

The Gospel and Work

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[0 : 0 0] Awesome. Well, good morning, everyone. Thank you for having my family and I here. We're so honored to be with you. This is our first time to Haddington. As you might be able to tell, I'm from the States. My wife is from the States as well. We've lived here for just over a year now. It's nice to see Scotland get sun, which has been enjoyable. But thank you for having us. We're members at St. Columba's Free Church in Edinburgh. That's where we live and I study there as well. It's really good to be with you all. As Ali said, as we continue in this series on gospel and life, last Sunday, Ali preached on gospel and friendship. Like he said, this Sunday is going to be about gospel and work. Let me just start off by qualifying that and saying work doesn't just speak to those of us in this room who have nine to five jobs or to those of us who have careers. The Bible speaks much more broadly about work than just a nine to five job that you have. Life, I think the Bible would talk about it, is spent working. And this psalm, if you're going to look at, I'd encourage you to have a Bible because I really want to point you to specific things in this psalm. This psalm makes that very clear. It makes it very clear that life is work because if you look at it, it describes basically three things. If you look in verse one, it describes building, right? Unless the Lord builds the house, the one who builds it, it talks about a builder.

And in the next line of verse one, it talks about watching someone, unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman, someone who watches over a city, right? And then in verse two, if you look, it describes sleeping, getting up early, staying up late, Lord giving sleep.

And building, and when we think about this, building doesn't just speak, so it's not just broadening it out to two more categories. Those who work in building houses in here, which I don't know if anyone works in building houses. Building describes something much broader than those of us who work in construction. It describes what's the essence of building.

It's creating. You're creating something. And those who watch or those who watch a city doesn't just describe those of us here today who work as security guards or something like that.

It's the idea of preserving and watching over and protecting what it is that has been created. And all of our days, really, when we think about it, are spent creating with our hands and then trying with all of our might to protect and preserve what we've spent our days creating, basically. And whether you're an engineer here or you're a student or you're retired or you're a mother, this is what we do. Whoever is in here, even if my three-month-old daughter could hear this. It would be a life of creating and preserving.

[2 : 4 6] And then you do your best to sleep at night after you spent your days creating and preserving. And we all do our best to then go to sleep at night after that. And those of us, mothers, for example, you attempt to create.

You attempt to create healthy habits for your children and vibrant relationships for your home. And then you spend your time trying to protect your children in those relationships.

And then you do the hardest thing maybe for a mother, which is then to go to sleep and get a full night's sleep at night. Right? And those of us here who are retired or unemployed, you still spend your days creating and preserving and then sleeping at night.

And so no matter who you are here this morning or what your work situation is, your life is a never-ending cadence of creating, preserving, and then resting at the end of the day.

But this psalm, if you look at it, it doesn't just describe what we do, what we all do here. It describes how we feel as we crawl into bed after a long day or after we wake up, or maybe for many of us here, how we feel this morning as we come to church.

[3 : 55] And it's always good when you read the Bible to look at the words that are repeated. What word is repeated in Psalm 127 over and over? Vain. Right?

Do you see that word repeated over again? In vain. And that's the fear that haunts us as we all wear ourselves thin and work and we're afraid that this might all actually be in vain.

And maybe that haunts us as we fall asleep. Is this work really meaningful? Is this work in vain? Is this, all this creating and building, are we creating something that the next generation will just do away with and it all will mean nothing?

Vain is the idea of emptiness, of meaninglessness, of toil without really an end, of pain without really a purpose. And this is what he says your entire work life essentially can become unless we're careful.

You can carry this boulder of work on your shoulders day after day after day, year after year, and into your nights and early mornings. And this boulder of work and stress and anxiety can sit on your stomach as you try to sleep and your mind as you try to sleep.

[5 : 04] And the scary reality is, is this Psalm says, it can actually be meaningless. It can be in vain. The word vain often describes storms and what they leave behind.

And we've seen the news. If you've seen the news, you see this all the time. The destroyed homes and cars and mangled schools and all that the storm leaves in its wake.

And you look at it and everything is torn and tattered. All these schools and homes and gardens that people worked on. And it all feels, it's hard not to say the word in vain.

It's hard not to feel like it's meaningless. And the writer of this Psalm is saying that that is what life can so easily become unless we watch how we're working carefully.

