on us, and this consideration should into our thinking.

Having an integrated life

Finally, another way in which we stay grounded in the kingdom of God is to take a good fraction of our thought time to read the Bible and Christian books (or listen to them on audio.) The apostle Paul said,

> "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2)

This passage says that life of the mind is important—crucial for our transformation to being more like God.

I've sometimes talked to people who were at the top of the game in difficult fields such as science or medicine, who had no more knowledge of theology and the Bible than they had learned in elementary or middle school. I've challenged many such people to "tithe your thought time"—take ten percent of your mental effort and devote it to time with

God, in things like prayer, the Bible, and reading Christian theology. Many such people push back: "It takes all my mental effort just to succeed in my career; there is no extra time available!" As with keeping the Sabbath, the conclusion I draw is, if this is true, you are in the wrong career. If you cannot be a whole person, with rest and life balance, and a whole Christian, with fellowship, worship, and study of God's truth, then you are effectively treating yourself as a slave.

Summary

We can summarize how to think about the priorities for our work in the following:

- Some types of work are priorities for the church (worship, missions, etc.), and all Christians do well to consider whether they can do one of these "front line" jobs. But most Christians won't end up doing them, and will instead do work that non-Christians might also do, as part of the way God set up the world at Creation.

- Working in such types of non-church work is not a compromise, or a failure, or "settling;" it is a high calling; every type of honorable work can be a calling from God, and we ought to do whatever God gives us to do with our best effort.

- A sense of calling is not just something that I determine on my own according to my feelings, but has constraints, including whether other people affirm it and whether I can really do it. I also need to be able to do it in a way that does not wear me out, or turn my job into an idol, or cut me off from the community of the church or time spent in thought and meditation on the things of God. If I can't work and rest in a healthy balance, and spend time drawing close to God, in a particular career, I need to look for a different career. To be open to that means that I need to not make my job an idol; I must hold all things of this world lightly.

- Callings can change. If God prevents me from pursuing one path, it doesn't mean necessarily that I was wrong to choose that path. As the vanity theme of the Bible reminds us, God reserves the right to change our plans as he chooses.

Chapter 12. Is Capitalism Moral?

In the previous chapters, I discussed various types of creation mandate work such as art, science, and engineering, which don't typically happen within the organization of the church, but which are still good callings for Christians. I didn't specifically mention business, that is, the art of making money. This brings up a different set of questions. Can it be good to pursue making money? Can a system that rewards work with lots of money be just? Should Christians advocate socialism and communism? Some of the early arguments for communism were based on the perception that capitalism devalued the work of laborers, and did not give them the fruit of their labor.

Many Christian discussions of work focus on the idea of making a product, that is, some "thing" that is valuable. But let's be honest. Many people work not because they love the things they are making so much, but because they want to make money. They may be happy that their products are good, but their primary motivation is not to make particular products—they might just as well have made a different product, if that had helped them make money.

Is that kind of motivation sub-Christian, "selling out"? Many Christians think so, and one consequence is that people who go into business already start out feel they have sullied themselves, and therefore feel no strong need to act ethically. Should Christians not go into "business" as such, if we define business as the art of making money?

The Bible commands us to not love money

At the outset, we should be clear that the Bible has a lot to say about money, and the dangers of loving it too much, for example in the following verses:

> "No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." (Luke 16:13)

> "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'" (Hebrews 13:5)

> "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs." (1 Timothy 6:10)

> "He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity." (Ecclesiastes 5:10)

> "But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction." (1 Timothy 6:9)

> "For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." (Luke 18:25)

> "A faithful man will abound with blessings, but whoever hastens to be rich will not go unpunished." (Proverbs 28:20)

Any approach that tries to "explain away" such verses is a quick path to hypocrisy. Any Christian who goes into business needs to meditate on them seriously and take them to heart.

But these verses do not strictly say that a person can never work for the purpose of gaining money, nor become rich. They do say that money is like high explosives—extremely dangerous as a temptation to our souls. As a balancing point to consider, the Bible also talks that way about our language. We are warned many times of the danger of words:

> "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell." (James 3:1-6)

> "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits." (Proverbs 18:21)

> "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." (Matthew 12:36)

These verses (and many others) run in a similar vein as the passages on money: this common element of human society has much more power and danger than people usually think. But very few people would conclude that Christians must not talk! (Although some monastic orders have indeed mandated that.) Instead, there are two conclusions: 1) realize the power and spiritual danger of this thing every time you use it, and 2) some people need to not pursue a job that focuses on this thing, because in knowing themselves, they know it will be too much of a temptation to evil. In the case of words and speech, James says "not many of you should be teachers." Far from saying that everyone should be in a competition to be famous teachers, the Bible says that most people should opt out. A person who seeks glory in academia or in the church as a teacher, while despising those who work in the business world, has missed the point entirely—words are as dangerous as money in tempting our souls to earthly glory.

Just as many Christians should not aspire to be teachers, so also many Christians should not aspire to be rich because of the spiritual danger. I have personally seen both teaching success and business success have insidious effects of people. People who are viewed as important or wealthy typically have the experience that the people around them

never contradict them, and seem to always tell them how wise they are. Without realizing it, such people can start to believe their own press clippings, so to speak—they start to believe that they really are wise and mature, because everyone they meet says so. Like the emperor who went naked while everyone complimented his new clothes, rich and famous people in both the business world and academia can be immature, selfish, and bossy, while thinking they are mature; everyone around them knows it but says nothing.

How can we strike a balance, then? Is it possible for any Christian to be rich without automatically falling into sin? One part of the balance is the same admonition that the apostle James gives to those who want to become teachers, right after the passage quoted above on the danger of many words:

> "Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere." (James 3:13)

Those who work in the areas where our society gives its worldly glory, whether as teachers or as rich, need to especially clothe themselves with a spirit of humility and service. And this must not be just a show of humility, like a self-effacing Pharisee, but real. The rich people I have known who were the most godly were those who most other people didn't even know were rich!

The Bible commands us to help the poor

Another mandate given by the Bible to combat the danger of wealth is the command to *radical generosity*:

> "As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share." (1 Timothy 6:17)

> "In a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part." (2 Corinthians 8:2)

> "As it is written, 'He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.'" (2 Corinthians 9:9, quoting Psalm 112:9)

This radical generosity by all Christians does not extend only to other Christians, but to all of the poor, as much as possible:

> "Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him." (Proverbs 14:31)

> "The wicked borrows but does not pay back, but the righteous is generous and gives." (Psalm 37:21)
>
> "Whoever gives to the poor will not want, but he who hides his eyes will get many a curse." (Proverbs 28:27)

As discussed in Chapter 10, help for the poor is a high priority mandate for the church as a whole.

Radical generosity can be viewed as wealth that overflows. The Bible does not present a picture of the kingdom of God as a collection of miserable ascetics. Rather, it presents the picture of the kingdom of God as a rich feast to which everyone is invited.[61] God's people in the book of Acts were characterized by joy and many meals together,[62] not by fasting and misery.

The overall picture then, is one in which the church has rich people, but the generosity of these rich people overflows to everyone else, without any sharp social lines drawn between people of different classes of wealth—all rejoice in the success of everyone, and all attend the same parties.[63]

In general, one of the best ways to not fall into the temptation of love of money is to give a lot of it away, and to invite many others to enjoy its fruits with you. As we saw in earlier chapters when looking at the vanity theme of the Bible, we need to hold everything in this world lightly, and giving our money away freely is one of the main ways the Bible gives us to make sure we are not grasping it too strongly.

Considerations about systems that hurt or help the poor

It is obvious that all Christians are to be personally generous. Many authors have pointed out, however, that if we really care about the poor, we need to be concerned not only with personal, local efforts, but also with societal systems that oppress the poor. Even if I am personally quite generous, if I live in a society that makes it impossible for the poor to escape poverty, my impact will be minimal.

Of course, we need to be careful to work for systems that *actually* help the poor, not just ones that *say* they are about helping the poor. In this, wisdom demands that we look at real, empirical data, not just what policies sound good to us, or that make people think we "care."

In this spirit, we cannot ignore the fact that the existing "Western system" has led to wealth and reduction of physical suffering to a degree unprecedented in human history. The degree of wealth and health throughout the world under the present system is the

[61] See, e.g. Matthew 22:1-10.
[62] Acts 2:46.
[63] Luke 14:12-14, James 2:1-5.

highest it has ever been in history. While there is much that we may point to as still failing, overall in the past two centuries every measure of physical well-being has improved, not just for the wealthiest few, but across all classes and nations in the world.[64] For example, as recently as the 1980s, mass starvation of millions of people was a regular occurrence, but that has nearly vanished.

One can debate the causes of this prosperity, but in general, this "Western system" includes the following elements:

- Legal systems that encourage risk-taking to try new types of work. This is done (1) by reducing the impact of failure, so that people do not remain under crushing debt if they fail, and (2) by rewarding success with very high personal financial gains. These legal structures include incorporation laws and bankruptcy laws (which prevent people from losting their homes if a business fails), patent and copyright laws, relatively easy credit for business loans, savings insurance, and protection of private property.

- Legal systems that limit the power of an elite class, such as laws to break up monopolies, laws to deter insider trading, inheritance taxes, graduated income taxes, and laws to protect the health, safety, and environment of workers and communities.

- Rule of law, including courts and police with well-published laws, so that people are not constantly worried if the rules of the game will change, or whether they will need to pay bribes.

- Allowing many people to make many decisions daily and locally, instead of a top-down system of elite control. This includes allowing competition of more than one institution doing the same type of work.

- Universal access to education, which allows people to leave poverty in many cases.

- A "safety net" of free services for the poor, run by both government and private institutions, to prevent abject suffering.

This system typically goes under the name of capitalism, but is a greatly modified version from the "Laissez-Faire" capitalism of the 1800s, and might be better called "regulated capitalism" or "social-democratic capitalism." Countries that have adopted some version or other of the "Western system" have seen remarkable progress in the past thirty years, including places with very few natural resources, such as South Korea or Singapore. By contrast, those that adopted "socialist" systems have suffered greatly, and most countries that have tried it have abandoned it in favor of the modern Western model, at which point the well-being of their poor increased dramatically. Examples include Sweden, the United

[64] See, e.g., J. Norberg, *Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future,* (OneWorld, 2017).

Kingdom, and other western European countries that jettisoned doctrinaire socialism in the 1980s, as well as India, Russia, eastern Europe, and China, all of which have adopted at least some aspects of the Western system.

Capitalism is sometimes characterized by the catchphrase "greed is good." Many libertarians and "objectivists" specifically advocate that greed and selfishness are virtues,[65] and argue that capitalism is based on this. For this reason, many Christians shy away from it and feel that some version of socialism sounds more virtuous.

But the modern Western system need not be defined inherently as the celebration of greed. More fundamentally, it is a system in which many people can make decisions about their own resources for their own reasons, whatever their motivations may be.

One may think in terms of a computer analogy: a computer with a single, central processor is known to have "decision bottlenecks" which slow the whole system down. Socialism, which puts all significant economic decisions in the hands of the government, intrinsically has this type of decision bottleneck. Systems that allow many people to make their own economic decisions are like computers with many, distributed "parallel processors," which are known to act with much greater efficiency. These economic decisions by individuals can include radical generosity, as has in fact occurred in Western society, with many rich people making huge donations to various non-profit organizations. This flies in the face of much early thinking about both computers and economies— it sounds more efficient to have one central processor directing all activity instead of many different agents with the potential to act cross-purposes to each other. But has been shown time and time again that massively parallel systems always do better than centralized systems in the end, even when the different actors sometimes work cross purposes to each other.

