

“The Wonder of Work” (Genesis 1-2)

I’m going to use a four-letter word. Many consider it an expletive. Get ready. Are you on the edge of your seat? Here it goes...WORK!!! One more time...WORK! Let’s face it: work can be brutal. Whether you are a teacher that deals with unruly students or a student that doesn’t appreciate a heap of homework, work can be tough. Whether you’re a full-time, stay-at-home mom or a busy, full-time grandma, work can be demanding. If you’re a state employee, salesman, or contractor, you know what it’s like to have a bad day. For many of us work is something we’d just assume avoid. As a result, most of us go through life living for the weekend.

Speaking of the weekend, what do the initials “T.G.I.F” stand for? “Thank God it’s Friday!” When people say that, what are they saying? Most are saying, “My job is a boring and demanding necessary evil.” While I can certainly empathize with this, the Bible pictures labor as having intrinsic value.¹ Work is inherently worth doing. God never intended that we finish up the workweek and say, “Thank God it’s Friday!” As people of faith we are to take God to the workplace with us so that we can actually say, “Thank God it’s Monday!” The only way to shift to this mental paradigm is by recognizing three truths.

1. God is a worker (Gen 1:1-2:3). The first verse of the Bible reads: **“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”** (1:1). Genesis 2:2 calls God’s creative activity **“work”** (*melakah*). This is the same word that is used for work in the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:9-10). In Genesis 2:7-8, God’s work of creation is described as physical and earthy: **“Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. The LORD God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and there He placed the man whom He had formed”** (emphasis mine). So, in the first two chapters of the Bible, God demonstrates to human beings that He believes in work.² Through His creative activity God demonstrates that He is, above all else, the Master Creator (Acts 17:24). He is an artist, a designer, strategic planner, organizer, project developer, assessor, zoologist, biologist, chemist, linguist, programmer, materials specialist, engineer, and waste management technician.³

God is a worker. Obviously, He doesn’t have to bring home a paycheck but He works nonetheless. The Bible reveals that there are two primary reasons why God labors. First, God works to reveal who He is. Romans 1:20 says, “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.” The invisible, spiritual God shows us who He is through His creation. We are finite, physical creatures and the only way we can even begin to comprehend God is through the work of His hands.

The second reason God works is to bring Himself satisfaction. When He finished creating the universe, He stepped back, saw everything that He had made, and said, “It is very good” (Gen 1:31). God Himself made this pronouncement. So we see that His work both expresses who He is and brings Him satisfaction. He can do nothing that is not inherently good, or else He would violate His character. So the fact that God works and calls His work good means that work has intrinsic worth.

Most Christians believe that God the Father is a worker but there seems to be some question about Jesus. What does the Bible tell us? Jesus spent his adult life as a carpenter, until age 30 when he went into a preaching ministry in the workplace. This accounted for almost 90 percent of his earthly life. Jesus called 12 workplace individuals, not clergy, to build his church. Of Jesus’ 132 public appearances in the New Testament, 122 were in the marketplace. Of 52 parables Jesus told, 45 had a workplace context. Of 40 divine interventions recorded in Acts, 39 were in the marketplace. 54 percent of Jesus’ reported teaching ministry arose out of issues posed by others in the scope of daily life.⁴ The Father and the Son both work.

[Not only is God a worker, the Bible also teaches that...]

2. God created you as a worker (Gen 1:26-29). Genesis 1:26-28 says, “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them; and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’” Verse 26 states that we have been made in the image of God. When we say that, what do we mean? One thing it means is that God was a worker and we are also workers. The Lord says that man is to “**rule over**” the creation. The very first thing the Lord gave man was a task—work!⁵ Before God gave him Eve, He gave man work. It was part of His plan from the beginning. We can only conclude that originally humanity’s labors had the same purposes as God’s: expression of self and to bring a sense of satisfaction. God works and He has created you to work, right where you are.⁶

Folks often ask me about my calling into pastoral ministry. I don’t mind sharing it at all. But the reality is, as believers, you have also been called into ministry. In addition, God often calls believers to a particular vocation. He has uniquely wired each of us for a particular kind of work. I should be able to ask each one of you, “So tell me how God called you into sales or construction or teaching or medicine.” How did you know that your particular vocation was what you were born to do? Make no mistake about it; you have a calling. God has a plan and purpose for your life.

