

SERIES: THE KINGS QUEST FOR MEANING IN THE REAL WORLD
Lesson #4: “Looking For Purpose in Work”

Opening Events and Prayer

Icebreaker: "What was your dream job growing up? Why? Are you doing that job? If so, has it turned out the way you expected?

One of our favorite questions to ask a child is, "So, what do you want to be when you grow up? It's a simple question and valid, but it also hints at the subject of today's topic from Ecclesiastes. Some people work to live while others seem to live to work. So the question we ask today is, "Can you find contentment and clarity in life at work?"

How did Solomon explore work?

Read Ecclesiastes 2:4-6

- Undertook great projects -
His father David had collected the materials but was prohibited from building God's house of worship, The Temple. Solomon got to build the temple. It was magnificent filled with incredible craftsmanship and lined with gold. The temple complex was enhanced throughout Solomon's reign. Solomon's temple was looted and later destroyed when Babylon took Judah into captivity in 587/6BC. Solomon also constructed large fortifications at Millo, Tadmor and many other sites for kingdom defense
- Built Houses and grounds
He built his royal palace four times the size of the Temple. It was 150'L x 75'W x 45'H. An unbelievably large home by even today's standards at 11000+ Sq-ft. It contained so many Cedar pillars it was known as "The House of the Forest of Lebanon." In front of that he constructed the massive "Porch of Pillars", a sort of colonnaded open living area. In front of that he constructed the House of Judgment also known as "the King's Gate," which contained a throne room and living quarters for the queen consort and her entourage.
- He Planted vineyards, built gardens and parks filled with fruit trees
- Dug reservoirs.
These reservoirs were part of an elaborate water supply system that provided fresh water to the city. Solomon constructed a fairly sophisticated system to ensure there was water.
- Considered politics **Read Ecclesiastes 4:13-16**
Solomon made several strategic alliances with Egypt and with Tyre. Often, as we go on throughout the history of Israel and Judah, we see that alliances of this kind lead to ruin because they are made with unholy nations for unholy reasons. Under Solomon the kingdom became a prominent world power militarily and commercially. To include the use of substantial trading fleets and the breeding of many stables full of horses. Solomon

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became an influential international powerbroker. Evidence of this can be drawn from the visit of the Queen of Sheeba.

Discussion Questions:

- Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem as one of great projects, clearly a God project. He also built luxurious palaces using the same resources an labor force, clearly Solomon projects. How easy is it to confuse God projects/work with me projects/work?
- Do you go looking for work, as Solomon did, or does it just find you?

What did Solomon discover about pursuing work for contentment and clarity?

Read 2:10-11

- He was able to enjoy all the **busyness** of building and he did receive a **reward** for his work *He enjoyed working hard while he was working at things. There is a sort of excitement-in-the-moment atmosphere that comes with most big projects. The problem is, as with the adrenaline junkie, the workaholic is always seeking that next big rush.*
- He found it **hebel** *He felt nothing was gained. The transition to this verse is jolting, like downshifting without matching RPMs, it lurches the reader from delight to disillusionment. The entirety of his work becomes a pursuit of the unattainable, a chasing after the wind*

Read 2:17 -26

- He **hated** life *His delightful work turned sour because he realized he couldn't keep any of it beyond the grave. Hearses don't pull u-hauls! Work became "grievous". That's an incredibly descriptive word. "The reader must interpret this verse [18], as all the verses, in the context of the whole book. When Solomon makes the pronouncement that he hated life, he is neither making an absolute statement nor generalizing about life. At that particular moment in his quest for meaning, Solomon comes to this personal conclusion." (Bland, D., pg.319)*
- The one he passed it all to might turn out to be a **fool**
 - *Examples of wasted skills:*
 - Reheboam (Solomon's own son) lost the ten northern tribes, dividing the kingdom. He set the kingdom on the path to destruction - 1 Kings 11-14
 - Michael Jackson - went from over \$1 billion on hand to \$300 million in debt at the time of his death

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- *The Hartford family, owners of A&P Food Stores were one of the 4 wealthiest families in America worth over a billion dollars to penniless in 35-years.*
- *Mike Tyson - \$400 million up in smoke*
- All work done eventually gets put in the hands of those who didn't earn anything.
Solomon would have definitely believed that those who don't earn it often don't take care of it. Work creates stress and anxiety as one deals with the ups and downs of making money. Due to this, he begins to despair and think of work as a curse or a waste of effort. Planning and scheming and desire to complete the job kept him awake at night, yet where was it all going?

He worked hard but felt like the return on investment was nothing. Again Bland says, "Verse 22 echoes the initial question asked in 1:3: What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? His answer once again is "nothing." During the day, he experiences nothing but pain and grief. Night brings no relief. At night the overachiever tosses and turns. Solomon ends with the typical refrain: this too is meaningless. In the face of all the contradictions, life is hebel. Humans cannot understand or control the course of events." (Bland, D. pg. 320) In the final analysis, he comes to the conclusion only when God enters the picture can people really enjoy work.

