

God's Intention for Our Work

DAVE BAST

I once saw a bumper sticker that was a play on the song of the seven dwarves from Disney's Snow White. You remember it? Hi, ho, hi, ho, it's off to work we go; well this version went: I owe, I owe; so off to work I go. That certainly expresses the truth about work for many people. We work because we have to; we work in order to pay the bills; but we would much rather be at leisure and do whatever it is that we please. So, how should we think about work? Is it a curse? Is it a blessing? Is it a necessary evil, an opportunity for growth, a chance to help and serve others? Those are some of the questions we want to think about on Groundwork as we begin a new series of programs about what the Bible says regarding work and vocation. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

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

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and welcome to a new Groundwork series about what the Bible says... how it helps us to think about our daily work – the jobs that we do day in and day out, whether inside the home or outside of the home.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The Church is more and more paying attention to the role of work. I read an interview just recently with a pastor who is the pastor of work and vocation at a big church – Redeemer Church in New York City – and he points out that the amount of time that we spend in church is very, very small, but the amount of time we spend on the job is very, very big; and so he said: Worship should be, not an end in itself, but in a sense, our Sunday worship should be a launching pad for our vocation for carrying out the work of God in our lives through the various things which we are called to do. So, that is what we want to think about in this series.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and if you do stop and think about it, it is a huge part of our life for most of us, for most of our lives – our adult lives, certainly – it occupies most of our waking hours in any given week. By that I include the work, maybe the unpaid work, that might be done by husbands or wives in the home as they care for their children. So yes, it is a huge subject, and the Bible does have some wonderful and instructive things to say about it. So we want to get right to that, and we are going to start at the beginning with a foundation story, not only for where we come from, but for where work comes from, and that is from the book of Genesis Chapter 1.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, from verse 26: Then God said, "Let Us make mankind in Our image, in Our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." ²⁷So God created mankind in His own image; in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them; ²⁸and God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it; rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

DAVE BAST

So this passage includes what is sometimes called the cultural mandate, and that is what we want to focus on in most of this program; but before we get to that, I think it is important to pause just for a few minutes and look at what the Bible says about who we are before we talk about what we were created to do; and who we are is expressed in these famous words from Genesis 1:26, where there is a dramatic pause before God sort of climaxes His work of creation with the creation of human beings. So, all up to this point it has been going day by day and God has created the various things in the heavens and the earth and the plants on the earth and various animals, and all of a sudden He pauses and says, “Let Us make humans in Our image;” and Christians have always found the plurals there to be significant.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Some have thought that perhaps this is an early hint that God is triune. We never really get that full picture of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; that emerges more out of the New Testament witness. Probably the text in Genesis is not really hinting at the Trinity...

DAVE BAST

At least not fully.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, right; it is what is called a royal hortatory – the “let Us” – it is a very majestic way of speaking because this is a momentous thing that is going to happen when God makes us in His image, but it certainly points to the relationality of God; what Karl Barth, the German theologian, called the “I thou,” encounter that human beings have because we have been made in God’s image. We are relational; God is relational; we are relational, that is part of the image, not all of it, but that certainly is part of it.

DAVE BAST

Yes; we are creatures made by God, first of all, like God, that is what “in the image” means, and for God; ultimately our destiny is to know Him and to be related to Him; but meanwhile, it is not good for man to be alone, as God will say in the next chapter with Adam. Male and female He created them, when it speaks about the creation of human beings or humankind or man, as we used to say. It is not a solitary existence. He doesn’t just create Adam, He creates Adam and Eve; and together they represent the image of God because, as you said Scott, fundamentally, what it means to be like God is to be a being – a creature – who can relate, who can love, who can know and be known by another; and God, of course, in and of Himself, is a community of love.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The first humans were created in the Genesis 1 account on day six of creation, which is the day the animals are created; so we are part of the animal kingdom, and we know genetically and in terms of embryology and a lot of other sciences that we share a lot in common with animals; which should not surprise us. We were made by the same Creator. Sort of like an artist has a certain way of painting and art experts, wherever they see that little flare, they say: Ah, that is Van Gogh, you can tell. Well, we are all created by God, so of course we do bear resemblance to the other animals; but there is this huge difference for human beings, that we were given the image of God as a divine gift. The image of God did not just emerge once our brains got sufficiently complex. It is not a biological property. It wasn’t inevitable. The image of God was a specific gift that made us Godlike in very significant ways, including relationality and being able to be in relationships with each other and with God, above all; but also, as we are going to be talking about, it will also endow us with the ability to do work, as God has done work.

