

Work, Rest and Play

Connect Group Studies

Work: The Big Picture

The Briefing

David Höhne | 4 June, 1996

Introduction

When we come to the Bible with questions about life we can do so in two ways. Firstly, we can look up all the words in the Bible that relate to our query, and try to collate the results. In this case, we could look up 'work', 'toil', 'labour', and so on—but this is by no means as easy as it sounds.

For a start, when we survey the 753 references that a search on just the above three words yields (not to mention other words we haven't thought of), how do we decide which are the really important references, and which ones are peripheral? And what of other biblical references that might speak about the idea of work, or say something relevant to work, without actually using any of these words. To be true to all these various references in their particular contexts, and then still tie them together into some kind of meaningful whole, is a stretching task indeed.

There is a second way to approach what the Bible has to say about something, and that is to look at the question against the larger backdrop of the Bible's story. In the unfolding purposes of God—starting with creation and flowing through the Fall, the history of Israel, the coming of Jesus and finally including us—where does 'work' fit in? How does our daily labour fit into the bigger picture of God's dealings with the creation as a whole?

This second approach is the one we will adopt in this article. We will begin by looking at what work meant for Adam "in the beginning". Next we'll jump ahead in the story to Solomon's time, when Israel was at its height, and look at the wisdom of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. That's as far as we'll get in this article. We will get to the end of the story, and the difference that Jesus makes to our view of work, in our next *Briefing*.

Adam: In the Garden

When mankind enters the great drama of creation on day six, the Lord gives the man and woman a role to play. As God's image bearer, they are to be fruitful and multiply, and to have dominion over the earth and all that is in it.

As the story unfolds in Genesis 2 and 3, we begin to see more of what this means. As far as the multiplying goes, we discover that the man and woman are created out of the same stuff, and are bound together in a marriage relationship in which children will be produced. In terms of subduing the earth, Adam is put in a garden to 'work it and to keep it'. He acts as a steward or superintendent of the beautiful garden that God has planted, enjoying its bounty and naming the animals.

It is important to note that Adam's work flows both from his relationship with God *and* his relationship with creation. Although mankind is the pinnacle of creation in chapter 1, and is given dominion over it, he is still very much part of

it. When God forms the man (Heb. *adam*) from the dust of the earth (Heb. *adamah*), the Hebrew words are very similar (Gen 2:7). The same expression is used to describe how the animals are 'formed' from the 'earth' (2:19). The same expression, too, denotes both the man and the animals as 'living beings' (1:20; 2:7). The earth, mankind, the birds and animals—all are made of the same basic stuff, according to Genesis 2, and all are formed and animated by the one God. There is unity here, as well as dominion.

Adam's work, then, is an expression of the relationships that God has set up. He has dominion because God has granted it to him. He subdues the world by filling it with his offspring, and by working the ground from which he was taken. His work is inextricably bound up with his dominion; it springs from his place in the created order, as God has established it.

From Dominion to Toil

The dominion of Adam is short-lived. In defiance of God's command, Adam rebels and seeks to rule outright and independent of God (Gen 3:1-13). God's judgement on this rebellion is pronounced in the successive curses upon the serpent, the woman, and the man (Gen 3:14-19). These three are cursed in a way which strikes at the essence of their basic relationship to God, each other and the world.

Rather than eating the green plants of the earth (as the animals and creeping things are granted to do in 1:30), the serpent is forced to eat the dust from which he was formed. The woman, who was commissioned with her husband to 'multiply' and fill the earth, now suffers a different kind of multiplying—the multiplying of pain and distress as she bears the children. In the same way, Adam is also afflicted with pain and distress (same Heb. word) as he attempts to work the ground. The former natural relationship between mankind and the earth is now characterised by hardship, toil and difficulty. Prior to his sin, man's task was 'dominion'; now he must 'toil' with agonising effort (cf. Gen 3:16; 5:29).

In other words, at the very points at which human beings were to express dominion over the earth—in filling it and working it—they are afflicted with pain and distress as a result of their rebellion.

It is often emphasised that the Fall caused the ground to become unyielding. Thus a change occurred in both man and in the environment, and this is supported by the reference to the 'thorns and thistles' that the ground will now produce. However, man's inability to *rightly use* the ground is at least as much of a problem. The Fall has left him 'like God' in this way: He has power to make decisions by which the course of his own life and his world are to be controlled. However, he does not have the ability to be sure his decisions are right in themselves nor the assurance that such decisions will promote the right consequences. As a result of the Fall, the man is unable to exercise proper dominion over nature, as we saw him doing in chapter 2.

We still live in Adam's world and as a result, despite all the wonderful things that *Beyond 2000* might suggest, we are and will always be unable to rule and subdue

the earth as Adam was commanded. That task belongs to another as we shall see.

Pause and Ponder:

Does this experience of work – on the one hand, seeming made for it, but on the other, finding it frustrating – ring true for you?

Solomon: In the Land

When Solomon ascends the throne of David in 1 Kings, it seems that the promises to Abraham will at last be fulfilled. Israel is at its peak politically, having expanded to its ideal borders from the Euphrates to Egypt (1 Kgs 4:21). At the same time Israel has become a great nation of many people drawing admiration from surrounding nations. The rest that has come upon the land (1 Kgs 5:4-5), and the descent of the cloud over the temple, mark the formal end to the exodus (1 Kgs 8:10-11).

