

Theology of Work

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Preacher: Jeremy Sarber

[0 : 00] So, we've been studying what I've called everyday theology. In other words, we're trying to develop a biblical understanding of ordinary life.

From the time we wake to our alarms in the morning to the time we wind down and get ready for bed, what does the Bible say about our completely ordinary routines?

Well, today I'd like to consider a theology of work. What does it mean to have a biblical understanding of work?

Does God really care about our daily labors, whatever they might be? Obviously, this is a crucial part of studying everyday theology because work is where we spend most of our waking time. Some of us have a traditional nine-to-five job. Some of us raise children at home. Some of us commit ourselves to volunteer work. Some of us may be retired, but we fill our days with household chores and other commitments.

[1 : 12] And sadly, many people view work as little more than a chore or, worse yet, a necessary evil.

You know, we might see it as something we just have to endure so we can pay the bills and maybe get on with our real lives.

The Bible, however, paints a much deeper, richer picture of work. It shows us that our labors, far from being insignificant, fit into the grand story God has been telling from the beginning of creation. When we begin to develop a truly biblical theology of work, we realize that work is part of God's good design for us.

Our jobs, whatever they may look like, connect to God's plan for the world. From the moment God made Adam and Eve, He gave them work to do and responsibilities to fulfill.

[2 : 14] And His intention was that these tasks would bring Him glory. Now, it's really interesting because this theology of work runs all the way through the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation.

It's not just a topic that appears in one or two isolated verses. Sometimes we see it in explicit commands. Sometimes we see it in the stories of men and women who are serving God through their work, or perhaps doing the opposite of that.

And just like many other subjects of the Bible, we can trace the topic of work right through the grand story of redemption. So we have creation.

We have the fall. We have redemption. And we have consummation at the end. And we might think of it as kind of a framework for understanding really the entire Bible, but for our purpose, work specifically.

So my goal is to answer three basic questions. First, how does the Bible portray work in the overarching storyline of the world?

[3 : 33] In other words, how does work fit into the big picture of what God is doing? Second, what distinct truths does the Bible teach us about work?

For example, is work a blessing or a curse? Has the nature of work changed over time? If so, how? And third, is there a deeper or perhaps symbolic or eternal dimension to our work? Does it matter that we devote so much of our time and our lives to it?

Is it really about more than earning a paycheck so we can afford to do the things we really want to do? And I'll break this down in terms of that salvation framework.

Creation, fall, redemption, consummation. And first, we'll consider creation, of course, where God himself models what work should look like and actually commissions humanity to take care of the world he created.

[4 : 45] And then second, we'll consider the entrance of sin into the world. How did that change things? Third, how does Christ's saving work change the way we work?

And finally, we'll look into the future. What does work look like on the new earth after Christ returns? So let's begin with creation.

Obviously, it makes sense to start where the Bible starts with Genesis chapter 1. This is where we meet God the Creator. He is the very first worker, creating the heavens and the earth over the course of six days.

Now, we know he's omnipotent. He's all-powerful. So we might question whether he's really working, right? But I call him the first worker because the Bible consistently uses the language of work to describe what God is doing.

So think about how Genesis 1 unfolds. On day 1, he says, Let there be light. On day 2, he separates water from water.

[5 : 57] On day 3, he gathers the waters and he forms the dry land. Each day, he's active, systematically shaping the world. And at the end of creation, in the first part of Genesis 2, we see him resting on the seventh day, not because he's tired, but because his work of creation is complete.

Now, it's important to note that work did not begin with the first man, Adam. It began with God. God was there working before Adam entered the picture.

And, by the way, God continues to work. In John 5, 17, Jesus says, My Father is working until now, and I am working.

Of course, God the Father did not stop caring for his creation after Genesis 2. He continues to sustain all things by the power of his word. And it's God's work that sets the stage for human work because our work reflects God's work.

It reflects his creativity and his wisdom, his purposeful arrangement of creation. We might say that work is part of who God is.

[7 : 21] So clearly, work is about more than earning a paycheck. It's certainly not what we might call a necessary evil. Not even close.

