

# **Come Alive in Your Work**

## **1. Work is meaningless?**

- Ecclesiastes 2:18-23

## **2. Work is a curse?**

- Genesis 3:17-21; 2 Corinthians 5:18; Revelation 21:1

## **3. Work is worship and witness!**

- Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-25

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## **Come Alive: Experience New Life In Your Work<sup>1</sup>**

I know I've told some of you before about my experience working in a shoe store, but in case you haven't heard it, let me tell you. It was during my junior year of high school. The father of a friend of mine owned a shoe store downtown where I lived, and he got me a job working there. I was already working three other jobs at the same time – in a movie theater, in a grocery store, and as a dishwasher at a restaurant, and the reason I had three was because the pay was low and the hours were minimal. But the pay was better at the shoe store and I hoped I could lose at least one of my other jobs.

I started out, my first day on the job, in the backroom pricing shoes. This was long before computers, so I was given a chart that had the product number that corresponded to certain shoes, it had the price per shoe that the shoe store paid, and then it had a column with the higher prices that I was to mark each pair of shoes. The mark-up was significant – at least three or four times their price; sometimes up to ten times more. Then I would dial in my little stamper on the price tag maker, and I would put price tag stickers on each box of shoes with that product number. Then I'd go on to the next product number and do those, and so on. Some of the shoes were new, and some were being marked up from their previous price. I did that for half the day, and then I took a lunch break. After lunch the owner asked me if I wanted to try working out on the floor and helping customers out. I said, "Sure!" So I wasn't out there long when a lady customer came in. I did my salesman thing and said, "Is there anything I can help you with?" She said, "Yes" and showed me a shoe that she wanted to see in a particular size. It happened to be a shoe that I had just finished pricing that morning, so I knew right where it was. I got the shoes and brought them out for her. She seemed to really like them and was going to buy them. So I said, "Ma'am, are you sure you want to buy those shoes? Because I can tell you how much we paid for them, and the mark up is crazy! You should wait until they at least go on sale!" She thanked me and decided I was right. I was quite proud of myself – I had really helped a customer out!

The owner was close by and observed my 'excellent' customer service. He pulled me aside and told me that he didn't think I was cut out for retail, and let me go. So

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<sup>1</sup> Main resources: Dan Boone, *The Way We Work: How Faith Makes a Difference on the Job* (2014, Beacon Hill Press, KC). Andy Stanley, *Taking Care of Business: Finding God at Work* (2005, Multnomah Books, Colorado Springs, CO). Earle L. Wilson, Alex R. G. Deasley, and Barry L. Callen, *Galatians, Philippians, Colossians: A Commentary for Bible Students* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007). John D. Barry, Douglas Mangum, Derek R. Brown, et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016). Mark A. Holmes, *Ephesians: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1997). [Theologyofwork.org](http://Theologyofwork.org)

my career as a shoe salesman lasted for exactly one customer interaction, without making a sale. It wasn't too bad, though – I ended up getting a job at Shakey's pizza, and they gave me enough hours and pay that I could quit my other three jobs and work there. It was a great deal because I got free pizza on my lunch break if I was working a full day! Well, at least it started out that way. Being a teenage boy playing three high school sports, I had a healthy appetite so I would eat a supreme large pizza for lunch. After a couple months they changed the rule, so for lunch we could make a free personal pizza – about six inches. Whatever we could fit on it, we could eat. I became a master chef *and* architect; my six-inch pizza was piled with about six inches of meat and cheese. It wasn't really a pizza - it was more like a stack! But it was a great job and lasted into my senior year.

I'm sure you've got stories about places you've worked, too. Today we are going to see how we can come alive in our work.

Since Easter Sunday, we have been spending time in this series looking at practical and powerful ways that resurrection life makes a difference in our lives. Our desire is that we would realize that living this resurrection life has an impact in very practical ways. Yet the fact that it is practical does not take away from it being powerful, resurrection life. This is a quality and power of life that cannot be reached without the resurrection; without the new life that Christ gives us and without his Holy Spirit within us. We'll fail without him.