DAVE BAST

Right, yes. So part of God’s image is the ability to think, to reason, to remember, to know the past. No animal can know the past any more than it can think about the future, but human beings can do both of those things. In many ways, our likeness to God relates to what we might call the spiritual side of our nature. So, human

beings are like the animals: We have a physical nature; we have bodies that are perhaps formed and shaped in some ways the same way as the animals; we have animal appetites and passions; we need to eat; we need to sleep; all of that, but the Bible gets at this other side of our nature in Genesis Chapter 2, in a second story about creation, where it speaks of God forming Adam from the dust of the earth and then breathing into him, and that too... It is a picture language, you know. It is an image – a metaphor – but it is the breath of God coming into us – the *Ruach* – the Spirit of God – so that all of that is what we mean when we talk about having a soul as well as a body.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. Genesis 1 opens with the Spirit of God hovering over the primordial chaos before God imposes cosmos, and that same Spirit of God then enters into us and makes us, not just animals, but spiritual beings endowed with God's own image.

DAVE BAST

So, then, that is who we are. Let's talk about what we were made *for* in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork, and this first program in a four-part series on work, and on vocation. How should we think biblically and spiritually and theologically about the work that we do, which occupies such a huge part of our lives; and we said just a minute ago, Dave, that the theology of work, if you want to call it that, begins right in Genesis 1 with the very creation of humanity. We are endowed with God's image, and no sooner are we told that we have God's image than we get these four verbs that kind of relate in some ways to work: We have to be fruitful, we have to increase, fill, subdue, rule; so work-related verbs and commands come up almost immediately.

DAVE BAST

What is interesting is that the very first thing we know about God from Genesis 1 is that He is a God who works. That is how He is introduced. He is simply there in the beginning, and what He is there for is to make things. Jesus would say in the New Testament, "My Father is always working and I am working, too;" and He created human beings to, like Him, be workers, to be doing, to be creating; and specifically, these verbs that are used in Genesis 1:28 I think can be divided into two groups. So the first set of let's say three: To be fruitful, to increase, and to fill the earth, all point to the fundamental work of forming families and having children. God's intention from the beginning was, not that He would individually create first a few dozen and then a few thousand and then a few million, and then finally a few billion people; but that natural increase would fill the earth that He had formed for humankind. So, His first commandment, and our fundamental work today, is still related to families – to marriage and the procreation of children, and the raising and nurture of children; and that, I think, is very important for us to remember. Whatever your job may be as far as your livelihood is concerned... one of the things that God intends, as a rule... not for every last person, but as a rule, is that we should become parents, and we should bring, in our turn, children into the world and raise them as we ourselves were raised.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And even if we are in a situation where we cannot have children, or where we don't get married, we are all part of families; and so that relational aspect of the image of God is very important.

So, there is work to be done inside the family, and inside of being a parent, being a child, being an uncle, being a grandparent, being a friend, even, is part of that relational; but then there is the other stuff in Genesis 1:28 about subdue and rule, and that seems to point to some degree of our relationship with the earth, and with our fellow creatures. Most of Genesis 1 is taken up with God creating birds and fish and deer and, you know, lions and the like, and we have a relationship to them, so we are told to subdue and rule them, which can sound a little exploitative – it can sound like we are to treat them harshly or something; but that is probably not really the intention; but the point is, we have work to do within our families, with fellow human beings, and we have work to do over against the earth and our fellow creatures.

