
God Remembers Our Work

SCOTT HOEZEE

Someone once said that if you want to know whether or not what you are doing counts as work, there is a simple test: If you would rather be doing something else, then what you are doing is work; or, as the comedienne Paula Poundstone once said: I will tell you a secret; adults don't know what they want to do for a living either. That is why we are always asking little kids what they want to be when they grow up. We are looking for ideas. Well, we have heard sentiments like these before, and they point to a common fact: Work, our jobs, what we do for a living can sometimes be frustrating. At times our efforts may even seem downright futile. Why is that, and how can we find better, more positive ways to view what we do in our jobs? Well, the Bible knows both about work's frustrations and also something about how to frame our work more positively. Today on Groundwork we will dig into scripture to ponder these important matters. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

Hey, Scott...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes?

DAVE BAST

It is time to go back to work. We have another Groundwork program here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think we are; we are on the job right now; and that is a good thing because we are now in this four-part series on the nature of work and Christian vocation. This is our second program in this series; and recapping the first program, Dave, we mentioned that work is woven into the fabric of the creation. Having to go to work, having to do a job, is not a result of sin in the world. God established the importance of work long before we fell into sin.

DAVE BAST

Right, exactly. We looked at Genesis Chapter 2, and then a few verses later in the book of Genesis, the so-called cultural mandate, where God creates Adam and Eve and then charges them to care for His creation, specifically the Garden; and this happens before there was sin. So work is not the consequence of the Fall, it precedes the Fall, it was instituted by God, as the old Book of Common Prayer says, in the time of man's innocence. So, work is a good thing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

However, like everything else in God's good world, now work is also affected by sin. I mean, it would be quite amazing if work was the only thing exempt from the reach of sinfulness and of our being in a fallen world. So, in this program, Dave, we want to think a little bit about how a broken creation affects the work we do; and maybe just to start – this won't be the main focus of this program – we are going to focus on things a little more typical, a little more common to most of us, but we should point out that there are a couple of big areas where sinfulness affects work; and one of the most obvious would be the whole prospect of slavery.

DAVE BAST

Right; in Genesis 3 God pronounces a curse upon the creation after Adam and Eve sin. We also looked at that briefly in program #1, and saw how that warped work for the human family; but Abraham Lincoln once famously alluded to that when he said: Is it just that some men should wring their bread from the earth by the sweat of other men's brows? In other words, unrequited labor – slave labor – where an owner takes advantage of the work of another human being and gets something for nothing, in effect.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. So that is clearly slavery: Being owned, getting paid nothing at all and being forced to work, often under brutal conditions; slavery is a major effect of the Fall when it comes to work; but we could also mention there is also great injustice that can accompany work. There are people who are underpaid, who are forced to labor under some very, very bad working conditions that just makes their lives miserable. In fact, a great example of this was that up until 9/11 – up until the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York – the single worst thing that ever happened in New York City happened in 1911. It is called the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. There was a factory that made garments – Triangle Shirtwaist Factory – and the owners of this factory were intent on increasing their profits in every way they could. They cut corners, they refused to put in place modern fire prevention techniques. In order to keep people from maybe stealing from them they locked all of the fire escape doors from the outside; and then in 1911, a terrible fire broke out. It spread rapidly, and 146 people either burned to death or jumped to their deaths to escape the fire; and so, there is a classic example of workplace injustice, where people work for too little wages under dangerous conditions. This, too, is a result of the Fall and of sinfulness affecting work.

DAVE BAST

Yes; frankly, the greed of owners; and sadly, although things have much improved in Western countries, there are many places in the world where these similar kinds of conditions still exist. Maybe we read about it or maybe we even turn a blind eye, but one of the reasons we can purchase goods cheaply in Western countries is because they are made often under horrible conditions in other countries in Asia or Africa or elsewhere. You know, this is something of concern, or it should be of concern, to all people of morality.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and including child labor, which is a terrible scourge in our world. So those things are an effect of sin: Slavery, injustice, dangerous working conditions; but for most of us, thankfully – thanks be to God – for most of us, we are not in slavery and we don't work under those kinds of conditions; and yet we still find frustrations. We do our best. We work forty hours a week, and we sometimes think it doesn't make a difference to anybody. Who cares what I do? I work so hard and nobody cares. The Bible knows a little something about that.