It would also be naïve to think that no government officials in socialist top-down systems are motivated by greed. Christianity insists that all people are sinful, and therefore the justice of any system is not measured by what it says it values, but by how it deals with those who break the rules and seek to oppress others. In a top-down system with all major decisions made by a few powerful people, there is little to prevent them from feathering their own nests at the expense of the rest of the people, and that has occurred time and time again in socialist countries.

What does the Bible say about economics?

All of the above can be called a pragmatic argument, which is reasonable since biblical wisdom demands that we deal with the real world. But pragmatic arguments can go astray if we don't hold them up to the light of Scripture. Therefore we need to also ask, as successful as the modern system has been, is it in fact supported by the Bible?

[65] E.g., Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness,* reprint (Tingle Books, 2021).

Of course, much of the modern world is not discussed in Scripture, which was written in ancient times. But we can establish several general principles.

- *Money is a tool, and not evil in and of itself.* As much as the Bible warns us against the love of money, it does not forbid its use, and in fact, in at least one place, it commands the use of money,[66] and Jesus himself used money.[67] Money is a tool that can be used for good or evil, but as discussed above, it can be a dangerous tool.

- *Private property and unequal levels of wealth are affirmed everywhere in Scripture*. Two of the Ten Commandments specifically affirm the right to private property and the right of others to have things that I don't have: "You shall not steal,"[68] and "You shall not covet."[69] The New Testament also explicitly affirms the right to making decisions about our own private property,[70] and reaffirms the command to not covet the property of others.[71]

Therefore it is not "inequality" as such that counts as oppression of the poor, but suffering. Some inequality is due to sins such as injustice and theft, whether in the present or the past, but it is not intrinsically always so. Our approach should generally not be based on, "How can I bring that rich person down?" but instead, "How can I help alleviate real suffering wherever I see it?"

- *One of the main concerns of the Bible for the poor is when they do not receive justice in the courts.* The poor are often tempted to crime,[72] but also they often receive much harsher sentences than the rich. This can be because of bribes by the rich, but it can also simply be because the rich can afford to hire much better lawyers, who know how to work the system, and because juries and judges expect certain groups of people to behave a certain way.

Sometimes the term "social justice" is used to refer to fightng inequality as such. As discussed above, that is not biblical, because inequality is allowed and assumed in the Bible. But it is true that systems can lead to injustice even when no single government official or group has a deliberate intent to oppress the poor.

- *It is simplistic to say that the government can never use tax money or mandates to help the poor.* There is a legitimate debate among Christians about how much tax money should be spent to help the poor, whether directly or indirectly. Christians on the "right"

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[66] Deuteronomy 14:25-26 says, in regard to the difficulty of taking supplies to the Temple if it is a long distance away, "Then you shall turn it into money and bind up the money in your hand and go to the place that the LORD your God chooses and spend the money for whatever you desire—oxen or sheep or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves. And you shall eat there before the LORD your God and rejoice, you and your household." This exactly the definition of the use of money: to allow easy exchange of goods.
[67] Matthew 17:27.
[68] Exodus 20:15, Deuteronomy 5:19, Romans 13:9, Ephesians 4:28.
[69] Exodus 20:17, Deuteronomy 5:21, Mark 7:22.
[70] Acts 5:4, 2 Corinthians 9:7.
[71] James 4:2, Romans 13:9.
[72] Proverbs 30:7-9.

tend to distrust giving too much power to government, which increases when government has a great deal of money to spend; Christians on the "left" tend to have more trust of elected officials and to distrust unelected leaders of corporations and businesses. As discussed above, history has amply shown us that both classes, elected officials and rich individuals, can use their power unjustly.

In the Bible, Joseph as a government ruler is commended for his aid to the poor based on taxes.[73] The system set up by Moses of Sabbath rest days, Sabbath years, interest-free loans to the poor, gleaning, and so on, was also clearly aimed at helping the poor by force of law.[74] One therefore cannot argue that government can have no legitimate role at all in helping the poor.

In general, the Bible's view of universal sinfulness undergirds the maxim, "Absolute power corrupts absolutely"—if we give too much power to people, whether in government or private industry, even with the best of intentions, the common sinful nature of humanity will tend to lead to corruption and oppression,[75] and we have seen this historically in many cases. But it is not biblical to argue that government can have no role at all in helping the poor.

- *We have a greater obligation to help those near to us.* In the age of the internet, every crisis near and far can be brought to our instant attention, to the point that it can seem overwhelming. In the Bible, there is a set of expanding circles of concern. We have our highest obligation to take care of our own family,[76] then our church family,[77] then our neighbors near to us,[78] and then those more distant.[79] If we have limited resources of time and energy, we will need to prioritize along these lines. This is an area of Christian freedom and sense of calling.

That doesn't mean that we give those near to us everything that they want before we move to help anybody else. We may have to make pragmatic choices about what really is suffering, and what kind of suffering we can really make an impact on. But it does imply that it is not un-Christian to make a cutoff of helping people outside our nearest circles, when our resources are limited.

- *Preventing wealth and power accumulation in the hands of a few people is not unbiblical.* The laws of land ownership in the Law of Moses were specifically designed to prevent a few families from owning all the land,[80] as happened in Europe and many other

[73] Some commentators have argued that this plan was actually oppression by Egypt, but Joseph is clearly commended in Scripture. See, e.g., Genesis 44:4-11.
[74] See, e.g., C.J.H. Wright, *An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today*, (Intervarsity Press, 1983).
[75] Ecclesiastes 5:8.
[76] 1 Timothy 5:8.
[77] 1 John 3:17.
[78] Ephesians 4:28, Luke 10:29-37.
[79] Deuteronomy 28:12.
[80] See C.J.H. Wright, *op. cit.*

places. The Old Testament had a system by which the "means of production" (which was primarily farming in that day) would regularly be recycled back to people.

Inequality as justice

Above, we noted that the Tenth Commandment, "Do not covet," implicitly allows for inequality in private property. This is part of a general theme in Scripture—that God does not distribute his gifts and blessings equally, and we must accept that. Two parables of Jesus illustrate this. In the first, God gives people different numbers "talents." (The English word "talent," now used to refer to an ability, derives from this parable, where the word is a specific weight unit of the ancient world.) Jesus said,

> "For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest." (Matthew 25:14-27)

The lessons are clear: God gives different blessings to different people, and makes no apologies for that; whatever we have been given, we owe it to God to use it for his kingdom priorities as much as we can.

In a second parable, Jesus inverts the inequality: God gives the same reward to people who have worked differently, so that the hourly wage of some people far exceeds the hourly wage of others:

> "For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired

> us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?'" (Matthew 20:1-15)

Both of these parables grate against our sense of "fairness"—we feel God should treat everyone the same way, while in these parables, people are treated differently: some get more talents than others, and some don't have to sweat in the middle of the hot day to get their needs while others do. The response of the God is, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" God is the ultimate free being in the universe, who can bless as he pleases, and take away as he pleases.

Given this reality, it would be injustice to pretend that it is not so. Consider, for example, two men who work making tables. One man makes one table per day, while the other man makes five tables of equal quality per day. It would be a denial of reality to say that the work of one man did not have five times more economic value than that of the other. This has nothing to do with the moral nature of the men—perhaps both work equally hard and faithfully. Perhaps the man who makes more tables is actually less moral, and perhaps he is so talented he actually works less hard than the other man. It makes no difference in regard to the values of the products—five tables are worth more than one table. Justice in society fundamentally rests on *truth*, not denial of reality. In the same way, sometimes people resent entertainment stars getting such high salaries, but the bottom line is that if 100,000 people will pay to see one person, and only 10 will pay to see a second person, the first entertainer has much greater economic value than the second.

Some might argue that the second parable above indicates that we should pay both men the same total amount for their work of the day. But that is not the point of the parable. In this story, the first people who signed up to work were paid at the standard market rate for that era, as shown by the fact that they readily agreed to it. The later people were all *overpaid*, out of the generosity of the master. This fact is recognized by the people in the story; it is his *generosity* which they begrudge.[81]

At core, people pay according to the economic value they perceive in something, not according to the needs or good morals of the producers of it. If they do pay more to those in need or to those they want to encourage, they are paying *above* the real value, as an act of generosity, which is of course their right.

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[81] The immediate implication for those who heard this parable in the first century was that the Gentiles would be accepted into the Church, even though they had not "labored in the vineyard" for centuries as the Jews had.

Practical responses

As practical matters, how should Christians respond to this? The Bible gives several lessons:

- *Humility without coveting*. We should not resent people who are gifted to create greater economic value, for whatever reason, whether innately or by communal and family background. This ultimately rests on submission to the sovereign authority of God to give out his blessings as he chooses.

- *Work hard at whatever you do*. We have already noted in Chapter 5 that the Bible commends us, in both the Old and New Testaments, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might."[82] We are each responsible to do what we can for the Lord with what he has given us.

- *Christian social justice is not based on tearing down those who are more blessed, but on radical generosity to those in need*. The Bible never talks of attacking the rich to take their wealth, but rather of creating a culture in which everyone, especially the rich, practices radical generosity. Like the rich men in the parables above, they are to give freely as they see fit. This doesn't mean that there is no place for taxes, but inequality of wealth is never an intrinsic evil in the biblical view of the world.

[82] Colossians 3:23, Ecclesiastes 9:9-10.

Chapter 13. Thinking about Wealth

Some people don't resent the idea of a famous entertainer or sports star getting a high salary, or even a carpenter who makes five tables getting paid more than a person who makes only one. But many people resent "business people" getting paid high salaries. As Thomas Sowell has eloquently written,[83] most cultures around the world have historically resented "middle men"—people who are merchants, bankers, managers, agents, and so on. They seem to get rich by a trick, because they don't seem to produce anything concrete, the way a carpenter does. In the same way, a singer, artist, or sports star creates an obvious "product."

This gets back to the question we asked at the beginning of the last chapter—is it moral, or is it "settling" into moral compromise, to be in the business of making money, as such?

As Sowell and many other economists have pointed out, *organization and communication have economic value*. What the merchant, business manager, banker, and other "middlemen" offer to society is the organizational skill to get things some people produce to other people who want them, navigating through the complex web of society to make the desired interactions happen.

Such people are not motivated by desires such as "I want to make a thing" (the engineer, constructor, or artist), or "I want to heal people" (the doctor, pastor, or counselor), or by "I want to entertain people with excellence" (the singer or athlete), but instead by the motivation, "I want to help people get what they need and want." In doing so, they are due their wages as much as any other person who does good honest work to make the world a better place. And there is no particular limit to how much they can earn at doing that, just as there is no intrinsic limit for the sports star or doctor, if there is economic demand for what they do.

A person with this motivation might say, "My goal is to make money," but a similar sentiment could be expressed without "love of money" in the following way: "My goal is to find out what people need and want, and to work hard to find a way to get it to them, as my contribution of honest work to society, and to be paid accordingly." Such a person doesn't have special feelings about a particular *product*, but instead loves *helping* and *organizing,* as activities in their own right.

To those who feel called to "business" in this way, all of the principles of the previous chapters still apply. We must not cling too tightly to success in this world; we must act within the constraints that God commands; we must have a balance of rest and participation in our church community, we must not resent those who do better, and so on.

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[83] T. Sowell, "Jews are Generic," in *Black Rednecks and White Liberals*, (Encounter Books, 2006).

But business is not a "lower" type of work than art or science or carpentry, and profits as payments are not "obscene."

Storing up capital

The term "capitalism" comes from the foundational belief that private individuals have the right to store up "capital," that is, large amounts of money to be used in great endeavors. As pointed out by many economists, there are some types of valuable work that require a huge up-front cost before they can earn any money at all from services and products. For example, a train system requires a massive investment in tracks, trains, hiring engineers and conductors, making train stations and schedules, etc., before a single ticket can be sold.