DAVE BAST

Right; and the fundamental work with respect to the creation... I think we need to expand this and to use our imagination to fill out what subduing the earth and ruling it might mean; but clearly God intended the earth to serve human needs. The crown of creation, as we used to say, is man... is the human family; and this, too, has come into disrepute. I mean, I think we have to be honest here and say that modern critics or skeptics have often criticized biblical theology at this point because they say it is an invitation to rape the earth – to just treat it as kind of a repository to get everything out of it that you can. Just dig it up, strip mine it, polluting factories belching forth poison into the streams and into the air; and enrich yourself. That has happened, and that is part of the Fall, and that is part of the sinfulness of humanity and our behavior; but that is not what God's intention was.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. There was a very famous essay published, I think, in 1968 by Lynn White, Jr., in which this person laid the blame for pollution and species extinction at the Judeo-Christian doorstep because of this very verse. People have taken that as authorization to just exploit it and ruin it and sully it; but that is not true, and we know that that is not true because there is a counterbalancing verse that makes it a little more clear from Genesis 2:8.

DAVE BAST

This again is the so-called second creation story. God creates Adam, and we read in verse 8: The Lord God had planted a garden in the east in Eden, and there He put the man He had formed. The Lord God made all kinds of trees to grow out of the ground; and the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and care for it; and the Lord God commanded the man, ¹⁶“You are free to eat from any tree in the garden, ¹⁷but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; for when you eat from it you will certainly die.” Take that key phrase: He took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to care for it. So the great image of ruling and subduing is the image of cultivating a garden.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is actually... Sometimes that verse has been translated: To tend and to keep; and the second verb there: Take care of it or to keep... that is the Hebrew verb, *shamar*, which is the exact same verb used in the great Aaronic benediction in Numbers 6: The Lord bless you and *keep* you... Well, okay; how do we want God to keep us? Well, we would like God to keep us whole and healthy and well, and that is the same verb used there. So what does it mean for us to *keep* the earth? Well, it doesn't mean to do with it what we please, and hunt species to extinction; no, it means we *keep* the earth gently and lovingly, as we hope God blesses and keeps us, which obligates us to be caretakers. Cultivators, yes, but also caretakers so that we don't ruin the earth. God wants us to take care of it on His behalf; in fact, that is part of the image, too, right? The likeness of the King... So, there is image and likeness... *tselem*, is the second word in the Hebrew, and ancient kings used to put likenesses of themselves – statues of themselves – in distant places of the realm to keep people in line, saying: Remember, this is this king's territory, so take good care of it; and that is sort of what we are; we represent God now on the earth. We are taking care of it on His behalf, and that is part of our work – that is part of our vocation; to cultivate, but to do it carefully.

DAVE BAST

Really, I would say that is *all* our work. We are caretakers; caretakers of our brothers and sisters in the human family, caretakers of the earth, stewards, and that is what God intends us to be; and whatever our job might be, it might be a little hard... If your job is assembling widgets in a factory, on the line all day long, day after day, and you are worried about a robot coming in and displacing you, it might be hard to see, but big picture, all of our work when it is honest and wholesome toil, is part of the cultivation of the earth and its resources for the benefit of God's human family; and God wants and intends that we should live in harmony and relationship with our environment, with nature, and with all that we can make nature be and become for us. So, we are creators – we are sub-creators, as the great Christian writer, Dorothy Sayers once said: Sub-creators who work along with God for the betterment of human society.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that includes everything that we do, from art to literature, music, sports, the invention of machines, and artifacts. All of it is part of taking the earth that God has given us and using it for God's glory, ultimately, but also for human benefit.

DAVE BAST

Right; there is an interesting little bit in Genesis 4, moving on a little bit in the book of Genesis, about the descendants of Lamech; so we read about people like Jubal, who is the father of all who play on stringed instruments; and Tubal-Cain, who forged tools out of bronze and iron. So here we see already just a few generations after Adam and Eve, there is agriculture, the fundamental work on which human culture is built; there are the arts, there are crafts and production of tools. All of that is part of the work that God intended us to do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, Genesis 1 and 2 – the creation accounts – show us that work was woven into the fabric of creation; Genesis 4 shows us the development of that in the invention of stringed instruments and tools; but something happens in Genesis 3, in between, that has also had an effect on work, and we will consider that as we close the program next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