In the flow of the Old Testament story to this point, Solomon marks a potential climax. Israel is at its height not only in the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham, but also in recovering from the consequences of the Fall. They have entered a Promised Land which is remarkably like Eden in the way that it is described (in Deuteronomy, for example). Now that God's people (Israel) have taken possession of the 'New Eden' and live under the reign of 'Solomon in all his glory' (1 Kgs 4:24-25) our attention is diverted back beyond God's covenant with Abraham to the creation itself.

Indeed, it seems significant that the first thing Solomon does when he takes up his charge to rule God's people is to ask for the wisdom to discern good and evil (1 Kgs 3:9), the very thing that Adam so disastrously sought in Genesis 3. In contrast, Solomon responds to the Lord by *asking* for the ability to discern good and evil—in other words, wisdom (1 Kgs 3:9). Thus Solomon shows his fear of God in admitting his own dependency and also his desire to serve the Lord as a wise ruler of his people. That this is the right response to God is indicated by the Lord's words to Solomon (in 1 Kgs 3:10-14) and in the record of Solomon's reign (in 1 Kgs 3-10).

Solomon, as God's regent, rules and subdues the land through the exercising of wisdom. Although Adam lost the ability to have dominion over the earth it did not lessen his desire for it nor reduce the need for it. Mankind still needed to maintain his place in the created order just to survive. With Solomon (and Israel) in the ascendancy it seems that mankind may have gained the upper hand at last. Certainly the account of Solomon's life in 1 Kings records his many great achievements. Yet it is in the wisdom literature that we are able to gain most from the insights of Solomon the Wise.

Pause and Ponder:

Can you think of times in your own work when you've really needed wisdom, you used it and made a good decision, and it really paid off? Conversely, can you think of a time that you made a really foolish decision at work, and it all went pear-shaped?

Proverbs: Solomon's Dominion

In the narrative context of Solomon, the Book of Proverbs is a record of the God-fearing, wise man exercising his dominion over the promised land through discerning the order of relationships that God established in creation. Within this order, Solomon perceives that hard work is granted success, whereas laziness is followed by poverty (Prov 10:4; 13:4). The diligent ant is given as an example well worth imitating (Prov 6:6-11). The implications of diligence and laziness form the subject of some 18 proverbs, almost one of every 20 in the collection that runs from 10:1-22:16. Yet Solomon is also quick to point out that, "The blessing of the Lord makes a man rich, and toil does not add to it" (10:22).

Solomon tells his readers that work is not an additive to life. Rather it is an essential part of being human. Without it life would cease. The bluntest expression of the drive for survival is in 16:26: "The labourer's appetite works for him; his hunger drives him on".

The threat of hunger is the strongest possible motive for hard work. Significantly, the negative obstacles to an adequate food supply were not necessarily a malevolent creation out to destroy humankind. Human resolve was. One could choose to work hard or not. In 21:25 we read that the choice of the 'lazy' not to work is a choice ultimately fatal. Not only does the person who does not work harm themselves, they are a threat to others. In 18:9, Solomon says: "One who is slack in his work is brother to one who destroys".

The over-relaxed or lazy worker, far from being a harmless nuisance, is like a great destroyer (the same word is used for the fertility gods of the Canaanites!). In contrast to this destruction, in 14:23 we see that "in all toil there is profit". Even toil that is willing to sweat and bleed will produce profit.

The specific results mentioned in Proverbs amplify both the profitable and the destructive effects of our attitudes toward work.

He who works his land will have abundant food, but he who chases fantasies lacks judgment. (12:11)

The sluggard craves and gets nothing, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied. (13:4)

He who gathers crops in summer is a wise son, but he who sleeps during harvest is a disgraceful son. (10:5)

Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth. (10:4)

The wages of the righteous bring them life, but the income of the wicked brings them punishment. (10:16)

Diligent hands will rule, but laziness ends in slave labour. (12:24)

Diligence and vigorous work are great virtues, according to Proverbs. The

noble wife is a hard worker, setting about her labour vigorously, and thereby earning not only profit and security for her family, but praise from her children, her husband, and at the city gates (Prov 31:10-31).

Amongst the admonitions to diligent work Solomon also offers advice on the place of work in one's life:

Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and your plans will succeed. (16:3)

Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint. (23:4)

The key to Solomon's dominion was that he feared God and served him. Because he had this relationship in order, Solomon was able to discern the order that God had placed in all relationships in creation. And consequently, whatever Solomon put his hand to prospered because God blessed him as he worked as steward to the land. Furthermore, Solomon knew not to overwork for the sake of wealth. The dangers of greed are well documented in Proverbs. Solomon sought God's wisdom first and admitted his dependence on the Lord. God granted him power and riches as a result (1 Kgs 3:10-14).

Pause and Ponder:

Can you think of a time when a particular insight from the Bible helped you at work?

At this stage of the Bible story, we might think that Solomon had managed to undo the mistake of Adam and had regained dominion over the earth, the secret being fear of God and diligence. All we need do is fear God and work hard and 'the world is our oyster'. Yet the idyllic state of Israel and the 'simple' causal view of the world that Proverbs appears to give us is not the full picture.