In the first week, we looked at ways that we can “come alive” in our relationships. Last week we looked at how we can come alive in our family. We looked at the mutually submitted relationship of wife and husband and parent and child. Next week we'll wrap it up by seeing how we can come alive in our circumstances. But today we are looking at how the resurrection life makes a difference in our work – whether it is our schoolwork, or part time jobs or even our full time jobs and careers.

It's important to begin by making sure we are clear on what the Bible tells us about work so we know what our perspective or attitude about it should be, so we can see what it means to come alive in our work.

The Bible talks a lot about work, and there are some things that stand out, but they could make it confusing, so we need to clear them up. The first question we might raise is this...

## 1. Work is *meaningless*?

I remember during my work as a state police officer in Oregon having a conversation with one of the veteran troopers. I was sharing with him that I was wrestling with my call to ministry, and that I knew we are here to make a difference in the world; I was just trying to figure out what God wanted me to do. I was sort of asking his advice, but truthfully I was trying to share my faith with him as we were talking because I knew he wasn't a Christian. But he was at least 20 years older than me and I didn't want to be disrespectful. I figured this would be a way for me to

share my faith and get his opinion at the same time. He gave me his opinion; that's for sure.

He told me that I was too idealistic. He said this is what work was about: that work consisted of putting in hours and years in a job that you *don't* like, in order to make enough money to do the things you *do* like. And then if you do it long enough and make enough money you can retire, and then you can do the things you like whenever you want, without work interfering.

In other words, work is just nothing but drudgery. It's just a meaningless task you do to get the money you want.

I wonder if he listened to too much country and western music. If you listen to country music, you get some interesting advice about work as one author points out: "Tennessee Ernie Ford suggests that the back-breaking toil of loading sixteen tons gets you another day older and deeper in debt. Dolly Parton croons that working nine to five is no way to make a living. And Johnny Paycheck, a man whose last name suggests appreciation for a steady job, sings the resignation song of everyone who wants to quit: 'Take this job and shove it, I ain't workin' here no more.'"<sup>2</sup> I'm thinking that we should *not* get our theology of work from country music!

My jaded police friend and that country music sound similar to the opinion of someone else; someone called "the Teacher." The Teacher is the self-identification of the writer of the Old Testament Wisdom Book called Ecclesiastes, traditionally believed to have been written by King Solomon. It is in that book that the Bible says the most about work, toil, sweat and labor. The main word of that book is the Hebrew word *hebel*, which is typically translated as "vanity" or "meaningless." The word literally means, "vapor, emptiness, transitory. It is like a fog that you cannot get your fingers around. It is gone by midmorning and leaves no evidence that it was ever there. This is the word most used to describe work."<sup>3</sup> This is what the Teacher says in Ecclesiastes 2:18-23 –

"I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. For a person may labor with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless." (Ecclesiastics 2:18-23, niv)

There's more in chapter four, but it doesn't seem to get any better:

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<sup>2</sup> Boone, 13

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, 13-14

“And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person’s envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Fools fold their hands and ruin themselves. Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind. Again I saw something meaningless under the sun: There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. ‘For whom am I toiling,’ he asked, ‘and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?’ This too is meaningless—a miserable business!” (Ecclesiastics 4:4-8, niv)

The Teacher paints a pretty bleak picture of work, but it sounds familiar, doesn’t it? Maybe you’ve heard it from the person in the next cubicle over, or someone at the water cooler during a break at work. He sounds like the kid who sits next to you in school.

Are they right? Is work all really meaningless? Is the Bible really telling us that work – which consumes on average over ten years of our total lives – that it is all meaningless? Maybe there is more going on than we see. Let’s keep reading:

“This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them—for this is their lot. Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God. They seldom reflect on the days of their life, because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart.” (Ecclesiastics 5:18-20, niv)

At the center of the Teacher’s “sarcasm and pessimism about work, there is wisdom. He’s making a point. (I like what one author writes –) He seems to be saying that if we draw our life and identity from our work, if *it* tells us who and whose we are, if it is all we live for, we will end up holding fog someday. But if it is a gift from God that occupies us all our days with good things to do, and if we experience our work as given by God, and if we know we are blessed, then our life is rich.”<sup>4</sup> So if we try to find our source of identity and worth in our work, it will be meaningless and toilsome because it cannot provide those things for us; only God can. This passage is telling us that *we don’t find our meaning in work, but work does have meaning.*

So it is not meaningless.

