
Following our GPS: Vocation

Topical¹

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Having a GPS about our vocation has two major aspects. There is the Biblical theology of work. There are the practical directives for work. We have spoken about that much over the last few years. How do you think about your work? What is your primary orientation toward work, vocation, school, home?

Orienting our work needs work

Work, for many, is a four-letter word, conveying the bitter and hopeless laboring in the drudgery, toil, and striving of everyday life. But for others, even many in the church, it is the self-centered, never-ending pursuit of satisfaction in wealth, comfort, prestige, and the praise of men.

Orienting our work is an issue of God's glory

To have a Biblical orientation for our work means that we "do all things for the glory of God." As in all of life, work is about what we worship. It often more fully than anything else exposes what we trust and what we treasure.

Orienting our work when emptied of work's meaning and significance

Unfortunately, the world has devalued work and emptied it of any spiritual context. Today, work is most often, simply a means to serve ourselves. Leisure and lifestyle, for example, have become the world's masters, enslaving families to dual-incomes as a means of purchasing a false peace and happiness. If you don't think people are enslaved to their work, consider the truth of the bumper sticker that says, "I Owe, I Owe, So It's Off to Work I Go." We live in a culture that is gorged on an appetite of self-indulgence. The title to a once-popular rock song, "Everybody's Working for the Weekend", speaks to the hearts of culture. Leisure activities are the primary focus of the modern world's non-work time, in what has become a vain pursuit of humanistic pleasure.

Orienting our work by exposing our heart attitudes

How many of us have said or at least ventured the thought, "Thank God It's Friday"? But let me suggest to you that the Christian worker ought to arrive at work at the beginning of the week saying, "Thank God It's Monday!" We need to restore to work, the spiritual significance and God-glorifying purpose it is given in scripture. We need to reject and shed the influence of worldly views of work. We need to reject the un-Biblical notion that work is somehow secular and separated from our spiritual lives. And we need to reorient our minds with a God-positioning system arising from the Biblical truth about work.

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The God Who Works (Genesis 1-3)

A God-positioning system must begin with God. Our God works...

God's Creative Work (Genesis 1:1-30)

Genesis 1:1 – In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

In the beginning God created. Here in the very first verse of the Bible the beginning of human history begins with the creative work of God. The act that brought the heavens and the earth into existence out of nothing was the miraculous and wonderful work of God. The creative work of God is unique and of far greater scale than the creative work of men. The beginning of history and God's plan for glorifying His name through the redemption of men begins with His creative work.

Another word that expresses the work of God in this passage is 'made'. This word is used to speak of the work of God in creation. The final expression of God's work is in the phrase "God said". Here again is a unique work in which God is able to speak, and what He speaks, happens. Literally, you could read verse 3 as "God declared light, and there was light." Our hearts should be filled with a sense that God is a worker of an essence infinitely beyond our understanding and ability.

In fact, in Deuteronomy 32, which records the Song of Moses, verse 4 declares that His works are perfect! The purpose of God's perfect work is to glorify His name and bring Himself the worship and praise He is due. Psalms 8 proclaims the awesome majesty of the Lord's creative work. *"¹ O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. ² From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger. ³ When I consider your heavens, the **work** of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place".* Listen to what Psalm 145:4-6 declares of God's works. *"⁴ One generation shall praise Your **works** to another, and shall declare Your mighty acts. ⁵ On the glorious splendor of Your majesty And on Your wonderful **works**, I will meditate. ⁶ Men shall speak of the power of Your awesome **acts**, And I will tell of Your greatness".* And even the last verse of Genesis Chapter 1 ends with God's assessment of His own work as He declared it to be "very good."

God's Ceasing from Work (Genesis 2:1-4)

Genesis 2 God ends or ceases His work. God uses this to establish a pattern for the Mosaic Law governing Israel's work.

¹ Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. ² And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation. ⁴ These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.

God completed His work. And He rested from what? *All* His work. And what work was it that He had done? From that which He created and made. The word conveys the sense of 'ended' or 'ceased'. The Hebrew word here is used more often in the Old Testament in this way including Genesis 8:22 where we read, *"As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease [sabat]"*. We know of this word from the formal Jewish observance of the 'sabbat', literally the ceasing of or resting from work. The word 'rest' is somewhat misleading in our culture

because it conveys the western idea of rest as leisure and relaxation. God did not stop His work to play a round of golf, go on a much-needed vacation, or watch 16 hours of football over the weekend. What scripture says is simply that God stopped and rested from the work that He had been doing.

