

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

Exploring My Strange Bible Podcast

Podcast Date

[47:10]

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Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

Tim Mackie: Hey everybody. I'm Tim Mackie and this is my Podcast, Exploring my Strange Bible.

I am a card-carrying Bible history and language nerd who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have.

On this podcast, I'm putting together the last 10 years' worth of lectures and sermons where I have been exploring the strange and wonderful story of the Bible and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith and I hope this could be helpful for you too.

I also help start this thing called The Bible Project, we make animated videos and podcast about all kinds of topics in Bible and theology. You can find those resources at the BibleProject.com. With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

In this week's episode we're going to be closing down the three parts series, this is part three of three on the book of Ecclesiastes and in this message, I explore the theme of work and labor in the book of Ecclesiastes.

It's a repeated theme that comes up in all of the main sections of the book. The teaching voice of Ecclesiastes was to show you how it's actually impossible to create meaning in your life from your vocation, your career, your day to day efforts but that doesn't mean you shouldn't keep working. It just means you should put all your life's work in some kind of greater context that can account and help you work through both your successes and your failures because you're likely to have a lot of both in life.

There's a lot of practical wisdom and guidance about having a job and wrestling through both the mundane and the beautiful parts of going through your career life.

It's very practical, there's a lot of great wisdom. This message is called The Limits of Labor and let's dive in.

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

Ecclesiastes doesn't play a very positive role in the Bible, does it? It plays the negative role, remember that. Ecclesiastes, it plays the role of a wise gardener who knows that before you can grow healthy fruits and vegetables, you need to plow up the ground, you need to dig out the weeds and hack away the brambles, right? Which can be a painful and difficult process.

You need to get rid of distorted views of work and vocation before we can truly hear the good news about the Christian redemptive view of work and vocation. So, tonight's the bad news, sorry. But depending on how you feel about your job right now, you might actually hear this as good news. I'm not sure.

Turn to Ecclesiastes Chapter 1 with me, we're just kind of dive in. The first words of the book really get us into the core ideas and we'll just kind of reacquaint ourselves and then dive into this theme of work, which we'll actually see in the first words.

Ecclesiastes 1:1 "The words of the Teacher the Son of David, King in Jerusalem." So, this is the Solomon-like figure whose voice we're hearing in the book and pronouncement of this Teacher is "Meaningless" says the Teacher, "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."

Now, we've said this many weeks, but the point is repetition leads to memory. And so, what's the Hebrew word that the author uses here, the Teacher? Hevel. Does it mean the same thing as "meaningless" does in English for us?

No. Okay remember it doesn't. So, remember, we'll throw this up here again on the slides, the word hevel which means smoke or vapor. I said that with an accent that I've never had. Smoke, why did I say that? It just kind of came out, I'm sorry.

So, smoke. That's what I mean. And as a metaphor, the Teacher uses in two different ways, right? To mean fleeting or temporary, like, here one moment, gone the next. But also, something more concrete than that as if smoke, when you look at it, it seems like it's

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

there and that you can touch it. It seems like a thing but then the moment I try and grasp it or make sense of it, it eludes me.

And that's how life is under the sun here. It seems like it makes sense but then when we try and make it make sense half the time or most of the time, life falls apart on us or it doesn't go we thought it would. We can't make it work the way we want it to. It's like hevel. So, like, hevel. Okay.

So, everything is hevel. What did people gain from all of their labors at which they toil under the sun? Hey, now we're talking about work. Now, this is the first sentence of the book. We're talking about work.

The other key word in the book of Ecclesiastes: "under the sun" refers to life in this world as we presently experience it, a world-

[05:00]

Of enigma and paradox, a world that has been compromised by human sin and folly and selfishness. And because of that, because of the follies of humanity, it's wreaked havoc in God's good world. The way we experience life isn't fully as God intended us to experience life.

But somehow, we all know that and we all experience how screwed up the world is all the time, right? But somehow, and what the Teacher is concerned is with, is that we continue to work and live and operate as if ultimate, like, happiness and ultimate lasting fulfillment really is possible here under the sun.

We say we don't think it is, but we live and work as if we think it is and the way we know that is because when we don't find ultimate happiness and significance and fulfillment under the sun here, we get utter despair, we get ticked off at God and blame it on Him as if it's God's fault. And the whole point of the story of the Bible is that it's not God's fault. It's our fault for the reason why the world is the way that it is.