Yet, we tend to view our vocation merely as a means to make a living. Today this mindset dominates in America. Labor equals money. This faulty perspective was nearly cemented in place by the Industrial Revolution. In particular, the advances of Henry Ford brought our modern mindset into being. Ford’s assembly line shortened the time needed to construct an automobile from 12.5 hours to just 1.5 hours, but this technical efficiency came at a high human price. As employee boredom increased so did absenteeism. As production quotas continually increased, workers began to suffer stress-related ailments and the incidence of alcoholism increased. In a short time, Ford found it difficult to keep enough laborers on his assembly lines to meet the production schedule.

What went wrong? On an assembly line a craftsman was separated from his area of expertise. Once, work was the deepest expression of who a person was; now there was nothing left of the person in his task—he had become little more than an extension of the machine he operated. Laborers often had little idea what their monotonous efforts contributed to the final product—in fact, from where most of them stood, they couldn’t even see the end of the assembly line. Once, a worker might have felt esteemed as a respected craftsman in a field that required years of training and experience. Now almost anyone could do almost any job. For the sake of productivity, something terrible had been sacrificed—the meaning of our labor. Ford’s solution to the lack of employee motivation was to more than double the average salary, from \$2.34 for a nine-hour day to \$5 for an eight-hour day. Ford’s audacious offer more than solved his manpower problem. It made employment in his factory a sought-after prize. But even as he solved one problem he created another. Ford’s employees, through their boredom, stress, alcoholism, and absenteeism, were expressing their struggle with a single question: What does my work mean? Ford’s answer: Work means money. And though the Model T has long since disappeared, Ford’s simplistic answer to the meaning of our labor still torments many of us today.⁷

Fortunately, the Bible teaches that there is indeed intrinsic value in our labor. Abraham Kuyper, nineteenth century Dutch theologian and prime minister, said it well, “There is not one square inch of the entire creation about which Jesus Christ does not cry out, ‘This is Mine! This belongs to Me.’”

Clearly, God wants to be the Lord of every area of your life. He wants to be intimately involved in everything you do, say, and think. British writer and Christian apologist, Dorothy Sayers (1893-1957) asked, "How can anyone remain interested in a religion which seems to have no concern with nine-tenths of his life?"⁸ This is a question that demands to be answered. If God isn't genuinely concerned in our work life, then what earthly value does Christianity have?

[Not only did God create you as a worker, but He went a step further.]

3. God created you as His co-worker (Gen 2:8, 15). In Genesis 2:8 and 15, the creation account says: **"The LORD God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and there He placed the man whom He had formed... Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it."** Adam was placed in the garden to **"cultivate it and keep it."** I should point out that this task was given to Adam before the fall.⁹ God planted the garden and man cultivated it. *God planted the garden; man cultivated it.* The first partnership! God conferred great dignity on us when He delegated to us much of the responsibility for managing the creation.¹⁰ We cannot contribute to the work of God,¹¹ but we can participate in it.¹² This partnership continues today. God gives to us, and we manage what we've been given.

Tragically, with the entrance of sin in Genesis 3, this stewardship and partnership was distorted. Adam and Eve became self-centered, with the desire to take instead of give, to dominate instead of serve, and to hate instead of love. In addition, because of the fall, in Genesis 3:17, God says that our labor would involve "painful toil." Verse 18 declares that our efforts will no longer be completely efficient because the ground would "produce thorns and thistles." Someone put it this way: "God designed man to be a gardener but the fall made him a farmer." The challenge for us is to recognize that even though labor can be difficult and challenging, we've been designed to work in tandem with God, not just for ourselves.

The famous Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892), often worked 18 hours a day. Famous explorer and missionary David Livingstone once asked him, "How do you manage to do two men's work in a single day?" Spurgeon replied, "You have forgotten that there are two of us."¹³ Spurgeon understood that he was in partnership with God. Christian writer, Watchman Nee (1903-1972), once said, "To have God do His own work through us, even once, is better than a lifetime of human striving."¹⁴ This quote epitomizes the truth of this section. When you partner with God, He will do things you never imagined were possible. He will live His supernatural life in and through you. But this requires adopting a biblical perspective regarding your work.