Well, as the story continues, we see God give the first man and woman responsibilities of their own, right? Genesis 1, God made man in his image, and then he tells them in verse 28, to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.

Then, in Genesis 2, 15, God places Adam in the garden to, specifically, work it and keep it. You see, Adam is not simply there to frolic around 24-7.

He was meant to enjoy it, but that's not all he was meant to do. He's there to cultivate the garden.

He's there to guard the garden. In other words, God builds work into the very identity of humanity.

We were created to work. We were created to use our minds and our bodies and our creativity and our talents to shape and steward the creation God entrusted to us.

[8 : 44] Now, I've often heard Genesis 1, 28, referred to as the cultural mandate. Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.

That is, God entrusting human beings to essentially develop the potential of his world. That might include agriculture, like tending the garden, animal husbandry, naming creatures, building families, constructing cities, and really, by extension, everything we do in society.

Think of how many skills and forms of knowledge that have developed over the centuries.

Architecture, engineering. We might go into the creative works like art and music and technology.

These are all ways that we harness the resources God put in this world for us, ideally, to mirror him, to image him, and to ultimately glorify him.

You'll notice that in Genesis 2, verses 19 and 20, Adam names the animals. And I've always found that a fascinating detail in the creation story.

[10 : 07] Now, that may sound like a small task, a meaningless thing, but it illustrates Adam's role as God's steward. He is exercising dominion in a faithful way by categorizing and labeling the creatures God has made, which is no small intellectual task for sure.

It's a creative work. It's an intelligent work. But he's cultivating order, and that's really a pattern for all of us. We look at the raw potential of the world, and we arrange it in a way, we use it in a way that honors God.

We organize workplaces, design projects, cultivate the land, produce goods, raise our families, and in each case, we reflect a bit of God's own creative power.

Now, when it comes to Eve's creation, we might normally not read the account of Eve's creation as a text about work, but it does help to inform our view of labor.

God sees that it's not good for man to be alone. Genesis 2.18. So he creates Eve, and he unites them together in marriage. They become one flesh, we're told.

[11 : 34] But you'll notice that they are not just a couple for the sake of romance. They are a working partnership.

They are told to be fruitful, and multiply, and subdue the earth. That means they cooperate in the tasks God has given them.

Marriage is about companionship, for sure, but it's also about serving together, which includes stewarding creation and fulfilling the responsibilities of that cultural mandate in Genesis 1.28.

And we can see a hint of this in Genesis 2. Adam is tending the garden, but God notices that Adam needs what? A helper.

He needs a helper. And Eve's presence, of course, completes that picture. So work and family become intertwined in a way that produces stability, produces encouragement, and really a multiplication of their efforts.

[12 : 48] They can go much further together than they can by themselves. Together they can accomplish far more for God's glory. So from the very beginning, Scripture has a high view of families working together to fulfill God's purposes, and a big part of that purpose is to work, to be stewards of creation.

Now, we can expand this theme further by looking at other passages in the Old Testament. When God establishes Israel as a covenant nation, for example, He promises to bless their obedience with abundance.

Deuteronomy 28, for instance, lists blessings. Blessings in the city. Blessings in the field. Blessings upon their families. Blessings in everything they set out to do with their hands.

Now, to be clear, that's not a prosperity gospel formula guaranteeing that we can all be rich if only we're faithful enough. But it does show that God delights in blessing His people when they walk in faithfulness to Him.

Psalms 128 says something very similar. Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways. You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands.

[14 : 11] You shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you. Those who fear the Lord and walk in His ways can enjoy fruitful labor and a thriving household.

So, God is not indifferent to our work. He's not indifferent. If we view our labor in a way that seeks to honor Him, if we don't separate our work life from our worship of God, He will delight in blessing us, both spiritually and at times materially.

Now, that doesn't mean we'll never face hardship, and it doesn't mean that this is a sure path to wealth and recognition and every other vain thing that we might pursue.

Remember, we still live in a fallen world, and we'll come to that. Yet, God does desire our good. He designed work as something good, something beneficial, something that reflects His glory.

And before the fall, there was no tension between duty and delight. None at all. There was no such thing as the Monday morning blues.