It can be meaningless burdens that we carry. And so the question that I want to think about this morning as we think about gospel and work is how do we know if our work is in vain?

[6 : 01] Before we talk about when to wake up in the morning or what kind of work to do, we want to say how do we know if we're actually working in vain or not? Do we bear these burdens in vain?

And the first question let's ask is kind of the opposite question actually. Is how do we make sure that our lives are spent in vain? Let's ask that question first. How do we make sure that our work is in vain?

We don't want this. This is just the first point of how to know if you're working in vain. And the Psalm, if you look at it again, is very clear about the vain life. What does it say? It's very up front with you. It says it's one where you build a house and God isn't building the house with you.

Where you're laboring, you're staying up and watching a city all night. Someone's sitting on a wall watching a city and God isn't doing it. That's the description of what it means to spend your days in vain.

And the interesting thing is that the Psalm tells you you can be a builder, you can be someone who creates, you can be a watchman, you can be someone who preserves, and the Lord can be with you in that.

- [7 : 05] Or the Lord cannot be with you in that. And so that's the first thing to think about is I think a lot of times, especially when I was younger, the conversation was, how do you make sure that your work isn't in vain? Well, it's make sure that you're doing the right things.
- You know, what you do. Make sure that you're working for the church and not for a coffee shop. Or make sure you're doing international missions each summer and not this. That's how you make sure that your life isn't spent in vain.
- Make sure you're doing the right things. And notice that isn't actually what the Psalm says. That's not how he describes how to decide if you're working in vain or not. It's not about what you're doing.
- It's about how you do whatever it is you're doing. In verse 2, it says, there's a little phrase if you look there.
- It says, eating the bread of anxious toil. Do you see that phrase? Eating the bread of anxious toil. And notice those two words, anxious toil.
- [8 : 01] Anxious toil. He says that a vain life is one where you wake up early, you go to bed really late, and every moment that's between waking up early, going to bed, and the sleep that you do at night is just another, he's giving you a picture of biting a stale loaf of bread of anxiety.
- That's what your life is. And that feeling, I think, is what he wants you to know, that when you have that feeling in your life, if that's what marks you, that should be the indicator light that pops on in your life that says what you're doing actually might be, you might be doing it in vain if that feeling marks your life.
- Anxious toil. It's just one word, actually, in the original. And it's a word that's actually really hard to translate. So if you have a different Bible, it might translate it differently.
- But notice that it uses two words to describe it, anxious and toil. Anxious and toil. It's the idea of anxiety, inner pain, and toil, the outer burden.
- So it's both an inner and an outer reality, which is what it's trying to capture in that phrase, anxious toil. It's both deeply physical and emotional sorrow, even anguish that you feel.
- [9 : 16] And the writer is trying to tell us, all of us here this morning, no matter what you do, that there's a way to spend your whole life getting up early, going to bed late, being efficient, working hard, creating and watching whatever sphere it is that you live in, and be in internal and external anguish for your whole life.
- And I probably don't need to explain that feeling too well, because my guess is, in a room this size, many of us feel that feeling, not just on Monday morning, but even here, even as we try to sleep.
- And the question is, why do we feel that? Why is that anxious toil so characteristic of our lives so often? And let's just think about it a little bit more, and you don't have to turn there, but in 1 Kings, this word used for anxious toil is used to describe a son whose father neglected him.
- His father didn't pay attention to his son, and this idea of anxious toil is the word that's used to describe the feeling that creates in a son whose father doesn't pay attention to him.
- In the book of Isaiah, it's used to describe a forgotten and forsaken wife, a wife who was meant to be loved by her husband. And that wife, the word that is used to describe her is a feeling of anxious toil within her bones.
- [10 : 38] It's an internal and an external pain. And you can't just get this pain by hitting your finger with a hammer.
- You can't get this pain by stubbing your toe. It's a soul pain that hits you so deep in your soul that it reverberates that you're even feeling it in your body.

And the tragic reality is that many of us here may have experienced the anguish of not being loved by someone who should love us. And those who have felt that know the internal and external pain that that creates in our lives.

Here's the point. What's the point of all this? Just like the son, just think about the son in 1 Kings who's not loved by his father, whose father doesn't pay attention to him. You can tell he might be tempted to work so that his father would just notice him.

