

Building Toward that Garden City

Introduction:

Q: How's everyone holding up? Thrown a lot at you through this series.

Maybe some of you have developed questions over the course of the last month, like:

- Learn about relationship between faith/work great and all, but what does any of this have to do with eternity?
- I mean, what - if any - is the connection between what I do for a living in THIS LIFE and what I'll experience IN THE NEXT?

After all. . .some will say, it's all going to burn anyway, right?

That's the dominant view in many American churches today. . . idea Jesus is going to come back, judge the world, and take us away to heaven to live happily ever after.

I call this the Theology of Evacuation. It's getting out of here and going someplace else.

But, if this is true, then it begs the question:

Q: What's the point of work? What difference does it make what I do (whether it's in art/architecture. . .nursing/news reporter) if, in the end, is' all going into the cosmic trash can and we're going off to a galaxy FAR, FAR away?

I've literally had Christians tell me: We need to focus more on 'spiritual' things, because after all, everything else is going to burn.

But that phrase, 'it's all going to burn' comes from a misreading of a letter written by the Apostle Peter. This is what he said,

¹⁰But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.
2 Peter 3:10 NIV

There it is. Pretty black and white. The heavens and earth will be destroyed. Game over. Cue the angel choir!!

Except for the fact that the context in which Peter making this statement is a discussion about THE FLOOD. And in the paragraph right before this, he uses the exact same word "*destroyed*" to describe what the waters in Noah's time did to the earth.

But we know that story. The earth wasn't destroyed in the sense of being completely wiped **out** or ceasing to exist. It was destroyed in the sense of being wiped **clean** (like erasing a white board). It was a global restart.

What Peter is saying, is that there is a future day coming, when all the layers of:

- smut and garbage
- injustice and racism, greed and exploitation

Will be burned away and the earth will get an opportunity to begin again. . .to be what God had intended it to be all along.

And this could happen at any minute. *“The day of the Lord will come like a thief”* – like a robber in the middle of the night. Peter’s on pins and needles waiting for that day. The Day of the Lord. The day that will mark the end of human:

- Sin and rebellion
- Sickness and pain
- Suffering and demonic evil.

And the Day of the Lord arrives. He will usher in a new age. One marked by –peace, justice, loving community.

But here’s the best part. . . this age to come takes place HERE. . .not somewhere else!!

*“See, I will create
new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
nor will they come to mind.
¹⁸But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I will create,
for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight
and its people a joy. . .*

*They will build houses and dwell in them;
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. My chosen ones will long enjoy
the work of their hands.
²³They will not labor in vain,
nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune;
for they will be a people blessed by the LORD.* *Isaiah 65: 17-18; 21-23*

Notice all the language about WORKING!

When Isaiah paints a picture of God’s future, he sees us building and farming and eating and drinking and lives bursting with joy!

Not exactly the picture many have of ‘heaven’. A life of:

- Leisure.
- A combination of an eternal church service and a long vacation.

But humans are made in the image of a God who works. And so for us to truly be what we were made to be. . .to be fully human. . .it must mean *we will continue to work.*

But, here’s the thing. . . the painful toil of work will be gone. The curse will be undone. Our work will be:

- Exciting,
- Challenging

- Rewarding
- Energizing
- Significant
- And custom fit for who we uniquely are!!

So, when we get to the last book of the Bible (Revelation) and we read about a new heaven and new earth. The word “new’ doesn’t mean scrape everything and start over. The Greek word was used to speak of restoration: Like restoring an old car or piece of furniture and then telling your friends. *“It’s just like NEW.”* That’s the idea of this word.

So the story of the Bible doesn’t end with us going off to heaven. It ends with heaven invading earth. It ends with Jesus returning to strip this old world down to the studs, cleaning out the junk and the grime and making it new again.

Why? So we can once again live and work and reign with God over the earth. . .as we were always meant to do.

So, if this is the future, if this is where we are going. Then it has huge implications for how we work in the here and now:

1. **Good Work is worthwhile EVEN if is just for this age.**

- Whatever you do:
 - Cooking
 - Building
 - Teaching
 - Writing
 - Project managing
- If you do it as an act of worship to God, as a way of reveling his beauty through what you do, as an expression of love and service to others
- That’s Enough!
- Work isn’t a means to an end. . .it IS the end.

2. **Work in this life is PRACTICE for our work in the next.**

- In one sense, what we do matters all by itself.
- But in another sense, it’s practice.
- Philosopher Dallas Willard said this life is ‘Training for Reigning”
 - As cheesy as its sounds, it’s nevertheless true.
 - Right now we are learning the skills we need to operate in God’s new world.
- Remember Isaiah picture of the new world: building, planting, etc. and John’s picture in Revelation that we will ‘reign with him forever and ever.”
- GOD IS LOOKING FOR PEOPLE WITH WHOM HE CAN RULE THE WORLD. RIGHT NOW, WE ARE BECOMING THOSE KINDS OF PEOPLE!**
- Learning how to:
 - Fight laziness with hard work
 - Learning how to handle money, sex, and power