There’s another part of the Bible that, if you read it, you might think that the Bible says that work is part of the curse of the Fall of man. So...

## 2. Work is a ***curse***?

If you go back to the beginning of creation, you’ll read in Genesis chapter 3 that Adam and Eve disobey God and they sin. And that decision to sin has disastrous

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, 22

consequences that stretch all the way to our workplaces today. Because of their sin, we read in Genesis 3:

“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, and 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 from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” (Genesis 3:18-20, niv)

So much went wrong when Adam and Eve sinned. But was *work* a result of the fall? Is work part of the curse? From that passage, it sure doesn't sound like work would be fun.

The curse of sin created alienation between people and God, between people and each other, and between people and creation – the very earth that was supposed to support people. Work became very hard and would now be prone to failure and frustration and unintended consequences. Still, “*Work was not inherently a curse, but the curse affects our work.*”<sup>5</sup>

I want you to see something from that passage: the ground was cursed, but people were *not*. God did not abandon people. In fact, God moves right ahead providing for Adam and Eve – even to the point of sewing clothes for them when they don't know how to do that:

“The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.” (Genesis 3:21, niv)

Isn't that a tender picture? God, hunched over some skins, sewing them together so they fit for Adam and Eve. That speaks of love, not anger. Blessing, not curse.

Don't forget that Adam and Eve were already commissioned to do work back in chapters one and two, and that work had to continue despite the curse. There is still ground to be tilled, nature still needs to be studied, and even names given to the animals and plants and nature that they discovered. So despite the curse, men and women must still be fruitful, they must still multiply, they must still govern creation and community.

But I want you to see something: because of the curse, work now involves something else, too. There is a “second layer”<sup>6</sup> of work that also needs to be accomplished: work is not just cultivation, there is now the work of healing and repairing things that go wrong and fixing the broken result of sins that are committed. Doctors were not needed before; now they are. Police and judges were not needed before; now they are. Pastors and priests were not needed before. Even farming and architecture and art all have elements now that echo God's redemption. “Scientists and salespersons help people overcome various difficulties by providing products to make life easier and healthier. Law enforcement officers and parents

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<sup>5</sup> [theologyofwork.com](http://theologyofwork.com)

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

provide safety in the midst of chaos (and even evil threats). Accountants and repairmen fix broken ledgers and appliances and technology.”<sup>7</sup>

So if you think about it, work is not the curse, but the curse affects our work – not just in negative ways though. Even in the curse-affected work, we see echoes and reflections of God’s reconciliation at work, in our work! Our work all points to the hope that one day everything will be restored, like the Bible tells us:

“Then I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.” (Revelation 21:1, niv)

One day, brokenness and pain will be gone. Pain will be no more. But until then, even the most frustrating jobs can be a means by which we show and extend God’s redemption and reconciliation. Like God sewing clothes for Adam and Eve, our work meets needs around us, fixes brokenness, and can help make things better. This is a huge part of what the Bible means when it says:

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.” (2 Corinthians 5:18, niv)

So work is not meaningless; it is not a curse. It can actually reflect God’s reconciliation, and work directly *with* God in *his* reconciliation and healing in people’s lives and hearts. As one author says, “We can reflect Jesus’ finished work in our lives as we display God’s characteristics to the world and work to redeem areas of brokenness.”<sup>8</sup> Work isn’t where we find our meaning, but work *has* meaning: work itself can become a means of grace to the world – a way that God’s grace is shown and extended to the people around you.

So because of that...