Read 4:4-8

- Man's drive to work is motivated by envy
Bland says, "The underlying question is, When does one work too much and when does one not work enough? Competitiveness drives people to put pressure on themselves to accomplish more. The results become destructive not only to others but to the self as well. In wisdom material, envy is always self-destructive (Prov 6:34; 14:30; 27:4; Job 5:2). The verse describes just the opposite of Jesus' command to "love your neighbor." So Solomon concludes, It is hebel in that it is a worthless pursuit." (Bland, D., pg. 333) Laziness leads to ruin. Overwork leads to a lack of peace -- "all work and no play makes jack a dull boy". The Workaholic loses his friends and family because he cares more for work than them. In the end he deprives himself of the good in life

Read 10:5-7; 10:16-17

- Hard work doesn't get rewarded as it should in this world - *More often than not favorites, rather than the qualified, are appointed by the rulers. Those who are incapable of doing the work are put in charge. The best person for the job is often locked out of the position they deserve and poor decisions, intentionally made by superiors, often lead to injustice and the corruption of the social order as it should be.*

Often we work for incompetent superiors - As Solomon tells it, the king here is a "servant", or better a "child". The one in charge is not fit to be in charge of anything. His

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leadership gifting and experience if lacking leading to the recklessness and people damage of il-leadership. This leader is so irresponsible that his subordinates do whatever they please and make a mess of the entire kingdom as self-indulgent immature leaders abound.

Discussion Questions:

- *Do you ever get so wrapped up in the delight of accomplishing that others around you suffer?*
- *How do the work philosophy and the self-indulgent nature of our culture contribute to the problems that "The Teacher" discovers?*

Has work ever made you "hate life"? Should this ever be more than a momentary feeling for a Christian?

Is work a blessing or a curse?

It can be either. In 2:10, 4:6, and 9, he suggests that a person can delight in his or her work, work and be satisfied (tranquil), and get a good return for his work. Additionally, it is clear that Solomon sees work as the avenue to provision for oneself and family. He also considers work to be a meaningful fulfillment of our days in other sections of the book. One can add that God designed man with a desire for meaningful work and that work has been a God-honoring activity that in Solomon 's words you, "Do with all your might" (9:10), since the beginning of man's existence. Even Adam had work in the garden. So, there can be blessing from work.

Alternatively, misaligned work can become a curse for all the reasons Solomon unearths. As one Army Captain recently said to this author, "I like the people I work with, I just really don't like the people I work for." A bad boss can make life pretty miserable. A job that merely pays the bills but does nothing to appeal to the inner passions that drive us or that serves a meaningful purpose can seem like endless striving, "a chasing after the wind." Those that should not get rewarded with promotion and payments often do and that alone can put you in a tailspin making you "Hate life."

A with the other pursuits Solomon comes to a single conclusion, the pursuit in itself isn't evil, but placing it first in life as a source of contentment and clarity is. He clearly states that only when properly aligned with God's design is work life-giving rather than life-stealing. Once again, it depends upon the heart state of the individual.

Discussion Questions:

- *If work is ALWAYS more curse than blessing to you, what do you think this says about your work?*
- *What does it take to be tranquil (at peace) in your work?*



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That, of course, leads us to the last question...

How can you work with purpose and contentment? What's the proper priority? It would seem that two of the most prominent passages on Ecclesiastes on this are 2:24 - 26 and 9:9b - 10.

- Working purposefully is a gift from God.
He expects it and provides the satisfaction - 2:24 -26. Work can be highly enjoyable when we place our plans and satisfaction with the outcome in the hands of God. It is he who gives the good stuff. What we should be striving to pass on to those that come after us is not what work can earn but perhaps more importantly what work can teach: dependence on God for what we need, delight in what he puts before us to do, and direction on when, where, and how.
- He expects us to pour ourselves into the work that he provides in a purpose-filled life.
Contentment and clarity in work comes when, no matter what the direction of boss or organization, God defines the work set before you. Sometimes the avocation that God has placed before you is more significant than the vocation he's provided for you to be able to do it with. For example, having a job that might be a daily grind that merely pays the bills may pay them well enough for you to fund a missions trip for yourself or someone else, important work. Or maybe through your work, mundane as it seems, you meet someone or are introduced to something that sets a new direction for your life that you would have missed if you were not listening for God's voice in your work life. "To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge, and happiness." It's a delight to work for God.

Read 9:9-10

- Whatever he provides go at it like gangbusters!
This is certainly akin to Paul's instructions in 1 Cor 10:31. We do everything for God's glory! "Whatever you find to do," Solomon says, "do it with all your might!" Remember the source of what we have been given to do! "This is not an exhortation simply to flail around with your hands, and whatever they grasp, work hard at it. Rather whatever fits your hand, that is, what you have the ability to do, put every ounce of effort you have into seeing the task to completion. The reason is that death is coming, and when it arrives, there is nothing left to do. Solomon lists the activities of working, planning, knowledge, and wisdom. These cannot be done in the grave (i.e., Sheol). These activities further define what the sage means by enjoyment. Planning, knowledge, and wisdom are all intellectual activities that humans are to engage in and enjoy" Bland, D. (2002). Proverbs, Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs. The College Press NIV commentary. (373). Joplin, Mo.: College Press Pub. Co.



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- God is the giver of every ability, therefore it only makes sense to work in accordance with his designs for life.

Discussion Questions:

- *How has today's lesson reshaped your view of work?*
- *Is contentment and clarity in work primarily about your vocation or is there more to it?*

Break Out Groups: (Each table discusses these questions and then presents their ideas)

- *What does Jesus have to say about work through his parables? Consider the content, the settings, and the characters? Pay extra special attention to where money comes into the picture?*
- *Why did God code the need, desire, and pride in work into our humanity? What is the source of this? Where do you see that in Scripture?*