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

And so, he's going to take us down, every possible dead end of where humans look for meaning and significance and fulfillment and so on and show us that it's a dead end. And that apart from God, it's a dead. And so tonight, he's going to take us down the dead of work.

Which, I think, is quite depressing because this is, like, what we do with most of our waking hours, you know what I'm saying Sleeping and working. That's, like, what we do with most of our lives, right?

But we have to go here, this is a major theme in the Teacher's word. And so, here's his question Verse 3. I want you to look down at it again.

He's going to ask you. He's going to ask, "What do people gain from all of their labors at which they toil here under the sun?"

What do we gain from all of this work that we spend most of our waking hours doing or maybe you are not spending most of your waking hours working and there might be many reasons behind that.

You might be trying to find work and you're frustrated because you can't, or maybe you're intentionally trying not to find work and that's the joke about young people in Portland or whatever. But it's more of a stereotype than reality, maybe. Maybe I just don't know the right people.

Anyhow, so we're aware of the fact that we are not working if we aren't and He's asking, what do we gain? What do we get from all of this work that we do, this pursuit of work? And some of us might think, "Okay, already this is too, like, abstract and philosophical because what do we work for? We work to get a paycheck, to survive, you know what I mean?" Like, that's what we're doing. That's what we gain. I get a paycheck, I survive, I provide for myself and for those who depend on me, if I have people depending on me. That's what we work for.

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

And the Teacher says, yes, of course. Right, that's a given. But that's not what he's asking here. He's not asking, that's compensation. You work to receive compensation. What he is asking is what over and above mere survival do we get for all of the work? He's asking what's the gain, not the compensation. What's the gain?

And he's working with this idea that we know in the modern world through this famous little pyramid. There's educators, psychologists and it was Abraham Maslow. Yeah, he made this famous, called Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. And its basic point is that human beings aren't just like ants, but things that make ants happy do also make us happy. But we need also much more to make us happy, right?

So, we need food, shelter, clothing to get our physiological needs taken care of. But humans, above and beyond ants, we need also safety and security, we need also community and loving relationships and also, we just have this nagging sense to become more of a fully healthy human. We need to find significance.

I need to do something that seems to have meaning and fits into some larger story or some larger significance or something like that. And so that's what he's getting at here.

We work, yes, to provide for your needs and to survive but what he's asking is, but do we actually get to the upper parts of the pyramid? The self-actualization or significance or fulfillment from all of the labor that we do. And he's essentially going to come to the conclusion that kind of, a little bit, not really. So, no.

That's where he's going to leads us, that where it's going to lead us. And to do that, I want to, kind of, paint, get a mental image in our heads, I think that will help us as we come sort through in Chapters 2 and forward to see where he talks about work more.

So yesterday, was yesterday a glorious day or what? You know what I'm saying? I've forgotten that these days happen. This is my first winter back in Portland after many, many years. Yesterday was

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

amazing. So, Jessica and I, we did only the sensible thing you do on a sunny warm February day in Portland, we went to the beach. And I decided, I could wear a t-shirt and it was sunny. I was actually sweating in the sun in February on the beach. It was wonderful.

So anyhow-

[10:00]

So, we went on a hike, one of my favorite hikes this month, and we ended the day with sunset at Canon Beach because it's a convenient place and its wonderful nice beach and saw lots of people.

So, we were kind of walking and talking as the sun was setting, it's beautiful and stunning. All of a sudden, I had all of these memories of Canon Beach as a kid. So, one day a year, usually in the first week or so of June, every year at Canon Beach, what awesome event happens? Sand Castle Day. And hundreds and hundreds of sculptors come from the region, from the world, to Sand Castle Day.

And Canon Beach is not big, and it fills up with about 10,000 extra people for the weekend of Sand Castle Day and world-class sculptors.

And so 8 AM, people register, and you go out. And the tide has gone out and people go to the wet sand, and they all, like, have come marked out where the different lots are that people register for. And you got 7 hours because you start at 8 AM, you got till 3 PM to finish your project.

And it is epic what these people accomplish. And they lie in the beach, hundreds of world class sculptors, it's epic. And I actually can't remember how many times I went as a kid. Just because we're having this conversation, did I go four different summers growing up? Did I go two but it's so awesome it felt like four in my memory? I'm not sure.

