

What Am I Working For?

Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:18-26 (NIV)

² "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."

¹⁸ I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. ²¹ 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. ²² What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? ²³ All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless. ²⁴ A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, ²⁵ for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? ²⁶ To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Why do we work? Kind of an easy question. We work because we need to eat. We work because we have to provide for our families. We work because it is through work that we earn money to pay for a roof over our heads, to provide heating in the winter and cooling in the summer. We work so that we can afford transportation. We work, yes, even to provide enjoyment for ourselves – to go out to eat, to purchase movie tickets, buy those blu rays, video games.

But we don't just work for what we need today; we work for the future. We work to provide some rest from our work. We work so that we can take vacations, so that we can pay for the RV, for that cabin on our property. We work so that one day we can stop working at a job. We work to build up a nest egg so that we can retire, live peacefully, and get to do the other things that we always wished he had the time for while we were working.

We also work to leave behind a legacy. That legacy may or may not be a pile of money or inheritance to pass on to our children, but we do hope to leave something of value behind. We raise our children in a way that we think that they will turn out to be good people, productive members of society. We buy life insurance so that our children are not left destitute if something were to happen to us, that they can have enough to provide for a good education, a good future. We want to pass on something to make the lives of the people who come after us better.

We can have all these great plans about what I can pass on to the next generation, of what I will leave behind as my legacy, and we may work very hard to leave something of value behind for them. But, when it is your time to go, what happens to all that you put your effort into? What happens to the remaining portion of the nest egg that you built up? What happens with your life insurance money? How is it spent? What happens to your RV, your home, your cabin on your property? You don't know. Will it be used according to your desires? You don't know. Will it be used wisely and productively or will it be lavishly wasted? You don't know, and you will have absolutely no control over it.

It's this thought that left Solomon, the author of Ecclesiastes, stating that all of this is meaningless. This building of a legacy - I don't know what will happen to it when I'm gone, and I will have no control over it. So, "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." (verses 18-19)

This idea gets you thinking, "What am I working for?" What is the point of all the work I do? Solomon asks it this way, "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." (verses 22-23) No wonder Solomon's theme to the book of Ecclesiastes is "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." (chapter 1 verse 2) What a hopeful message, am I right? What do you do with this observation?

Weighing in on Solomon's words, what's the point? Why work so hard at your job, at parenting, at maintaining your home? Why labor so hard for all these things under the sun if they are just going to be handed off to someone else in the end and you will have no control over them? Why tear up your body with toiling for these things under the sun? What are you working for?

If you are working for an abundance of possessions, if you are working pretty much only with an eye for the here and now and this life, then it is meaningless. It's a whole lot of pain and a lot of restless nights for a short life and then you die and someone else gets the fruits of your labor.

What if, though, we are working for something else? Now, I'm not talking about working your way to God's good graces or to achieve a level up in heaven. The truth is you can't achieve those by your efforts. As God says, "All your righteous acts are like filthy rags." (Isaiah 6:4) God looks at the good things we do and he tells us, "That's not enough. That will not get you to heaven. You can't earn my favor that way."

Solomon did not write Ecclesiastes to tell you how to get to heaven, how to earn God's favor. He wrote this book for life "under the sun." This means that he wrote this book about living day to day on earth. And do you know what the secret is about enjoying life under the sun, to find meaning in the labor that you do? Solomon says, "A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?" (verses 24-25)

Now, don't misunderstand Solomon for being a Hedonist, that he is advocating eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die. He is not saying cast off all the work in favor of play. No, he is saying that the only way we can find enjoyment in life is to have it given to us by the hand of God.

Our enjoyment in our labors comes from the fact that the hardest work under the sun has already been accomplished. Although we could never toil our way to God's good graces or work ourselves into a better place in heaven, God has done that for us. He came down from heaven as eternal God and was born of a virgin named Mary and became true man in addition to being God Almighty. From there, he went to work. Jesus toiled under the sun. He worked for us, worked in fighting temptation, worked in resisting the opportunity to roll his eyes at his Mom and Dad, resisting the opportunity to complain about his chores or to avoid doing what he was told. He worked over the temptations of the devil and pushed them aside with the Word of God. He fought off the sinful desires to get angry at his disciples and the Pharisees for their lack of understanding, for their twisting of his Word. Jesus toiled every single day of his life here on this earth toiling to be perfect.

At the end of that perfect life, he left his perfection behind for us and for all people, for you and me who did not expend the effort to earn this, who couldn't do this. God left for us a heavenly nest egg by the life and toil of Jesus Christ. What do we do with that heavenly nest egg? Will we be wise or foolish with it?

God has made you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus as the one who toiled under the sun for perfection for you and me. He took care of our eternity, of our future. Because Christ has toiled for perfection for me and given it to me, that frees me to work hard in this life, not because I have to earn something or make an eternal retirement plan for me or my children, but because I know what my future is. My future is not to keep doing the same thing over and over so that I can provide for myself and others and then to leave a legacy of stuff, of possessions, to other people when I die. No, God has taken care of me and he always will. This means that when my work day is over, when the job is done, when the kids are out of the house, when retirement comes, no matter the kind of nest egg that I built up for myself, I can have satisfaction in all the things I had toiled for under the sun. I can be contented knowing that God gave me the strength to work and blessed me with every good thing that I have.

When I work, I work not just for a paycheck, not just for retirement, not just for a nest egg, not just for a legacy. I toil under the sun because God toiled for me. I want to say thank you to him for giving me that heavenly nest egg. I can do this by working hard at whatever vocation, whatever position, God has put me in in life. I can work hard at my job, my calling, and have enjoyment that God has given me employment, that God has given me a roof over my head, that God has given me food to eat, that God has given me family and friends who love me, that God has given me an eternity in heaven by all his labors of perfection under the sun.

So, when you are sitting on your patio, enjoying a cool drink, admiring the beautiful day with the work day done, you can rest easy. You can have satisfaction in your labors because God has given you enjoyment. He has given you happiness, not just now, but forever to come. These are his gifts to you. He has completely taken care of you by his labors for you. When we work, we work for God. While we work, we remember that God has secured that heavenly nest egg for us. When we work, we work knowing that our future is secured because Jesus toiled under the sun for us to give us perfection. This gives us meaning to our lives. This is what we are working for. Amen.