GOD LOVES WORK

The Drama of Work

Volume 3

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God Loves Work: The Drama of Work

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The play's the thing.
– Hamlet, William Shakespeare

For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to humans.
– 1 Corinthians 4:9

In 6th grade I got the part of Bottom the Weaver in Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream. While the main drama concerns the blunders of two pairs of lovers, Bottom, the comedic star of the show, leads a buffoonish group of working-class men who stage their own play within the play. I loved playing Bottom as I first tasted the thrill of being the center of attention, and I still love that play now because I have come to see it as a profound picture of God's saving work in the world.

The play within a play—Bottom's play—in A Midsummer Night's Dream ultimately resolves the play's primary plot and dispels the lovers' confusion caused by the fairies.

The Gospel is also a play within a play. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has **enacted** an eternal drama on the stage of the world. The eternal drama is the ongoing, self-giving love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. **That** play, staged fully within our world, has resolved the plot, defeating the powers of sin, death, hell, and the devil.

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What does this have to do with work? Everything, actually. Although God's saving action is complete (John 19:30), God's redemptive work in the world is ongoing and God graciously invites us onto the stage. When Paul writes to the Corinthian church about his apostolic vocation, he employs words from Greek theater: God has "exhibited" the apostles to be a "spectacle" to the world (1 Cor. 4:9). Our lives are to be a play, a continued enactment of the eternal drama of self-giving love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And work? Work is the main stage where much of the action unfolds and where we can play our parts, participating in God's ongoing redemptive action.

This devotional traces the drama of the Gospel in four acts:

Creation, Fall, Redemption, and New Creation.

Each act will include a key biblical passage, questions for discussion, and a guiding prayer. It is perhaps best done alongside others you trust, but can also be done alone in quiet reflection. Shakespeare was right, the play's the thing. God's eternal play, staged in the world through the person and work of Jesus Christ, is the thing (the play) that has saved us. To him be the glory, and may our lives, particularly in our work, be a spectacle to the world of God's saving action.

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ACT 1: CREATION

READ

Psalm 8 (ESV)

To the choirmaster: according to The Gittith. A Psalm of David.

1 O Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
2 Out of the mouth of babies and infants,
you have established strength because of your foes,
to still the enemy and the avenger.

3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
4 what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?

5 Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.
6 You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet,
7 all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
8 the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

9 O Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Part of the beauty of Psalm 8 is that it begins and ends with the same line: "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" I imagine David praying this line at sunrise, and then again at sunset. In this way the structure of the poem calls attention to its content, the beauty of creation eliciting our praise.

Psalm 8 reminds us that God's work is **creative** work. Praying this psalm, particularly alongside an experience in creation, connects our work with that of the Creator. In prayer, David is mimicking what God did at the close of each day of creation, beholding creation's goodness.

Praying this psalm also allows us to see ourselves rightly. David steps back and sees that creation is good, and in so doing, understands humanity's limited but significant place in the created order.

How majestic is his name in all the earth!

REFLECT

Significantly, the first element of creation that David names is actually the most vulnerable: "You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouths of babies and infants you have established strength" (v. 2). **What is it about babies that particularly declares God's glory? What are the elements of your work which reflect the vulnerability, dependence, and newness of infants?**

At the center of David's prayer is awe that the God who created the moon and stars would be mindful of humans (v. 3-4). **How is God's mindfulness and care for people at the center of your work? If God's greatest care in creation are human beings, how can your work more fully express this care?**

In verses 5-7, David indicates the place of significance that humanity has in creation; this is understood as "dominion," a word which means care and stewardship. **How does your work express this vocation of care and stewardship?**

PRAY

Try bookending one day this week with a sunrise and a sunset prayer, and pray David's opening and closing line:

"O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth."

As you do so, sit in quiet reflection, listening to the voice of the Spirit, the one who continues to sustain the whole of creation, including you.

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ACT 2: FALL

READ

Genesis 4:1-16 (ESV) Cain and Abel

1 Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord."
2 And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. 3 In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, 4 and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, 5 but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. 6 The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? 7 If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, and you must rule over it."

8 Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. 9 Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" 10 And the Lord said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. 11 And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. 12 When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth." 13 Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear. 14 Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me." 15 Then the Lord said to him, "Not so! If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold." And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him. 16 Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Genesis 4 records another fall of humanity. This fall, between brothers Cain and Abel, was preceded by the fall in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve and the serpent. After Genesis 4, we read of yet another fall when humanity builds the tower of Babel (Gen. 11). While we often only think of "the fall" as the moment in the Garden, Genesis helps us recognize that our estrangement from God due to sin is ongoing and we are all complicit.