### 3. Work is ***worship*** and ***witness***!

Our work becomes an expression of praise to God for his blessing, and our work becomes a way to demonstrate his love and reconciliation to the world. That makes work incredibly valuable. It actually becomes a means of worship and witness. Remember last week we read that passage in Ephesians that gave practical instructions to husbands and wives and parents and children? Well we stopped reading last week right before there were instructions about work. If we kept reading, we’d see that it says this to workers and to bosses:

“Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. And masters, treat your slaves

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<sup>7</sup> ibid

<sup>8</sup> ibid

in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.”  
(Ephesians 6:5-9, niv)

You might wonder if this passage really applies to us today; after all it’s about slaves. I mean, yes, you *feel* like a slave to work or school, but does it really apply?

Before I answer that, I’d like us to look at a very similar passage to that one, in Colossians. We’ve read a lot of Scripture here this morning, but this one is really the main one we want to understand in this whole message, so would you honor God’s word and stand with me as I read this one?

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him ... Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism.” (Colossians 3:15-18, 22-25, niv)

Thanks – you can be seated.

So what do first century instructions to slaves have to do with our work today? Does it really apply to us? Well, it does, and it helps when you consider slavery during that time. Slavery was an accepted practice in the first century. Before that time, slaves were usually prisoners of war. But by the time this was written, they had become a necessary part of the economy. If a person was born into slavery, they remained a slave until they were freed or their freedom was purchased. Slavery could be forced like a jail sentence; in violation of a crime they had to become a slave for a certain number of years or until their debt was paid. Or someone might willingly become a slave to pay off his or her debt. Still, they were “owned” by their master until their time was done or freedom was secured. They had no rights until that would happen. Or they could retire from slavery at age 60, if they lived that long.

So slavery *was* more like work is today, in many respects. I think that gives us plenty of room to read this passage from the perspective of how we should approach our work today. And we are told to do our work (and everything else we do, for that matter) *for the Lord*.

Like the Teacher in Ecclesiastes was saying, work is an expression of gratitude to the Lord. Too often, we think work is an exchange of obligations. We too often approach work as a way to obligate our boss – so that our boss *owes* us money or benefits. But that’s not to be our attitude. “The focus is on what grateful believers



owe (God and) others, not what is owed to them. (We don't work to get people to owe us stuff. And we don't do good work to pay back God for anything we owe him. The) Christian life is not to be driven by any need to do good works in an effort to repay God for past sin. It is not an effort to keep God pleased or a way to gain an insurance policy to avoid eternal disaster after death. What should drive (our work when we live) the life of faith is gratitude to God for the many divine gifts, including salvation itself. (This passage) calls for a life of song in the heart. Jesus came less to provide a ticket to heaven for (people to bravely hang on until then), and more to create a body—the church—that in peace, love, and joy will reveal in its own life (and work) in the world the redeeming God graciously active in Christ.<sup>9</sup> In other words, our work becomes an expression of gratitude for all God has done for us, and way to show the world how much God loves them. It is a demonstration of a God who sews clothes for us when we have no clothes and we don't know how to clothe ourselves.

Let's say that you work on an assembly line making widgets. All day long you watch widgets go by. Some might say you are merely lining them up on the conveyor belt and looking for defects. How meaningless and boring. *Unless* you realize that every widget is making someone's life better. *Unless* you realize that through widget watching, God is providing food for your family's table. He's providing money that you can use to be a blessing to others as you share it and give it away. *Unless* you realize that excellence in your work is a witness to your coworkers of God's goodness.

More than that, if Jesus was your boss or teacher, would you settle for slipshod work or studies? Or would you want to please him by doing your very best? This passage is telling you, Jesus *is* your boss. *Everything* you do is for him and for others.

And by the way – if *you* are a boss, those people who work for you belong to Jesus. You'd better take good care of them.

Do you want to experience new life in your work? Do you want to see resurrection power in your work and studies? Then do you work and studies for the Lord, not for anyone or anything else. Work is far from meaningless, nor is it a curse. Work is a means to worship Christ and be a witness to the world of God's reconciling, rescuing, restoring love.

*Pray*

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<sup>9</sup> Earle L. Wilson, Alex R. G. Deasley, and Barry L. Callen, *Galatians, Philippians, Colossians: A Commentary for Bible Students* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007), 339.