Capitalism is not at its core about greed, but about *federalism of capital*. It says that not only the government can attempt such huge endeavors, but private individuals and private groups can also. Socialism views any such accumulation of capital by private individuals as evil, or suspicious at best, perhaps to be allowed only when subcontracted by the government.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the basis of federalism of capital is the principle that many, parallel planners always beat a single, central planner, even where there is inefficiency and lack of coordination in their work. This system also distributes societal power among many organizations instead of focusing it in one, single organization (the government), reducing the potential for tyranny.

On the other hand, we have biblical maxim, "Do not store up treasures for yourselves."[84] Are Christians forbidden to accumulate capital?

The answer is, "It depends." Christians are not forbidden to do great projects which require lots of up-front cost, and therefore accumulation of capital. But this can't be used as a *carte blanch*e to justify being ungenerous. Notice that Jesus said, "Do not store up treasures *for yourselves*." A self-focused accumulation of wealth is antithetical to the principle of radical generosity discussed in Chapter 12. But storing up money could be used to bless other people by providing products and services, creating jobs, and other economic benefits. This is the idea of *investment*—enabling good things to happen. Historian Max Weber argued[85] that the Puritans and Pietists of northern Europe made this direct logical connection, and this was the origin of modern capitalism. The following is a quote from a Wikipedia article on Max Weber:

[84] Matthew 6:19, Luke 12:21, James 5:3.
[85] M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904), reprint (Norton, 2008).

Weber argued, in simple terms:

- According to the new Protestant religions, an individual was religiously compelled to follow a secular vocation (German: *Beruf*) with as much zeal as possible. A person living according to this world view was more likely to accumulate money.
- The new religions (in particular, Calvinism and other more austere Protestant sects) effectively forbade wastefully *using* hard earned money and identified the purchase of luxuries as a sin. Donations to an individual's church or congregation were limited due to the rejection by certain Protestant sects of icons. Finally, donation of money to the poor or to charity was generally frowned on as it was seen as furthering beggary. This social condition was perceived as laziness, burdening their fellow man, and an affront to God; by not working, one failed to glorify God.
  The manner in which this dilemma was resolved, Weber argued, was the investment of this money.

We also see this at work with extremely wealthy men in the Old Testament such as Abraham and Job, who employed hundreds of workers.

The parable of the talents, discussed above, is often used as an allegory for how we use our "talents," that is, our innate abilities. But it can also be used as the principle for how we use our money, which is what the talents actually were in the story. The story says that the people with different levels of money did not give away all that money, nor did they bury it and store it uselessly, but rather they invested it in productive activities to advance the priorities of their master (who represents God). The question any Christian must ask about wealth then, is "How will this money I control actually advance the priorities of God's kingdom, in either redemptive or dominion work?"

Is luxury moral?

Finally, what about spending on luxuries? Once again, we have two balancing themes in Scripture. On one hand, we have verses that warn against self-indulgence:

> "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence." (Matthew 23:25)

> "You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter." (James 5:5)

> "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!... For all nations have drunk the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality, and the kings of the earth have committed immorality with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxurious living… Pay her back as she herself has paid back others, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double portion for her in the cup she mixed. As she glorified herself and lived in luxury, so give her a like measure of torment and mourning." (Revelation 18:2-7)

On the other hand, we have verses that commend us to enjoy the good things God has made, as we saw in looking at the vanity theme in earlier chapters:

> There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy on mankind: a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity; it is a grievous evil." (Ecclesiastes 6:1-22)
>
> "Some will depart from the faith…through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving." (1 Timothy 4:1-4)

The movie *Babette's Feast* presents a beautiful picture of how European pietists were impoverished by rejecting any enjoyments of life, and how a moment of luxury blessed them.

What is the balance? As we have discussed above, the Bible presents us with the image of the kingdom of God as a public feast, a party to which everyone is invited. Consider another parable of Jesus told:

> He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."
>
> When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" But he said to him, "A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.' And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.' And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.' So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.' And the servant said, 'Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' And the master said to the servant, 'Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.'" (Luke 14:12-24)

Note that Jesus *not* say, "Do not have feasts". Rather, he said, have feasts, but be open-handed, and invite lots of people! In the Bible, the enjoyment of life is inclusive, not exclusive. We ought not have parties and luxuries that connect us with just the "beautiful people," or the "right sort of people." Rather, our wealth, if we have it, should be a blessing to many to enjoy God's created order. An inward focus of wealth is dead, while an open-handed, outward look pours out blessings on many others.

As with stored capital, we have to ask ourselves, will this thing tend to bless others, or will it tend to keep me self-focused and exclude others? Does it make the world a better place, or does it suck resources away from the world for my personal self-indulgence?

Enjoying life and the pleasurable things of God's creation are commended in Scripture, but we are not called to these things in the same way that we are called to the good works that God has prepared in advance for us to do. An inward-focused, self-indulgent person is an impoverished person (with its most pitiable form in the addict to pleasures), because we were created to bless each other in the context of community.

Rich business people can serve God!

Our society has had for many years an underlying current of resentment toward rich people (even while often secretly desiring to be among them). Some of this is purely covetousness and has no place in the Christian life. But some resentment is justified when people who claim to have love for others live in ways that are filled with self-indulgence, love of money, isolated luxury and exclusion. (Those on the left tend to resent evangelical Christians who live this way, while those on the right tend to resent those who espouse a progressive liberal belief system but live the same type of elitist lifestyle.)

Followers of Jesus may become wealthy through good work, whether in direct services or in the indirect service of organizational skills, but their use of their wealth is under the lordship of Christ. We are stewards of the wealth of someone else, namely God. A mentality of the vanity of all things and the glory of God's eternity, discussed in Chapter 3, should lead us to have the attitude that everything we own is to use for the purposes of God's kingdom, and will have no other consequence in the long run.

Chapter 14. Work and Self-image

We have not yet talked in great depth about the significance of the Cross of Christ and the forgiveness of sins, although we have seen its centrality in the story of Redemption and the undoing of the Curse. In this chapter we will see that the Cross plays an enormous role in how we think about ourselves and our work.

Justification and self-justification

Many writers have discussed how crucial the concept of *justification* is, not only in the Bible but in our entire concept of self-image. At its root, to "justify" means "to declare righteous."[86] The Bible contrasts justification by *works* and justification by *grace*, through faith.[87]

You may not at first think that you care about justification, but a few moments of reflection will show that you deeply do. If some criticizes you, do you not feel upset for days? Why? They have weakened your sense of justification of yourself. If someone compliments you, do you not feel good for days? That person has added to your sense of justification. If someone accuses you of doing wrong, do you become "defensive"? What are you defending yourself against? Is it not a sense of being "judged," that is, being declared un-righteous?

The normal state of most people everywhere is to constantly assess our self-image based on the hundreds of judgments and declarations that people make about us, our whole lives long. Some people work at careers for decades to prove that the declarations of their parents or peers are wrong (or right).

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[86] There has been some debate about this in recent years, centered around the novel teachings of N.T. Wright. The key question is whether we have an "alien righteousness" given to us by Christ, or an "infused righteousness" produced in us, so that God can approve of our works as good enough without the added righteousness of Christ. As discussed in this chapter, the Bible everywhere talks of Christ being united to us, so that what is his is ours, and what is ours is his. On this basis, the apostle Paul clearly talks of people being justified by God by grace: "*not having a righteousness of my own* that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith," (Philippians 3:9); "And to the one who *does not work* but believes in him who *justifies the ungodly*, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts *righteousness apart from works.*" (Romans 4:5-6). N.T. Wright argues that the words justification and righteousness in these passages refer to membership in the community of faith. But in the Bible, the word translated "justify" clearly refers to a declaration of rightness or goodness, as in Luke 7:29, which literally reads, "The people justified God." God could not be added to the community of faith! In the same way, the tax collector in the parable of Jesus was "justified" based on his faith (Luke 18:14), without yet having done any works of repentance, and the Pharisee in the same parable was *not* justified, despite being an upstanding member of the community of faith.

[87] While the technical language of justification through faith does not occur often in the Old Testament, the language of the "heart" does—God frequently says that he does not look on outward actions but on the "heart," which represents the core of a person, that is, their deepest faith commitments. "For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7)

Some people, such as disciples of the author Ayn Rand, opt out of this by deliberately acting as though they don't care about what other people think or say. But in most cases, such people have actually just substituted the opinions of one group of people for the those of another group of people, namely, other devotees of Ayn Rand or some other like-minded group on the internet. They feel good about themselves by demonstrating their superiority over the "sheep" of the rest of the world.

The connection to the topic of this book is that for a great many people, especially in Western society, our sense of justification is found in our work. One might say that we have a system of "justification by work" rather than "justification by [religious] works." For many people, seeking higher salary and income is not about love of money as such, but about keeping score—those with more money are those who are winning, who are valued more highly by others.

In this book I have many times talked of doing work that makes the world a better place, that advances the kingdom of God, and that is outward-focused not inward and self-centered. These are proper goals, but it is an easy and false step to go from these goals to dependence on the opinions of other people. The person who rests on the grace of God should instead do what is right for other people, even if those people don't like it or don't agree. As the Apostle Paul said,

> "It is required of stewards that they be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God." (1 Corinthians 4:2-5)

When we see God as the weighty, eternal anchor of reality, his opinion matters most, and the opinions of other people matter little. We rest in him for both the absolute standard of what is right and wrong, and for his opinion about ourselves.

And the Gospel says that we can know that God approves of us. This is not because we have done so much good, whether in our workplace or in religious deeds, that God measures us up and finds us adequate. Rather, the Gospel says that he approves of us because we are *united to Jesus*. The work of Jesus has two aspects: his death on the Cross has atoned for our sins, and his resurrection has obtained new life for us. When we are united to him by faith, his work becomes our work, just as the property of one spouse becomes jointly the property of the other spouse when they are united in marriage.

The person who embraces this is justified by *grace*—by the work of Jesus and not by that person's own work. That has huge consequences for our self-image. Like the Apostle Paul, we can say, "it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human

court." We can have a sense of once-for-all security: the Bible says that God adopts those who have faith in him as his children,[88] and he will not un-adopt them.

This is a crucial message for many Christians to hear. Many who have attended church their whole lives have an implicit feeling that although God forgives their sins, he still doesn't *like* them—that they don't "measure up." They mentally see God as a stern parent tapping his foot and saying, "Not good enough!" The Gospel tells us that God sees us as "good"—as discussed above, that is the root of the word "justified." God looks at us with favor, and his opinion matters more than anyone else's.

Some who hear this may immediately ask, "If my work does not contribute to my self-image and my sense of goodness, why should I bother to work at all?" This is a variation of the question the Apostle Paul address two thousand years ago: "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" (Romans 6:1) It is also a variation of the question addressed in Chapter 5—if everything of this world is lightweight and fleeting compared to God, why bother to work hard at anything?

In Romans 6, the Apostle Paul addresses this question with an extended discussion of our union with Christ through faith. In a nutshell, when we are united to Christ, we are implanted with his character through the Holy Spirit. We then begin to love what is good. And good work *is* good!

When we realize that our self-worth is not defined by the sum of products of our work, and the opinions of others about our work, we undergo a complete change of view of the world, to work for what is good for other people, because we actually want what is good for them. We can find joy in our ability to do that work, rejoicing in being what God made us to be, without fear of the "slings and arrows" of people's shifting opinions. And when we mess up, we can rest in the forgiveness of God through Christ.

