

Ecclesiastes 4:1-6, 13-16

Climbing the Ladder to Nowhere

Main idea: Life is not about what we can accomplish. It's about what Jesus has accomplished for us.

Bronnie Ware is an Australian nurse who spent several years working in palliative care, caring for patients in the last 12 weeks of their lives.¹ As she talked with them, she heard them express the same regrets over and over again, and the top 2 regrets that people had as they were nearing the end of their lives were these:

1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.
2. I wish I hadn't worked so hard.

And I think these two things are actually very closely related for a lot of people. We think that we're expected to live a certain way, and to work a certain way. Our culture often looks up to people who work a lot and make huge contributions to society, but we often don't hear about how they did so at the expense of their health or families. So nearing the end of their lives, when they reflect on what they wished they had done differently, most people say that they wished they hadn't spent so much time working.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/feb/01/top-five-regrets-of-the-dying>

Billy Graham said something similar. When he was interviewed by *Christianity Today*, he was asked the question: “If you could, would you go back and do anything differently?” Billy Graham responded:

Yes, of course. I'd spend more time at home with my family, and I'd study more and preach less. - Billy Graham

Billy Graham was one of the most successful evangelists from the last 100 years, sharing Jesus with millions of people! Talk about making your life count! And yet, when asked about what he would change, he regretted spending so much time preaching. Towards the end of his life, he wished that he had simply spent more time with his family.

So much of our lives are spent working. The average adult in America works about a third of their waking lives. And if you factor in the work that it takes to maintain our homes as well, doing laundry, cutting the grass, fixing things, the number goes up to almost 50% of our lives.²

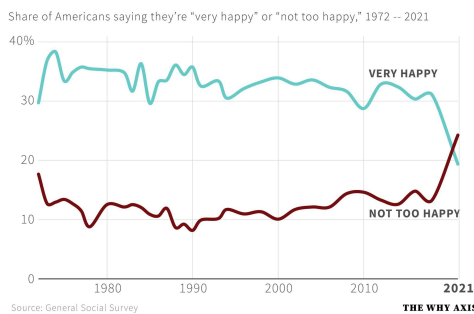
Now, that's on average. Some people work more, and some people work less, but the staggering truth is that we spend a lot of time working!

² <https://www.nexalearning.com/blog/bid/50652/startling-statistics-about-how-we-spend-our-time>

Some people say they work just to pay the bills. Some say they work for personal fulfillment. But if that's the case, it would seem that most people would be happy and have all that they need. But the data indicates that people are in debt and aren't happy.

In a recent survey, only 19% of Americans said that they were very happy, compared with 24% who said that they were not too happy.³

[Happiness Graph]



Now, a large part of this in recent years is due to the results of Covid, but even before that, it still shows that the majority would not describe themselves as very happy.

So with work being such a big part of our lives, and given the fact that we're less happy than ever before, how do we change that?

³ <https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/02/politics/unhappiness-americans-gallup-analysis/index.html>

Ecclesiastes 4:1-6

Again, I observed all the acts of oppression being done under the sun. Look at the tears of those who are oppressed; they have no one to comfort them. Power is with those who oppress them; they have no one to comfort them. So I commended the dead, who have already died, more than the living, who are still alive. But better than either of them is the one who has not yet existed, who has not seen the evil activity that is done under the sun. I saw that all labor and all skillful work is due to one person's jealousy of another. This too is futile and a pursuit of the wind. The fool folds his arms and consumes his own flesh. Better one handful with rest than two handfuls with effort and a pursuit of the wind. (Ecclesiastes 4:1-6)

Now skip down to verse 13.

Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer pays attention to warnings. For he came from prison to be king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom. I saw all the living, who move about under the sun, follow a second youth who succeeds him. There is no limit to all the people who were before them, yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. This too is futile and a pursuit of the wind. (Ecclesiastes 4:13-16)

Father, as we think about our relationship with work, even good work, help us to not get so consumed with what we do, or what we think we should do, and miss what it is that You've done. Help us to rest in Jesus's work for us. In Jesus's name, Amen.

The Bible says a lot about work. It tells us to work hard.⁴ It tells us to work honestly and treat others fairly.⁵ It tells us to do all things with excellence and to work as unto the Lord.⁶ But in all of the things that it tells us about work, the Bible is not primarily about us and what we do. It's about God, and what He does.⁷

In our pride, we often treat life as if it's all about us. We call that narcissism when others do it, but we call it personal goals when we ourselves do it. And I'm not saying we shouldn't have goals, but we should always keep our goals in perspective of the ultimate goal. Because, you see, life is not ultimately about what we can accomplish. It's all about what Jesus has accomplished for us. Jesus lived the perfect life that we fail to live, and He died in our place.⁸ And in so doing, He invited us into His rest.

⁴ Proverbs 14:23

⁵ Psalm 106:3

⁶ 1 Corinthians 10:31, Ephesians 6:7-8

⁷ John 5:39-40

⁸ 1 Peter 3:18

So when we work for the Lord, serving the Lord, we don't work to earn a wage. We don't work to climb the ladder that leads to heaven, as if we had to earn it for ourselves. All of that has already been accomplished for us by Jesus. So we work simply because God is worthy of our work. And we work because it's a joy to serve God and give our lives to Him, because He loves us and gave His life to us.⁹

And when we miss or forget that truth, we can often spend years chasing after the wind, trying to climb a ladder that goes nowhere.

Verse 1.