[15 : 38] Work was very much worship. And that brings us to the second stage of this. Genesis 1 and 2 show us the ideal.

Work is part of the very good creation of God. But that's not what it feels like to us now, does it? It doesn't feel perfect.

Many times, it feels quite far from it. So what happened? Well, Genesis 3 answers the question of what went wrong. Adam and Eve disobey God's command by eating of that forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

And this moment, the moment that sin enters the world, disrupts all of creation. It's as though a disease just instantly spreads through every aspect of human existence, our hearts, our relationships, and even our work.

And as a direct judgment in Genesis 3, starting at verse 17, God curses the ground. So Adam, they still have work to do.

[16 : 48] But now, they will contend with thorns and thistles. Their efforts will be met with opposition and with hardship. So their labor, once pure and joyful, have now become toilsome, wearisome.

And we see this played out in the very next chapter of Genesis, Genesis chapter 4. Cain's sin adds yet another layer of difficulty to the ground he works.

After he kills his brother, God says in verse 12, when you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. From that point forward, our work is fraught with perpetual tension.

It's both a blessing because it is from God. It's what we were made for. And it is a burden because of sin.

And I think we can all relate. Right? We face deadlines, conflict in the workplace, physical exhaustion, mental burnout, and the list goes on and on.

[17 : 57] All of our frustrations with work can be traced back to the fall, the moment that Adam and Eve sinned in the garden. The ground fights us.

Our labor is not always as fruitful as we want it to be, as we wish it could be. Sometimes we pour our hearts into our work only to see the most minimal results.

So, if you've ever felt exasperated in this way, you have felt the echoes of Genesis 3 and what took place so long ago. It's still with us because sin is still with us.

Now, Genesis 4 zooms in a bit more on how sin distorts not only the ground itself but also the way we approach work in a sense.

So, you have Cain. he's a farmer. You have Abel. He's a shepherd. Both bring offerings to the Lord but God accepts Abel's sacrifice and not Cain's.

[19 : 02] And we can discuss why that is but instead of responding with humility, we see Cain, he grows very envious and he murders his brother.

So, essentially, from the beginning of human history, we see work becomes this this battleground for human desires. What was meant to be an act of worship and stewardship turns into a platform for pride and envy and even violence.

Cain brings his offering. This is what he does. He grows fruit. And it wasn't good enough. And his response is anger. Then later in Genesis 4, we see various descendants of theirs building cities, forging metals, making musical instruments.

Now, technology, art, engineering, all of these things can and should be used for God's glory but they can also become ways to exalt ourselves. Sin has a way of twisting even good things into idols.

And I probably don't have to convince you that that dynamic still exists today. Maybe we idolize our careers, letting them define our worth.

[20 : 26] Maybe we become resentful if we see someone else who seems to be prospering more than us. all of these pitfalls flow from the fact that we live in a fallen world.

This is not by God's design, in other words. This is the direct result of sin. We've talked about the book of Ecclesiastes. Well, it offers a reflective look at the vanity or the emptiness that accompanies life under the sun when we have a very secular worldview, when we don't have a right view and right relationship with God the creator.

The preacher in Ecclesiastes, he pursues wealth, he pursues pleasure and wisdom and work only to lament. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

And he wonders about the benefit of our toil under the sun. He even admits, I hated my toil.

Because he said he worked all of this time, he gained all that he gained only to leave it to someone else.

What good is it? Yet, in the middle of this cry of futility, the preacher, Solomon that is, affirms that we should still find enjoyment in our labors as a gift of God.

[21 : 54] So, Ecclesiastes, as we've talked about, offers us two perspectives. On the one hand, work is a chasing after wind if God is not at the center of it.

On the other hand, if we understand that he is the giver of all good gifts, we can receive our jobs, even the difficult ones, as a blessing to be enjoyed.

Now, we still experience burdens with it, but it's not meaningless if we trust the creator. Meanwhile, Proverbs offers us more straightforward instructions.

It extols diligence, and it warns against laziness. Proverbs 6, 6 through 11.

Proverbs insist on honesty and integrity. Proverbs 11, 1. It praises generosity. Proverbs 11, 25.