DAVE BAST

It does. Here is a passage from Ecclesiastes. This is sort of a characteristic tone for the writer of Ecclesiastes, and he talks about the frustration of work. So he writes:

2:17 I hated life because what was done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a chasing after the wind. 18 I hated all my toil in which I toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me; 19 and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish; yet they will be master of all for which I

toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. ²⁰So I turned and gave up my heart to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun.

That is a pretty stark expression of the way work can sometimes strike us as meaningless, as pointless, as leading to nothing; in the words of Ecclesiastes: Vanity and a chasing after the wind.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and of course, that word vanity in Ecclesiastes is the little Hebrew word *hebel*, which barely exists. It sounds like you are clearing your throat: *hebel*; and it means *breath*. It is just a vapor; it is nothing. Some people, and a lot of us even today, sometimes look at what we do forty hours a week and we say: You know, it is just a *haaa*; it is just a little breath; it doesn't mean anything. In fact, there was a popular song some years ago: Everybody is working for the weekend; because what we do Monday through Friday is boring and it is terrible and we hate it and all we can do is hope that we can party on the weekend and forget about it...

DAVE BAST

TGIF.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, thank God it's Friday, right? So, we understand these frustrations, and the kind of frustrations that are reflected there in Ecclesiastes Chapter 2; but we can wonder: What is it about our work, right; what is it about our work that can sometimes feel so hollow, so empty, and are there any better ways that we can think about our work in a more hope-filled direction?

DAVE BAST

Yes, I think one of the goals we have in this series on work is to point to those better ways, to listen to what scripture says about our work, and how it can inform and shape our own attitudes, recognizing that we are speaking in generalities here. We cannot address any one individual's concern. It is a by-and-large sort of approach. By and large, work of all kinds can be seen to be productive and meaningful. It is not just a job. It is not just a matter of slavery or drudgery, of something that we are condemned to or sentenced to; but there is a better way to see these things based on what scripture says, and that is what we will look at next.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And a moment ago, Dave, we were in the book of Ecclesiastes, known for its cynicism, for its kind of no-holds-barred realism, and we saw the writer of Ecclesiastes, the Preacher as he is sometimes called, despairing over work; and indeed, we all feel this way sometimes. Nobody notices what I do. Nobody cares. It doesn't make any difference. So, what are some of the things that make us feel that way?

DAVE BAST

I think, actually, everyone feels that way at some point or other...

SCOTT HOEZEE

At some point, yes.

DAVE BAST

We can all... even astronauts or doctors or scientists or artists must have days when it seems like: Oh, boy; you know.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Here we go again.

DAVE BAST

But then, you know, some people are stuck in a dead-end job. It is not what they want to do; it is not what they feel called to do; it is not what they think they would be good at; but circumstances have conspired to mean they have to work their way through school or they somehow missed out on a golden opportunity and now they are pushing a broom somewhere, or they are driving a truck or... On the other hand, there can be people for whom that job is wonderful and meaningful.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So we get mismatched sometimes.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We feel like: Hey, I didn't go to school for this, so we would like to do something different. That can be frustrating. It can also be frustrating... You might like your job, per se, just fine, but maybe you work with some people who just don't appreciate you or worse. Well, that kind of thing kills your spirit, too. If you work in an oppressive environment with people who never say thank you or good job or way to go, that can also be very, very frustrating.

DAVE BAST

Well, and I will add one more factor, Scott. I think that our culture can create false expectations in people. Our culture says things to children like: You can be anything you want to be.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Well, the truth is, you can't. No one can be *anything* they want to be. You and I are not going to be professional baseball players, and neither is anyone else we meet. Our culture says: Follow your passion; you know, whatever that is; follow your... Well, your passion may not put food on the table.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

You might not be able to follow it; and so people sometimes can take on an unnecessary burden of frustration as a result of that; and then the job that they have seems meaningless and seems pointless, and they want to say... I think there was a song way back when: Take this job and shove it; right? And that attitude takes over.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, there are legitimate frustrations; there are things that make us feel discouraged when we are on the job. What might be a better way to think about it? Is there a better way, no matter what job we do, is there a better way to think about it? In answer to that, we go back to Ecclesiastes, to the very next chapter. We just heard those cynical observations from Ecclesiastes 2, but now in Chapter 3 the author says this:

⁹What gain have the workers from their toil? ¹⁰I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. ¹¹He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, He has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. ¹²I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live. ¹³Moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in their toil. ¹⁴I know that whatever God does endures forever. Nothing can be added to it nor anything taken from it. God has done this so that all should stand in awe before Him.