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

So, by 3 PM, everybody has to stop because then the judges come, and they take pictures and they begin to evaluate and so on because what happens about 5 o'clock? What's going to happen? What makes the sand wet? Because the tide went out and it's all wet the sand, what's going to happen at 5? And it's the most utterly tragic. It's utterly tragic.

So, watch, because the tide begins to come in and it kind of slowly, slowly erodes, right? And those first waves begin to take over the sculptures. And then 8 AM, the next morning, you would never even know that Sand Castle Day took place.

It's the ultimate tragedy. It was all this planning going up to Sand Castle Day, the actual event itself, the judging, the awards and then the next morning, it's gone.

This is the Teacher's view of human work and accomplishment. Remember I said the first week, Ecclesiastes is like a wet blanket thrown over your life, right? And not to needlessly depress us, but to wake us up to the reality of life here in the fallen world under the sun.

Go to the Chapter 2 with me and keep this mental image of building sand castles.

Chapter 2:17 He says, "So I hated life," great start for a new paragraph, right? So, "I hated life because all the work that's done here under the sun is like, it was grievous to me. I mean, all of it is hevel." It's here and it's gone, it's over. It's like chasing the wind, it's a lot of activity but it never seems to actually amount to anything.

And so, I hated all of the things that I was toiling for here under the sun because here's the reality, I'm going to have to leave them to someone who comes after me. And who knows whether that person is wise or going to be foolish? But yet, they're going to have control over all of the fruit of my toil into which I poured all of this effort and skill here under the sun. This is hevel.

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

So, my heart begins to despair over all of this toilsome labor here under the sun because listen, you can labor with wisdom, and knowledge and skill, you might, like, rock making your sand castle, you know what I mean? Making the best sand castle ever. Or maybe you'll make creepy sand castles, you know? Whatever, right?

But you're going to have to leave it. You're going to have to leave it to somebody or something at some point. You will have to stop whatever it is that you are doing at some point. It's guaranteed. The uncertain certainty, you know? You're going to have to stop whatever it is that you put hand to in life and leave it to another who hasn't put in what you have put in, who hasn't worked for it. This is hevel, he says. It's a great misfortune.

So, in other words, what he's getting at is he says, we, on this hierarchy of needs, yes, we work to survive and get a paycheck but there is something inside all of us that is hoping that we can do more than merely survive. And many human beings, not all, but many human beings actually get to climb a little higher on the pyramid with their work and with their accomplishment

And one of the major motivators, he believes, is this desire to leave a legacy, to make an impact, to leave behind something of significance in the world. Is this a good desire? Yeah, we're going to take four weeks to explore that desire and how good it is and how God-given. Yeah, that's part of the image of God-

[15:00]

Inside of us is to do something and contribute something of value and beauty and goodness to the world.

That's a good thing. But here under the sun, in a fallen world am I guaranteed that what I've put my hand to will have that kind of contribution, that lasting contribution to the world. Do I have any guarantee? And his answer is, "I have no guarantee," because it might not be the ruthless tide that comes away and take your sand

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

castle. It might actually be, like, your kids who squander, like, what you give them after you retire or something, you know.

You build a business, or you build a corpus of work or something, of art or creative work or something, whatever it is, and you hand that off to the world to someone. You have no guarantee. You have no guarantee. And for the Teacher, he says it's hevel.

You're saying that's what going to make all of these years of work meaningful to you but, yet they will become hevel, they will at some point. The tide will come and wash it away, no guarantee whatsoever.

That's a happy notion. That's a happy notion. And so, some of us may have recognized that. We may have come to a healthy recognition like, "Okay, yeah, I recognize there is a degree to which I'm making castles in the sand and my goal is not to leave my mark on the world and to gain significance by that means, but at least I want to enjoy what I'm doing while I have to do it. Like, get some satisfaction. If I can't get this long-lasting payoff of leaving a mark on the world, maybe I can get some psychological payoff, if you know what I'm saying, of this satisfaction or enjoyment of our work," which he also deconstructs.

Verse 22: What is it that people get for all of this toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? All of their days, their work is grief and pain and even at night, their minds don't rest. This, too, is hevel."

So, he's saying, not only do we not get what we are looking for out of a life of work and accomplishment, because it doesn't make a lasting impact, but what we do get is something that we don't want, which is stress and anxiety and, like, physical pain and grief.

Some of you had this experience if you ever tried, like, starting your own business or something like that. Or let's say, you say, "I'm going to try move in the direction of my passions or my strengths and gift in my skill set."

