

Galatians 2:19–20 (NRSV)

¹⁹For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; ²⁰and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

1 Corinthians 15:51–53, 58 (NRSV)

⁵¹Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, ⁵²in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. . . .

⁵⁸Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Isaiah 65, from verses 17–25 (NRSV)

¹⁷For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind. . . .

²¹They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. . . .

²³They shall not labor in vain,
or bear children for calamity; . . .

²⁵The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!

Why do we work? What do we desire from our work?

Where does work fit into God's larger purposes?

It is Labor Day weekend, a holiday set aside to honor “the American labor movement and the contributions that workers have made to the strength, prosperity, laws, and well-being of the country.”¹

So, this week we will talk about work, as we have been for the last few weeks. We aren't speaking here of our work in the church, but the mundane, everyday work that consumes much of our lives. What value does it have? Is there anything of God in this work?

The answer to these questions lies in our eschatological viewpoint, i.e., what do we think lies ahead for ourselves and this world when Jesus returns to consummate his kingdom? Will this world we inhabit cease to exist as we are transported away to be with God or will this world be transformed? Will there be continuity between a before and after?

I think you will grasp the point quickly. If this world is to be ended, then the fruits of all our work will also be swept away; not just your work and mine, but also the works of Mozart, Monet, and Molière. But if this world is to be transformed by God, then our work has lasting intrinsic, even theological, significance. Ennobling work becomes part

¹ From the Wikipedia entry as of Aug 8, 2018.

of the project. If this world is to be transformed, we have the opportunity to build for the goodness of God's fully realized kingdom.²

So, the question then is which viewpoint do we find in Scripture, annihilation or transformation? The Bible is clear on this from beginning to end: God made this world, pronounced it good from top to bottom, and though it is marred by sin, this world will be redeemed and transformed into the world of our dreams. There is no clearer testament to this than when Paul reflects on Jesus' return and those who will be alive then. They will be transformed in the "twinkling of an eye." Why be transformed into imperishable flesh? So they will be suitable for the transformed world, the new heavens and earth. This world is headed somewhere; it has eternal meaning. On this question of what really lies ahead, Miroslav Volf writes:

R. H. Gundry has argued persuasively that in Revelation the saints' dwelling place is the new earth. It is 'quite clear that the Book of Revelation promises eternal life on the new earth . . . not ethereal life in the new heaven.'³

So, to follow on with Paul, since the dead will be resurrected and the living transformed upon Jesus' return, then "in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58 above). By this, does Paul mean only what we'd call "church work"? The answer is emphatically "no!" You can't pull apart your life in the world and your life in Christ. See the verse above from Galatians. It is true of all believers that it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us. But a word of caution, it is not also *all* our work that Paul speaks of:

It is not all labor or work that Paul praises and assures of value, but those labors that attest to God's work in and through one. So Paul's is not a paean of work or busyness for its own sake, but only insofar as one's own labors cohere with the work that God is up to. In fact, though Paul does not do so, one could suggest testing a contemplated action against what one understood about God's work that we see in Christ. One's labors in the Lord endure just as surely as does one's love (1 Cor 13:13); so properly to labor in God's work is at the same time to walk in love.⁴

What do we do while we wait?

As we await the arrival of this transformed world, a gift from the beginning, what do we do? Just lie around in hammocks and be patient? Paul makes it clear, that is not an option (2 Thessalonians 3:6-13). From Paul's letters, we can surmise that quite a few of the early believers figured that if Jesus was coming any day, then what is the point of

John Calvin's prayer:
'going to work'

My God, Father and Savior, since you have commanded us to work in order to meet our needs, sanctify our labor that it may bring nourishment to our souls as well as to our bodies. Make us constantly aware that our efforts are worthless unless guided by your light and by your hand. Make us faithful to the particular tasks for which you have bestowed upon us the necessary gifts, taking from us any envy or jealousy at the vocations of others.

Give us a good heart to supply the needs of the poor, saving us from any desire to exalt ourselves over those who receive our bounty. And if you should call us into greater poverty than we humanly desire, save us from any spirit of defiance or resentment, but rather let us graciously and humbly receive the bounty of others. Above all, may every temporal grace be matched by spiritual grace, that in both body and soul we may live to your glory.

² If these brief sentences intrigue you, you might get a copy of *Work in the Spirit* by Miroslav Volf, a prominent theologian at Yale Divinity School. His work undergirds this study. Not light reading, but worthwhile.

³ From Volf's book, p. 94.

⁴ Sampley, J. P. (1994–2004). The First Letter to the Corinthians. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 10, p. 994). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

working toward a future. But that attitude belies what happened in the Garden of Eden. God gave the humans work out of goodness not necessity. There is no contradiction between waiting for the consummation of God's kingdom and building for it now, or, as Volf phrases it, between "Kingdom-expectation" and "Kingdom-participation." Further, inactive waiting denies our claim that the kingdom of God was inaugurated by Jesus; to put it carefully, we await the consummation of God's kingdom, not its arrival.

Our congregation is filled with teachers, accountants, sales people, analysts, family CEOs, and more. A diverse collection of jobs, careers, and vocations. All of the work entailed in these jobs can be done in love, kindness, honesty, humility, and compassion. That is, we can work in love, in Christ, and by the Spirit, who does not dwell in us merely on Sundays or at committee meetings, but at all times and places.

We could do worse than follow Martin Luther in this, who believed that when the gospel is proclaimed and embraced, the Good News reaches even into our job and transforms it into a vocation, a calling. A "Christian accountant" is not a label nor a marketing ploy, but describes someone who is using her training and experience to help others, to be a light in her profession, all to the glory of God. We are God's through and through. Adam and Eve tilled their soil; will we till ours?

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Acts.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying Paul's letter 1 Thessalonians.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series: *Paul: A biography*. A fresh look at the life and ministry of Paul.