



## SESSION 4

# THE PROBLEM WITH WORK

### ▶ **The Point**

Our work gains meaning when it's done to honor Christ.

### ▶ **The Passage**

Ecclesiastes 2:18-23; 3:9-13

### ▶ **The Bible Meets Life**

Each month, about fourteen million people around the world listen to the NPR podcast, *How I Built This with Guy Raz*. Each episode focuses on a well-known product or business. Guy Raz interviews the entrepreneurs to discuss how they built their now-successful companies.<sup>1</sup>

One of the many great privileges of living in the United States is the ability to begin a business in your garage (Apple® computers), your home (Etsy®), or even out of the trunk of your car (Under Armour®). For many of these companies it was a roller-coaster ride from the struggle of having nothing to the success of a multi-million dollar company. Yet, there is a harsh reality that—no matter your success or product—you will have to leave your hard work in the hands of others after you're gone. Sadly, "70% of wealthy families lose their wealth by the second generation, and a stunning 90% by the third."<sup>2</sup>

What's the point of all that work if you're just going to leave it to those who will squander it?

### ▶ **The Setting**

As he continued his search for meaning, Solomon turned from gaining wisdom to pursuing work. The king wondered if people could find satisfaction from doing more. The Bible is clear that work is a good thing. God actually gave humans work responsibilities in Eden before they sinned. New Testament writers like Paul affirmed the importance of honest work. But Solomon wanted to know if the work we do is really what explains our reason for being here.

## What does the Bible say?

**Put eternity into man's heart** (3:11)—While humans are constrained by time on earth, they are also eternal creatures who have an innate longing for more.

### ***Ecclesiastes 2:18-23; 3:9-13***

**2:18 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,**

**19 and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity.**

**20 So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun,**

**21 because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil.**

**22 What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun?**

**23 For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.**

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**3:9 What gain has the worker from his toil?**

**10 I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.**

**11 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.**

**12 I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live;**

**13 also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man.**





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## ***Ecclesiastes 2:18-23 Commentary***

**[Verses 18-19]** Solomon found some sense of peace in his work, only to become disenchanted by his accomplishments (2:10-11). He returned to the theme of disappointment and discouragement. The emotional term **hated** expresses how strongly he felt. **Under the sun** is an all-encompassing idiom. In other words, Solomon failed to find any work in any setting that produced peace and satisfaction. Why? Because all he accomplished through his work would eventually pass on to others or, worse, pass away completely. Solomon's main concern about leaving a financial legacy was the character of the person who would get it. Would his heir be **wise or a fool**? Parents may think they are raising wise stewards, but their kids may be free spenders. Either way, the handoff of the estate will happen. All Solomon had accumulated had the potential to go down the proverbial drain. The uncertainty robbed Solomon of any peace or hope for the future. It was another example of futility in life.

**[Verses 20-21]** The thought of the next generation exhausting his hard-earned resources drove Solomon to **despair**. The Hebrew wording indicates Solomon faced a turning point of sorts. He determined working for the next generation would lead to more discontent and despair. This repudiates the myth that working at all cost is worth any price. While work has benefits, an unhealthy obsession with work, even for a supposedly noble cause, is a waste. While God created us to work, He did not create us only for work. A balanced approach to any area of life is always the best approach—including how we approach work. God gives each person specific resources to use for His glory. He expects us to use them well. Solomon noted individuals should work with **wisdom and knowledge and skill**. It bothered Solomon to leave what he had to a person who might waste it—even if that person was his own child. It seemed **a great evil** to him and only deepened his sense of futility. In his mind, it was an example of unwise stewardship.

**[Verses 22-23]** Solomon rhetorically asked: **What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart?** Solomon's concerns were not about what gets left behind but what the individual has to endure between here and the grave. The pursuit of success holds futility for the future, but it also creates a sense of hopelessness in the present. All the work and labor lead to a life **full of sorrow**. The worker finds no peace or purpose because his **work is a vexation**. Instead of seeing labor as part of God's bigger plan, those consumed with work go through the motions, clocking in and clocking out every day until the end of their lives. They may burn out or wear out, but the results are the same. A misplaced focus on work doesn't just make the days miserable. It also robs one of sleep at night. Their **heart does not rest**, and they lose sleep because they can't leave work at work. Once again, Solomon focused on the perspective of one who ignores God. But seeing work as a blessing from the Lord returns us to Eden. It reminds us that labor has meaning.