[23 : 04] Proverbs 31 famously describes the noble or the virtuous wife who excels in business and caring for her household and serving her community.

So, the message of Proverbs is that even in a fallen world, there are principles of wisdom that can lead to flourishing. It's not all in vain.

When you work hard and you conduct your affairs with honesty and you trust the Lord through it all, you will find a measure of stability and you will find a measure of blessing.

But, of course, we also see throughout Proverbs that foolishness or laziness or dishonesty will lead to ruin. Consider Proverbs 10:4.

So, let's briefly consider a few examples of people who flourished in their work despite the burdens of working in a fallen world. Perhaps the best example that comes to my mind is Joseph.

[24 : 13] He's sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. In Egypt, he suffers all kinds of injustice from false accusations to being forgotten in the belly of a prison.

Yet, he remains faithful to God and, frankly, to his work. Whatever he has to do, whether he's managing Potiphar's household or overseeing the prison's operations, God blesses his diligence and raises him to second in command over all of Egypt.

And his story reminds us that even if we find ourselves in terrible circumstances, maybe a workplace that isn't ideal or a job that we're not particularly thrilled about, or maybe a position that seems unfair to us, God can still bless us.

He can still use our labors for good. Another example is Daniel, who served under a pagan king, pagan kings, I should say, in Babylon and Persia.

He never compromises in his devotion and his service to the Lord while excelling in wisdom and leadership in the job he was placed in, so much so that he outshines his other officials.

[25 : 46] Daniel 1:20 says he was ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all the kingdom, all of these people that the supreme leader relied on.

So even in a terribly ungodly environment, we see that it is possible to serve the Lord and carry out our duties with integrity and be blessed by God.

Now ideally that's not the kind of environment we want to find ourselves in, but if it comes to that.

How about Nehemiah? When he hears that Jerusalem's walls are in ruins, he feels compelled to go and rebuild them.

And he faces opposition, he faces threats, he faces exhaustion, yet remains steadfast in his prayer and in his planning, and eventually we see the wall rebuilt in 52 days.

You know, sometimes God calls us to do hard things that require a lot of organization, a lot of perseverance, and of course a lot of hard work, yet when we depend on him, we can see some remarkable results.

[27 : 06] Lastly, consider Ruth, a Moabite widow who returns to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law Naomi. She gleans in the fields to provide for them both, and through her labor, as small and insignificant as it seemed, not to mention her virtuous character, I think something can be said for that, she comes to the attention of Boaz who redeems her.

And she ends up in the genealogy of not only King David, but then Jesus Christ. You see, something as mundane and seemingly unimportant as gleaning in a field can, according to God's sovereign purpose, have these ripple effects that reach far beyond anything we could ever see. So my point is that work can still be fruitful in a fallen world. Sin has made it difficult. There's no question about that. We constantly battle everything from laziness to greed to pride, but work is still good.

And when we treat it as good, keeping God at the center of it, treating it as another form of worship, it can be a tremendous blessing to us materially at times, and even more importantly, spiritually. It can be good for our souls. So now we come to the third phase of work, redemption. Of course, at the center of our faith is the work of Jesus Christ.

[28 : 55] His perfect life, His atoning death, His victorious resurrection, and unsurprisingly, His redemptive work changes everything, including our relationship to work.

Romans 6 says that we are united to Christ by faith, meaning we have died to sin and are raised to new life. And that new life affects how we use our bodies.

It affects how we spend our time. It affects how we carry out our tasks each day. If sin once corrupted our work, Christ renews it.

We no longer labor merely for ourselves or to serve some sort of idol like wealth. Instead, we work out of our gratitude to the God who saved us.

We become co-workers with God in a sense, reconciled to Him once again, and we reflect His grace and His truth and everything that is good.

[30 : 08] One key passage here is Romans 12.1, which calls us to present our bodies as living sacrifices. That sacrifice includes our minds.

It includes our bodies, our attitudes, and even our jobs. If you're an accountant, do accounting as unto the Lord.

If you're a teacher, teach as a living sacrifice. If you're a stay-at-home mom, you parent for God's glory, this is not a Sunday only affair.

the redemption of Christ, what He has accomplished, what He has done, what He has made us envelops all of life.