Ecclesiastes: Solomon's Toil

By the end of Solomon's story in 1 Kings 1-11, we discover that Solomon was not the one to reverse Adam's downfall. Great and wise though he was, Solomon still lived under the curse of Genesis 3. He was unable to exercise the mandate given to Adam in Genesis 1:26-28. Instead, in his observations in Ecclesiastes, we read that Solomon saw the true state of his work in a world of sin—that it was in fact toil and ultimately absurd. In practically all the texts where Solomon's observations are recorded (as opposed to his instructions), the limitations and senselessness of toil are emphasised. The following principal thoughts can be found:

- Toil cannot change anything (1:3-11; 3:1-11; 13:14-15).
- The toil of the wise is a painful or senseless undertaking (1:12-18; 2:12-17; 4:13-16; 6:10-12; 7:23-29; 8:16-17).
- One cannot enjoy the fruits of one's own toil (2:18-21; 5:9-16; 6:1-9).
- Human toil is joined to an incomprehensible or unjust world order (3:16-21; 4:1-3; 4:4-6; 8:9-15; 9:1-6; 9:11-12).
- Each person needs help (4:7-12).
- Toil does not make anyone happy (2:1-11; 2:22-23).

- The enjoyment of life has to be given by God (2:24-26; 3:12-13; 3:22; 5:17-19; 8:15; 9:7-10).

Solomon's conclusion is obvious: that toil is absurd (vanity of vanities). Man's attempt at dominion over the world is misdirected, not only because life's experience belies the attempt, but also because it constitutes an effort to transgress upon divine independence. In this sense, Ecclesiastes reads something like an inventory of the 'pain and distress' promised to Adam as a consequence of his sin, a catalogue of the frustration and futility that is mankind's lot under the sun. In this world, God is sovereign and inscrutable (3:11; 7:13). Thus we can neither find out what we are to do, nor know what will come after us (8:16; 9:11-15). Death makes fools of us all. Wisdom is transitory and uncertain (4:13-16), and is easily defeated in the presence of riches and folly (9:16-10:1). Given life's experiences and limitations, and God's inscrutability, all of man's activities have the mere weight of one's breath; they are like a chasing after wind.

Pause and Ponder:

Any of this ring true for you?

Solomon's reign comes to an end, and with it the glory of Israel. Israel's decline will continue until she is eventually expelled from 'Eden' like Adam before her. The Old Testament closes with Israel returned from exile in Babylon and her hopes of Messianic glory cast into the future by her prophets. She now awaits a time when the Day of the Lord will come and the Messianic kingdom of heaven will be installed.

In looking at both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, we see that through wisdom Solomon can perceive something of the order that is in creation—for example, that hard work leads to profit and laziness to ruin. However, the full picture is beyond him. He cannot perceive any overarching design or purpose that can make sense of everything and account for the 'fallenness' of our world—its unpredictability, injustice, and decay. He can see what sort of thing work is, for example, what its characteristics are, and what it usually leads to, but he cannot fathom the end for which work was instituted. He cannot see its over-riding purpose, for when he observes the nature of mankind and the world, all earthly work and achievement seems pointless. It is rendered ultimately absurd.

In other words, although work is still a basic part of God's good creation, like the rest of the creation it is fallen and under judgement. Because we live in Adam's world, the ultimate end of work is frustrated, and we will never achieve dominion of the earth through it. Work is necessary to life, and if we can find enjoyment and satisfaction in it, then we should thank God for his kindness to us. However, according to Ecclesiastes, finding enjoyment in our toil is the exception rather than the rule. Solomon paints a picture of vexation, frustration and futility as he considers his toil (and the toil of others).

This is certainly true in human experience. For much of mankind, work is a continual drudgery and a burden. Even in our affluent culture, where many have the rare privilege of actually choosing their work, there is still frustration—as

seen in recent surveys which show that 80% of Australian workers find their jobs dissatisfying. Work is the thing we love to hate. We cannot do without our jobs, either financially or psychologically, yet complaining about work is a national pastime.

Whilst ever we live in a sinful world, this will be the way of things. What is needed, of course, is someone to come forward and break the power of sin! For the intriguing possibilities that are opened up for work by the fact that Jesus has actually done this, we must wait for our next article.

Work: the big picture unfolds

The Briefing

David Höhne | Tony Payne | 18 June, 1996

The story so far

At the end of our last article (*Briefing* #180), the picture regarding work was still fairly grim. Adam's sin had led to mankind's loss of dominion in the world, with the result that work—which was an expression of his dominion—had become painful, difficult and frustrated. It was toil.

As the story unfolded, we saw that with Solomon it seemed that mankind might once more fulfill the mandate given in Genesis 1:26-28 to rule and subdue the earth. Yet Solomon was still under Adam's curse and his work was still, in the end, toil (as seen in Ecclesiastes). We were left looking for another, for one who would restore mankind's dominion and do away with the pain and frustration that accompanies all our life in the created order—including our daily work.

This Other is of course Jesus the Christ. What does the coming of Jesus mean for our daily work? Have we entered a new era in which we can expect work to be less frustrating and more productive? Does work have a new significance in the kingdom of God? What new possibilities are opened up for our work by what Jesus has done?

In order to answer these questions, we need to understand just what it is that Jesus has done, what is the nature of his dominion, and how, most importantly, we share in it.

The last Adam

When Adam was confronted by the delicious prospect of gaining wisdom like God, he grasped the opportunity and ate. Solomon was also attracted by God's wisdom—he asked for it and it was granted to him. As the Bible's story reaches its climax, however, a Man enters the drama who is God's wisdom *incarnate*. With the coming of Jesus, God's Word becomes flesh and walks among us.