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

Okay, so then you start into a career or a job where it's not just, like, mindless work or whatever, you just check the hours or something like that. But really, I'm going to give myself to work that is meaningful, that's tied to my passions and giftings and so on.

Is that a recipe for a stress-free life, that kind of job?

That's actually a recipe for a much more stressful life because you carry work everywhere you go because it's tied to who you are and your passions, you know what I'm saying?

So, people, you know, who, like, start small businesses out of their passions and dreams, are these, like, relaxed people who had long weekends at the beach every weekend? You know what I'm saying. But these are the hardest working people you've ever met, and they're totally stressed because, "Are we going to make overhead this week or are we going to make it this month or the things going to meet, and we don't-"

It's stressful, it's hard. And while there's joy in it because it's connected to my passions, the Teacher is going to force you to ask and say, "Listen, you put it in scales of a balance. Yes, you're finally getting to do something that you enjoy but you're also constantly losing sleep." Not only is it stressful when you're awake, he says you can't even sleep, right? You can't even sleep because at night you're sitting there, staring at the ceiling wondering what's tomorrow going to bring. Grief, anxiety, pain? I don't know what's it. So, he says it's not worth it. Is it really worth it?

This is really depressing but it is brutally honest at the same time, right? We get the sense as we go about our work, maybe you can't find work and it's really frustrating to you. And it's true because humans go coo-coo when we don't have anything to do.

We're meant to do stuff. It's the image of God stuff in us. But yet at the same time, here under the sun when we pursue it with all of our might and our passions and dreams, it ends up, like, ruling us and making us stressed out all of the time.

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

Or it ends up totally just making us disillusioned because we realize, I'm building castles in the sand for someone else who I don't even know. I've just seen, like, their names in the magazine or something like that. This is the odd thing in terms of, like, corporate culture and the alienation that many of us feel from our work because we fit one piece, or one part of a larger business or corporation and I don't know the people I'm actually working for.

And maybe you don't even see the people that the thing that you are working for benefits or serves, you know what I'm saying? This is weird, it's weird, it's weird. It's castles in the sand, let's stress this out.

So, what's the point? Turn to Chapter 4 with me, he has one more dead end to explore.

[20:00]

And you're like, "Two is enough," you know? Dead ends, that's enough. But actually, this is the most insidious and I think the deepest dead end of all because I could come to convince myself that what I'm working for won't last and what I'm looking for won't be able to provide for me a sense of significance or leaving a legacy or an impact in the world. Okay, I've dealt with that. I dealt with it. And I can get myself to a place of just dealing with the pain and the greed.

There was a Pulitzer prize-winning book wrote in the early 1970's by a guy named Studs Terkel. And it won a Pulitzer. And what he did was he, the journalist, he went around the country conducting hundreds and hundreds of interviews with mostly blue-collar America. And he called the book, the book with excerpts of the interviews and quotes and so on, drawing to get the themes.

The book is called Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do. That was the name of the book. And here's the first paragraph of the book, and he says:

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

"It's a book about work and therefore, by its very nature, is about violence; violence to the spirit as well as to the body. It's about ulcers as well as accidents. It's about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It's, above all, about the daily humiliations to survive the day is triumph enough for the willing, walking, working, wounded among the great many of us."

That, apparently, is the expression of what work does to us 40 years ago. Are we doing any better today? I'll leave that to your judgment. And so, some of us might say, "Okay, I can't necessarily make a world-lasting impact. I may not be able to find a life free of stress but maybe somehow, maybe what work can help me do is find myself. Maybe I can find a career or a job that will give me a sense of who I am and an identity to figure out what I'm about in the world." And the Teacher said that's the deepest delusion of all, that work can give you an idea of who you are.

Look at Chapter 4:4 He says, "And I saw that all toil and all achievement," let's stop there. He's using two words for work here and there's significance. So, the first one is just the general word "work" or "labor," right? All work. But the second word he uses is something you might have new translations like skillful work or skillful labor.

He's saying, let's say you, like, really rock at making sand castles. You're, like, the best. You win, like, Sand Castle Day every single year, right? So, you might just work or whatever or you might have great achievement and success at what you do. You can say that it's all of this springs from or comes from one person's envy of another person. This is hevel, it's like chasing after the wind.

Envy. So, we think of envy and we think, "Okay, so all toil and all achievement come from me wanting what you have? I'm envious, like, you have the awesome vintage bike or something, you have a cool car. And so, I want that so I'm going to work harder to get that."