The wife in Isaiah, the forgotten and neglected wife who's not loved like she should be loved, she's probably tempted to work, to do anything to capture the attention of her husband again who should be loving her.

[11 : 49] To calm the anxious feeling that we aren't worth any. So they're trying to calm this anxious feeling. We can all work hard to fill a deep void within ourselves. We might do the same thing to calm the anxious feeling that we aren't worth anything to anyone.

And so we might do the same thing. We might try to work to fill this void that's within our bones and to, we look for that approval maybe in our bosses and our coworkers and even in our own sense of self-accomplishment.

We might do the same thing. We're trying to work to fill this void, this deep pain that we have in our own life. And so it's going to be so tempting to spend all of our waking moments trying to be loved, trying to be noticed, trying to get someone just to see us and what we're doing.

And this psalm says to anyone who feels that way, anyone who feels that anxious toil in their life, you were made to be loved, but you're going about it in all the wrong ways.

You're going after filling that void in all of the wrong ways because you can't ever get love in that way. And my guess is that somewhere deep down we know that.

[12 : 59] We know that's a vain pursuit. We know that calming the anxious toil by just working harder will never solve the problem really. So what do we do? How do we not work in vain? So if our first point was how to work in vain, which is to work to be noticed, to work to be loved, to work to calm the anxiety that we have within, how do we not work in vain?

What does this psalm tell us about not working in vain? And if you look at the actual words in the first two verses, if you just run your eyes through the first two verses and look at the actual words, look at the kind of words that we have.

We have building in houses, we have labor and vanity, we have someone who watches, we have cities, we have staying awake, rising up early, going to bed late, eating the bread of anxious toil, you can feel the genre of all these words.

And then if you look, there's a little word that doesn't seem like it belongs in the genre of all the other words of this psalm. Beloved, right? It says God gives to his beloved sleep.

It's almost like a rose poking through the cracks of like a steel yard. In the midst of toil and work and sleepless nights, the psalm says the word beloved.

[14 : 14] He says he, God, gives his beloved rest. So what's the difference between a vain and a meaningful life that's spent laboring?

What's the difference between these two? It's the difference between a wife who's loved by her husband who makes him dinner at the end of a long day and he sits talking to her and they have a nice meal together and a servant who makes dinner for her tyrant master because she knows she has to.

Those two women are both making dinner. They're doing the same thing but that's about the only similarity between what those two women are doing. Inside, it's a very different reality and this is where we begin to see the gospel intertwining with our work.

This is how we see the gospel affecting what it is we do in our lives. See, the gospel is more than just a list of points that you have to believe. It's more than just a confession that you sign your name to.

It's more than just a decision that you make. The gospel is ultimately a view of God and so we need to ask ourselves how does this psalm talk to us about God and do we think about God in that way?

[15 : 26] So how does this psalm present God to us? And if you look again at verse one, it says, God builds the house as we build the house. It says, also in verse one, the Lord watches over the city all through the night right beside us as we're watching the city, the Lord is watching over the city alongside of us and as we rise up early, the Lord rises up early alongside of us and as we yawn and stay up late to finish the work that we've been given, the Lord sits beside us lovingly watching us and saying, I love you.

And the beautiful thing is as the Lord gives us sleep and I wonder if we think about that. Every night as we fall asleep that the Lord is gifting that to us. He's giving us sleep and he holds us as we fall asleep and protects us as we sleep.

And do you see the picture that this psalm is trying to create for you? It's a God who says as you've read elsewhere in your Bible, I will never leave you or forsake you. And we may have heard those words before, we may have read those words before, but the psalm makes it so tangible for us, a God who would never leave us.

It's a God who says, I won't leave you as you build relationships and homes and careers and marriages. And not only will I not leave you, but I'm building along with you.

And as you watch over what you've created, as you tidy your home and steward your finances and pray for your marriages and build friendships, I'm not only with you, I'm doing it for you and in you and through you and alongside of you.

[17 : 05] I'm the God who says at the end of the day, now please go to sleep and you can rest because you know that even while you sleep, the Lord will keep watch over your little ones and over your house and over your city and over your mind and your marriage.

