

Our Hope for a Prosperous Future

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Isaiah

In Isaiah's vision of the new *Zion*, one of God's promises is that people will enjoy the fruit of their own labor. The people of God will no longer be oppressed but will build their own houses, drink their own wine, and eat their own food.

In the Old Testament, farming was the major occupation of the majority of the people. Thus many examples in the Bible are drawn from agrarian life and expectations. But the larger principle is that God calls us, regardless of our vocation, to trust him in our work as well as in the more apparently religious aspects of our lives.

God enjoys the creative roles his people play as they endeavor to excel at what they do under God's covenant. "They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit!" (Isaiah 65:21). The problems arise when we try to overturn the Creator/creature distinction by replacing God's values and provision with our own values and unchecked ambition. This happens when we compartmentalize our work as a secular affair that seems to have nothing to do with the kingdom of God.

Of course, in a fallen world, living faithfully does not always result in prosperity. But work done apart from faith can lead to even worse outcomes than material poverty. The early chapters of Isaiah's prophecy witness to Judah discovering exactly this.

Throughout the book, Isaiah encourages Israel with the hope that God will eventually put to right the wrongs the people are suffering in the present. Work, and the fruits of work, are included in this hope.

In chapters 60-66, this hope is finally expressed in full. God will gather his people together again, vanquish the oppressors, redeem the rebellious who repent, and establish his just kingdom. In place of Israel's faithless leaders, God himself will rule. The change is so radical that it amounts to a new creation, of parallel power and majesty to God's first creation of the world. "I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind" (Isaiah 65:17).

It may be surprising to some how much of this portion of Isaiah is related to work and the outcomes of work. Isaiah chapters 65-66 describe food and drink, construction and housing, and prosperity and wealth all coming together with health and long life to bring the work of God's people to complete fruition at last.

All these things have eluded Israel in their faithlessness to God. Indeed, the harder they tried to achieve them, the less they cared to worship God or follow his ways. The result was to lack them even more. But when the book of Isaiah presents Israel's future hope as the New Creation, all the preceding promises in the book come to the fore. The picture portrayed is that of a future eschatological or final day when the "righteous offspring of the servant" will enjoy all the blessings of the messianic age depicted earlier. Then people will actually receive the things they work for because "they shall not labor in vain" (Isaiah 65:23). Israel's sorrow will be turned into joy, and one of the dominant motifs of this coming joy is the enjoyment of the work of their own hands.

As Christians living in the tension between the inauguration of God's kingdom and its coming fulfillment, our enjoyment of our work and the fruit of our labor to the praise of God's glory foreshadows the coming day when the tension will be removed. It might be said like this: when Christians enjoy their work and the fruit it produces to the praise of God's glory, they taste a bit of heaven on earth. When all is made right and the heavens and earth are as they were originally intended, work will not cease. It will continue and will be a great delight for those involved, for the sting of the Fall will have been finally and irrevocably removed.

Work and enjoying the fruits of one's hard work, are gifts of God to be enjoyed and shared with others. When work and labor are enjoyed in the context of loving God and loving neighbor, a little bit of the new heavens and the new earth are tasted in the here-and-now.