Raising children as good work

This message of self-image through grace is especially important when we think about raising children. Our society is somewhat schizophrenic about raising children. On one hand, many of our elites mock stay-at-home parents (especially stay-at-home mothers) and talk with disdain and irritation about the drudgery of child rearing or the banality of suburban soccer parenting. On the other hand, many who do not have children (often not by their own choice) see the social media posts of happy parents with their children and are deeply envious. Some Christians will do anything to get a spouse and children, including marrying a person who shares none of their Christian beliefs.

In Chapter 1, I talked of the creation mandate given at the beginning of the Bible to all people.[89] One side of this is "dominion over the earth." But we should not skip quickly over the other part: "Be fruitful and multiply." Raising children is good work, and a proper

[88] Romans 8:15.
[89] Genesis 1:28.

life goal. It is also hard work, as much good work is. The Bible has many verses that talk of God's priority of raising godly children.[90]

Why do so many people disdain raising children? Perhaps one reason is that almost anyone can do it. Much of the work of raising children involves thankless tasks like changing diapers, comforting crying babies in the middle of the night, and correcting defiant little children stamping their feet. Some people may try to convince themselves they are doing parenting better than anyone else, but most of us realize we are doing what people have done for ages, in largely the same way.

This returns us to the vanity theme of Scripture. When we realize that all our work is vanity, we don't need to run after types of work that seem new and improved, or important in the eyes of the world. Good work to do what needs to be done—parenting, farming, cooking, building homes, and so on—is valuable in its own right and doesn't need to be done in a way that is novel and exciting. Too often, we want to justify ourselves by saying that we have done work that no one else has ever done. That makes us feel we stand out from the crowd, which at the end of the day is another method of evaluating our own merit.

Another reason why some people disdain raising children is because it is seen as "women's work," and historically women's work has been devalued relative to men's. Instead of raising up the value of "women's work" (which was the original motivation behind "Mother's Day," a century ago), our modern society instead lifts up traditional "men's work" and encourages women to join in that.

There are many good reasons why some women would want to do work traditionally done by men, and good reasons why some men would want to do traditional "women's work," such as staying home with children. But denigrating child rearing as a full time vocation helps neither. And there is no obvious reason why the world would be better if the number of hours spent by women and men in raising children was exactly the same. Indeed, physically, women are naturally suited to breastfeed their children for the first few years of life.

The cultural movement against stay-at-home moms may not be so much driven by women not enjoying being at home with their children, but by the mockery of them by rich and powerful women, because the rich can afford to pay nannies to do their child care for them, while they engage themselves in "more important" work. Many a woman has secretly felt she would like to just stay home and parent, but has felt she would be made fun of as a nincompoop if she did.

A kingdom perspective says that raising children is following an important mandate of God to raise up the next generation; an eternal perspective says that the jobs lauded by our society have no more lasting value in God's perspective. Both of these should lead to as an assessment of our gifts and desires without worrying what other people think, which

[90] E.g. Deuteronomy 6:6-7, Proverbs 13:22, 22:6, 31:27-28, Malachi 2:15, Acts 2:39, Ephesians 6:4.

will lead many Christians to seriously consider dedicating a major chunk of their life's work to parenting. But some Christians may opt not to. Just as world missions and evangelism are important priorities for the church, but not everyone is called to be a missionary on the front lines, so also not every Christian is called to parent full time.

On the other hand, some people deeply desire to be parents and cannot, for one reason or another. Christians in this category need to hear from the church that marriage and parenting are not the *summa* of all Christian life. Partly as a reaction to the world's denigration of marriage and parenting, some churches have raised up parenting to a near-sacramental duty and blessing. This is out of balance; all types of honest work are callings by God, and we cannot hold any type up as sacred, even if it has a high priority in the kingdom of God. Those who don't have a spouse or children also need to look in the mirror and ask if they have made an idol of this kind of success. Just as with wealth, we can allow ourselves to covet and think of it as proper judgment of others.

Also, single and childless adults in the church community have a calling to help raise all of the children in the church. Children deeply need these "spiritual uncles and aunts." If all of the input to a child's education and training come from its parents, the child can tacitly assume that everything the parents say is their own insular opinion. And parents need outside perspective to make sure they don't go off the rails.

Many of the things in this section can also be said about care for people in other stages of life, such as elder care. Jesus made clear that the Fifth Commandment, to "honor our parents," includes caring for them in old age.[91] This can also feel like a thankless task, and not "changing the world," because elders in their late years most likely won't go on to impact the world. But a perspective of love leads Christians to care for all people who need care, in all stages of life. As discussed in the previous chapter, the kingdom of God is a party to which everyone is invited, not just the beautiful or influential people.

Dealing with failure

I can't escape the feeling that many Christian books on work and vocation are written to a target audience of people who are quite successful in their careers, to encourage them that they are not playing second fiddle to people who do church work. But most people in this life will deal with some type of serious failure, and won't always have success. I have known people who failed out of difficult educational programs, or didn't get accepted to the programs they wanted; men in their 50's who lost their jobs and could never find a stable, well-paying job after that; missionaries and pastors who had to leave fields of service because they became "burned out;" reasonably successful people who felt ignored and saw others who seemed less competent promoted over them; and many others who felt they had failed in serious ways, whether through sinful choices or merely lack of gifting to do better. The scenario of a man having a "mid-life crisis" is familiar to us: around age 40 or 50, many men perceive that they have gone as far as they can go in their careers, which look to be static and boring in the future, and so they try to

[91] Matthew 15:4-6.

compensate by making radical changes. Woman can experience this also, with the added pressure of a "biological clock" pushing them to marry and have children.

We need to face head on the fact that failure happens for most people. First, because of the general Curse on humanity due to the Fall, and because of the vanity of this world, things beyond our control can thwart our goals, such as physical illnesses or mental lapses. As we have now noted several times, the Bible says,

> "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit'— yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.'" (James 4:13-15)

Our plans might have to change, for example, if we need to give a substantial amount of time to caring for the health of a loved one. A pastor friend once told the story of a young couple who got married, and on their wedding night, the woman came down with a serious illness from which she never recovered, for the next decade. The man took seriously his vow "for sickness or health" and stayed my her side, ministering to her, until she died. He certainly didn't have that in mind as his calling in life before he married her, but recognized that callings can change by the will of God.

Second, as discussed in Chapter 12, God has given a diversity of gifts to people and did not make them all equally talented. Even if the Fall had never happened, God might have done it that way, as a free expression of his to give different gifts to different people. It is not hard to imagine that people might have played ball games in the Garden of Eden had they never fallen into sin, and that some of them would have won more games than others.

Third, sometimes we fail because an enemy shoots us down. Christians cannot ignore the fact that the Bible says that we have spiritual enemies, both supernatural (in the demon world) and natural: people who hate God and Christians.[92]

We often don't want to admit failure, so we rebrand it as just changing our direction. This is partly correct. If we define failure as a blocked goal, then clearly most people fail many times. We try hard to do something, and do not succeed, so we try something else. There is no shame in that. The perspective of the kingdom of God says that we belong to a victorious army, the people of God. If an army wins a battle, but some of the soldiers are killed or wounded, the whole army is victorious, and there is no stigma for the fallen; instead, their sacrifice is honored. In the same way, if we attempt great things for the kingdom of God, and some of us fail, we are still part of the advancing work of God in this world. As the Apostle Paul said,

[92] "For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ." (Philippians 3:18) "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." (1 Peter 5:8)

> "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable." (1 Corinthians 9:24-25).

In saying that "only one receives the prize," Paul is not saying that only one person goes to heaven in the end. Rather, he is saying that our lives should be characterized by great striving in good work, not for the goals of this world but for the goals of the kingdom of God, but not everyone will succeed in meeting their goals. This should not cause us to give up, but to do the best we can.

A shift of work from one goal to another should therefore be seen as normal for Christians. All types of good work are valued by God. It is not wrong to want to pursue work that has greater economic value, or work that uses my natural gifts more fully, or work that appears to be more on the "front lines" of missions, evangelism, and worship, but if I don't succeed in such things, God does not love me less. In fact, in the Bible God goes out of his way to say that he values those rejected in this life. Paul also wrote,

> "For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God." (1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

The whole story of Israel in the Old Testament has the same theme—that God did not choose them because they were powerful, but precisely because they were weak, so that they might not boast.[93]

In Chapter 12, I argued that a simple recognition of the truth requires us to admit that some work has more economic value than other work. But that does not mean that people who do work with more economic value are more valuable to God. God can use people with economic, academic, ecclesiastical, or political influence, but he often favors working through those with neither; those who are in power must be willing to give up that power at a moment's notice, as in the stories of Esther or Daniel.[94] Also, those in power in any sphere must be willing to humble themselves as Jesus did, to serve quietly at times.[95]

We discussed parenting as a vocational calling above; it's also possible to feel a deep sense of failure in parenting. Singles can feel failure if they don't marry; married couples can feel failure if they can't have children; Christian parents want their children to grow up

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[93] E.g., Jeremiah 9:23-24, " Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me."

[94] In *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World,* (Oxford University Press, 2010), James Hunter argues that the most impactful movements in history were led by people who had training at the top echelons of society, but were willing to be cast out from those top echelons. Those who feel they must keep their power at all costs will inevitably make moral compromises.

[95] See, e.g., Matthew 20:25-28; John 13:1-13.

to be faithful Christians but may find that they don't. On this last, we ought not to be neutral about our children's spiritual state; we should aim to be persuasive and winsome in explaining the things of God to them,[96] in the same way that the Bible tells us to be concerned about the heart of all believers near us.[97] But we cannot change the heart of another person in the end; only God can do that. God can use us as his instruments, but we cannot have an attitude of determinism that if we do everything right, people's hearts will be always converted. As stated in the quote of James above, we cannot say that we will definitely accomplish *anything* that we set as a goal. That doesn't mean that we shouldn't set goals, including goals of evangelism and discipleship of those near us, especially our own children. But we can fail there as well.

It can be especially hard when our own sin contributes to our failure. We may sin against our children, and they may throw that back in our face as an excuse for abandoning the Lord. A boss may fire us for a moral lapse. We may not be sure whether any of these accusations are right. In the end, if we understand the Gospel, we can accept that our sins are forgiven through Christ. We don't need to pretend that we did not sin, and we don't even always need to know exactly when and whether we did sin. All our sin is atoned for when we are united to Christ.

Accepting that we may fail can actually help us to fail less often. Sometimes the pressure of thinking that we have to do everything right to make our goals happen causes us stress, which can lead us to become manipulative. When we rest in the Lord instead of in our own work, we actually do better work and put others more at ease to work alongside us.

Can a Christian retire?

As a final topic of self-image, we turn to the question of retirement in old age. There are two equally dangerous temptations in thinking about retirement. One is to have our identity so wrapped up in our work that when we can no longer do it, our sense of self-worth plummets. This is common, for example, in parents, especially women, whose children have all left the home, as well as in people who are asked to retire by their employers. On the other hand, some people can see retirement as the goal of their whole life and career, as a kind of Nirvana to be reached.

In Chapter 13, we discussed how the Bible teaches that self-indulgence is never a calling for a follower of Christ, but that does not mean that we do not enjoy life as we share good things with others, nor that we never rest. It does mean that Christians technically never "retire" from doing good; the command to do the good works prepared in advance for us to do in Ephesians 2 does not have an expiration date! Seeking a worldly paradise of enjoyment at retirement is both short-sighted, as it can often fail to happen as we wish, and self-absorbed.

[96] Deuteronomy 6:6-7, Proverbs 22:6, Ephesians 6:4.
[97] Hebrews 3:12.

