

Finding Meaning in Our Work

From the Series “Solomon Teaches Us About the Meaning of Life”

By Phil Brainerd

Introduction

This article is being shared a day before Labor Day holiday. On Labor Day, Americans honor all the people who have helped to build our country. As such, it’s a good time to reflect on the topic of **work**, along with its value.

A lot of employers spend significant time studying ways to make their workers more effective.

One of best ways to do this is to check on the level of satisfaction that a worker experiences.

Happy, satisfied workers are effective workers, or so it is thought. Psychologists are very happy to help at times like this. So, they have produced something called the “Job Satisfaction Survey”. In these surveys, workers are presented with a series of questions that measure their feelings about their work.

There are lots of these. Let’s consider one that I ran into recently. The survey was conducted in 2020 by a group called, “The Conference Board.” Recall, 2020 was when the world was going through COVID. Here is a summary of the report:

In 2020, overall job satisfaction remained historically high. Despite the pandemic, economic crisis, mass layoffs, and the increase in the unemployment rate, job satisfaction climbed from its lowest ever rate of 42.6 percent recorded in 2010 to 56.9 percent—the highest in 20 years. The percentage of workers reporting engagement in their work also increased from 53.2 percent in November 2019 to 54.3 percent in November 2020. However, some components of job satisfaction declined because of the recession and economic stress.
(Conference Board 2021 Report)

This is very interesting. It seems rather optimistic. We’re told here that job satisfaction at the time of the survey was “historically high” at 56.9 percent. But what do these numbers really mean?

First, we have to note that the numbers change over time. A few years back, the number was lower – 42.6 percent. That means only four out of ten workers were satisfied with their work.



The other six had some problems. The number went up to 56.9, but that means only 6 out of ten workers were satisfied. Even with “historically high” numbers, four out of ten still had some problems.

And who were the satisfied workers? The report mentioned layoffs. In fact, there were massive layoffs during the height of the pandemic. Could it be that the only people who could answer a workers’ survey were the people who were still working? Maybe those people were happy to have a job when lots of other people didn’t. That could skew the results.

And what makes the numbers change? One reason is hard times. “Economic stress” like a recession can cause problems.

This leads us to a question: What can the average person do to be satisfied with their work? Is it possible to find satisfaction that resists factors like hard times and economic stress? In fact, we’re going to find that this is not the best question. A better question is this: How can we find meaning in our work?

When we started this series, we learned that you find meaning in life when you believe in God. More than that, you find meaning when you fear God. That is, you have an awesome respect for God that leads you to do what he says. Then we learned that you find meaning when you realize that God is sovereign. That is to say he has total control over his universe. And he has a plan - A beautiful plan. In the last article, we learned that we find meaning when we understand our place in eternity. We are created to be eternal beings, and when we take that into account, it changes our perspective dramatically.

Today, on this Labor Day weekend, we’ll share the last article in our series. We’re going to discover that you find meaning in life through something you wouldn’t expect: You find meaning through your work.

Let’s get started.

I. Understanding how God fits in

In the opening message of our series, we stated that you find meaning when you believe in God, and when you fear God. How does that fit in with the concept of work? Let’s think for a second about where King Solomon is coming from. He was the product of centuries of interactions between the Hebrew people and God. His starting point was the books of Moses, the first five books of our Bible, Genesis through Deuteronomy. He also had the writings of his father, David. Much of those writings were later recognized as inspired Scripture and included in the book of Psalms.

From Moses, Solomon read the opening chapters of Genesis: There he learned that God created the heavens and the earth. In chapter 2 of Genesis, we learn what God did when he was done with all that creating:

Genesis 2:1-3

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.

2 By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. 3 Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

So, “By the seventh day God had finished the (what?) work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his (what?) work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the (what?) work of creating that he had done.

There was a lot of work going on here. Here’s an important principle: **God works**. What does that mean? Let’s call work: Expending effort and energy to make things, manage things, and nurture things.

Work is a big part of who God is. It’s not all he is, but it’s a big part. In our last passage, we learned that God rested from his work at one point. So, work is important to God, but it’s not everything. However, it’s very significant.

It’s also a big part of who humans are. Here’s how we know that: Listen as Moses describes the very last things God did before he rested:

26 Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”
27 So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:26-27)

We talk about the image of God a lot in our church. What does it mean? It means that humans are the only created things **specifically** made to be like God. In what we read; we are created to rule. God is the great King of the Universe. He made Adam and Eve to be King and Queen of the earth - And from there to share this with all their children.

But we also learn that God works. From all this, we learn an important truth:

God works
Work is important to God.
Humans are created to be like God.
Therefore, we work.
And work is important to us.

If you're not convinced yet, consider the first thing God did with the first humans. The earth was a beautiful place. Did God say to Adam, "I'm going to take you to the beach. Relax and gaze at the sun shimmering on the water. Breathe in the fresh ocean air. Dive into the water and swim. Maybe play with the dolphins."

Did God do that? Or did God take Adam to a beautiful flowery meadow? Did he say, "Adam, look at all the beautiful flowers. I want you to run among them. Jump and play. Sing – 'The hills are alive with the sound of music!'"

Or did God perhaps take Adam to a forest? Did he say, "Adam it's time for a nature walk. We're going to go on a hike together."

What was the very first thing that God did with Adam? Let's read about it:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. (Genesis 2:15)

Note that: "...to work it..." The very first thing that God did with the very first human was to put him to work. This wasn't mean-spirited. It certainly wasn't punishment – Adam hadn't sinned yet. He was still in his perfect state. And God certainly didn't need Adam to tend the garden. He could have had angels do that. God did this because of what we learned. God works. He made us like him. Therefore, we work.