# STUDY THE BIBLE

## NOTES

### ***Ecclesiastes 3:9-11***

***<sup>9</sup> What gain has the worker from his toil? <sup>10</sup> I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. <sup>11</sup> 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.***

**READ:** Ask a group member to read aloud Ecclesiastes 3:9-11 on page 41 of the PSG.

**RECAP:** Work is not the problem. Work is a gift from God (Eccl. 5:19). God assigned work for Adam to do, and He made that assignment before the curse of sin entered the picture (Gen. 2:15). But one of the consequences of sin is that our work became something that caused pain (3:17). The problem is that our work has become a struggle.

**DISCUSS: Question #4** on page 41 of the PSG: **“How can your current job be used for kingdom purposes?”**

**SUMMARIZE:** In this passage are truths and principles that help us regain a proper perspective of our work as a gift from God. These truths can transform our miserable labor into God-honoring work. Highlight the main points from pages 41-42 of the PSG.

- ▶ **God is in control.**
- ▶ **God has created us for more than this world.**

**DO:** Direct group members to complete the activity, “Work Perspective” on page 43 of the PSG to help them see how human wisdom falls short.



*Evaluate where you think you are on a scale of idleness to idolatry when it comes to your work. Then answer the questions. [PSG has three questions listed.]*

**TRANSITION:** In the next verses, Solomon further expanded upon the good gift of work.

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## Ecclesiastes 3:9-11 Commentary

**[Verse 9]** Solomon raised a question similar to the one he had asked in 2:22. **What gain has the worker?** echoes the same search for significance. However, the Teacher approached the topic this time with a much different attitude. Rather than focusing on the futility of what is lost through hard work, he emphasized the potential benefits. The difference is seeing work through the lens of God. The element of **toil** is still a part of the equation. After all, hard work is still hard work. Nothing makes it easier or less taxing. However, the motivation behind the work is important. If workers labor for their own benefit, they will end up frustrated—much like the king found in his earlier observations. But when work is done for the Lord, things change considerably. An honest day's work could actually be a blessing.

**[Verses 10-11]** Solomon recognized something incredibly important. God is the Author of work. This truth reaches back to the time when the Lord gave Adam and Eve specific responsibilities in the garden of Eden. In many ways, work is a reflection of the image of God found in His highest creations. Genesis does not reveal a God who sat back and let things happen. Instead, He actively worked. He initiated life. He created something out of nothing. God continues to work in the lives and circumstances of His people. The apostle Paul told the Philippian Christians that the One who began “a good work” in them would keep working until the job was complete (Phil. 1:6). Solomon noted that God **has given** work to **the children of man**. While God's work certainly differs from ours, we still imitate Him when we work hard at a worthy task. That should have an impact on how we see what we do. Verse 10 ends with the term **be busy with**. One commentator has suggested that it also could be rendered “afflict.” Despite this emphasis on difficulty, Solomon also emphasized the beauty of work from God's perspective.

Going to the idea of time in verse 11, Solomon noted that God makes **everything beautiful in its time**. So, even though work—and all of life, really—can be hard to bear at times, we can see its true beauty when we choose to view it through God's perspective. Since God's perspective is not limited to time, humans should also seek to view time with an eye toward eternity. That is where work finds its ultimate meaning and fulfillment. People are eternal creatures trapped temporarily in the confines of time. Solomon indicated this by saying God has even placed **eternity in man's heart**. The idea of forever means something to us because God has given us that inclination. We know there is more than life on earth, something of greater significance. This tension between here and hereafter takes readers again to the work God has done and continues to do in the world. He is active in the affairs of humanity. And His work should motivate us to work on His behalf in this world. As humans, we can never completely understand God. Despite our advances in technology and understanding of laws of science, He still remains beyond our reach. As Isaiah noted, His ways are still higher than our ways and His thoughts are greater than our thoughts (Isa. 55:9). But to those who will seek Him, He still reveals where He is working, so we can strive to be a part of that work.



# STUDY THE BIBLE

## NOTES

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### ALTERNATE QUESTION:

What evidence do you see that God has set eternity in the hearts of people?