On the other hand, it is pragmatic reality that as we grow older, the energy we have to do work decreases, to the point that we may need to cease doing some types of work. Health issues may also arise at any age to prevent us from doing some types of work. This is not a failure, but similar to failure, it can be a signal that we need to move to a new calling in our work. When we understand that we are not justified by our work, and that our identity is in Christ not in the value of our work output, and no work lasts forever, we can accept that God sometimes redirects us to new things. A Christian may retire from one job and take up another one more suitable for a person in a different stage of life. That job might not be one that is paid—perhaps officially retiring from a career will allow new volunteer work opportunities.

I came face to face with God's change of calling some years ago when I was preaching regularly in in worship service in a nursing home. As we got to know the residents, several of them were Christians who lamented, "Why am I still alive? What am I good for?" What could I tell them? As I wrestled with this, I realized that there are at least two types of work every believer in Christ can do: encourage others,[98] and pray. Many of the famous martyrs of the church were limited to these while in prison. In the eyes of God, these are not minor things. Our words matter enormously, and so do our prayers. We can recognize that the total impact of our work on society is less than that of others, while also recognizing that God values all of his children equally, giving them all good work to do.

Summary

Much of our work is bound up tightly with our self-image. The Gospel acts to both tear down our false self-images and to build up our self-image in Christ. If we evaluate our self-worth based on our success in work, whether in "secular" work or "church" work, we will inevitably suffer both from the fear of failing, before we have ever failed, and from depression at not reaching our goals when we do fail (or when forces beyond our control tear down the work we have done, as the book of Ecclesiastes predicts). When we realize that Christ has accepted us and forgiven us, identifying with him and accepting his work on our behalf, we are free to simply do what he has set before us to do. The Gospel of the forgiveness and acceptance of Christ is therefore central to our whole attitude toward work.

Instead of thinking of "a" calling in life, it can be more helpful to think of a series of callings as we move through life. God can change our calling in a number of ways: by failure in one way or another, by moving us into a new stage of life, by the forces of the Curse and the powers of nature, and by other things beyond our control such as changes in society and technology.

[98] Ephesians 4:29; Hebrews 10:24-25.

Chapter 15. Work and Corporate Identity

In the previous chapter we looked at personal failure. But many people struggle with a very different sense of failure—the shame of being part of a family or ethnic group that is perceived to have failed. For many people, this plays a much greater role in their self-image than their individual work. A person from an ethnic group known for poverty, or past slavery, for example, can feel that there is no point in working to accomplish anything; a person from a broken family, or who was born as the result of an unplanned pregnancy, may feel the same way. Some people feel shame for the sins of their parents or ancestors who were oppressors, but actually, those who feel they come from groups who were the oppressed, losers, and failures typically feel much greater sense of shame and worthlessness. A sense of corporate shame can lead to overcompensation—overt bravado, machismo, or other ways of projecting an image of control, even while not attempting any great works, out of the expectation of failure.

In the US, the solution to this for many people is to deny any sense of connection to these larger corporate groups. We can cut ourselves off from our families, reject our ethnic upbringing, reject our national identity, and adopt new identities in their places. But in the Bible, and in our hearts, corporate identity and corporate sin and failure are real.[99]

The solution of the Bible is not to cut ourselves off from communal connections, but to realize that Jesus died not just to save us from personal sins, but from shame and corporate sin as well. Jesus washes away all of our uncleanness, whatever the source. When we come to Christ, we have a new identity not just as individuals, but as a corporate body, the people of God, whom he has washed and purified.[100]

Corporate Identity

Our corporate connections make up a large part of our "identity." Our self-identity is closely related to our self-image, the topic of the previous chapter, and is a major theme in our culture today, with many competing voices.[101] Self-image can be defined as how we evaluate ourselves, that is, our sense of "justification." Self-identity can be defined as whatever corporate senses of belonging we acknowledge. We can identify ourselves by our ethnic group, by our allegiance to a sports team, by our sexuality,[102] by our handicaps,[103] by

[99] For an extended theological discussion of corporate identity and corporate sin, see D. Snoke,…
[100] Revelation 7:9-14; 1 Peter 2:9; Ephesians 2:19-22.
[101] See Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolutionodern Self*, (Crossway, 2020).
[102] Although the emphasis seems to be on the individual with a sexual identity, many people have testified that adopting a particular sexual identity gave them a sense of belonging in a group that shared that identity. That may be the greatest factor for some people in adopting a new sexual identity, starting from a sense of being outsiders in a previous group.
[103] Sin patterns such as alcoholism can also become part of a shared corporate identity, as in Alcoholics Anonymous.

our personality type,[104] and so on. Changing an identity, or refusing to admit any weaknesses or sin patterns in an existing corporate identity, can be strategies for self-justification. When we understand the Gospel, we don't need to pretend there are no weaknesses either in us as individuals or in the groups we belong to. All is washed by the blood of Christ.

Seeing our highest allegiance and core identity as part of the people of God does not eliminate all other corporate identities. They can remain part of who we are, even if they have unique temptations to certain types of sin. The Bible says that people from "every tribe and nation and language" will be present together, worshiping God at the end of this world.[105] God loves diversity—he created it—and will not erase our ethic or family identities even in heaven. Rather than feeling shame about our corporate identities, we can embrace them as subsets of God's kingdom people, who are a holy nation, purified by God.

One implication of this is that the principles we have discussed in this book are not just for "success cultures." They are for all Christians, in any culture. It may be the case that some cultures focus on one type of work over another, with wonderfully diverse different contributions to the tapestry of the kingdom of God, but the general principles of work in the Bible are not just "white Protestant values" or a "Jewish work ethic." All of us are called to good work using the resources we have, even if we or our families fail.

Seeking Power

In the previous chapters, I argued that we can view ourselves as part of God's victorious army; in the last chapter I argued that this can be of great comfort when we ourselves become casualties. There is a dangerous slide we can make from this attitude, however.

It is possible to become so identified with a "movement" that we make moral compromises to ensure it succeeds, and can be devastated when it fails. This movement might be politics (whether of the progressive type or the conservative type), an evangelism or missions program, an ecological cause, or some other way of "changing the world."

It is not wrong to use strategy when planning good works. In Chapter 12 we discussed how storing up capital can be used for great good; in the same way, some great efforts require lots of "human capital"—organizing and training many people to work on the same goal. This might a "world evangelization plan," for example, or an effort to build alliances in the political sphere. To an outsider, it might look like a "conspiracy," but to those planning it, is simply good organization and strategy.

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[104] Books such as D.R. Riso, *The Wisdom of the Enneagram: The Complete Guide to Psychological and Spiritual Growth for the Nine Personality Types,* (Bantam, 1999), and I. Briggs Meyers, *Gifts Differing: Understanding Personality Type,* 2nd edition (Nicholas Brealy, 2010) tend to create a sense of shared identity in common personality attributes, in effect normalizing behavior that might otherwise seem to be an outlier in our relationships.

[105] Revelation 7:9.

Attempting such great works is fine and good, but they are not equivalent to the kingdom of God, and they can and often do fail. The Holy Roman Empire was founded to be a grand Christian society, but descended into chaos; the Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches all started as revivals of Christian life, but descended into "mainstream" nominalism over time. The Progressive movement in the United States was initially led by Christians such as William Jennings Bryan, with the goals of reducing the power of capitalists, prohibition of alcohol, and women's rights, but eventually was taken over by secular non-Christians with different goals. All of the above did some very good things in their day, and rested on the work of Christians whom we can affirm as sincere in their faith.

One of the most insidious effects of these movements is not their particular goals, whether misguided or not, but their appeal to Christians as their "identity" even when their goals are laudable. For Christians, it is also possible identify with a particular church denomination or non-denominational group.

As we discussed in the previous section, the Bible does not tell us that all such allegiances are wrong, but it tells us that our *highest* identity is as people of the kingdom of God. The Apostle Paul said,

> "For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." (Galatians 3:26-29)

> "You have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all." (Colossians 3:9-11)

Paul's language of "putting on a new self" is as near as possible to the modern language of having a new self-identity. When Paul said that there is no longer Jew of Greek, male or female, etc., he did not mean that such categories no longer existed. Rather, he insisted that our highest sense of identity cannot be associated with such categories.

It is therefore possible for a Christian to self-identity in several simultaneous categories; say for example, as an American, as a Pittsburgher, as a Republican, as a Baptist, as ethnically Hispanic, and as a member of a particular family. Sometimes people bundle two or more identities together; for example, "If you are Italian, you must be Catholic," or "If you are Black, you have to be a Democrat." None of these identities can have our highest commitment, however. Above all, we are the people of God. Jesus explicitly said that even our families by blood cannot claim our highest allegiance.[106] This was a radical teaching for his day, when family identity defined people's identity nearly universally.

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[106] "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26)

This also applies to our identity with "movements" or "causes." It is possible to so identity with a particular movement that we use the church for the purpose of getting that movement to win, instead of submitting our participation in that movement to the larger priorities of the church. If we do so, we have inverted priorities.

We learn a lot about of our deepest sense of identity by asking which allegiance will win if a conflict between two identities arises. Such conflicts are bound to happen, and then we must choose—what team do I stand with, when push comes to shove? The following are some diagnostic questions:

- Am I tempted to see the Church as a potential base of support for my cause, rather than as an end in itself, which stands above any causes?
- Am I tempted to see evangelism as a way of building support for my cause, rather than as the saving of eternal souls?
- If people in my church have incomplete discipleship, which would bother me more—that they are insufficient in love, or that they are ignorant of my cause? (See 1 John 4:8, "Anyone who does not love does not know God.")
- Am I tempted to excuse, cover up, or minimize the sins of people on my side, because confronting them would weaken my team?
- If I make alliances with non-Christians to advance my cause (which is a legitimate strategy), do I feel those allies are more my brothers and my family than those in the church who are united to Christ, but don't agree with my cause or show enough zeal? Do I hold back on sharing the Gospel with allies in my movement, so as to not threaten our unity?

One reason why we can become so identified with movements and causes is that we feel we can made a mark, that we can do something that will last. Even if I am not a leader of the movement, I can feel that my life has more weight if I have been part of a movement that has changed the world. But as we saw in looking at the vanity theme in the early chapters of this book, this kind of feeling ultimately rests on our need for eternal significance, but nothing in this world can truly satisfy that. Movements come and go; empires rise and fall—only God himself is eternal and can bear the weight of our desire for eternity.

Giving our cherished causes less weight also stems from humility. We act on what we think is right at the time, but we must also recognize that we could be wrong. A glance through the list above of past Christian causes—the Crusades, Prohibition, and methodism, for example[107]—should tell us that Christians can be misguided even with good aims. Much good has also been done by Christian movements, such as the movements to create hospitals and universities, the world missions movement, the Abolition movement, and so on, but even these also had flaws and unintended consequences.

[107] "Methodism" was originally not a denomination, but a movement to reduce many activities to "formulaic" thinking (that is, "methods") such as the scientific method, the evangelistic tent-meeting method, and so on. This was a reaction against the perception that earlier approaches were haphazard and half-hearted.

Humility says that even if a cause is important to me, and I am sure my side is in the right, I need to recognize that other people may not see it that way; in particular, rational Christians may disagree. In the political sphere, for example, the Progressive movement suffers from a monolithic view of "progress." This narrative says that there are only two sides, the side of Progress and the side of Tradition, that is, resistance to progress. But there is more than one vision in our society of what counts as progress. Many Christians active in politics are not interested in going back to the old days; they want to create a new "culture of life" (treating the unborn, the elderly, and the mentally deficient with respect and care), to create a culture of celebration of male and female differences, and to create a culture of independence and not dependency; they would see widespread adoption of these attitudes as "progress." On the other side of the political divide, many conservatives have a monolithic view of the role of government: any government program or regulation must be bad, and anyone who wants to see government programs funded must be a socialist and anti-Christian. But Christians involved in social services often testify that some government programs really do help people, even when they are mismanaged.

