

Dr. August Konkell, Proverbs, Session 22

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Welcome to the last of a series of talks on the book of Proverbs. We covered the last chapter in Proverbs in our last meditation, actually the last poem, which is an acrostic on the woman of strength in the book of Proverbs. As we've noted numerous times throughout these talks that we've had on Proverbs, there are topics that repeat.

One of the useful things to do is to bring together the Proverbs on a particular topic. Since the Proverbs themselves have not been assembled in that sort of fashion, it can be quite helpful to pick some of those themes that are very significant to us and just look at what all the different Proverbs have to say about them. Proverbs, of course, as we've already observed, are sayings, they're aphorisms that are an observation that you can see are true in human relationships in the case of Proverbs, and sometimes based on the analogy of things you observe in the natural world, not in the scientific sense of cause and effect, but rather in the sense of association.

You know that when the wind is coming from the east, in my case, it's going to rain. There's nothing scientific about that. It's just a kind of an association, and Proverbs observe the world in that sort of way.

So, what I wanted to do in this last meditation on Proverbs is to just give one sample of a very, very important motif in the book of Proverbs that is very useful to contemplate in terms of all the different kinds of Proverbs that there are about it. We have already covered some of these Proverbs, so there's going to be a little bit of repetition here, but I'm going to bring these Proverbs now into a relationship with each other, and not only with each other but also with other wisdom writings. Now there's one other wisdom writing that has an awful lot to say about our topic, and that is the book of Ecclesiastes.

The topic that I want us to cover, as we can see on the screen here, is about work and wealth. Now I've put the two together because in many ways they're related. One could, of course, focus just on work, or one could focus just on wealth, but I'm going to observe the two of them together because so often we say time is money, and what is time? It's the effort we spend in working, and that's how we generate wealth.

So, there's an association between these two topics, and that is especially developed by the person that we call Kohelet in Hebrew or the preacher. So, I'm going to tie together some of the thoughts of the preacher with what the book of Proverbs has to say about work to kind of give a perspective on what the Bible has to say about

work, and what is work supposed to be. So, I want to start with our experience concerning work.

And in terms of our experience concerning work, there are really two words that become important. One of them we've mentioned several times, it's the word *etzev*, or it's a boat. It can be written either way.

In either case, it's something on the order of pain, it's struggle. The English word that we probably have for it is toil. The preacher uses a different word, it's *inyan*, we're going to see it here as we go through some of our passages, and that word has to do with busyness.

This is what occupies us all the time. Now these two things are true about our lives. Most of us find our work at various points in time to be toil.

That is, it's just really a lot of effort of one kind or another. Takes a lot of our time, takes a lot of our energy, and unfortunately often doesn't yield the result that we want. And that's where the pain part comes in.

Because we put a whole lot of effort into something and then it gets consumed by fire, to use a biblical metaphor. That is, in the end, it doesn't yield the way that we want it to. Now, what is the biblical view of why we experience work as this busyness? Or why do we experience work as this toil? One of the verses to me that expresses this so well is Psalm 127.

Psalm 127, most of us remember because of its emphasis on family, and Psalm 127 is a psalm that says, Children are a heritage of the Lord, blessed is the person who has a quiver full of them. So, it's comparing children as your great asset, just like arrows are the asset to the soldier. Now, that is always true.

We tend to forget that in our current times with some of this paranoia about overpopulation and everything else. It's pretty evident now that our problem is not going to be overpopulation, it's going to be a shrinking population. This is already happening rapidly in China and is going to be happening in India and is happening very rapidly in America.

Our populations are actually shrinking and that's going to create a lot of trouble in the shorter term because there's going to be so many old people. So, children are the heritage of the Lord. Birth is a wonderful thing.

There's nothing, nothing in the world that shows more the strength of the woman than that she is the bearer of children and has a family exactly as the virtuous woman in Proverbs chapter 31 says. But Psalm 127 too begins this way. It is in vain that the builders build the house unless the Lord is building it.

Now, I think that that's a reference not only to a physical house, it's a reference to a family. God promises David a house and I think Psalm 127, 1 is referring to David's house. It's God who has to build David's house.