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

And that's a part of what he's saying but that's not the deepest part of what he's saying. It's not envy of your stuff, it's not envy of what you're working for. This is about the core motivation for why we work.

He's talking about this deep sense of jealousy rooted in insecurity as a motivation for why: why we work. That's what he's getting at here. This envy that's a result of comparing myself to you.

So, for example, we have great many baristas here at A Door of Hope. Did you know that the Northwest Regional Barista Championships took place today? Did you know this? February 3rd up in Seattle? Maybe you didn't know this, but you may have friends up there and I know for a fact that there's A Door of Hope people up at the Northwest Regional Barista Championships there.

So, let's say, what, it's that feeling, you're a barista and you get up to the championships. And you're good. I mean you can make the cool heart shapes or whatever, on the top of your, you know, lattes or whatever.

And like, you're good. You're good but you get up to the championships and you realized all these other baristas and you have to face the facts, like, these people are way better than me. I may be a big fish in a small pond, but you get to the regional championships, I'm outgunned, you know what I'm saying?

So, it's that feeling, right? When you get around people who do what you do or do what you want to do.

[25:00]

They do the same thing and you just realized, "Holy cow, like, they're better than me and I can't do a darn thing about it," you know what I'm saying? Have you been in this position before?

You're a musician, you're a parent, you're a mom. And like that other mom's kids, never, like, slobber and drool or whatever, and Johnny was potty trained at two and half or something, you know?

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

And so, you just realized, "Oh my gosh they're better than me and I can't do a thing about it."

And there's a whole bunch of us, there's a whole bunch of us for whom that is such a great threat but we may not even realize it but we internalized that so deep that the symptom of that insecurity resorts itself in competition, in excelling, in working even harder, maybe working to a degree that isn't healthy for us, or working in a ways that we treat the people around us in ways that we would normally never treat people. But because we got our eye on the prize, eye of the tiger whatever, you know? Because I'm going to succeed. You can't be better than me, you know? This is what he's getting at here. Envy of another.

And so, what he's convinced of is that even though we might say that I'm working to provide a service, what he really believes is that we're working to provide ourselves with an identity in a sense of worth and value.

So, we might say, "I'm working to get a paycheck. I'm working to get compensation." And he's saying, "Actually what you're working for is to get a life. You're trying to prove that you're someone and justify your existence in the universe and justify that you're worth taking up space in the universe."

I'm just trying to say what he's saying in different words. that's what he's getting at. He believes this is one of the heart core motivations for human work and he says its hevel. And why it is hevel?

He says because work cannot provide you with a sense of who you are. A sense of your self-worth and your identity and value isn't something that you can create. You can't make or manufacture that. It has to be something given to you, it's something you receive.

And that truth is contained in a sort of riddle that he tells in Verses 5 and do you guys like riddles? So, what's great is that the punch line of this whole thing comes in a riddle, it's a lot like Jesus' teaching, right?

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

Versus 5-6: He tells us a little riddle. The three dead ends: work can make an impact, well actually it can't really. Work can bring me joy and satisfaction, well, really put that into scales but actually not really. It might be a little bit behind the scales. Work gives me an identity and a sense of who I am. Actually, it's hevel because it's rooted in insecurity.

And so, he tell us through a riddle in Versus 5 and 6. Brilliant, it's brilliant. He says "Fools fold their hands and they ruin themselves. Better is one handful with tranquility." or some of your translations have rest.

"Better is one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind." It's a riddle. Suppose you have a cup of tea and think about it, you know? That's what you do with riddles, right?

You pause, you ponder, and you get it? You get what he's saying with the riddle? You can get the basic idea, right? So, there might be a whole bunch of us who are ready to go quit our jobs right now, you know what I mean? Like, what's the point, you know? What's the point?

And he will say that's foolish. It's foolish because he says fools fold their hands, get that. And also look, in English, we have three words for hands. Here, we have hands, handful, handfuls because in English, we have basically one word to refer to this thing. It's hand.

And the riddle in Hebrew, he uses three different words. Hebrew has three different words for hand, all with different nuances or meaning. Do you want to learn all the three words for hands right now?

Okay, you need to understand the riddle, I think. So, he says fools hold their yad. The yad is from your fingertips to your elbow. So, we call this, like, your hand and so what do we call this? Right, your forearm.