The Bible tells us that there is such a thing as a "disputable matter,"[108] and issues which are not among the "weightier" things.[109] We must be careful to recognize when something is a deduction from principles that make sense to us, that the chain of logic we follow does not always work for everyone. For example, in the Prohibition movement, it seemed obvious that 1) alcoholism was a scourge on society, destroying many families (this was certainly true, much more so in the 19th century than now); 2) the Bible calls us to avoid drunkenness and to treat our bodies well (also true); 3) many safe non-alcoholic drinks are available (not always true in Bible times, but true now); and therefore 4) abolishing the use of alcohol is the obvious course of action. For much of the twentieth century, to be a committed Christian was to be opposed to drinking alcohol. Yet the Bible clearly does not prohibit the drinking of alcohol, and Jesus made wine for a wedding party. Most of us now look back on prohibitionists as misguided, but we do well to ask whether we have similar blinders about our own movements. We may all agree on the evils that plague society, but can have very different views on what should be done to deter them.

This may be what the proverb of Ecclesiastes is getting at when it says, "Do not be overrighteous."[110] It is not technically possible to be more righteous than perfectly righteous. But it is possible to be overly zealous about some point of ethics. This might be because we want to justify ourselves by our righteousness, as discussed in the previous chapter. Or it might be because we have convinced ourselves that we will do something really important if we can change the world in this way.

[108] Romans 14:1. (ESV uses "opinions," NIV uses "disputable matters.")
[109] Matthew 23:23.
[110] Ecclesiastes 7:16.

Chapter 16. Calvinism and Creativity

This chapter may seem a little abstract at first, as we look at a very basic question: to what degree can I call my work my own? If God is in charge of the universe, and prepares works in advance for us to do, is any of my work really mine?

But this will lead us into the general topic of "creativity," which is not necessarily the same as "novelty," but is related to it. Humans everywhere dislike the "same old, same old," being "in a rut," or the "drudgery of routine."

The significance of Adam naming the animals

We've already mentioned Adam naming the animals. The language of this passage is quite significant:

> Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them.

This passage says that God wanted to "see what [Adam] would call them." This is fascinating when one remembers that God is omniscient, knowing everything and predicting the future. In what sense could God be waiting to find out what Adam would say?

Many books have been written on exactly how much "free will" people have. This discussion is often framed in terms of Calvinism versus Arminianism. Calvin, Luther, and earlier writers such as Augustine in the Roman Empire emphasized God's absolute sovereign control over the entire universe including human will; [111] Arminius in post-Reformation in Holland, and Pelagius in the Roman Empire, believed that some part of human nature is not accessible to God. Both of these viewpoints have representatives in the modern Christian theological world.

As a Calvinist myself, I cannot give a fair presentation of Arminianism. Instead, I will give here a discussion of what Calvinism does *not* say, which allows some common ground with Arminians.

The crux of the debate turns on what we may call *ownership* of deeds, or *authorship*. If something happens, who gets credit as the "doer" or "owner" of it? As a specific example, consider the written works of Shakespeare. Should we say that Shakespeare is not the author of these works, and instead that God is the author? No Calvinist I know would say that. In Calvinism, there is an "ownership," or responsibility, that a person has for his or her works. To deny that ownership would be a form of *pantheism*, the philosophy that says everything is really just a part of God. Calvinists reject pantheism, and affirm the

[111] The classic work from this perspective is Jonathan Edwards' *Freedom of the Will,* reprint (Yale University Press, 2009). R.C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Tyndale, 2011), and J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God,* US edition (Intervarsity Press, 2012) are more accessible, recent works.

creator/creature distinction.[112] Part of this creator/creature distinction implies that the actions of creatures are their own: when a tree falls, we do not say "God fell," we say the tree fell. In the same way, we do not say "God authored the works of Shakespeare;" we say that Shakespeare authored them. This ownership of actions by a creature is sometimes also called *agency* or *second causes*.

The causal flow in Calvinism is that God created us humans with our unique attributes, and then, out who we are, we create new things. These new things do not catch God by surprise, since he is omniscient, but they are still things generated by *us*, like the names of the animals generated by Adam. These new things can be both good or evil; in fact, to do evil requires an imagination to suppose the existence of something different from what God has made good.[113]

The Calvinist and the Arminian therefore both affirm that an intrinsic attribute of humans is *creativity*. We can rightly say that we have generated something new. God can create new things *ex nihilo*, that is, without needing any prior "stuff" external to himself, while we create only new ideas that may lead us to rearrange the stuff God has already created. But we do have an aspect in common with God, which is a core aspect of having the "image of God," namely that we can indeed create.

It's not surprising, then, that we humans don't like to get stuck in a rut doing the same old thing, and that being forced to do so feels like oppression. As discussed in Chapter 11, art and science flow from this aspect of our nature, and societies that suppress art and curiosity suffer. But not only professional artists and scientists participate in this aspect of human nature. We all do.

Aesthetics

This brings us to a discussion of *aesthetics*. There is much debate about what this term even means; it is too narrow to call it the discussion of "beauty," although beauty is one aspect of it. More generally, we may say that aesthetics is the topic of when we may say a work is "well done," as opposed to done in a shoddy way. In Chapter 10, we discussed how works may be ranked in terms of their priority for the church as an institution, and in Chapter 12 we discussed how they may ranked in terms of their economic value, but the aesthetic concern is different: can we rank works in terms of how well done they are? Most people would answer "yes," but there is much debate as to how to do that ranking.

We can generally say that works are well done when they have the following aspects:

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[112] See Peter Jones, *One or Two: Seeing a World of Difference,* (Main Entry, 2010).

[113] This raises the question of the problem of evil, not addressed here. For an extended discussion of the problem of evil, see D. Snoke, "Thinking about the problem of evil," davidsnoke.weebly.com. The problem of evil is not resolved any more easily for the Arminian than the Calvinist; in both cases God has the option to not create people who will turn to evil. The general approach to this question is to assert that God could have an adequate good reason to allow the existence of evil people, which outweighs the temporary evils they do, which will end at the Final Judgment.

- *Creativity.* Has the worker put something of his or her unique personality into the work? This is sometimes conflated with "novelty," that is, doing something new that no one has done before, but novelty by itself is empty. In fact, bare novelty can be highly "derivative," mindlessly adding new things just as everyone else mindlessly adds new things.
- *Aptness,* or appropriateness. This is sometimes called agreement of form and function. There is neither "overdesign" with extraneous things that don't belong, not "underdesign" with missing elements that need to be supplemented ad hoc. The work also works well in its environment instead of defeating or destroying it.
- *Care for detail.* Many tourists instinctively know that medieval castles and cathedrals and Victorian and Art Deco buildings have a sense of care for detail that many late-20th-century buildings don't, which seem slapped up and soulless. This doesn't mean that good works can't be mass produced; even mass produced works can show evidence of the care of the designer.

This list applies not just to art, but to engineering, architecture, and any type of work—Christians should be concerned with their work being "very good," as God proclaims about his own work of creation in the first chapter of Genesis. Sadly, many evangelical churches are known for their lack of concern for aesthetics. One aspect of this is understandable—many churches don't have a lot of money, and concern for aesthetics often takes a lot of time, which translates to money to pay people to take the time. The cathedrals of the middle ages had very wealthy donors and mass numbers of Christians to support their construction (and they often underpaid their artisans). But is also the case that many evangelical churches explicitly or implicitly embrace *utilitarianism,* the philosophy that says that we should not be concerned about aesthetics at all, and just do whatever gets our top priorities done the fastest. In the church context, this often means putting up a hall that fits a certain number of people where the Gospel can be preached. At a much more mundane level, it can mean setting out bad coffee in large aluminum urns, since the purpose of the coffee is just to insert caffeine.

This neglect of aesthetics has roots in the history of the modern evangelical church. At the time of the Reformation, there was a strong reaction against the perceived gaudiness of the Roman Catholic churches while the preaching of the Bible was neglected; righty or wrongly, many felt that the "bells and whistles" of the Catholic church were being used to distract people from its spiritual poverty, and worse, in some cases a type of idolatry. This counter-reaction was particularly strong among the Anabaptist and Pietist churches of continental Europe and the Scotch-Irish churches, which played a strong role in founding the churches of North America. It was further underscored in the fundamentalist movement of the early 20th century which saw liberal theology as emanating from elitist universities and the upper class, and therefore rejected anything that hinted of elitism.

These churches have had great strengths: the clear preaching of the Word, the founding of Bible schools and seminaries, and worldwide evangelism and missions have been successes and are top priorities, as discussed in Chapter 10. But a greater balance is

possible. Some church members may love to work on aesthetic issues and not view it as a burden at all. As we have seen, there are many callings in the Body of Christ, and therefore the work of the Body is not a zero-sum game, in which work given to one thing automatically takes away work on something else. Some people may find it a part of their rest to add energy to aesthetic considerations, which for other people would be extra work.

Paying attention to aesthetic issues is not the same as gaudiness or inward-focused luxury. Gaudiness has impressing other people as its motivation, and most people can detect it easily. Inward-focused luxury can lead a church to have comfortable seats but still no emphasis on aesthetics.

Beauty

While we have seen that aesthetic concern is not the same as beauty, it is not unrelated to it. The Bible tells us to focus our attention on that which is beautiful in one aspect or another:

> "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." (Philippians 4:8)

The Bible itself clearly shows us, in its many stories and laments of sin and failure, that we don't have to only think happy thoughts all day. But the Bible also tells us to move past these things to remember the grand story of God. That which is evil is eventually conquered, and that which decays and is under the Curse will one day be made right. We therefore end up meditating on the good and the beautiful, even when considering the bad.

Man artists have rightly pointed out that good art is not just about beauty; a Rembrandt painting strikingly showing the lines on the face of an old peasant, a sad song of a love lost, or the gripping writing of Tolstoy describing Anna Karenina's descent into self-hatred, are all good art. Yet a Christian does not *celebrate* what is evil, or focus on it to the exclusion of the good. Good art from a Christian perspective has an *appropriate response* to the fallenness of this world, which can be laments and mourning (as in the book of poems called Lamentations in the Bible), anger at injustice (as in many Psalms, which were songs meant to be sung), or longing for the future kingdom of God (for example, the Song of Solomon expresses longing for kingly love, which speaks not only to our desire for human love, but also is a metaphor for our longing to meet Jesus, the king who loves his people). These emotions are themselves ways of focusing on the noble and the beautiful, by remembering what was good in what has been lost, and by reminding ourselves that evil things do not last forever.

Perhaps the main argument against celebrating the beautiful in our day is the leveling impulse discussed in Chapter 12. We start with justification by works, that is, valuing other people and ourselves based on the judgments of people about them. People who produce more economic output, or who are smarter, or who are more beautiful, are sought after more by society. Rather than questioning this as the basis of valuing people,

we accept it and instead try to find ways to level people so that there are no such differences. We pretend that no one is smarter than anyone else, we pretend that no one is more beautiful than anyone else, and we try to bring down the wealthy. Against this, the Bible says, "Do not covet"—God reserves the right to give out different gifts, and differing degrees of those gifts, as he chooses.