In Jesus, we see humanity as we were created to be—the perfect image of God who rules the earth. In fact, we see more than simply another 'Adam' (remember the word 'Adam' means 'man'); we encounter the final or last Adam whom the first Adam foreshadowed (see 1 Cor 15:45-49). These themes are reflected in the Gospels in a number of ways.

Firstly, in Jesus' own life, we see a Man in loving fellowship with God. Jesus lives by the Word, in complete obedience to his Father. He is tested (in the Wilderness and in the Garden), but unlike both Adam and Solomon he comes through. He has an intimate and unfettered relationship with the Creator.

Flowing from this, Jesus also relates rightly to the creation, exercising authority over it, as humanity was created to do. He calms the raging storm with a word. He walks on the water. He scatters disease and death wherever he goes. Jesus is portrayed throughout the Gospels as the Lord of Creation, the Son of Man who

convincingly and decisively exercises dominion over the world. In this, he not only acts on the divine mandate given to Adam, but fulfils it. One greater than Adam has arrived; the man from heaven. God himself has become man.

This is also reflected in Jesus' teaching. Unlike the Scribes of his day, Jesus speaks with authority. His teaching reveals the Father, and the Father's wisdom for living. Because Jesus alone has seen the Father and makes him known, he teaches us how to live in right relation to both the Creator and his creation.

At a broader level, Christ also displays his authority over the spiritual realm. His mission is a direct confrontation with the Strong Man (Satan), whose strength is seen in the enslavement of humanity to sin, demonic possession, disease and death. Rather than being mastered by Satan as Adam was, Jesus binds the Strong Man and plunders his house.

The story reaches its climax as the Last Adam dies as a ransom for many, and is raised to new life as the firstborn of many brothers. Through his pain and distress, he deals with the root cause of our pain and distress. In the obedience of Christ, even to death, the disobedience of Adam is answered and swallowed up, and mankind can once again relate to the Creator in unhindered fellowship.

The resurrection is a very important part of this. According to 1 Corinthians 15, it is the point at which the new 'mankind' begins:

So it is written: "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth, the second man from heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the man from heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven. (1 Cor 15:45-49).

Notice what this is saying. God breathed into Adam's nostrils and he became the first "living being", the progenitor of a vast dust-based humanity. In the same way, in raising Jesus from the dead, God inaugurates a new humanity, who will draw their life from the Last Adam, the life-giving spirit. We will bear his image, just as we have borne the flawed, earthly image of the first Adam. "For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive" (1 Cor 15:21-22).

In his resurrection, then, Jesus the Man is declared the ruler of the world. All authority is granted to him, and his disciples are sent to preach his Lordship throughout the world, in order that men and women everywhere might submit to him. In Acts, we see this beginning to happen.

Christ's dominion and us

It is at this point that we must be careful. We have laid down the groundwork of who Jesus is, and how he came to reverse the curse of Adam—and it is tempting now simply to jump to how this affects 'work'. Before we do this, however, we

need to note four very important things about how the Lordship or dominion of Jesus relates to us now. Only with these things firmly in our minds can we draw right conclusions about how the big picture of the Bible relates to our daily work.

Firstly, the good news is that we can participate in the benefits of Christ's work now, by *faith*. By being united with him, we share in his death for our sins and are raised to new life in him. By being 'in Christ', we are declared right with God now, and become part of the new redeemed humanity, one of the many brothers destined for glory. Even now, through God's rich mercy we are seated "in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:6; cf Heb 12:23), and share in his dominion.

Secondly, however, it is important to remember that all this is granted to us in *hope*. As Paul puts it: "Hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently" (Rom 8:24-25). We share in Christ's dominion now, spiritually, as we bring our lives under his authority, and as we participate in the work of bringing others under his authority (through proclaiming the gospel). But the full possession and consummation of all that is ours in Christ lies in the future—the time when we will be resurrected with a body like his, when we will rule and judge the world as his holy people, when we will be co-inheritors with him of the heavenly kingdom (1 Cor 6:3; Rom 8:17; Rev 20:6). All this we long and groan for, but it lies ahead of us.

Thirdly, then, we continue to live now in a flawed, groaning, frustrated creation in which everything is not yet set right (Rom 8:18-25). Our dominion over the created world has not yet been restored. We still expect suffering, difficulty, pain and distress as the routine character of life. As much as we long for perfect health, world peace, economic justice, and prosperity for all, these things will never be a reality in this world. They belong to the freedom of the next world, as do we.

Fourthly, as we wait in faith and hope for Christ's appearing, the basic character of our lives is to be *loving service*. Love describes the relationship we have with Jesus in his Lordship: "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your soul" (1 Peter 1:8-9). In love, we submit to Jesus' dominion and serve him, obeying all his commandments, and doing everything in his name. Love and service also describe our relationships with others. We are to follow the example and the commandment of our Lord in laying down our lives for others, focusing ourselves on them, and finding our purpose in serving them.

Conclusions

We have seen that the Bible is about a network of relationships—between God, mankind and the creation—and that the story of the Bible is largely to do with the unraveling of these relationships, and God's initiative to restore and perfect them in Christ. Work is integrally related to this, as are all ethical issues, and having finished our big picture (rough sketch that it is) let us try to outline what

this means for our daily work.

Work and toil

Even though we await a new heavens and earth, we are still committed to this one. It is important to notice that in sending his Son to redeem humanity, God declares his intention to 'stick with' his creation. He does not scrap the sinful, fallen world and start again. The Word of God enters the creation, is born as a man, lives and dies as a man, and is raised as a man. The resurrected Christ is God's great stamp of approval for his creation, and his indication that he has redeemed it, and plans to transform it.