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

So, in Hebrew, yad is the way to refer to the whole thing, so even the way they divide up physiology. So, what does it mean to fold your yad? That's an image, it's a metaphor. What's he getting at with this image? Nap time, laziness.

So, in other words, whether it's intentionally or to intentionally give up, to neglect the abilities or the skills or the opportunities that I could have if I were to put myself to it, to neglect that, to reject it, it's foolish. He says laziness is foolish.

And we might think, well, wait a minute. Like, you're totally, like, motivating me to become lazy because what is the point of work? And he's like, we're not there yet. We got to get to the bottom of the riddle, right?

But laziness, the folding of my yad intentionally, to fold your yad is foolish. You're squandering what God has put in you.

[30:00]

You're squandering the fact that you've been given life and breath and a chance to do something in the world and discover what that is, it's foolish and it's the way to ruin yourself. Humans go coo-coo when we don't have anything to do. You realize this? Or we, like, turn the PlayStation 3 or Xbox or something and that really makes you coo-coo on a whole other way, though, because you think you're fine but actually you're being programmed to live in some other world, right?

So, you fold your yad, right? That's foolish. You ruined yourself, you ruined your humanity by not having anything to do. So, it's that some people's response to hevel under the sun. They fold their yad. That's one extreme.

The other extreme is the last one that he mentions, which is two hands full of toil and chasing after the wind, chophen, chophen. Would you say it with me?

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

Chophen. So he says "Fools fold their yad, as this is not wise but equally and on the other extreme of not being wise is to live life with two chopphen which is this grabbing fistfuls, like this. This is an equally unhealthy hevel-like way to live. And do you get what he means just by the metaphor of this right here?

What is this? Right, this is an approach to life where I'm trying to milk out of this job or this career or this life goal. I'm trying to get out of it all kinds of things that the Teacher thinks you will never get out of it, right?

You work tirelessly because it's this grabbing posture to life. You're trying to get something out of these things that can never actually give you what you're looking for, which is this deep sense of worth, of value, joy or satisfaction that you're contributing to something meaningful.

I mean, we have a word for this in English. It's one of the addictive behaviors that we actually praise in modern America, called "workaholism" right? And of course, because this person so successful, look how hard they're, like, making sacrifices and they're working and so on.

And in the New York Times, there's this survey done not long ago about what if, it's one of these, kind of, fun questions to figure out people's personalities, if there's an extra hour to the day, a 25 hour a day, what would you do with that extra hour? I'm hearing two people says sleep.

All right, this is the majority answer. Why is that? Because we're exhausted. We're exhausted, we're the most overworked culture, at least for upper class jobs in America. Most overworked people in the world. What's going on here?

Somehow, this is like an admirable trait to live life grasping with two chopphen. In Portland, I'm not sure, right? Which I kind of appreciate about the culture, at least, of this city. But for some people, you know what I'm saying? And this as foolish, it's hevel because it won't

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

give you what you're looking for because it's rooted in insecurity and envy, he says.

And sometimes some of us are honest about it that that's where this is all rooted in. It's in my deep insecurity and that's why I'm grabbing at life, right? Some of us are honest sometimes. People like Madonna are sometimes honest and just listen to her words. This is very powerful.

So, she says, "I have an iron will and all of my will has always been to conquer some horrible feeling of inadequacy. I push past one spell of it and then discover myself as a special human being. And then I get to another stage and think that I'm mediocre and uninteresting again and again. My drive in life, it's from this horrible fear of being mediocre and that's always pushing me because even though I've become somebody, I still have to prove that I am somebody. My struggle has never ended, and it probably never will."

So that sounds like a great career. That sounds like success and living with two chopfen has really pushed you to a healthy place. At least she's honest about it. And what's funny is that this is the kind of honesty that you wonder if it's really honest because clearly, she hasn't changed career trajectory, you know what I'm saying? She's still at it. She's still at it and so are many of us.

And so, the Teacher with his little riddle, he says "Listen, it's foolish to fold your yad and to just check out of the game because you're going to ruin yourself. But at the same time, it's futile to live life with this kind of grabbing posture."

We commenced this middle hand here, having the second hand, he says, "Best is one hand full with rest or with tranquility." And the word that he uses here is the word, kaf which simply refers to the inside of your hand, open palm right here. This is what he has in mind right here, an open palm. Because the moment you do this, it's chopfen. But this is kaf, it's kaf.