Thus, celebrating or focusing on what is good in this world, and the ultimate good that God will bring, whether it is found to a higher degree in one person or in one place or one culture, is not to disrespect or dislike certain types of people. One can say that there is an elegance and beauty in higher mathematics, even though not every culture of the world originally developed higher mathematics, and even though the culture that did also had negative attributes such as love of war. We can give God praise for a diversity of gifts distributed diversely and not uniformly. In the same way, I can admire a type of skill or beauty of a person even while accepting that I will never *exemplify* that type of goodness—I will never be an NBA player, nor a beautiful woman, nor a skilled pianist. Rather than demanding that the world be leveled, I can celebrate the diversity of God's creation.

In balance to this, the Bible warns us against idolizing any person or thing in creation. We can see great good, heroism, and so on, but no person is perfectly good; only God alone is truly and wholly good. We can honor and pay attention to those who appeal to us for one reason or another, but we must always remember that all good gifts come from God, and therefore no person (or any other good thing, such as a video game or sport) can take his place. Ascribing beauty and value to his creations is not un-Christian, if we keep in perspective that God is the ultimate source of it, and in fact respects and glorifies his creativity.

Esoteric versus practical work

Closely related to the topic of aesthetic versus utilitarian concerns is the issue of "esoteric" work versus "practical" or "accessible" work. This issue comes into focus clearly when we think of money spent on modern art and obscure science. In these fields as well as others, the experts in the field spend most of their efforts on what may be called a conversation with other experts, rather than producing things that the general public wants or needs. Many Christians in our day mock modern art as ugly or pointless, but they miss the point: much modern art is not aimed at them, but instead is part of a conversation with other artists. In the same way, some Christians disdain obscure science as useless and a waste of money, but it is often approved by other experts as a way of answering a hotly debated question. We may think of art as a type of language, and much art is spoken in a language used only by artists and art critics, not meant for display in people's homes. In the same way, many scientists are not trying to create useful devices for people, as engineers do; they are mainly dialoguing with other scientists about questions they share.

But we should not give such experts a free pass to do anything they want, either. There is a strong analogy with the *scholasticism* of monks in the Middle Ages. As the university and monastic system grew in those days, many scholars spent more and more time writing commentaries about the commentaries of other scholars. Their work grew

more and more obscure, and to a large degree, quite useless. The Reformation of the 1500s and 1600's included in large part a cultural revulsion against scholasticism. Common people resented that they were required to pay tithes and taxes to support an ever-growing class of monks who spent their time in such obscure studies, and celebrated when King Henry and others tore down monasteries. Scholars from the upper classes also grew tired of the seemingly endless internal discussions; as Scottish philosopher David Hume famously said,

> "If we take in our hand any volume of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion."[114]

Saying that my obscure conversation with other experts is so important that those who don't understand it should be forced to support it financially, regardless of whether it is any benefit to them, is a type of elitism. People who are smart simply don't have the right to demand others support them to do just anything they want.

Nevertheless, it is inevitable that the discussions of experts in a field will become difficult for other people to understand. Because these discussions do often address important questions for society, the powers that be, whether the government or wealthy individuals and corporations, have an interest in setting aside funds to support such work. From a biblical perspective, this stems from the value of "wisdom" and "wise counselors." The wisdom literature emphasizes this:

> "Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety." (Proverbs 11:14)
>
> "Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed." (Proverbs 15:22)
>
> "Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice." (Ecclesiastes 4:13)

A Christian who wants to engage in such matters needs to ask how and when the subject of these conversations translates to value for society. It is not adequate to simply say, "Many smart people find this question interesting and important." That can lead down a quick road to ingrown discussion like scholasticism. As we discussed in Chapter 6, we all want to be affirmed by others, and scholars are by no means immune to this; they are perhaps more subject to wanting to be approved by others than the general population. C.S. Lewis described this as the allure of the "inner ring"—the desire to be included in the top echelons of society's influencers, which leads to endless compromise to not be excluded from those circles.[115] This inward focus can end up in circular discussions in which each person in the conversation merely wants the approval of the others.

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[114] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, reprint (Kackett Publishing, 1993).
[115] C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, reprint (HarperOne, 2009).

Our discussion of human creativity and curiosity at the beginning of this chapter tells us that societal good may be taken more broadly than just what puts food on the table or makes our morning commute faster. High-level conversations *can* be valuable to society. At their best, they are *paradigm-questioning* conversations, in which those in the discussion ask, "We've always done it this way; we've always thought things were this way. But do we need to assume that? What are the consequences if we don't?" This kind of thinking can apply to theology as well as art, science, and other fields of work; it is often called "thinking outside the box."

As discussed in Chapter 1, historian Stanley Jaki showed that much of the reason that the scientific and industrial revolutions occurred in Western society, and not in other cultural centers which initially had as much wealth, can be traced to view, taught in the Bible, that history is progressing toward something new. This is an overall implication of the Bible's view of the flow of history, discussed in Chapter 1. Societies that had a strong weight on tradition, in some cases because changing anything would be an affront to their ancestors, and in other cases because of a philosophical view that time runs in a circle, tended to be less willing to try new things. Human creativity and curiosity, seeking out the new, is fundamentally related to the way God made the universe with an upward trajectory.

Cutting loose—seeing the world and men going wild

There are shortcuts to satisfy this human desire for creativity. One that we have already discussed above is to aim merely for novelty. Much of modern art suffers from being *merely* novel, without any real creativity. In more common experience, many people simply seek to add new experiences to their lives, such as travel, without a good purpose.

In the middle of the 20th century, sociologists talked of "conspicuous consumption"—trying to impress others (that is, to increase our sense of self-worth) with gaudy and showy purchases, such as big houses or big cars. In the past forty years, we have moved to "correct consumption" and "experience wealth." Instead of showing off objects, we try to impress each other with our stories of doing proper things, or new things. People travel from one place to another to check off lists of things seen and done, without any love or care for these places. Christians sometimes participate in the same thing when they go on short-term missions trips.

Seeing the world can have a good purpose. It is like education—travel to new places broadens our perspective, to see our own culture from a different viewpoint, and for Christians, fellowship with believers from different cultures helps us to see what is truly core to the Christian faith and what is not. But like education, more is not always better. Some people may indeed be called to advanced degrees, and some may be called to wide travel, but if we begin to evaluate people by how educated they are or how well-traveled they are, we have once more descended into justification by works and accomplishments.

Another, related way of seeking novelty is to "cut loose," to "go off the grid." Some Christian authors have argued that this especially applies to men, in what may be called the

"rogue" instinct.[116] Christian men's groups responding to this sometimes go on wilderness camping trips or create drum circles. This instinct may not be restricted to only men, but in any case we will do well to not try to stamp it out. As discussed above, our creativity often drives a desire to do something really different from the routine. Yet like travel or education, more is not always better.

An analogy is somewhat apt—novelty is like salt or pepper, or some other spice. A little can make plain food better, but it does not follow that we should maximize the amount of salt and pepper we use. Humor and "colorful" language such as that used by Martin Luther[117] fall into the same category. Like the modern artist who is merely shocking, Christians who seek to shock are like a cook using too much spice; too much spice is actually uncreative and insipid.

While all people rightly seek some spice of novelty, the Bible also commends to us the satisfaction of routine work:

> "Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much." (Ecclesiastes 5:12)
>
> "Aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands." (1 Thessalonians 4:11)

If we cannot find any pleasure in the normal and the routine, it may indicate that we have not gotten the message of the Bible in Ecclesiastes, and are seeking satisfaction where it ultimately cannot be found, in dazzling experiences of this world.

"Christianizing" work

A second shortcut to addressing our need for creativity is to copy the work of others and "Christianize" it. In well-known examples, this takes the form of someone saying "Let's make a Hallmark romance movie, but make the characters Christians!" or "Let's make a pop dance song with sexual squeals, but make it about Jesus!"[118]

In reaction to this, some Christians reject the notion of Christian music or Christian art altogether. But history has many examples of art with distinctly Christian themes that is well done and not derivative. In the area of literature, books like *A Pilgrim's Progress*, *Anna Karenina*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and C.S. Lewis's *Space Trilogy* are all explicitly Christian yet extremely well done; even some novels written by non-Christians *about* Christians wrestling with their Christianity, such as *Middlemarch* or *Les Misérables*, are great, and not diminished by their spiritual themes. In the same way, music styles such as bluegrass, spirituals, and Gospel came directly out of church music; classical composers like J.S. Bach

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[116] J. Eldredge, *Wild At Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul,* expanded edition (Thomas Nelson, 2021).
[117] Martin Luther's colorful insults are well known, e.g., "You say, 'What comes out of our mouth must be kept!' I hear it—which mouth do you mean? The one from which the farts come?" in *Against the Roman Papacy, an Institution of the Devil*, (reprinted in *Luther's Works*, vol. 41, p. 281).
[118] This latter is not a joke; in the 1990s pop music often had "orgasmic" oohs and aahs by female singers, and Christian pop songs copied this.

and Handel explicitly put Christian themes in their work. Christian cathedrals are recognized as some of the great architecture of the world.

Merely adding a Christian theme or moral lesson does not save a bad work, but on the other hand, having an explicit Christian theme or moral lesson does not automatically make a work bad. The attributes of aesthetics discussed above need to be present, and when they are, the work as a whole prospers.

It also does not follow that every work by Christians needs to be centered on things only Christians can relate to. This brings us back to the topic of *common grace*. Because all people are made in the image of God, Christians have overlap with the feelings and experiences of non-Christians, as we discussed in the context of the creation mandate, in Chapter 11. Some of what Christians do in art and other work will appeal to non-Christians, and some of what non-Christians do will appeal to Christians; there is no reason for a Christian to draw a bright line of demarcation between the two. But a Christian who deliberately *hides* his or her Christian commitments to do work just like the rest of the world is as un-creative and derivative as the one who copies the world and adds a Christian gloss.

This approach has application in areas besides art, which may not be as obvious at first. In my own field of science, many Christians shirk away from anything uniquely Christian added in science; like a second-rate Christian pop star, they seek to do science exactly the way the world does, and just add a Christian "message" at the end. For example, many do not give the Intelligent Design movement a hearing, because they feel religion has no place in science; they adopt all of modern science, such as evolutionary psychology, and just put a Christian gloss on top that "God did it." On one hand, because of common grace there is no reason to expect all of science done by Christians to be utterly different from that done by non-Christians. But as discussed in Chapter 11, Christians ought to question paradigms and allow their world view to affect all that they do, even when this leads to uncomfortable conflict with the prevailing views of the world.

In the same way, merely adding a Christian symbol to a business logo also doesn't make a business more authentically Christian. Many in the small business world have said that business people who lead with their Christian identity often are the most likely to be false sheep and con artists, attempting to get a leg up in their business contacts by monetizing their connections in the church. On other hand, a Christian commitment can lead to a truly different paradigm, such as Chik-fil-A keeping the Sabbath in place for its workers.

To copy the world exactly is derivative; to do the exact *opposite* of the world in every case is just as derivative. In each case, the world controls the agenda. By contrast, black and white Christians in the rural South of the US who developed bluegrass, spirituals, and Gospel did so mostly out of their own agenda, and in doing so created something far more authentic and novel than most pop music.

Summary

Christians are not called by the Bible to lead humdrum, boring lives of no creativity or novelty. Far from it, from the time Adam named the animals, people made in the image of God show aspects of his creativity and to do new types of things. Seeking out the ends of the earth was a direct mandate from God to people at the creation.

Much of modern evangelicalism has historical roots in a reaction against elitism and the perception of gaudiness in the Catholic church, and as a result tends to neglect any focus on aesthetics, beauty, and quality. While the church should still maintain a focus on the priorities of the kingdom, we should nevertheless strive to do all our work *well*, consistent with the creative image of God in us, who rejoiced that his work in creation was *good*. As Martin Luther said,

> "The Church's approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him not to be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours, and to come to church on Sundays. What the Church should be telling him is this: that the very first demand that his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables….No crooked table legs or ill-fitting drawers ever, I dare swear, came out of the carpenter's shop at Nazareth."