This is why Christians continue to respect the natural (that is to say, created) structures of life while looking forward to their transformation in the next world. We still rejoice in the goodness of marriage, even though there will be no marriage in the resurrection. We still work, even though the next world is described as "God's rest". Rather like the exiles in Babylon, we continue to "seek the welfare of the city" where God has put us (Jer 29:6), as we wait for the Eternal City, whose architect and builder is God. Work is a good, right and proper part of God's created order. This is certainly the assumption of the apostle Paul in his teaching about work. He puts it as bluntly as this: "If anyone will not work; let him not eat" (2 Thess 3:10). We must be careful not to devalue the importance and goodness of daily work, nor to exempt ourselves from it.

Pause and Ponder:

How is this an encouragement to us when we feel (as we all do sometimes) that our work is pointless?

However, our work will continue to be plagued by toil. Our glorious reign with Christ is something we look forward to in the next world, and so in the meantime our failure to subdue the earth continues. We will keep on being frustrated and defeated by our work, finding it a source of difficulty and distress. In this sense, we will still experience the toil and despair of Ecclesiastes (as well as its gratefulness to God whenever we are blessed with satisfaction in our work). This perspective prevents us from being too optimistic about our work, or investing it with too much significance. Our daily work is not the 'answer' to the world's problems, nor is it how God will change the world and bring in his kingdom. It remains toil.

As we toil, however, we must remember that Jesus' life, too, was toil and pain and distress. Throughout his ministry, he faced many temptations and struggles, and ultimately of course the humiliation and degradation of death at the hands of those whom he had created. He was a man of sorrows, a suffering servant. Note how the apostle Peter draws a lesson from this for the difficulties and injustices faced by other 'suffering servants':

Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to the kind and gentle but also to the overbearing. For one is approved if, mindful of God, he endures pain while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it, if when you do wrong and are beaten for it you take it patiently? But if when you do

right and suffer for it you take it patiently, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. (1 Peter 2:18-23).

Those who serve in their tasks, be it as a High Court Judge or a volunteer at a youth refuge, follow the example of their Lord and Saviour, Jesus the King. Though they are despised in this world, their hope is laid up in heaven where their treasures are stored (Mat.6:19ff.) Though their work is judged futile in this passing world they look forward in hope to the dominion that they will share with Jesus in the New Heavens and the New Earth.

Pause and Ponder:

How might following Jesus' example cause you to suffer in your work?

Work and dominion

Precisely because we look forward to the next world, the toil and meaninglessness of Ecclesiastes will not be the last word on work for us. Because we now know the End towards which the whole of God's purposes are moving, and because we know that we have a place in that kingdom prepared for us, nothing we do in this world can ever be the same again—whether work or marriage or raising children or anything. Work will be part of the 'everything' which we do in the name, and under the Lordship, of Jesus, the Man from heaven. This is why the New Testament is far more concerned with our motivations and behaviour at work, and how we use our earnings for the sake of others, than with what particular job we do, or what we achieve through it. Work is just one more facet of our daily lives within the created order that is to be lived under the dominion of Jesus Christ, in loving service of him and of others. In fact, it is striking how many of the New Testament exhortations to work are framed in terms of 'love' (more on this in our next Briefing.).

Interestingly, this perspective helps us to see how daily secular work and 'gospel work' relate together. They are driven by the same truths and motivations. Because of the truth of Christ's Lordship, we will want to bring our work under his dominion, doing it in a way that brings honour to him, working diligently and honestly, as for him (cf. Col 3:22-25). However, we will also want to see Christ's dominion spreading everywhere in the lives of those around us—and so we will do all we can to support, encourage, pray for and actively engage in evangelistic enterprise in whatever ways are possible for us, whether at work, at home, with neighbours, at school, at church, or throughout the world.

Some, who have appropriate gifts and opportunities, will leave aside daily work and give themselves to this gospel proclamation full-time. However, the driving force or motivation remains the same. The love that drives us to work (so as not to be a burden to others, and to share with those in need) also compels us to proclaim the gospel of Christ. How we work that out in our own lives will depend much on how God has gifted us and the circumstances in which he has placed us.

The Sabbath Rest

The Briefing

Joshua Ng | 1 February, 2003

Workaholism

Workaholism is an addiction that needs remedy, much like alcoholism. Its symptoms are clear: long hours getting longer, work priorities overriding family and church; no time for recreation (what's that?!). Workaholics can't even go on holidays without taking their ball-and-chain mobile phone or laptop. But what is the underlying disease? What drives workaholism?

Is it not the seeking of approval from others, be they peers or the boss? A desire for success, or at least the avoidance of failure. Workaholics are their work. When asked at a party what they do, they answer by who they are: "I'm a doctor", "I'm a lawyer", "I'm an accountant". If work fails, they themselves have failed as people. Their self-esteem, significance and self-worth are inextricably tied to their work.

Are you a workaholic?

"No", you probably say—denial is common. In Alcoholics Anonymous, people often need to be convinced by listing out exactly how many drinks they actually have, and calculating the total over a week or even a day. What if you opened your diary, and counted honestly the number of hours you work per week? Is your pattern of life to work or study seven days a week? That is a common marker for workaholism: the inability to take a day off. There's a good chance your life is about work. It is work that gives you meaning in life.