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

So, he says one hand. So, it's not folding here yet, it's one hand. You're working, you're committed to something, to being productive. It's important for humans, we'll explore this in the next teaching series-

[35:00]

For four weeks. It's vitally important for identity and worth and for community to contribute and to be working in some way but he says this is the posture. One hand, the other hand's down because you're resting. You're working and you're in the game and you're engaged but somehow, it's with an open hand.

This is such a beautiful image. You're working from a place of rest. This is a paradox. You're in the place of rest but that's what allows you to work. This is beautiful.

So somehow, he thinks it's possible to have a posture in life where I'm working, I'm committed to something and it's something more than just survival but I'm actually looking to become the kind of human being God wants me to be but I may begin from a place of rest and that's what allows me to commit myself but with an open handed approach, right?

Because the moment that you do this, then I'm trying to control the outcomes. We did a whole message about that a couple of weeks ago, right? And he says that's hevel. So, open handed approach.

This is the riddle that he tells. It's a little Hebrew riddle. This is what he comments, and it leaves us just on the brink because we're just like, "Okay and how do you get here? This is it. Apparently, this is the way to live, right?"

So, I'm resting from a place of deep rest, hand in the game but it's an open hand. How do you get there, and you read the book of Ecclesiastes, right? Because what's the role of this book in the Bible? Positive or negative? It's negative.

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

He's exposing the brokenness of the human heart, he's exposing the reality of life here under the sun. He doesn't provide any ultimate solutions, that's not the point of the book. Not the point of the book. It's one book in the Bible that's hacking away at the brambles and digging up the weeds to prepare us for something that can bring us rest.

And this here, I think that some words of Jesus that may be familiar to you but familiarity breeds contempt or at least boredom. And so, hear these words in light of the incisive critique and the hacking of the Teacher. Hear these words of Jesus again for the first time.

Matthew 11: "Jesus says come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you," what? "I'll give you rest. Take my yoke upon you learn from me for I'm gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls for my yoke is easy, my burden is light."

There's a paradox at the heart of what He's saying here, do you see it? Somehow, following Jesus is a burden. It's hard, it's difficult, isn't it? Life is hard, and life is difficult. Can I get an amen? But somehow, coming under the burden, the Teacher says if you, what? Shoulder the heavy burden of work and toil on your own, you're welcome to it. It's going to destroy you or at least give you ulcers or at least make you really depressed. But go for it if you want, right?

Or I can take on myself the burden of what Jesus has to give me and somehow, it's a burden that brings rest. It's work that brings rest. It's a yoke, so he uses this image of, like, we're oxen or cows or donkeys who would wear this heavy wooden U-shaped or O-shaped thing that gets connected to, like, a cart that I pull along or something like that.

So, it's an image of something heavy over me but this heavy thing that Jesus wants us to put on us is actually going to bring us rest and freedom in life.

So, it's actually kind of another riddle, isn't it? So, what's he getting at? And what Jesus is always getting at is the heart of the human

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

condition and it's the heart of what He came to address. Ecclesiastes exposes the problem, Jesus comes to give the remedy and the answer.

And the answer is ultimately this: You can shoulder this burden of finding meaning and significance and making an impact and finding joy. You can shoulder that on your own. The Teacher says it's not going to go well but you allow Jesus's burden to fall on you.

It's the word of His teaching, it's the word of the Gospel. And the good news about Jesus and what He did for us on the cross and the resurrection is this paradox because it's the clause in the Gospel says, "The worst possible thing about you and me that we could possibly imagine and that's the heavy burden to bear." At the same moment it says, "The best possible thing about it is that you could ever hope for or imagine which is what gives freedom."

[40:00]

And so, the Teacher's convinced that if there's something broken inside you and me so deep, right? The "walking wounded" as Studs Terkel, I can't even say his name, right? Don't name your kids Studs, whatever you do, right?

So, Studs Terkel, right? The working, walking wounded. He says it comes from this place of deep self-centeredness of insecurity, of wanting to make for myself a life for myself. Don't tell me what to do. That's a form it takes for some of us.

For others of us, it dresses us. The Gospel and what the Teacher points out is our deep insecurity and selfishness. And when that issues itself in the life of work, it creates seven billion human beings who make the world exactly what it is today.

That's the bad news of the Gospel. It's the burden that we need to take upon ourselves, this word of Jesus that says you and I are so deeply screwed up we don't even realize how screwed up we are.

