

## The Search for Meaning at Work

### From the Theology of Work Project

Having declared his theme that toil is vanity in Ecclesiastes 1:1-11, the Teacher nonetheless proceeds to explore various possibilities for trying to live life well. He considers, among other things, achievement, pleasure, wealth, and finding joy in God's gifts. In some of these he does find a certain value, yet nothing seems permanent, and the characteristic conclusion in each section is that work comes to a chasing after wind.

First the Teacher explores achievement. He was both a king and a sage — an overachiever to use today's terms. And what did all his achievement mean to him? Not much. "It is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind" (Ecclesiastes 1:13-14). No lasting achievement even seems possible, because "What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted" (Ecclesiastes 1:15). Achieving his goals did not give him happiness, for it only made him realize how hollow and limited anything he could accomplish must be.

Next he says to himself, "Come now, I will make a test of pleasure" (Ecclesiastes 2:1). He acquires wealth, houses, gardens, alcohol, servants, jewelry, and entertainment. Unlike with achievement, he finds some value in seeking pleasure. His supposed achievements had turned out to be nothing new, but his pleasures

at least were pleasurable. It seems that work undertaken as a means to an end — in this case, pleasure — is more satisfying than work undertaken as an obsession. Today's workers might do well to take time to smell the roses, as the saying goes. Nonetheless, toiling merely in order to gain pleasure is ultimately unsatisfying. This section ends with the assessment that “again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 2:11).

Then the Teacher turns to wealth, which may be gained as a result of toil. What about the accumulation of wealth as the higher purpose behind work? This turns out to be worse than spending wealth to gain pleasure. Wealth brings the problem of inheritance. When you die, the wealth you accumulated will pass to someone else who may be completely undeserving. “Sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil” (Ecclesiastes 2:21).

Like the Teacher, many people today who accumulate great wealth find it extremely unsatisfying. While we are making our fortunes, no matter how much we have, it doesn't seem to be enough. When our fortunes are made and we begin to appreciate our mortality, giving away our wealth wisely seems to become a nearly intolerable burden. Andrew Carnegie noted the weight of this burden when he said, “I resolved to stop accumulating and begin the infinitely more serious and difficult task of wise distribution.”

And yet, the character of God in the book of Ecclesiastes is that of a giver. “To the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy” (Ecclesiastes 2:26). The giving aspect of God’s character is repeated several times in Ecclesiastes, and God’s gifts include food, drink and joy, wealth and possessions, honor, integrity, the world we inhabit, and life itself.

In the last section of Ecclesiastes, the Teacher explores the gift of God in allowing us to enjoy our work and the wealth, possessions, and honor it may bring for a time. “It is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us” (Ecclesiastes 5:18). Although the enjoyment is fleeting, it is real. “For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts” (Ecclesiastes 5:20). This joy comes not from striving more successfully than others, but from receiving life and work as a gift from God. If joy in our work does not come as a gift from God, it does not come at all.