The problem that we have as modern American Christians is that we compartmentalize our lives. We confine work to this little box. Family time goes in that box over there. God and religious stuff stay in the church building. This is why some folks act a certain way on Sunday mornings and then seem to leave God and everything they've learned and experienced behind on Monday morning. If you want to be able to say, "Thank God it's Monday!" you've got to tear down the wall and the perspective that keeps God away from your workplace. Begin to look at your workplace as your mission field. Begin to ask yourself how you can do God's will at your place of employment. Begin to view your workplace as a sacred space. God is just as present in your office or car or shop or store as He is in this church building.

A man came to a construction site where stonemasons were working. The man said to one, "What are you doing?" The stonemason said, "I'm chipping a stone." The man walked over to another mason and said, "What are you doing?" He answered, "I'm building a wall." The man walked over to a third mason and said, "What are you doing?" With a glint in his eye, this mason responded, "I am building a cathedral." All three were doing the same thing but what a difference perspective makes!

God is a worker, you are a worker, and you are a co-worker with God. As you adopt this perspective you will be able to say, “Thank God it’s Monday!”

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Notes

¹ See the outstanding book by Doug Sherman and William Hendricks, *Your Work Matters to God* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1987), 77-86.

² Psalm 104:10-24 tells us that God not only created the world, but He continues to work to sustain the world (cf. Ps 111:2). In John 5:17, Jesus said, “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.”

³ See Os Hillman, *Faith & Work: Do They Mix* (Alpharetta, GA: Aslan Group, 2000), 8.

⁴ Preaching Today Citation: Lewis and Lewis, *London Institute of Contemporary Christianity*; submitted by David Bartlett, Rochester.

⁵ Part of that work involved management and care for all the animals. God even gave Adam the job of naming the animals. Genesis 2:19 says, “Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name.” Now giving a name in biblical culture involved much more than simply sticking a label on someone or something—it had the force of giving it identity, character, and purposes—giving a name in essence infused the creature or being with all that the name signified and called forth those characteristics from it.

⁶ It is important to realize that at least three-fourths of the men and women from the Bible whom we call “heroes” were not in “full-time ministry.” Consider Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation. He was not a professional priest but a rancher who followed God west and built a livestock empire on an open range. Joseph started out on the family ranch but was abducted and taken to a foreign country where he rose to a top governmental position and saved the Near East from famine by his savvy grain trading. Daniel is known as a prophet, but professionally he was chief adviser to several kings—a governmental worker who was employed well into his eighties. David became a professional soldier and later the ruler of his country. Nehemiah was a career bureaucrat who became the general contractor over a large government rehabilitation project. Even the ideal woman of Proverb 31 receives accolades for executing several entrepreneurial ventures in real estate and textiles while practicing her other profession of being a family manager. See William Carr Peel and Walt Larimore, *Going Public with Your Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 32-33.

⁷ Our Daily Bread, September 5, 1994.

⁸ William Carr Peel and Walt Larimore, *Going Public with Your Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 37.

⁹ In the beginning, God gave us work and it was a good thing. But an event occurred that threw a wrench into the plan. Our work was frustrated by the fall. Humanity rebelled against God. He created the first man and woman as sinless beings. He gave them only one command, “Don’t eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil” (Gen 2:16-17). Satan disguised as a serpent enticed them to break that one rule. They ate and their sinless status was broken. As their heirs all humanity is infected with sin because of the fall. After this event, God revealed to the man that his sin had affected his relationship to God, his relationship to his wife, and even his work (Gen 3:17-19). Because of sin, rebellion against God, the purpose of work was altered. Rather than work as a means of self-expression and to bring satisfaction our labor meant providing food and other necessities to live. God didn’t do this to us. In the garden of Eden, food and shelter was provided. Clothing was optional. Adam and Even worked for the pleasure of it. That all ended with the fall.

¹⁰ Sherman and Hendricks, *Your Work Matters to God*, 82.

¹¹ See Esther 4:13-14; Ps 115:3; 127:1-2; Eccles 3:14; Isa 46:9-10; 2 Cor 3:5.

¹² See John 4:34 and 1 Cor 3:6-9.

¹³ Preaching Today Citation: “Charles Haddon Spurgeon,” *Christian History*, no. 29.

¹⁴ Preaching Today Citation: Watchman Nee, *Leadership*, Vol. 7, no. 3.