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

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we are finishing up this first of four programs on work and vocation, and we have been in Genesis, a good place to start; and we have seen that work, even though as you said earlier, Dave... I mean, everybody gets tired, everybody kind of looks forward to the weekend and to vacations... Work is not a result of the Fall, but there is such a thing as the Fall.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; but I think it is really important to stress what you just said. Work is not a curse. Our daily jobs are not the result of sin. They are not something... you know, God did not create us just to lay around on the beach all day, every day, for seventy or eighty years. He created us to be like Him, to be productive, to be making beautiful things, to be contributing to the good of human society and the human family; but, things went badly wrong, and if you know the Bible story, you know what happened in Genesis 3, how Adam and Eve together fell. They both succumbed, and did the one thing God had commanded them *not* to do. What we want to focus on is how this affected their work. God said: As a result of what you have done, your work is going to be radically different; and He applied it to both sides that we pointed out: The work of having families and raising families, and the work of earning your daily bread.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. Genesis 3:15-19 (paraphrased) To the woman He said: Your pain in childbearing will be very severe; so there is that work of the family and raising families. Now there is going to be some pain involved in that; and then to Adam He also said: Your cultivation of the soil is going to be difficult. Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you. You will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since you were taken from it. From dust you are, to dust you will return. So, there is that curse; and again, as you just said, Dave, it affects both parts of the toil that was a blessing originally; but now they are going to be tinged with some frustration. We are actually going to devote our second program in this series to the frustration that attends work, as the Bible deals with that quite a bit. We will be going into the book of Ecclesiastes in that program; but work is not a result of the Fall, but it is, like everything else,

affected by the fall into sin.

DAVE BAST

So, the first thing we learned from God is that now the task or the work of reproducing – of bringing children into the world – of multiplying and filling the earth, as He said in Genesis 1, will become fraught, not only with pain, but danger. So all the travail of childbirth... in fact, travail is a synonym for childbirth... is going to be visited now on the woman, but in addition to that, the relationship between the sexes is skewed in the family. So God says: Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you. That necessarily was not part of God's original intention, where the sexes were to live sort of in complement to one another, but now we've got the battle of the sexes and all the strife that can attend family life and marriage. This is all a sad and unhappy result of the selfishness of human beings.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And cultivating the earth. Obviously I don't think, even if there had never been a fall into sin, cultivating gardens and planting plants and harvesting would still have been work; but now God says it is going to get a little bit tougher than it would have been ordinarily because the earth is going to fight you. There are going to be thorns and thistles, and the sun is going to be too hot some days for comfort level, and so forth. Everything is affected. So, the fact that work is hard doesn't mean it is a bad thing in and of itself. It is still a good thing. It is still redeemable. We will be talking about that in a future program, too; but there is this ripple effect...

DAVE BAST

Yes, and what comes into play, really, is Murphy's Law, you know. You remember Murphy's Law: If anything can go wrong, it will. As somebody said: Murphy was an optimist. So, yes, jobs just don't go smoothly, as anyone knows who has tried to accomplish anything, and that is part of the fractiousness, now, of nature. The great evangelist, George Whitefield once said: If nothing else, the barking of a dog would tell us that something has gone wrong – that man has sinned – that where now suddenly the animals turn on us and nature proves ungovernable and unmanageable, and work often ends in brokenness rather than in the thing that we desired to produce; but there is a note of hope even here at the very end of the story of the Fall in Genesis 3.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; in Genesis 3:21: The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and He clothed them; and that is sort of... so God shows them how, even in a fallen world now where they need these garments, that there could be work to be done to do that. So God started the garment industry...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; He became a tailor. Isn't that interesting? I would have liked to have seen what those looked like. Maybe He revealed to them how to do it because soon they take this work on, too, for themselves; but a little grace note there at the end: God still cares, even in our workaday world, whatever the job is that we are called to do, He is with us there, helping us. That is a wonderful thing to think about.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well thank you for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into the scriptures. So visit our website, groundworkonline.com, and suggest topics and passages for future Groundwork programs.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/gods-intention-for-our-work>

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