Again, we can't compartmentalize the Christian life into the sacred and the secular. It's all sacred.

[31 : 08] And Romans 12.2 adds, do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind. You see, our sinful nature might incline us to see work as a way to seek something other than what God intends, like prestige or money or power, but the renewed mind in Christ views work as something entirely different.

It's an act in service to God Himself. Colossians 3.17. Whatever you do, whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Now, just think about that for a moment. Think about as you're working from day to day, week to week, any given moment, would you want to put that stamp on what you're doing?

I'm doing this in the name of the Lord Jesus. Well, if you're working honestly, if you're working hard, if you're working with integrity, then yes, I'll put that stamp on it.

If you're working for the right reasons, you might want to put that stamp on it. If not, you might be a little more hesitant. Let's say you're in a workplace with a difficult boss or maybe some uncooperative colleagues.

[32 : 36] faith. If you're working as unto the Lord, you're far more likely to respond with patience and with kindness, even when it's not recognized, even when nobody seems to care.

You're not just doing it for a paycheck. You're doing it for Christ our Lord, and that perspective transforms an otherwise dreary job into a mission field.

not to mention a place of worship. And let's not forget an opportunity for sanctification. And our jobs will sanctify us. Now, that doesn't mean we're automatically free from all temptations.

The Bible warns us repeatedly about turning our careers into idols or our pursuit of money into an idol.

evil. Consider Ephesians 4.28 where Paul instructs those who once stole to now work honestly so that, not that they can gain personally, but so that they can share with those in need.

[33 : 50] So, here we see a direct contrast. Instead of using our skills and abilities for selfish gain, we use them for generosity. Colossians 3.5 calls greed idolatry.

And of course, 1 Timothy 6.10, we're all familiar with, it identifies the love of money as a root of all kinds of evil. We have to be on guard.

It's easy for work to become a place where we feed our pride and we measure our worth by, I don't know, productivity, and we chase material success.

But the gospel pushes back against all of that. It reminds us that our worth is not in our job title or how much money we make or how successful we are in this world, but in Christ alone.

That's where our worth comes from. Not in a promotion, not in a bonus, not in the form of applause from men. Our worth is in Christ alone. So, what then does redeemed work look like in practice?

[35 : 11] Well, I would describe it as a labor motivated by love for God and for neighbor and marked by integrity and diligence and, of course, generosity.

1 Corinthians 10.31. I've read several times throughout this series. It sums it up pretty well. Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

If you're writing emails, do it ethically. Do it kindly. If you're building houses, do it with excellence. Do it with fairness.

If you're working as a nurse, you care for patients with a compassion that reflects our Savior.

Again, there should be no division between the sacred and the secular.

All honorable work can be worship if done in faith. And we see glimpses of this in the Apostle Paul's ministry.

[36 : 17] In 1 Corinthians 9, he talks about running the race to receive an imperishable wreath.

Now, he's speaking about his ministry, but the principle extends to how we approach any vocation, whatever it might be.

We run with discipline, not aimlessly. We focus on glorifying God in all that we do, not chasing empty accolades or whatever else that might move us.

Ephesians 6 speaks to bond servants or slaves and tells them to obey their earthly masters with fear and trembling with a sincere heart.

ultimately serving Christ. And by extension, employees or those under another's authority can apply that same principle.

We work wholeheartedly, not just when the boss is watching and not just doing the bare minimum of what's required of us. Colossians 3 repeats the same call.

[37 : 27] We're not to be people pleasers, but God pleasers. And 2 Thessalonians 3 warns against idleness. Believers should earn their own living rather than burdening the community.

In fact, they should be givers to the community. And these passages, and we could reference many more, reinforce the idea that under Christ's lordship, saved by His grace, work is dignified.

It's meaningful. We can take real joy in laboring faithfully, confident that even the smallest, most mundane tasks matter to our heavenly Father.

They mean something, and they will mean something in eternity. So last but not least, we come to the consummation of all things. The new heavens and the new earth, described in Revelation 21 and 22.

Here we find a breathtaking vision. The dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people.