Again, I observed all the acts of oppression being done under the sun. Look at the tears of those who are oppressed; they have no one to comfort them. Power is with those who oppress them; they have no one to comfort them. So I commended the dead, who have already died, more than the living, who are still alive. But better than either of them is the one who has not yet existed, who has not seen the evil activity that is done under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 4:1-3)

Now, at first, you might hear this and think, "What does this have to do with my job? What does any of this have to do

⁹ Ephesians 2:8-10

with my work today?” But the only reason we might not see it immediately is because the kinds of jobs most of us have today weren’t nearly as common when this passage was written about 3,000 years ago.

The Teacher in this passage basically groups everyone into one of two categories: those with power, and those without. Those with power, whether political figures, or business owners, or even just people with influence in some way have the capacity to change and order around the lives of those who do not have power. We can complain about it, and in our political system, we can try to change it through our vote, but in the end, it’s just a reality that there’s an imbalance of power in this life.

I’m sure we all know the name Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.¹⁰ In the 1950’s and 60’s, Dr. King was a Baptist pastor and civil rights activist who advocated for nonviolent resistance to the discrimination and segregation of African Americans. He believed that the power of love and justice could overcome the forces of hate and injustice. And his message was embraced even by many people in power, so much that he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for combating racial inequality through nonviolent resistance. And yet, in 1968, he was killed for nonviolently promoting love and peace.

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther_King_Jr.

There's just no question that a great many people are oppressed in this life. The poor, the marginalized, even the common worker is to some degree oppressed. If you don't have the power yourself, you're oppressed or at least suppressed by those who do. And this goes on all of our lives. It's a great injustice.

Now, this injustice finally ends when we die, but Solomon writes that it would be even better not to see it or have to participate in it at all. And yet we do. We all do.

For example, if your motivation for working is just to serve those who have power, whether your boss or even your clientele because they have money that you want, you've become a slave, oppressed, and that's a great evil. And if your motivation for working is to eventually have the power, bossing others around, then you basically want to be the oppressor. And even if you reason that you want to use your power for good, there will still be those under you who feel powerless, and that's also a great evil. In fact, the Teacher wrote in verse 4:

I saw that all labor and all skillful work is due to one person's jealousy of another. This too is futile and a pursuit of the wind. (Ecclesiastes 4:4)

If you just want to beat your neighbor, then you can't possibly be their friend. But God calls us to love our neighbor! And yet, it seems that our whole economy is built on competing with our neighbor. We work so hard, for so long, and it's all just a pursuit of the wind. It's meaningless.

So we might be tempted to go the other extreme. Verse 5.

The fool folds his arms and consumes his own flesh.
Better one handful with rest than two handfuls with effort
and a pursuit of the wind. (Ecclesiastes 4:5-6)

Instead of working hard, and trying to climb the ladder which ultimately leads to nowhere, we might decide that the system is flawed, and refuse to participate in it. And this can certainly be good to a degree. It's good to rest.¹¹ It's good to not buy into the idea that life is all about getting the most power or the most stuff. But if your motivation for resting is just to serve yourself, then you'll consume yourself. You'll end up wasting your life.

Jesus said:

If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life

¹¹ Exodus 31:13

because of me will find it. For what will it benefit someone if he gains the whole world yet loses his life? (Matthew 16:24b-26a)

You see, so often we seek to make our lives mean something by striving after achievements or possessions, but Jesus says that our lives mean something when we lose our lives for Him. And He Himself modeled this best. He went to the cross not for His own benefit, but to magnify God's love, and to save us. And He calls us to follow Him in giving our lives to Him. THAT is when we find our purpose in life, when we find our purpose in Jesus.

But once again, we tend to want to make life all about us. So the last few verses of the chapter paint a best-case scenario about working for ourselves. Most people love a good rags to riches story, and that's exactly what this is. Verse 13.

Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer pays attention to warnings. For he came from prison to be king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom. I saw all the living, who move about under the sun, follow a second youth who succeeds him. There is no limit to all the people who were before them, yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. This too is futile and a pursuit of the wind. (Ecclesiastes 4:13-16)

So say you have a poor kid, but he's smart. In fact, he's so smart and hardworking that he becomes king. He really pulls himself up by his own efforts. We love that kind of story!

But what comes of it? Nothing. We talked about this several weeks back. We don't know what the next generation is going to do with what we accomplished or earned. They could completely undo everything we did. Someone who's considered a hero today could be re-written in history to be a villain tomorrow. It happens all the time.

Now, is this saying we shouldn't work hard and try to make a difference? Of course not. But it is saying that if that's our only motivation, it's meaningless. Instead, there's a greater motivation for working hard.

So this passage leads us to the question, "Who are you working for?" If you're working for your boss or some company, it will lead to feeling oppressed, like they just want something out of you and don't really care about you. If you're working just to compare yourself to others so that you can have what they have or prove to yourself that you're better than them, it's a pursuit of the wind. It's a never-ending cycle. And even if you decide that you're working just for yourself to make a lot of money and live the easy life, you'll end up wasting away.

So we can't make it our life's aim just to work to make money. And we can't just work for men's praise, because you never know which way it's going to go from one year to the next. And you can't even primarily work for yourself, for your own satisfaction, because that may feel good for a moment, but will ultimately lead to loneliness and a wasted life.

But there is One to work for, to give your life for, and the ironic thing is that He first gave His life for you.

Jesus is worthy, and we find our greatest satisfaction in life when we work not for money, or others, or even for ourselves, but for Jesus. And in the greatest unexpected reversal of history, even though Jesus is God, and worthy of all worship, Jesus humbled Himself, and died on the cross because we didn't give Him all our worship, which is sin. But out of His love for us, Jesus, the Righteous One, gave His life for us, the unrighteous ones, in order to bring us to God. And as we rest in Jesus, we find the purpose for which we were created: to rejoice in God's love forever.