The Fourth commandment reads:

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Ex 20:8-11)

The Sabbath command makes it quite clear that there is a pattern of 6 + 1 ... all work is to be done on the six days, and the seventh is set apart as different, distinct, holy. "Holy" does not mean being dressed up in your Sunday best and sitting in quiet solemnity all day while your pagan friends are out watching movies, playing sport and enjoying themselves. In what sense is the seventh day "holy"? That is, how is it set apart and distinct from the other six days? Answer: no work! It is a 'holy-day' ... a 'holiday'.

But isn't it just an Old Testament Law that no longer applies today? Before we dismiss it off-handedly like that, we need to see the commandment in the context of both the Old and New Testaments. God's unfolding history from Creation to

Heaven needs to be the framework in which we seek to live in obedience to him. Sabbath rest in the Bible.

Pause and Ponder:

How were you brought up in relation to 'the Sabbath'? Did your family keep it strictly? Not at all? Or somewhere in between? What was it like for you?

1. Creation and Eden

Genesis 1 is a highly stylised account of the creation, underlining the movement from chaos to order. Six distinct days arranged in an orderly array, all rounded off by the repetition of the phrase, "And there was evening and there was morning, the ____ day". While mankind may be seen as the apex of the creation—since he is its ruler—he is not the climax of the creation. For the creation account does not end in Genesis 1, but in Genesis 2. The climax of creation is not man, but the seventh day! Indeed, the seventh day is not only the end of the week, but the end goal of creation. The seventh day is what the whole thing was heading towards. This created world is not the be all and end all of everything, but rather the final purpose is God's rest itself (Gen 2:1-3). As the fourth commandment had quoted, God blessed the seventh day and made it holy. It was a day of blessing, goodness, enjoyment ... rest! As they say in the land of the long weekend, "You've got it made!"

Moreover, this day of rest does not end. For there is no eighth day of creation. Indeed, while each of Days 1 -6 concludes with "And there was evening and there was morning", no such phrase is found for Day 7. In other words, the day of God's rest continues. And it is not just for God, but He leaves his rest open for mankind to enter and share. Adam and Eve shared in that seventh day blessing in the Garden of Eden. And so Genesis 2 goes on to describe that sharing in the blessings of God's rest, trees that are good for food and pleasing to the eyes, the centre of riches and gold, and the relationship of harmony and unity between man and wife, nakedness without shame. It is a picture of heaven itself, walking with God in the cool of the day. It is not a negative picture of restriction nor oppression, but joy and blessing in the company of each other and the abundantly generous Creator.

2. Fall

But the Fall of mankind in Genesis 3 spoiled all that. We rejected God's goodness and wisdom and thought we could decide what's best for ourselves without Him. God's rightful punishment on us was to banish us from Eden, ejected from God's rest. God's rest was still there, but mankind had lost his share of it, barred from re-entry by the flaming sword.

3. Salvation and Exodus

Nevertheless, God continued to seek mankind out through Noah, and through Abraham, through whom God's blessing would one day come to all nations. Then came the Exodus of Abrahams descendants via Moses. It is in this context that the Ten Commandments come, but even before they got to Mount Sinai, God had already taught them about the Sabbath rest. Manna was provided to them daily. They were not to distrust God's provision by collecting more than their daily need and storing it overnight. The exception was the sixth day, when they could collect

twice the amount so that they would not have to do the work of gathering on the seventh (Ex 16). It was a weekly reminder that God was their provider all the way to the promised land.

4. Mosaic Covenant

The Ten commandments then formally instituted the day of Sabbath rest, to be kept always especially when they arrived in the promised land. They were to down tools on the Sabbath, even during the busiest and most crucial agricultural periods, namely, sowing and harvest time (Ex 34:21). The positive nature of rest remained the thrust of the Sabbath legislations; it was to provide refreshment for the Israelites ... even for their oxen (Ex 23:12).

To break the Sabbath, however, was a serious offence, carrying the death sentence (Ex 31:12-17). The Sabbath was for the Israelites a sign of God's covenant with them; to break the Sabbath was far more than merely foregoing the refreshment of rest, it was tantamount to outright rejection of Yahweh as their sovereign, much like an American setting the "Stars and Stripes" alight!

In the second giving of the Law 40 years later, at the verge of entry into the promised land, the Sabbath requirement is reiterated. However, the reason given seems different. Israel was to remember not so much God's rest from creating in Genesis, but God's deliverance of them out of slavery in Egypt (Deut 5:12-15). Redemption, even more than creation, seems to be the underlying rationale. However, as we shall now see, they are not two unrelated reasons, but essentially one, because of the nature of the promised land.

5. Promised Land and Heaven

Canaan was viewed as the land of rest. It will be the Israelites' resting place, their inheritance where they will live in security, having rest from all their enemies (Deut 12:8-10; Ps 92). It will be a second Eden, a prosperous land where they will enjoy the blessing of peace and joy, being in the presence of God and his people (Isa 51:3; Ezk 36:35). Just as the goal of the six days of creation was the rest on the seventh day (Eden), so the goal of the Exodus redemption is the rest in the promised land (i.e. the second Eden). One is but a reflection of the other. In essence then, the rationale for the Sabbath command is the same, be it Exodus 20 or Deuteronomy 5. Be it the initial work of creation from chaos, or the recreation in the redemption from Egypt, God's ultimate goal was that his people might share in his rest—that is the fundamental reason for resting on the seventh day. Indeed, the argument of Hebrews 3-4 flows out of this understanding. The writer of Hebrews concludes that Canaan was not the real rest that God foreshadowed in Genesis 2. The ultimate fulfillment of sharing in God's rest lay yet in the future, not only for the people of King David's day, but our day as well. For the final Sabbath rest that all believers look forward to is the promised land of heaven itself (Heb 3-4). But we have jumped ahead: what about Jesus' view of God's rest?