For a moment, consider other ways in which God is a worker. There is God's *sovereign and sustaining work* in all of history to accomplish His plans and purposes. We also know that Christ came to earth to do the Father's *saving work*. In addition, we know of the *securing and sanctifying work* of the Holy Spirit and many other aspects of how God is a worker. It is glorious to note that we are uniquely the work of God in Christ. We are not only His created beings but also we are re-created beings through the redemptive and sanctifying work of Christ sealed through His Spirit.

God's Return to Salvation's Work (The Gospel of John)

Once the fall takes place, God goes back to work to accomplish salvation

Jesus does the Father's Work (John 5:15–21)

¹⁵ The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him. ¹⁶ And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. ¹⁷ But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working."

¹⁸ This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

¹⁹ So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. ²⁰ For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. ²¹ For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will.

God gave work to Jesus to do. He then set out to do the work His Father gave Him

Jesus accomplishes the assigned work (John 17:4–5)

⁴ I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. ⁵ And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.

Jesus was confident that He had accomplished the work. Yes, there was yet the suffering on the cross, but Jesus could speak in such a way that His work would be accomplished.

Jesus finishes the salvation work (John 19:28–30)

²⁸ After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst." ²⁹ A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. ³⁰ When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

The work that God had gone back to do and had given His Son to do is now *finished*.

Jesus brought the Sabbath rest from work (Hebrews 4:1–11)

¹ Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. ² For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. ³ For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said,

“As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest,’ ” although his works were finished from the foundation of the world. ⁴ For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.” ⁵ And again in this passage he said, “They shall not enter my rest.”

⁶ Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, ⁷ again he appoints a certain day, “Today,” saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”

⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. ⁹ So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, ¹⁰ for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

¹¹ Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the salvation work is done. There is no more saving work to do. So the rest, the Sabbath rest has been entered by all who believe.

Jesus will be Served in Eternity

There is a sense in which we, God and man, will continue to work throughout all eternity.

Revelation 5:8–10

⁸ And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, ¹⁰ and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”

Revelation 7:13–17

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” ¹⁴ I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵ “Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. ¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.

Because of the nature of God

God is One who works. His sustaining and ruling work of all that He has made will never end.

Because of the nature of man

God has created us for work. We will serve the Lord forever. We will rule and reign with Him forever. While the Bible is not detailed in what our work in the new heavens and new earth will be like, we know that it is not eternal idleness but eternal God-pleasing, man fulfilling and useful work.

Man's Work under God (Genesis 1:26-30, 2:5-24)

Not only is God a worker, but we read in this passage that man is a worker too. Remember for a moment to verse 26 of Chapter 1.

Man is a Worker

I am using this term "man" in the generic sense of "humanity". People were made to work, each in their own sphere. The spheres are sometimes gender, male and female work. They are sometimes

In the Image of His Creator

Genesis 1:26-30

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

God made man in His image. Just as God is a worker, He created man in His image to also be a worker. We can see this link in Exodus 20:9-11, where God commands six days of labor and a single day of rest just as God did in His creative work. Work is an intrinsic element of our creation and accordingly gives purpose to our being. Not only did God create workers; we see that He also created work. God Himself ordained it that man should work at ruling, filling, and subduing the earth. It was God that perfectly designed a physical realm where the very existence of the worker depended upon their work. In this light, the establishment of work should be seen as a gift to man.

At the Instruction of His Creator

Genesis 2:5-24

Man is not only a worker created in the image of God, but he was created to be a worker.

⁵ When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground, ⁶ and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground— ⁷ then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. ⁸ And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹ And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

¹⁰ A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. ¹¹ The name of the first is the Pishon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. ¹² And the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. ¹³ The name of the second river is the Gihon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Cush. ¹⁴ And the name of the third river is the Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

¹⁸ Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” ¹⁹ Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. ²¹ So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²² And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³ Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”

²⁴ Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

We see in verses 5 and 15 that God gives Adam the work of cultivating the ground for food and keeping the Garden. In verse 20, Adam is given the work of naming the animals. And even in the creating of Eve, we see that God provides to Adam a “suitable helper” to assist in his work and to provide companionship.