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

And it results in these lives of work that make the world what it is today under the sun.

Fallen and broken but at the same moment that the Teacher and Jesus exposes this deep brokenness inside of us, it's also taking the burden of the Gospel upon myself that gives me rest and freedom because the Gospel says that here we are, a bunch of broken people, like, just royally screwing up the world out of our deep insecurity and envy.

And what is God's response to us? And we think, "Oh yeah, exactly." You take that as He's going to destroy us all. And so, you can have that view of God if you want but please don't associate that God with Jesus. Please don't, please don't. That's not the Gospel.

The good news of the Gospel is that here we are, doing this to God's world and to other people making God's image and doing all of this to ourselves, and what is God's response? Is God's response is to come be with us in Jesus to shoulder our burden upon Himself and then His life on the cross?

This becomes the symbolic moment, it's like a magnifying glass where the hevel of our world that we create because of our envy and insecurity and our ego, it's like it all gets magnified onto Jesus and He lives this kind of loving life of rest and self-giving that you and I can only dream of living.

We can only dream. I cannot live like Jesus and to be honest with you most of the time I don't want to. Let's just be real, you know what I'm saying? That's the heavy burden, it's being honest with myself about that.

But right at that moment that I recognize that, and I take that burden of Jesus upon myself, He meets me right there and He says, "I have lived this life for you."

Somehow, and it was Paul who said, the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me so that somehow, I am actually dying with

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

all of this envy, all of this insecurity. It's being put to death with Jesus on the cross. And the life that I now live and the life that I now go into my work and career and accomplishment.

It's not me. It's Jesus living in me. It's what Paul says in Galatians Chapter 2. It's Jesus living in me. "Somehow through Jesus I can become the kind of person that I could never become for myself because it's Jesus' doing."

This is the remedy that the Teacher did not have on him. He exposes the problem, he tills the ground and Jesus provides this great saving remedy for the working wounded here in the world.

And the moment I internalize that truth, that God's love for me is so deep that He would do what Jesus did for me in His life, His death, His resurrection, gives me His life. If you internalize that truth it will completely transform your view of what you do 8 to 10 hours a day.

Jimmy can be the best priest in the world, I don't care. I'll be 14th in the regional championships, you know what I mean? Whatever. Jesus died for me. I'm freed from that place of rest because my identity is not something I'm getting. My identity as something that I receive from Jesus and His love for me. I'm freed to enter my work and to honor God and do the best of my God-given abilities that I can with the opportunities that I have in front of me.

And when I shoulder the bad thing the Gospel says about me, I'll find the freedom into God's love for me and I'm freed, I'm freed from the tyranny of work.

That's the answer to the riddle that Jesus gives. You're doing something with your life. Whether you're folding your yad or whether you're grabbing with your choppen. We're looking for something and Jesus says it's only when you take My burden on you that you will find rest, to work from a place of rest.

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

And so, some of us, we need to do that in a new way tonight because Monday is like this dark cloud over your life. And what we're doing with our 8 to 10 hours a day, it may be-

[45:00]

Extremely difficult, it may be very difficult but even the most difficult thing can be transformed when you know that the most important Person in the universe is just head over heels above you and gave His life for you and He's present with you in that frustrating situation.

It completely transforms your view of what you do with your day. So, some of us we need to come to the cross tonight and we need to hear this critique and this hacking of the Teacher and let Him expose what's inside of us and then we need to take that and lay it at the cross and receive with an open hand the love of Jesus for you and for me.

This is what our gatherings are for. That's what where here to do tonight. Amen!

Thanks for listening to the series on Ecclesiastes. I hope it was helpful for you and like it did for me I trust that it expanded your sense, both of your own humanity, your own mortality, your own finiteness but also inspires all of us to live in a way that's much more present in the moment, to live in a way that's honest with our limited capabilities as human beings. But also, it can still embrace the wonder and the beauty of existence in God's good world even when we don't understand it.

Such a profound book. I look forward to coming back to it and studying it all over again in the future but at least I hope it's kind of opened up some new horizons for you to go. Re-read this book of the Old Testament with fresh eyes and new understanding.

So, thanks again for listening to the Strange Bible podcast, you guys. If you like this podcast, if you find it helpful for you leave a

Ecclesiastes P3: The Limits of Labor

review and tell other people about it and how it's helped you.
Thanks for listening and we'll talk again next time. See you!

[End of transcription 47:10]