6. Pharisees and Jesus

Jesus arrived as a Jew when Israel was under the judgement of God. Although the nation had returned to Palestine from the punishment of the Babylonian exile, they were still in 'spiritual exile', awaiting yet another new exodus when God

would ultimately bring them into the promised land (Mark 1:1-3). After all, they were still under the foreign occupation of Caesar. There was no “rest from the enemies” in that! Hence, the longing for God’s kingdom to arrive.

The Pharisees sought to usher in the kingdom by fanatical obedience to the Law of Moses, including the fourth commandment. If all Jews could keep God’s commands, then the Messiah would come and give them rest from their enemies, the Gentiles. The Pharisees *minimised* obedience to God’s commands by making more rules. And so they sought to define what was ‘rest’ on the Sabbath, and what still classified as ‘work’. For example, to carry something outside of your house was considered work, but if you handed it out through the window to someone, and they carried it away, then it wasn’t work! No wonder they lost focus of the Sabbath as enjoyment! Eden, salvation, milk and honey in the promised land, *rest*! Here then, was the source of the conflict between Jesus and the legalistic Pharisees over the Sabbath.

The Pharisees accused Jesus of breaking the fourth commandment because he was plucking grain on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-28). But Jesus wasn’t a farmer, nor was he harvesting—he was just having a ‘drive-thru’ snack! Jesus gets to the essence of the matter, that “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath”. It is for our benefit, and ought not to function as a restrictive matrix of rules that we must fit into like a contortionist. When despised because he was about to heal a man’s withered hand on the Sabbath (that would constitute “work”), Jesus rebutted, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” Again the positive benefit of the Sabbath rest is underlined. The Pharisees then showed their hypocrisy by plotting to kill Jesus ... and that on the Sabbath, too! (Mark 3:1-6.)

On other occasions, Jesus points to their own inconsistency in caring for an ox on the Sabbath, but forbidding Jesus to do good for a human (see Matt 12:11-12; Luke 13:10-17; John 7:21-24.) It was the Pharisees who were in the wrong, not Jesus. Jesus never broke the fourth commandment, nor did he speak against it. He sought to rescue it from the Pharisaic legalistic distortion, and to bring it back to its intended focus. Indeed, their legalistic teaching was the very burden from which Jesus had come to give us rest (Matt 11:28-30; cf. Matt 23:4). More pointedly, he is the ultimate focus of the Sabbath, for he, the Son of Man, is the Lord of the Sabbath in whom we will find rest for our souls (Mark 2:28; Matt 11:29).

7. Jesus and Heaven

And so it should come as no surprise that in the opening chapters of Hebrews, Jesus as man is Lord, not only of this creation, but of the world to come. He leads many sons to the glory of heaven by pioneering the way (Heb 2:5-10). He is the greater Moses who leads us to our heavenly hope, the promised rest of which Eden and Canaan were only shadows. And in what sense will heaven be our sharing in God’s rest? It will be Eden revisited, indeed even better ... beyond Eden! For not only will there be no more pain and sorrow and death, there will be no possibility of it ever again (Rev 21-22). Moreover, we will have rest from our labour, including our struggle to remain faithful in the face of persecution, the daily struggle with the sin that so easily entangles, and the hardships that come as

God's discipline (Rev 14:12-13; Heb 12:1-13). We must fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer who has gone into heaven before us, and never harden our hearts, lest we never enter God's rest. For in the future, "there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God" (Heb 4:9).

Pause and Ponder:

Phew! That's a lot of detail! Any questions you have about any of that?

Sabbath rest today

But what about a Sabbath rest for the people of God now? Some take Hebrews 4:9 to be commanding Christians now to take a day off each week. But that simply will not stand the scrutiny of good exegesis. The Sabbath rest spoken of in Hebrews is not about taking a rest now, but persevering faithfully as Christians towards the rest then. Indeed, if the former were true, why not insist that it must be on the Saturday and not the Sunday (or even more precisely: sundown Friday to sundown Saturday!). We need more finesse in sorting out how to apply the Sabbath command to us today, a finesse that sees where we fit now in the framework of the Bible's progressive revelation of the Sabbath rest as outlined above. For we are no longer under the Mosaic Law but under Christ's law (1 Cor 9:20-21). We do not obey the fourth commandment as Old Covenant Jews, but we need to apply it to ourselves as those who live with Jesus as our Lord, realising that he is taking us to our heavenly rest, whilst we still live in this creation. How then are we to apply the Sabbath rest today?

1. Avoid Legalism

Firstly, we must not obey the Sabbath command in order to be right with God, or even to think we can get to a higher state of spirituality as a result. This was the context in which Paul argued against succumbing to Jewish legalistic judgements, such as "a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day". Christ is the reality who has come and fulfilled them all. Some Seventh Day Adventists (not all) keep the Sabbath in order to win their way to God. This is sadly heretical, as with any teaching that sees our obedience as good works that win God's favour. Another implication of Jesus fulfilling the Sabbath is that it no longer functions as a covenantal sign of our belonging to God's people, as it was for the Jews in the Old Testament. Breaking the Sabbath therefore is no longer a capital offence (phew).