And the Lord says, I'll be right here when you wake up early. And I just wonder if we have a view of the world and of God that lets us think about God like that, do we view the world in a way that's so God-saturated that as we fall asleep we're saying, thank you for this gift that you're giving me?

And actually, we might not. We might not just naturally have a default view of the world that lets us think about God like that. We might just by default have a view of God that says, maybe God doesn't want anything to do with me.

Maybe I'm not good enough yet or maybe we have a view of the world that says, God doesn't care about my business or God doesn't care about my work or God doesn't care about my friendships. God doesn't want to be near me.

If you knew what I've done, you would understand why God doesn't want to be near me. Maybe your heart quietly tells you any of those things. And whenever it does, just like that, you've sliced yourself another piece of the bread of anxious toil and you've ensured that you'll live in anxiety and anxious toil for just another day every time your mind tells you these lies.

[18 : 31] And here's what we need to understand if we do have thoughts like that. If you want to draw near to God and you want to be with him, the beautiful, crazy reality of the gospel is that he's already drawn near to you, that he already came in the person and work of Christ.

Christ. And if you trust on Christ, if you trust on his life, if you trust on his death, then if any of you were to stand before God right now, if God were to stand right here and he were to look at you, he would say to you, in all of the fears that we just talked about, he would say, but I don't see any sin in you.

He would say, I only see the righteousness of my son when I look at you. I only see his lived out obedience and his death when I look at you. And he would say, I love you and I want you to just rest from your anxiety and I want you to rest from trying to earn my favor because my son has already done it for you.

All the working and the anxiety and the toil, it's already been done for you. And there's probably something in you that says, because there's something in me that says, even as I say that, I do not deserve that.

I have not earned that. I don't think God would say that to me when he looks at me. It's too backward. It goes against everything about the way my mind says the world works.

[19 : 59] And that's the beauty of the gospel is that it's foolishness, you know, because it makes no sense that you don't have to work for the favor of someone because that's how our world works. The work has already been done.

And the question is, if we do believe that here and you feel that anxiety calming, do we actually live like that? Do we actually put it into practice that God views us like that?

And if we don't, life will continue to be both excruciating and meaningless as you just work, as you cut off another slice of anxiety bread every day of your life and have another loaf of anxiety bread.

And look at what the psalm tells you. It's not just a life without God. It's not only that it's not meaningless, not only meaningless, but it is lonely.

It's a life where you're building a house without God. It's a life where you stay up late and God isn't alongside of you. And it's a life where you fall asleep without God and you're alone.

[21 : 04] And I hope that there's something in all of us this morning that says, I don't want to do any of that without the Lord. I don't want to spend one more quiet night without the Lord in my life.

I don't want to work if the Lord isn't working alongside of me. I've had too many lonely nights. I've worked my fingers raw too many early mornings. I don't want to do this in vain.

I don't want to do this without Him. And if that's what you're saying this morning, I don't want to do this without Him, then I'll say something kind of shocking and then I'll explain it. You've just uttered the words of the covenant on your side.

What do I mean by that? God, if you've spent any time reading your Bible, you know that all throughout Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, God says, I will be your God and you will be my people.

From the end to the beginning, that's His covenant. And if your heart says this morning, I want God to be my God. And what you mean by that is, I want God to be so intimately involved in every aspect of my life, that He's giving me sleep, that He's helping me as I raise my children and that I just want to be with Him, then you can trust His word when He says, oh, how I want to be your God, how I long to be your God, how I long to give you sleep.

[22 : 22] And He just says, I want to give you peaceful rest. I want you to stop laboring for my favor, beloved. And most sermons on this passage as we look at the last three verses.

They will either preach the first two verses or the last three verses because it almost seems like there's no connection between the parts of this psalm. The first part talking about building and laboring in vain, and the second part is talking about children and arrows and protecting.

What is this all about? But the thing is, I think if we actually understand what the first part of this psalm is about, that God is creating and preserving alongside of us, the last three verses will actually make a ton of sense when we come into them with that idea.

So look what's happening in them just very briefly. It says, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward.

Notice the words from the Lord a reward. Do you see those words in there? In other words, the Lord gives us children. They're a reward that he just pours into our lives.