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## Ecclesiastes 3:12-13

*<sup>12</sup> I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; <sup>13</sup> also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God’s gift to man.*

**READ:** Ask a group member to read aloud Ecclesiastes 3:12-13 on page 41 of the PSG.

**DISCUSS:** Question #5 on page 42 of the PSG: **“What are some practical ways our group can help one another maintain a proper perspective of work?”**

**SUMMARIZE:** Highlight the main points from page 42 of the PSG. We must be content with what God has revealed to us:

- ▶ Though Adam sinned, bringing the curse of toil to our work, God gave His Son Jesus for our salvation and to redeem us from this curse.
- ▶ Through the work of Jesus—His perfect life and willing sacrifice—we can have salvation if we repent of our sins and believe in Jesus for eternal life.
- ▶ Because of our relationship with Christ, our work has purpose and our life has eternal significance.
- ▶ The work we presently do is preparing us for the rest we will enjoy one day in the presence of God.
- ▶ We are to carry out our work in the name of Jesus and with thanksgiving to the Father (Col. 3:17).
- ▶ God has created us to enjoy the life He’s given us. We are to enjoy the success God gives us through work that glorifies Him.

**LEADER PACK:** Display **Pack Item 3**, “Colossians 3:17” poster, to reinforce a biblical understanding of work. Ask a volunteer to read the verse aloud.

**GUIDE:** Refer back to **“The Point”** for this session: **“Our work gains meaning when it’s done to honor Christ.”**



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## ***Ecclesiastes 3:12-13 Commentary***

**[Verse 12]** The good life is a recurring theme in many advertisements today. Companies make big promises about their products, claiming they are the gateway to the life we have always dreamed of living. But Solomon said the good life cannot be found in products—or in the work that allows a person to buy those products. Instead, that kind of peace and contentment is found only in an intimate connection with God. Solomon was not saying rest and relaxation are wrong. He was not implying people should avoid having nice things. Nice things are fine as long as we keep them in proper perspective. Our work does not provide meaning because it produces stuff. It provides meaning when it connects to the higher plan of our heavenly Father. When humans approach work from that viewpoint, **there is nothing better**. They are free to celebrate what they have done because their work aligns with God's purposes and brings Him pleasure. We don't have to understand Him completely. We just need to stay busy seeking His will, obeying His commands, and expressing gratitude for His goodness. In a sense, Solomon came full circle on the issue of work. On one hand, it has no real significance by itself because it is temporary. No amount of work or the accumulation of wealth can pass beyond the grave. That is why we need to filter our work through the plans and purposes of God. When we do, we find meaning—in Him, not in the labor—and that allows humanity to find a genuine sense of satisfaction.

**[Verse 13]** The Teacher's summary can be expressed quite simply: Work is God's gift to us. While we struggle to see it from that perspective when the alarm goes off on Monday morning, He intends our labor to be a blessing to us, not a burden. Again, the Genesis account of God's own work can be instructive. After spending six days creating the world, God "stepped back" and took inventory of all He had done. He was pleased with what He saw. Everything was according to His plan and design. In the same way, humans who work hard for the right reasons—God's glory and not their own—can discover similar satisfaction when they evaluate their own efforts. The light of eternity removes the despair that comes from the temporary nature of human achievements. In Colossians, Paul emphasized this God-centered perspective on work. He challenged the Colossians to take on every task with a whole heart because they ultimately were working for God (Col. 3:17). While we should be careful to satisfy earthly bosses, we should never forget that we represent the Lord first and foremost in our work. He redeems our work so it can play a role in His plan for the world.

Read the article "Labor: A Biblical View" in the Spring 2019 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles "God 'Gives' in Ecclesiastes" (Winter 2009-2010), "Vanity: A Word Study" (Summer 2006), and "It's About Time" (Fall 2005) relate to this lesson and can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at [lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator). Look for Bundles: Bible Studies for Life.



5 minutes

# LIVE IT OUT

**GUIDE:** Direct group members to page 44 of the PSG. Encourage them to choose one of the following applications to carry out this week:



Notes

Dotted lines for taking notes.

- ▶ **Be thankful.** Acknowledge that the job you have and the work you do is from God. Give Him thanks.
- ▶ **Rest.** Balance your work with rest. Your work is important, but it should never consume you. Block out time daily for rest, and set aside a day for rest.
- ▶ **Work for Christ.** Consider the ways you can honor Christ and bring an eternal perspective to your work. Don't consider just the things you do; consider the people you interact with. Look for ways to point to Christ in your work-related relationships.

## Wrap It Up

**TRANSITION:** Read or restate the final paragraph from page 44 of the PSG:

If we view our work only from a secular perspective, it will frustrate us and leave us empty. But when we view our work with an eternal, kingdom perspective, we understand it is a gift from God. Let's put this kingdom perspective into practice!

**PRAY:** Conclude by thanking the Lord for the wonderful gift of work. Ask Him for the wisdom to keep a godly perspective on our work.



Free additional ideas for your group are available at [BibleStudiesforLife.com/AdultExtra](http://BibleStudiesforLife.com/AdultExtra)