Secondly, there is the legalism of thinking that the only way to please God with regard to this commandment is to keep it on Saturday (thus, many Seventh Day Adventists). While not heretical, it is having an uninformed and weak conscience. For Paul in Romans 14:1-6 argues that it is the weak Christian who thinks that any particular day is special.

Thirdly, there is the legalism of avoiding taking a whole day of rest by counting up a morning here, a few hours there throughout the week, in order to add up to 24 hours per week. Some have even suggested that three nights of 8 hour sleeps equals a Sabbath rest! Such legalism still fails to see the benefit of having a day of rest per week.

Fourthly, there is the legalism of equating the Sabbath to a "No Fun" day. Some of

us remember as kids having to wear our Sunday best, sitting through boring church services, no TV, no sport, repression and restriction. It hardly evokes the joy of the Garden of Eden!

Finally, we must avoid the legalism of the Pharisees who tried to define for everybody else what constituted work and what didn't. We all know what is "work" for us and what isn't. Whatever you consider as work for yourself, don't do it a day a week. Work need not be paid employment. Work may sometimes be enjoyable for you ... but it's still work. Don't be legalistic—have a break!

Pause and Ponder:

How have you been tempted to treat the Sabbath legalistically?

2. Living in this Creation

The motivation given in Exodus 20 for why the Israelites were to rest was because it was following the pattern of the LORD himself, when he created the world. God was a worker in Genesis 1. But not only was he a worker, he was also a "rest-er" in Genesis 2:1-3. This basis for the fourth commandment is crucial. While the commandment is given in the specific situation of the Israelites being rescued from Egypt, and delineating how they were to live in Canaan, nevertheless, the rationale for the command, is rooted in God himself. He worked six days and rested one. We are to follow his example. More pointedly, the fourth commandment is rooted in Creation itself. We may not live as Israelites under the Mosaic covenant, but we still live in God's creation. God's pattern of work and rest in Genesis is still relevant and applicable to us.

Furthermore, I argue that the pattern of work for six days followed by a day of rest is built into us as workers in God's creation. Adam was created to be like God, as a worker ruling responsibly over creation, and Eve as his helper. As workers, we are hardwired to work six and rest one, just like God worked in Gen 1:1-2:3. It is not just a cultural thing for the Jews, but built into the very fabric of the way we function. The Russians tried to have a 10-day week at one stage. It did not work. It should come as no surprise that our world has adopted a 7-day week. There is a need for refreshment for our bodies and psyche. Sleep is needed each day, but also God provides rest one in seven. It is good for us. And God is so good as to make it a command so we do not miss out. Because "every day [is] alike" (Rom 14) and the Sabbath *per se* is but a shadow (Col 2), our day off need not be on the Saturday. Nor indeed necessarily on the Sunday.

Moreover, we are especially to ensure rest for those under our responsibility. Hence in the Israelite community, the servants, maidservants, and even the animals were to have rest. I'm glad that in Hong Kong the maids are legally granted Sunday as a day of rest. However, in countries like Singapore, they are allowed a day off only once a month! Christian 'masters' need to provide rest as God generously directs. While most of us in the Western world do not have household maids, as a society we have not cared for the poorer and underprivileged by our move to seven day trading. For who works in the retail stores on the Sundays? Is it not those less privileged? It is not the CEOs ... they are out playing golf!

For many years CK Tang, a big department store in the centre of Singapore, closed on Sundays because Mr Tang was a Christian. What a great testimony it was in that place. We are against legalism in this, but for many a recovery of Sunday as the day of rest would be very beneficial.

Pause and Ponder:

What do you think about shopping on weekends now?!

3. Living for Heaven

If the first rationale for resting a day in seven is creation, then the second is what creation points to. Though this creation was created “very good” (Gen 1), its ultimate goal was not itself, but rather God’s rest (Gen 2:1-3). And we have seen how God’s rest, expressed in Eden, pointed beyond itself to the promised land, and ultimately to heaven itself (Heb 3-4). In other words, life is not ultimately about this creation or this world, but the world to come. We are to live not for this world, but for heaven. However, these are not two completely separate reasons, but one within the other. *Creation* is the surface reason made explicit in Exodus 20. What creation *points to* is the deeper core reason, which we arrive at through seeing how the *creation* theme of “work-rest” is progressively developed in the Old and New Testaments. Just as there were two reasons given in the two versions of the fourth commandment (*creation* in Ex 20 and *redemption* in Deut 5), yet they were not two completely separate reasons, but one. So for us today, the two reasons of “living in this creation”, and “living for heaven”, are but one reason within the other for resting. The first shows that to rest one in seven is a good thing for all humanity. The second is for Christians in particular, for they not only live in this creation, but are journeying to heaven (Heb 3-4).

As Christians, our ultimate satisfaction and meaning is not found in this creation, but in heaven. For if we work seven days a week, and close to 52 weeks a year, what are we living for? Work, and this world. If that describes you, perhaps you need the chastisement of the well worn Aussie saying, “Get a life!” But Christians have “got a life”—real life, eternal life. May we live it out by resting a day in seven, consciously reminding ourselves that we are en route to our heavenly rest.

Pause and Ponder:

How does the fact that Christians are promised an eternal rest in the new heavens and new earth affect the way we think about holidays?