Let's get back to Solomon. All the things we just looked at were the things he grew up with. He had Moses, whom we just read. And, he had the writings of his father David in the Psalms. We read there:

1 The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
(Psalm 19:1)

This is what led Solomon to say this in his book, Ecclesiastes:

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? (Ecclesiastes 2:24-25)

If you want to find meaning in your work, you must include God.

So, how does God fit into the concept of work? Work is important to us because it's important to God. Work is one of the ways that we express the image of God that he placed in every one of us.

II. Wrong views of work

We mentioned in a previous message that Solomon is one of the wisest men ever to live. However, he didn't gain his wisdom all at once. Apparently, he learned some of his wisdom over a period of years. Through a period of trial and error, Solomon learned some wrong reasons to approach work. Having looked at the ideal way to approach work, let's look now at some wrong reasons to work.

A. Power and Possessions

Because Solomon was a King, he was tempted to work to gain power and possessions. Let's read about that:

4 I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. 5 I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. 6 I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. (Ecclesiastes 2:4-6)

So, Solomon decided to become a builder. Of course, when you're king, you tell other people to do the building. But in the end, you still get credit. Solomon built multiple beautiful homes - No doubt each one a mansion. Then he created beautiful parks with trees and landscaping.

Solomon's pile of stuff is growing.

7 I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. 8 I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. (Ecclesiastes 2:7-8)

The ultimate power comes when you get to order around a lot of people. We should note that the slavery Solomon mentions is different than the kind of slavery we think about today. If you kidnap someone and sell them into slavery, that's called "chattel slavery". In the Law of Moses this kind of slavery was strictly illegal. It called for the death penalty.

However, there were times when nations foolishly attacked Israel. In those days, when you had a war, and if you lost, you had a big problem. If the winners let the losers go free, the losers might regroup and come back the next day. So, the winners offered the losers a choice: You could die, or you could become a slave. If you chose slavery, one day, you might work your way out of slavery. So, at least there was hope. This is a very imperfect solution, but it was a rough world back then. This is what Solomon is talking about. Add to this, he amassed a fortune that made him the equal of any king in his day.

And you know what? Solomon was not satisfied by all that. More about that in a little bit.

B. Pleasure

Another goal for many is pleasure. You work hard so you can play hard. You take your paycheck and straight to the bar. Solomon was a King, so he could do this in a grand way.

I said to myself, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.” But that also proved to be meaningless. 2 “Laughter,” I said, “is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish?” 3 I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. (Ecclesiastes 2:1-3)

So Solomon tried the party scene. He had the best comedians. He had the best alcohol. I like this one: “I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom.” In other words, Solomon got drunk and high and who knows what else. However, he still felt he was guided by wisdom. This is called a “Yeah, right!” I think Solomon is being a bit facetious here. His tongue firmly planted in his cheek.

But after doing the party scene for a while, Solomon found that all this was meaningless.

There are all kinds of pleasure. Some people go the party to laugh and dance. Some people go to the party to imbibe in the alcohol and drugs. Then there are the people go to the party to bring someone home for the night. Being a king, Solomon could also do this in a grand way.

I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well—the delights of a man’s heart. 9 I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me. 10 I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. (Ecclesiastes 2:8-10)

Solomon indulged in women in a big way. In I Kings 11:3, we’re told that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. That’s quite a crowd. We won’t even go there. When Solomon says he refused his heart no pleasure, we’ll take his word.

So, here’s a man who would make the richest of playboys jealous. What was the result of all this? Solomon sums it up in one sentence:

17 So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. (Ecclesiastes 2:17)

Solomon worked for power and possessions. Solomon worked for pleasure. He was more successful than any man of his day. Yet, this only made him hate his life.

that, we mean don't let possessions become everything. Possessions aren't a problem by themselves. There's nothing wrong finding the best job you can. Work and put some money in the bank. Take care of yourself and your family. If you have extra for the proverbial rainy day, then good. That's how the ant does things.

B. Skill

Next, Solomon talks about skill.

If the ax is dull
and its edge unsharpened,
more strength is needed,
but skill will bring success.
(Ecclesiastes 10:10)

Working with dull blades is always a hassle. Whether it's the ax you use to chop down a tree, or the knife you use to chop your food. Working with a properly sharpened blades speeds thing up. We've all heard the phrase "Work smarter, not harder." That comes right out of Solomon's wisdom. If you learn how to do your job properly, things will go better. So, get proper training. Learn to ask questions. And by the way, the best worker is someone who works smarter **and** harder.

So, Solomon has some practical helps for us. Attitude and skill go a long way to help when we work. Solomon offers much more advice, but for now we'll have to pull this all together.

Conclusion

We started by asking, is there a way to find satisfaction in your work - A satisfaction that resists hardships like recessions and other economic stress? It turns out that this isn't the best question. It's better to ask, "How do we find meaning in our work?" You know what, if you ask that question, you get a better outcome. Here's why: If you find meaning in your work, satisfaction has a way of taking care of itself.

To find meaning in your work, you do the same thing that brings meaning to life. Believe in God. Fear God. Include God.

Understand that work is an important part of who God is. And when he created us in his image, that's one of the things he shared with us. Understand that there are wrong reasons for work. Things like Power, Possessions, and Pleasure. There's more to life than those things.

Understand that there are some practical helps. When you work, bring a good attitude. Work with all your might.

With these things, we bring our series to a close. King Solomon has taught us much about the meaning of life. He has a lot more, so I encourage you to read more in the book of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

If you ever feel that life has no meaning, if you ever have a friend that feels that way, remember: King Solomon teaches us about the meaning of life.

Thanks for reading! Here are some helpful links:

Trinity Church: TrinityTeaneck.org

Phil's Site: PhilBrainerd.com

To learn how to begin a new life with Jesus Christ, visit Billy Graham's site: PeaceWithGod.net