- iii. Learning how to deal with technology and information in a way that enhances life and community, rather than divides people.
 - g. And so, as you go to work each day and hone your skill, you're not just make a better world now, you're learning the skills to one day, in the future, make the best possible world.
 - h. Whoever you are becoming will carry over into the next life.
 - i. It's true, you can't take it with you (*new pair shoes, or sweet ride*), but you will take the person you're becoming and the skills you learning INTO God's future.
3. The good work we do will actually LAST into God's new world.
- a. Revelation 14, we read that the *'Dead will rest from their labors, and their deeds will follow them.'*
 - i. Word **Deeds** is *ergon* in Greek. Usually translated work, but also be translated 'occupation'.
 - ii. So apparently, our work/occupation. . . in some way. . . will follow us into the new world.
 - b. Also, later in Revelation 21, we read about the Garden city, and John writes *'the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. . .the glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.'*
 - c. Miroslav Volf, the brilliant philosopher/theologian describes what's going on here this way:
 - i. *"The noble products of human ingenuity, whatever is beautiful, true and good in human cultures, will be cleansed from impurity, perfected, and transfigured into become a part of God's new world. They will be the building materials from which the glorified world will be made."*
 - d. What he's saying is that all the best that humanity has developed over the millennia . The most excellent, those works of the highest quality. . .will be a part of the new world.
 - e. I imagine:
 - i. living in a turn of century home with lots of character
 - ii. Eating Thai food
 - iii. Drinking a iced Americano w/ splash of cream
 - iv. Listening to Bach's Brandenburg Concerto's
 - v. And riding a bicycle on a forest trail on a Autumn day.
 - vi. **And reveling in all the good, beautiful and true things that image bearers have dreamed up over the course of human history.**
 - f. But all the graffiti – the evil, the ugly will disappear forever.
 - g. In chapter 3 of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, He gives this description of what it will be like:

Each one should build with care. . . . If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light.

It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. ¹⁴If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved.

I Cor. 3: 11-15 NIV

- h. Paul idea of the “*Day of the Lord*”, like Peter, is one where the world’s impurities are burned away. .where all that is cheap and ugly disappears, and all that is truly beautiful will be shown for what it is.
- i. Because there’s a lot of human work that frankly will not survive the day of the Lord. It will not make it into God’s new world: Stuff like:
 - i. War and weapons manufacturing
 - ii. Casinos and subprime mortgages
 - iii. Kitschy tourist towns and monolithic suburban architecture
 - iv. Illinois toll roads and Comcast “customer service”
- j. All this will be burned up. And people who gave the best part of their lives to what Paul calls ‘*wood, hay, or straw*’ they will have nothing to show for all their effort and energy.
- k. But on the flip side, Paul’s hope is that some human work will survive judgment and go on to find a place in the new creation. The kind of work that matters – gold, silver, costly stones.” Things that are valuable and that truly last.
- l. Love the way one my favorite New Testament scholars put it:
 - i. *“What you do in the present – by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, carrying for the needy- will last into God’s future. These activates are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, until the day we leave it behind all together. They are part of what we may call building for God’s Kingdom.”*
N.T. Wright
- m. Love phrase “*Building FOR God’s Kingdom.*’ We can’t fully build God’s Kingdom. But each day, we can contribute the bricks, stones. . .and God, the Master Builder, will enfolding them into his grand plan for the creation he loves and refuses to give up on.

Conclusion:

We are born with the desire to be great.

We come out of the womb screaming for a life of meaning and purpose and significance. We want to leave the world better than we found it.

- Ask a child, “*What do you want to be when you grow up?*” I doubt many of them would say, “*I want to sell corporate insurance*” or “*I feel a calling to tax law*”.
- They say, “I want to be an astronaut or a ballerina or a fire fighter or president of United States.”

As children, we have a desire to do something that matters. We grow up dreaming of being part of a larger story, a story worth telling.

- Nobody I know simply wants to work a job, buy a house, fill it with STUFF, sell it off and then retire to a trailer home in Florida with a satellite dish.

But as we grow older, it's easy to dismiss this dream as impracticable. We deny it, lock in the basement and starve it to death. But the truth is, it won't go away. No matter how much we try.

It pops out everywhere. Even in the mythology of American Culture - Comic book hero.

- Human beings
- With special powers
- Who serve the weak
- And rescue the world.

Q: Why is that? Mythology taps into our humanness. The fact that humans were created to rule the world, to partner with this powerful God in creating/shaping the world into something beautiful and help to heal and restore what's broken.

But even that desire has been twisted and warped by sin.

- We devolve from a desire to be great to a desire to be thought of as great.
- From a desire to serve the weak to a desire to be served by the weak.
- From a desire to save the world to a desire to OWN it.

But Jesus comes along and redefines greatness. He says greatness is found in loving God and serving others. In fact, serving people who are unimportant and don't have any status. People on the margins of society.

That's greatness!!!

This series was intended to flood the engine for your dreams with nitrogen. I hope and pray that it has given you a shot of vision and courage and faith to step out and do whatever it is that God had in mind the day he thought you up.

- Go back to school
- Start a business
- Become a surgeon
- Move to the city and work for justice in the middle of crime and gentrification.
- Solve the problem of Climate Change.

But remember, if your dreams are all about YOU, then your dreams are WAY TO SMALL.

You need to dream larger. Larger than your current job, larger than your future career or potential net worth.

You need dreams as large as Jesus vision of a worldwide Kingdom. A Beloved community.

Whatever your calling is, whatever you end up doing with the rest of your time on earth—please, don't do it for yourself. So many have **been there, done that.**

Do you work as an image bearer of Almighty God, create beauty, heal what's broken — do it all as an expression of your love for God and service to your neighbor.

- Maybe you'll make a ton of money, maybe you'll have just enough.
- Maybe you'll be a household name, maybe you won't
- Maybe you'll receive great accolades on this side of eternity, maybe not until the next.

But none of that matters. That's not why you do it. You do it because that's what God made you to do. Because it's good. Because it blesses others and allows the earth to flourish.

Because when all is said and done. . .our work MATTERS!!