[38 : 48] Of course, every tear is wiped away. There is no more death, no more mourning, no more crying or pain. Creation itself, according to Romans 8.21, is itself freed from the curse and the bondage of sin.

And in that glorified place, we read that God's people will reign forever and ever, Revelation 22.5. The concept of reigning takes us back to the cultural mandate in Genesis, doesn't it?

remember we were told to subdue the earth? Reigning, of course, also implies activity, oversight, responsibility.

This suggests that when God restores all things, we do not simply lounge around with nothing to do. You've seen the imagery, disembodied soul, little wings and a halo floating around on a cloud playing a harp.

That's not what the Bible presents. Work, as we know it, will be purified for sure.

[40 : 06] But we will continue to serve God in a redeemed creation. No more thorns, no more futility, no more vain striving. Our labors will be unbroken expression of worship and joy and love.

Daniel 9.24 speaks of a time when transgression is finished and everlasting righteousness is ushered in. Daniel depicts the final victory of God's kingdom over sin.

Then Isaiah 66.1 reminds us that the Lord's throne is in heaven. And in Revelation 21.22 we see that in the new Jerusalem, God and the Lamb are the temple.

So, everything is permeated by God's presence and His glory in this new earth. No corner of creation lies outside of His reign and this includes our future work.

We can hardly imagine the beauty of a world where every project, every creative endeavor and every act of service radiates with God's glory and His perfect holiness.

[41 : 16] service. But that's what we're shown. That's what's to come. Now, central to this future is the resurrection of our bodies.

Daniel 12 says that many who sleep in the dust will awake some to everlasting life. Jesus says essentially the same in John 5. 1 Corinthians 15 clarifies that we are raised in power incorruptible bearing the image of the man of heaven.

And this means our bodies will be fully equipped to serve God without fatigue, without sickness. Hallelujah.

We won't struggle with burnout or physical limitations the way we do now. We will be alive in every sense, able to create and to cultivate for God's glory, completely unimpeded by sin.

love. The lion will lie down with the lamb, physical and emotional pain will be replaced by everlasting joy. That's the promise. And I think this is a crucial point for how we understand work.

[42 : 29] The new creation is not a place of idle boredom, it's a place of flourishing life where each one of us in our resurrected body uses or continues to use our unique gifts to reflect the glory of our creator and redeemer.

We see a foretaste of this in Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. You know, he interacts with people, he shares meals, he continues to teach, he continues to do ordinary life things, right? In other words, the final state is not this ghostly existence, it's a renewed physical world where we experience the fullness of what work was always supposed to be.

In Matthew 25, we read the parable of the talents and it offers us a glimpse of that joy that awaits faithful servants. Those who steward their resources well will hear the master say, well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your master.

That would suggest that in the eternal kingdom, faithfulness leads to perhaps even deeper fellowship with our Lord. If you think about it, that's our highest motivation for work right now.

[43 : 52] We want to please our heavenly father. We want to grow closer and closer to him in everything we do. And in the new creation, that desire will be entirely fulfilled.

We will see the fruit of our labor, in a way that we can't fully see now. We will experience a rest that is not simply ceasing from activity, but resting in a sense of being in perfect alignment with God's will.

So, Revelation 21, Daniel 9, Isaiah 66, many other prophetic passages point us to a grand, restored reality. Work is no longer overshadowed by frustration, there's no exploitation, no injustice.

Instead, our tasks become that of constant, eternal worship of the King. Our hearts will be free from any kind of selfish ambition.

We will love each other perfectly, collaborating on projects for God's glory. Every moment of work will overflow with wonder and praise.

[45 : 02] Now, I'm out of time, so let's briefly pray. Father, you are the creator of all things and we praise you for the beauty and purpose you give to our work.

We confess that we often approach our labors with selfishness or frustration, forgetting that they are a gift from you. So, forgive us, Lord. Thank you for providing for us through our work and for redeeming it through Christ, making even the ordinary tasks of our day an act of worship.

Help us to honor you in all that we do this week and beyond. Strengthen us to labor faithfully. Help us to rest in your grace. Help us to reflect your glory.

And it's in Christ's name I pray. Amen. We're dismissed.