This idea of man as a worker is carried into the New Testament. Consider Ephesians 2:10 which says. “*For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*” The word ‘peripateo’ used here is more literally ‘walking’ or ‘living’. The sense of this verse is that we were created to do good works, which God prepared in advance for our living. I love this verse because it ties together the idea that we are God’s workmanship, the result of His creative and re-creative work, with the idea that man was created as a worker to do those good works which God has prepared for us to do.

Our Work as Toil

A great change has taken place in our work as a result of sin and the fall.

Work’s Original Design (Genesis 2:5–17)

As originally designed by God, work was to be productive and profitable.

⁵ When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground, ⁶ and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground— ⁷ then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man

became a living creature. ⁸ And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹ And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

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¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

These verses record the original sin and the fall of man as Adam and Eve yielded to Satan's tempting. But the important thing to note here is that work was ordained prior to man's fall and the subsequent curse upon mankind. What does this mean? This means that work was not a result of the curse, but rather was a part of God's perfect creation prior to it. Please note this. Work was ordained and instituted prior to the fall and was not part of the curse. Now to hear some talk about their work, you might think differently. But the truth is that work is a wonderful part of God's glorious creation. And it was a part of this creation upon which He placed His stamp of approval by declaring it to be "very good".

Work's Present Trouble (Genesis 3:17-19)

What changes in the fall is not the essence of work, but the nature of man's work.

¹⁷ And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; ¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹ By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

While we do not have a perfect picture of work before the fall, the Garden of Eden was most likely a place of peace where man worked in harmony with all of God's creation. But the fall brought upon man a curse that destroyed that harmony and changed his relationship with his creator. It is important to understand that the effect of the fall did not remove the legitimacy of work nor did it destroy the design for work that God created. But it did fundamentally change man's work.

The fall brought a curse upon the work of men. The first thing we see is that work became a burden. Whereas before the fall, work was a blessing, now it was toilsome labor. Second, we see that man would struggle against the land as it resisted his efforts to produce food from it. Thorns and thistles mix with the man's crops. Work now becomes a source of frustration and difficulty for men. Ecclesiastes speaks to the difficulty and frustration of work and depicts it as vanity and a striving after the

wind. Third, and last, we see that the fall separated men from God. And thus, it also separated the work of men from its God-glorifying purpose. Apart from worshipping and glorifying God in our work, we will reach the same conclusion as the Preacher of Ecclesiastes. That is, that under the sun, work is meaningless and has no purpose.

Our Work in the New Covenant

If this were the end of the story we would be without hope. But in Christ, man's relationship with God is restored and he is able to worship God through his work. With the fall came the reality that work would become difficult, wearisome, unpleasant, and a burden. With the redemptive work of Christ, the nature of work is forever changed. Christ's coming and death did not remove the effects of the curse but instead it overcame it. Christ's redemptive work is the transformation of a man into a new creation. The old is passed away and the new has come. The transformation of the believer dramatically changes his work in three ways.

Christ puts the worker back in a right relationship with God.

An unbeliever's relationship to work is empty and shallow, without spiritual purpose or meaning. Romans 8:8 tells us that, "*Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.*" Until man is put back into a right relationship with God, he cannot please God in his work. The believer, on the other hand, understands that his work matters to God; that it has eternal value; and that it has the potential to please God.

Christ puts your work back in right relationship with God.

No longer is our work the empty vapor described in Ecclesiastes, it is now full of spiritual significance, purpose, and satisfaction. It is the Lord we are now serving. Listen to Paul's words to the Colossians in 3:22-24.

²² Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. ²³ Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

Christ changes the worker.

He can take men and women who are enslaved to sinful attitudes and ways of work and transform them into God-honoring workers. Discontentment with work or a boss can be transformed into contentment. Worry about unfair treatment or pay can be transformed into thankfulness. Stealing can be transformed into productive labor and generous giving. Worthless jobs are given eternal value. Christ, and only Christ, brings real hope to the worker and his work.

Reflect and Respond

Let's review this Biblical theology of work. Here is what it means to have a God positioning system, to be Godward in our vocation.

God is a worker...

God created work...

God created us to work...

Work is not a result of the Fall...

Work has been hugely impacted by the Fall...

Work has been redeemed in the New Covenant...

Work will be fully restored in the New Creation...

And close with a brief summary of the New Covenant practice of work in this world.

Christ has been our pattern for our work.

Christ has sanctified work.

Ministry is a kind of sanctified work.

As sanctified people, we are to do our work to be pleasing to the Lord.

As sanctified people, we are to be employees with a godly orientation.

As sanctified people, we are to be bosses with a godly orientation.