[23 : 35] And we all know that, but think about that. The Lord is creating children in our home, he's giving them to us, he's building our families, and the Lord is creating in our home.

That idea of creating. And we just thought about the Lord creating in verse one, the Lord building the house, right? And we see him now building in our houses through our children.

And then verses four and five, like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them. He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

Notice again, just the language of arrows, warriors, quiver, enemy, gate. This is all battle language, right? This is the language of someone who protects, who guards, who we might even say sits on top of a wall and protects a city, maybe.

And do you see the themes emerging again of creating, protecting, just like we talked about in the first part, a God who creates, a God who protects. Here, God's creating in our homes and he's protecting us through our children.

[24 : 43] Do you see, this is an example, this is an example of how the Lord creates and protects us in the most mundane and unnoticed of areas, our homes.

This is how he does it so intimately in our lives. The psalmist is saying, don't you see the Lord caring for you even through your little ones, even through all the kids that are running around here?

Mothers, fathers, do you want proof that I'm still creating in your life and caring for you? Are you worried that I've stopped creating? Look at your children. I'm not finished with your home yet. And how would a child know that God loves her?

Well, all she has to do is look into the eyes of her mother who stays up with her when she can't sleep or the father who builds little block castles with her or watch her father lock the door at night.

And that is all God's practical way of saying to this little girl or little boy, I'm a father who loves you and I've given you parents who will love you. God is saying, I couldn't be more involved in the fabric of your home or your lives.

[25 : 46] I am always, always creating and protecting you. Always. Even in the most quiet areas. And this might at first seem strange to start talking about children right after the sentence that says, the Lord gives you rest.

Because all of us know that the idea of getting rest and children could not be more distinct from each other. But God wants to press into the place where you mothers might feel the most forgotten, where your work goes the most unnoticed, where you lose the most sleep and nobody will ever know, where you might feel the most alone and where you might even feel the most anxious over the little souls of your children.

And the God who says, I see in secret, says, I see you mothers and fathers and I am there with you. Though you won't be given awards or promotions for parenting, you're given a psalm to remember that your labor isn't in vain.

And it certainly isn't being done alone. So what do we all do with this? Just in conclusion, how does this all connect to gospel and work? How does this all apply to the work that we do?

And my guess is this probably wasn't the message you were expecting to hear about gospel and work. I haven't told you how to be more effective in the workplace or what time to wake up or how to evangelize your coworkers or anything like that.

[27 : 04] But the reason is because this psalm says you could be the most effective worker. You could wake up early every single day, never be lazy, be promoted. And the tragic reality is your life could be in vain still.

So we need to look at those words, anxious toil and beloved and just be honest with our hearts this morning of which most describes our hearts and why as we think about those words.

And that's why the gospel is so important because it will change your heart, not just the work of your hands. Now, once we have stopped working for the love of the Father and working as a result of the love of the Father, we can go back and look at the passage and say that all of life is one of creating, protecting, and sleeping.

So whether you're a student, your work is to create, to build things in your mind, to learn things, and to take care of your mind, and to sleep when you're done with all of it. And you can all, wherever your station of life is, you're just called to create, protect, and go to sleep and trust that God cares for you.

That's what we're all called to do. I'm running out of time, so let's just, in conclusion, this means that God doesn't love those of us who work for churches more than those of us who work for a coffee shop or for those of us who don't work at all.

[28 : 24] He's given each of us just a little plot to work in our whole lives, and he says, just be faithful here, and just know that you're loved here. And parents, this passage is especially interested in you because it speaks of the reward and the heritage of your work.

Because you aren't just given buildings to create or cities to watch, you're given little eternal souls to shepherd. And God lets you create habits in these little souls and teach them to sing and to read and to be a good friend and to pray.

And this passage promises you that you're not doing any of that alone and none of that will be fruitless. In the Gospels, Jesus says, he says, come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

And then he says, my yoke is easy and my burden is light. The crazy thing is, notice this, he says, I will give you rest, but then he uses the language of working, of yokes and burdens.

the work doesn't go away just because you have Jesus. The job doesn't go away, but you can rest because you're his even while you work. And you can know that you're beloved and it all becomes light and peaceful.

[29 : 39] And that's how the Gospel and work relate to each other. Let me pray for us. Amen.