So, there is a remarkably upbeat passage, a little bit.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you know, we think of Ecclesiastes as total darkness and total despair, and much of it is, but with this important proviso: When you read Ecclesiastes, you must understand that the writer is speaking often of things as they appear to be *under the sun*, as he puts it. In other words, without taking God into account.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

This is what life looks like if you are a purely secular person – if you only look at this world and believe that this is all there is. That is what is life under the sun; but if you take God into account, that can change everything, including work.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and what he ends up saying here in that passage we just read from Ecclesiastes 3... what he ends up saying here is that when you take God into account, you realize God has, as some translations put it, put a sense of eternity into our hearts – a sense of past and future; and that can be burdensome to us if we know we were made for something more than just this fleeting life, but it also lets us know that, indeed, we were made for eternity; we were made to serve God; and when you put God in the picture, all of a sudden you realize, as the author hints at here, your work becomes part of God's work, and that, then, puts a different perspective on it. Nobody ever notices what I do, we often say. Well, the author says God does. God notices what you do. In a later program in this series we will think about this a little bit more, but the idea is that if God notices what you do – if God works in and through what you do – well now, somebody – somebody pretty important – is noticing what you do and is weaving it into His larger work, which the author says, endures forever. We really cannot add anything to God's work or take anything away from it, but by grace God chooses to let us be partners with Him, and that makes a huge difference in how you view what you do from 9:00 to 5:00 five days a week.

DAVE BAST

Yes; just a moment ago in this segment we were talking about the things that can make work frustrating: Being in a dead-end job or not being able to utilize your gifts fully or being oppressed by cultural expectations; but maybe we should add one more thing that can make that sense of oppression come up, and that is the sense of meaninglessness or futility that nothing that I am doing is really going to matter. What difference does it make ten years from now or a hundred years from now whether I created this widget and put it together properly on the assembly line? But if God takes into account the things that we do, they are lifted up into eternity, and they have eternal consequences. I mean, we have no idea how our work might affect God's larger plan or purpose in the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; I sometimes think, you know, in science these days they talk about the butterfly effect, and scientists have determined that this is actually true, that minute changes in the world like the flapping of a butterfly's wings over London might mean that in Ontario next week you are going to have thunderstorms instead of sunshine; everything is interconnected; so also here. Who knows what God can do with and will make of our work; and that is a very hopeful perspective, and we will want to talk about that a little bit more before we

close the program; but we should admit first of all that this is not just some little band-aid to put over... I mean, if someone is deeply frustrated in their work, deeply discouraged about their work, just swinging in and saying: Oh yes, but God notices what you do, so cheer up. Go to work tomorrow; push your broom; cook your pancakes; and you will feel better. Well, it is not quite that simple. We don't mean to be simplistic here. However, this perspective of God and of God's noticing our work can make all the difference in the world.

DAVE BAST

And that is what we will look at next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork, where today we are talking about work, and we are in the middle of a series on what the Bible has to say about work; how it can encourage us to view our work in a more positive way; even offer it up to God as part of our service of Him, because as we just saw, Scott, in the last segment, really, God takes account of all that we do, including our work lives, and even can take them up into His larger work, which has eternal consequences.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And along those lines, in one of the best known of the psalms – the book of Psalms – Psalm 90, which has some really Ecclesiastes-like sentiments in it... in fact, there is that song: *O, God Our Help in Ages Past*, which is based on Psalm 90: Time like an ever-flowing stream soon bears us all away – we are like the morning grass...

DAVE BAST

We fly forgotten as a dream dies at the opening day, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That's right. So, there is a lot of resemblance between Ecclesiastes and Psalm 90, but then Psalm 90 closes with these well-known words, starting at verse 14:

Satisfy us in the morning with Your steadfast love so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. ¹⁵Make us glad as many days as You have afflicted us and as many years as we have seen evil. ¹⁶Let Your work be manifest to Your servants and Your glorious power to their children. (And then this verse, 17) ¹⁷Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us and prosper for us the work of our hands. O, prosper the work of our hands.