REFLECT

The text does not make clear why the Lord had regard for Abel's work but not for Cain's (verses 3-5). In all likelihood this had to do with the hidden motive of each offering. God is deeply attentive to our work and to the motives which sustain it. **Do you see your work as an offering to the Lord? How might God judge this offering?**

After Cain kills Abel, one of the most famous conversations in Scripture occurs. God asks, "Where is Abel your brother?" and Cain responds, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (v. 9). The word Cain uses is the same one that is used in the Priestly Blessing: "May the Lord bless you and **keep** you" (Num. 6:22). Although God does not directly answer Cain's question, the whole of Scripture declares that we are, indeed, our sisters' and brothers' keepers. **How is your work uniquely suited to do this keeping?**

When humanity acts outside of God's intent and design in Genesis 3 and 4, work becomes toilsome and less fruitful. Yet, God still invites us to join him in his work, right where we are today. **As you reflect on your work and its context, what do you notice that feels toilsome and less fruitful?**

PRAY

God of creation, you are the one who keeps me and my work. You tend to me with care and love, and you call me to be a keeper of my brothers and sisters, particularly in my work. Reveal to me how you want me to do this, and by your grace, I will follow.

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ACT 3: REDEMPTION

READ

Genesis 50:20 (ESV)

20 As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good,
to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

Act 3 in God's drama is the decisive turning point, God's act of redemption, grounded in God's saving work through the crucified and risen Christ. Christ's redemptive work is prefigured throughout the Old Testament, and nowhere do we see this more profoundly than in the concluding story of Genesis.

Joseph is face-to-face with his brothers who tried to kill him. Deathly afraid of what he will do to them, the brothers expect retribution but receive redemption. Joseph says, "You intended [or purposed] evil against me, but God meant [or purposed] it for good."

Joseph's response is one of the clearest expositions of God's saving work in Christ. What was purposed for evil—by Satan and by sinful humans—God purposed for good. Jesus' death on the cross was a violent and unjust act; yet, God purposed it for good, bringing about our redemption. Moreover, the drama of Act 3 continues, for we are called to participate in God's ongoing redemptive work, particularly in our work.

REFLECT

Work is frequently a theater for redemption, for in our work we often experience suffering, injustice, and even evil. **How have you experienced God's redemptive activity in your work, a place or time when something meant for harm was repurposed by God for good?**

God's redemptive activity in our work often starts with us seeing what is broken. **What is broken in your work or industry? What is one small step that you could take to address this brokenness?**

Joseph's response to his brothers was an act of forgiveness, and we are taught to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Mt. 6:12). **Who in your work or workplace do you need to forgive?**

PRAY

God of grace, your work of redemption is a continuation of your creative work. You are making me new, alongside all creation. Great is your faithfulness, which we see most fully enacted in the death of your Son. By your grace, may my work participate in the beauty of your ongoing redemptive care for your world.

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ACT 4: NEW CREATION

READ

Isaiah 43:19-21 (ESV)

19 Behold, I am doing a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
20 The wild beasts will honor me,
the jackals and the ostriches,
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
21 the people whom I formed for myself
that they might declare my praise.

God's drama has not ended, but we know how the story ends. The final Act of the gospel drama is God's work of new creation. There will be a new heavens and a new earth, and the new Jerusalem, the holy city, will be God's people's ongoing dwelling place and reality for eternity.

Although we are waiting for the culmination of this reality, we do not need to wait to experience it or participate in it. God's raising of Jesus from the dead began this new creation. Isaiah calls attention to this resurrection-shaped, already-but-not-yet reality of the new creation within the old: "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isa. 43:19).

REFLECT

Isaiah 40 and subsequent chapters, including Isaiah 43, are Isaiah's words to Israel after the city of Jerusalem has been destroyed and they are taken as exiles to Babylon. As the New Testament makes clear, the church is also in exile, waiting for God's victory, and experiencing the already-not-yet reality of God's new creation. When we experience things like miscommunication, betrayal, and injustice in our work we are experiencing exile. What are the marks of exile in your work?

Isaiah's call is clear: we are to behold God's work of new creation. What new thing is springing up from your work? Are you perceiving it?

In Isaiah 43:20-21 the prophet makes clear that God's people will experience "rivers in the desert" that "they might declare my praise." How has your work felt like a desert, and how has God provided life-giving water? In what ways is your work worship, declaring praise of the God who is doing new things even in barren places?

PRAY

God of grace, your work is ever new. I await the fullness of the new heavens and the new earth. I wait and I hope. For this moment, today, may I behold and perceive your goodness, knowing my work is a part of your new creation that has begun already in the risen Christ.

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