Authentic creativity means neither rejecting everything the world does, nor copying it blindly, whether we put a Christian gloss on it or hide our Christianity. Living in the hand of God also means that we can celebrate both the novel and the routine, as God gives them to us.

Chapter 17. Living It Out

Let's apply these principles with some real-world stories. All of these have fictional elements, but represent the struggles of real people I've known.

Joseph

Joseph grew up in a Christian family and often heard messages about the importance of changing the world by being an influencer. He went to college and couldn't decided on a major until his third year, at which point he picked art history. On graduation, he didn't find any jobs in art history, but he didn't want to just work in a corporate office, so he worked as a barista at a local coffee shop. He couldn't pay for his own housing on his salary, since he lived in a major city and had high student loan payments, so he lived with his parents. He eventually became heavily involved in online video games, with excursions into porn.

Although Joseph had high earning potential for jobs that paid much better than his barista job, he couldn't get motivated for those jobs because they don't seem either artistic, in keeping with his degree, nor influential, in keeping with his upbringing that told him to make an impact on the world. Being a barista in a city seemed vaguely more artistic, although he didn't have the time or energy to create art or write about art after a long day on his feet. Without much income, he didn't have any serious ideas of marriage, and he didn't consider moving to a more rural area where life is cheaper, because cities are where the influential action is at.

Joseph eventually met a young woman he liked, and became convicted that he should be a responsible father if he was going to get married. He was inspired, in part, by the examples of fathers he saw in church who sat with their families and seemed to enjoy being with and talking to their kids. It took him a long time to move past his bias that getting a job, getting married and having kids was "settling" for the "American dream," but he realized that being a good father was a calling that he could really look forward to, in which make the world a better place locally, instead of pretending to make the world a better place globally, and not really doing it.

Ann

Ann got married in her 20's, and only a few years after that, her husband started to have a debilitating illness that lasted for over a decade. Ann raised their kids almost on her own, and cared for her husband until he finally died. Then just a few years after that, one of her daughters got a different severe illness, and Ann cared for her for almost a decade before that daughter died.

When I met Ann, she was in her 80's, and a busy worker for the church. At one point after we had moved out of town, she apologized for not spending more time writing to me and my wife. She told me that her days were packed because there were so many old

people in the retirement community who were depressed and needed to be encouraged. It never occurred to her that she was living in the same retirement community, and that she might have been depressed about spending most of her adult life caring for dying people. Instead, she bubbled over with enthusiasm for her work in encouraging other people. At every stage of her life, she took what she had in front of her as God's calling in her life.

Caroline

Caroline was two and a half years into a Ph.D. program in laboratory science when she came to realize that she hated it. Yet she felt that she couldn't walk away from it, because she was raised in a family that had high expectations for worldly success and many family members who had accomplished that, also because she was influenced by feminist ideology that said that there needs to be equal numbers of women in every top field, and also because she had already invested so much time in it.

After talking with older members of her church, she realized that what she really loved was talking with people about the Gospel, both in evangelism and in encouraging Christians. She took the big step of quitting her Ph.D. program (to the dismay of her family) and going for training in student ministry. For the first time, she felt she was hitting her stride in doing work she was good at and liked. Although she had to work hard to raise financial support, she was still thankful that she had not spent her life doing work she really had no sense of calling to.

Thomas

Thomas was a raised by his parents as a member of a home schooling cooperative. Everyone else his age in this group went off to college and got various degrees. Sam decided instead to go to a technical school and get training in electronics and industrial skills. Although no one else said anything, many of them privately thought, "Too bad about Thomas being a failure."

After a couple of years, Thomas, with no debt and money in the bank, started his own company; by the time he was 30, he was worth over a million dollars, and by the time he was 40, he was worth ten times that. He was known as a kind and shrewd manager. He began to support not just church projects and missionaries, but also various arts projects in his town such as Christian theater and after-school arts programs. During all this time, he kept reading interesting books on art and history, and loved "academic" conversations with other Christians about these topics.

Sam

Sam worked as a graphic artist in a large engineering company for many years. When he was fifty, he department was eliminated, since it relied on old methods of drafting that were replaced in the modern world by computers. After unsuccessfully applying for similar jobs elsewhere, he went to a school to learn computers, but didn't have an aptitude

for it. Meanwhile, he and his wife, who had no children, worked at fast-food places to make income.

After several years in this, Sam found a job in a plumbing and bathroom renovation company, and found that he loved it. He was able to do both the labor on site as well as some aspects of the management and organization of the small company he worked for.

Around the time he retired, Sam was nominated to become a "deacon" in his church, and helped with many things in the church building and management. He looked back on the different "phases" of his life as interesting memories, each with its own ups and downs.

Alice

Alice was by all accounts not bad looking, but "plain." She was pursued aggressively by several non-Christian men, but although she had some "falls" with some of them, she broke those relationships off and held out for marrying a Christian man. It never came about, and by her late 30's she had to resign herself to not likely getting married. This really hurt, and was a grieving process. It was not helped by her church, which constantly had focus in worship on "family" and had a "singles" group that explicitly was for "people under 30."

She eventually transferred to a different church that had a much more integrated sense of fellowship, and was part of a home Bible study group that had a range of ages from college age to 70's and older. People in her church practiced hospitality and often invited her over, or out to dinner with a group at a restaurant, and eventually she started to invite people over to her house as well. She helped babysit kids for some families, and started to be called "Aunt Alice" by some of the kids.

In her 50's, the elders of her church created a "women's circle" of women to consult when various women in the church were in crisis. Alice was asked to be part of that group, and started to be listened to as an "elder woman" in the community. She always secretly regretted that she had not married, but found that her days were full of activity and fellowship.

Linda and Gabrielle

Linda was an extremely talented musician, and was accepted to Julliard. After she had been there a year, she had a crisis of conscience in which she reacted to the lifestyle of living, eating, and breathing her career in order to succeed. At the end of the year, she made the painful decision to quit the program and transfer to a different, less demanding school. After she graduated from that program, she had a series of part-time jobs in performance, which satiated her love for music, but she also began to diversify her interests, in getting married and having kids, teaching in a Christian school, and writing Bible study guides and leading Bible studies.

Gabrielle started out in a similar way, doing medicine in a top program and being told that if she did not live, eat, and breathe her career she would amount to nothing. She

decided not to do that, but stayed in her program anyway. She committed to taking one full day off from all work activities every week, as a "rolling Sabbath," which sometimes led to pushback from others she worked with, and in general she included time with people, church, and reading Christian books in her schedule.

She didn't get into a "top" residency, but went to a research-oriented program at a small institution. Unexpectedly, her lab group made a major discovery that propelled Gabrielle to a certain amount of fame, and she began to be asked to sit on national committees for medical policy. She began to lead a research group even while still keeping her balanced schedule and refusing to be a workaholic. In her 30's, she met a man in her church and got married, and when kids came, he agreed to be a "stay-at-home dad" and do most of the child care.

Gavin

Gavin was an "up-and-coming" pastor, who had planted a church that grew to several hundred members under his leadership; he had several book contracts and agreements to write educational literature for a Christian publisher, and regular invitations to be a speaker at Christian conferences. But when his son was a teenager, Gavin began to see a worrisome pattern of his son drifting from the faith and in general becoming "hard."

Gavin decided to quite his job as a pastor and take a 9-to-5 office job so that he could spend more time with his family, especially his son. Their relationship didn't change overnight, and his son, while remaining a Christian, never became particularly excited about his faith. But Gavin didn't regret changing his job at all. He viewed his "calling" as part of a joint calling of his whole family, and in his mind did what was best for all of them, not just for himself.

Peter

Peter loved theology, and burned through theology books as fun reading during his college years and afterward. People came to him to ask him his opinion about difficult questions of the faith.

He always expected that he would go to seminary and become a pastor, but like Jimmy Stewart in the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, one thing in life after another seemed to just come up to prevent that. He first needed a job to raise money for seminary, then he got married and needed a better-paying job to support a family, then had an illness, and found himself in his late 30s working for the same company, but with a fairly high degree of pay and responsibility. He had a hard time accepting management as a calling from God, but could not deny that he did it well.

He was nominated to be an elder in his church, but a moral failure that only his wife and friends knew about led him to turn that down. Although this was a disappointment to him, he felt that it was the right thing to do to get his moral house in order. Once again, it seemed that his love of theology was not going to use.

Yet people continued to ask his opinion about theological issues, and he was viewed as a wise voice to ask on church matters. Eventually, in his 50's, he did become an elder, and was viewed as a staid, stable, and wise man by people who knew little about his many internal struggles over the years.

Summary

We can see the Bible's attitude toward work as a set of balances between contrasts:

- We are called to work, and to work well; but we do not get our value from the product of our work. The "Protestant work ethic" has sometimes been mocked because it seemed to lead to type of justification by works, that is, the assumption that those who succeed the most at their work are the best Christians. But the Bible does teach us a work ethic, with an outward focus to bless others.

- We are called to give priority to certain types of efforts of the church as a whole, such as missions, preaching, evangelism, and help for the poor, but those who focus on those types of work are not a higher type of Christian; all Christians have callings at various points in their lives to do good work, which can focus on different aspects of both the creation mandate and redemptive work.

- There is nothing wrong with strategizing to accomplish goals, but we must hold these lightly, because God reserves the right to undo our works, even good and great ones; the Bible promises that setbacks, failure, and persecution will be a normal part of this life until Jesus returns to set up his eternal kingdom.

- We work in the context of the grand narrative of God's kingdom throughout history, culminating in the New Heaven and Earth when Jesus returns, but this doesn't mean we are simply going through the motions with no aim in this life until he returns; we are called to work with energy and excellence in the present, and God will remember in eternity all that we do.

- We are not all called to be rich or famous, but God can use people in those roles; we should neither covet the gifts given to others nor try to tear them down. Those with great gifts are called to have an outward focus to bless others with them. If our options are severely limited, we can also rejoice in whatever work God has given us.

In his book *To Change the World*,[119] James Hunter argued that the attitude of the Christian should be "faithful presence." He reviewed the history of times when cultures really did change, including times when Christian ideas took hold with great sway, and noted that common characteristics of those times were that the Christians most

[119] J.D. Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World,* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

responsible for the changes mostly didn't worry about their reputation in the world. They operated in the world, not shunning it but also not beholden to it, willing to be cast out or persecuted if their ideas ran up against the prevailing beliefs of their society.

Good Christian work is not just a marketing device in which to make a sales pitch to present the Gospel message; it has an end in itself of being good work that pleases God. It is also not a tool for a hostile takeover of the world, leading to Christian dominance and power. It is ultimately faithfulness to God, wherever we are, to do what he has called us to do at each point in time. In so doing, we tap into and participate in the grand story that at present only God can see.

The stories of Joseph, Daniel and Esther in the Bible show us examples of people who had great power in the world that was used for good. But a remarkable aspect of each of these stories that none of them set about to change the world. Each was simply faithful to do what God called them to do at the time, often with very limited options, such as Joseph in prison or Esther added to a harem.

In the Bible we don't just see such people who were called to great influence; we also see people who started out powerless and stayed powerless, such as the midwives in Egypt who refused to kill newborn babies, the workers in stone who built the walls of Jerusalem at the time of Nehemiah, and the day laborers in the New Testament who followed Jesus and later shared all things in common in the first churches. These people presumably had no idea that they would be recorded in the Bible as crucial players in the grand story of God's kingdom. That story is not finished, and all of us have deeds prepared in advance for us to do as part of it.