DAVE BAST

Or as another translation puts it: Establish the work of our hands. God makes something permanent out of the things that we do, out of the things that we make and build and create, and the service that we offer; and God can do that. God will do that; even though every earthly creation of every human artist and builder will someday disappear – they will crumble into dust – they don't last – nothing of this world lasts – but God can take it up and make something eternal out of it. That is one of the great insights, I think, of Ecclesiastes, and here this psalm, about our work.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we frame up what we do, not in what is the easiest thing to see, which is our everyday life, which we fly forgotten like a dream, like you just quoted from that song, Dave, like the morning grass springs up and by evening it is withered; that is what a lot of our days look like, you know, like withered grass at the end of the day. So, if you only look at that – if that is your only framework, yes, it is pretty discouraging. However, if you frame it up inside of God, then there is hope; and that last line, Dave, you mentioned, so the translation we just read: Prosper the work of our hands – establish the work of our hands is another translation – direct the work of our hands – and then in his paraphrase, The Message, Eugene Peterson said: Please affirm our work; and I think there is something to that. We want God to *affirm* what we do.

DAVE BAST

You know, Jesus once said to His critics: My Father is always working, and I am working, too. And of course, He completely identified His work with the Father's work; but on a lower level, let's say, I think we can do the same thing. We can identify our work with God's work in the world. God is doing something; God is building His kingdom; God is bringing people to Himself; God is pointing toward shalom – toward a restoration of the wholeness of the creation – and He can take our little jobs, whatever they may be, and absorb them into that bigger work, which is eternally significant. So, I think of a little word that Paul uses... I mean, one of the things that we want to establish in this series of programs, and especially today and in the next program, is that when the Bible speaks about the work of the Lord or the work of God's kingdom, it means more than just preaching and teaching.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Other things can contribute to that. So when Paul says that we are God's co-workers, as he writes in I Corinthians Chapter 3, that is a stunning idea, that we are *all* God's co-workers, not just pastors, not just missionaries; whatever your job is, it can be part of God's kingdom building work.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is so important to remember because somebody recently noted that especially in North American culture... maybe it is true in other places of the world today, too... but certainly in North American culture, we place a very high value on self fulfillment, right? We want everything to work for our benefit; we want things to make *us* feel good; and when we transfer that to our working lives, then we want everything to be just right for us. We should always feel scintillated and stimulated by our work, and fulfilled, and, well, you know, the fact of the matter is, is every job has some tedium; even jobs that you look at from the outside looking in and say: Oh, that must be so interesting to be a doctor. That must be so interesting to do that particular thing. You talk to those people and you know what? They have down days, too. They have days when they are bored stiff with what they do, even though... not every day, but some days, you know... and this happens to everybody, but that doesn't mean that the work itself isn't important, especially when we keep framing it up inside of God's appropriating our work for His purposes.

DAVE BAST

And without, again, getting too rosy-eyed about this, your job may be something that you do primarily to support your family, but that, too, is part of God's great work in the world. He wants us to have children, to be fruitful and multiply, as Genesis says, as we talked about in the first program in this series; so, if all that you do is for the goal of raising a family and supporting them and sending them on their way – giving them a start in the world – this, too, is part of God's work and God's kingdom, and it is a wonderful thing to be able to do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think of this... one of the things I liked doing is reading presidential biographies, and it is so interesting, you can read biographies of some of the greatest presidents that the United States ever had, or maybe for other countries, some of their great prime ministers; and very often you find they came from very common roots where their fathers did very, what you might call simple tasks. They were just day laborers, but they supported their family, they raised this kid, and the child became president of the United States and did great things on the world stage, and it wouldn't have happened without the faithful, daily work of that father – of that mother – just raising the family.

DAVE BAST

So, step back and take the big picture, I think, is what we are trying to say. Ecclesiastes in its dark mood says: All is vanity, including our daily toil; it is a striving after the wind; well the Apostle says: Be steadfast,

immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is never in vain. Nothing you do in God's name for God's sake is lost.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you to dig deeper into scripture. So visit our website, groundworkonline.com, and suggest topics and passages that we can dig into next on Groundwork.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/god-remembers-our-work>

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