When it's left up to David, his children are killing each other. It's only when God ordains the king and God builds the kingdom and God brings about his will through the king that there is David's house, which eventually comes to be true in our Lord Jesus Christ. And then Psalm 122 says it's in vain that you guard the city unless God is enabling you to guard the city and it's in vain that you eat the bread of pain itself.

In other words, you work all of your life because you need to eat exactly as Paul says in 2 Thessalonians chapter 3 verse 10. Don't work, you don't eat. That was very true in days when they didn't have these state social programs.

I'm not suggesting those are a bad thing, but I am suggesting that humans don't live without work. Psalm 127, it's in vain that you ate the bread of toil and I'm just going to accept the King, the Masoretic text here, the Lord gives to his beloved sleep. In other words, if we can trust the Lord with our work, our toil, sometimes it's very difficult.

We can sleep at night. I come from the farm where work was done mostly by hand and my parents raised nine children. They did it on probably less income in their lives than I now earn in one year.

But of course, they did it in other ways because we raised virtually all of the food that we ate. And my mother made a whole lot of the clothes that we wore. She was Proverbs 31, the virtuous woman.

But the one thing that my dad did was sleep at night. He didn't only sleep at night. When we got company and he sat down on the couch and he relaxed, he slept through many a wonderful conversation that he'd ever heard.

The Lord gives to his beloved sleep. It's kind of a reward for their toil. But we have this toil.

Why? Well, that takes us back to Genesis and our tree of knowledge. And we say, oh, I'm going to know what's good. And then when we decide we're going to know what's good, all of a sudden we find out that, oh, what's growing here in my field is something I don't want.

I call it a weed. I don't know how to grow crops the way that I thought that I would. God says to Eve, you know, it's going to be painful bearing children.

And what happens in the very next chapter? Cain, her son, kills Abel. Now, I can't even imagine the pain of a mother who has one child to kill another child. It still happens, of course.

But that's the reality. Our choice to want to be like God, collectively, as humans, all of us. And our choice to say that we're going to know what's good has brought about this etsev, this etsepon.

It's used both in relation to Eve and the family and in relation to Adam and his work. So that is this world that we live in. Genesis is not describing some world in the past.

It's really describing the world in the present. Gives us very sketchy details of what the world in the past was. We don't know anything about the city from which Cain came or the city from which he ruled.

We don't know where it was. We don't know anything about it at all. It's just completely sketchy.

We don't even know anything about his wife. That's not the point to tell us about the world that was. Its point is to tell us about the world that is.

And what is the world? Well, as the preacher says, it's a busyness. Now, the preacher had a luxury. His luxury was that he could actually accumulate great wealth.

And he could accumulate the satisfaction of every desire he thought he could have. And what did he discover? Well, what he discovered is that even if your toil and your work should result in great wealth and in satisfying everything that you have that's desirable, it does nothing whatever to make your life better. What an amazing thing.

But of course, the preacher is absolutely right. That's just completely true. That toil, exercise simply to get wealth, or toil, exercise to fulfill our desires, is going to be the most unsatisfying thing.

So, we have all this busyness. Of necessity, it occupies a lot of our time. And we don't understand the times that come into our lives.

A time to be born, a time to die. A time for peace, a time to go to war. Why should there be these times? That one, the time for peace and a time to go to war is the most striking to me.

Who makes war? People. Well, if people make war, surely people can make war stop. Well, we might think we can, but it has proven to be completely impossible.

After the First Great War in 1919, there was this pact that was made that there would never again be aggression. And of course, what happened? Well, 10 years after that, in 1939, Hitler was invading Poland. So much for there no longer being aggression.

And then after the Second World War, we said, okay, there's going to be no aggression. But what was there? A multiplication of wars all over. Because of course, countries within themselves are constantly at war.

As we stand here, as I stand here today, Russia has aggressively invaded Ukraine. So, we can't stop it. So, what is all this busyness? God has set the world in our minds.

It's our great desire. But we don't understand how God is working this all out from beginning to end. The work of God and our own toil are something of a mystery.

Exactly as the preacher says in Ecclesiastes 8 verses 16 and 17. I've preached Psalm 90 many, many times. Where we read that God turns us back to the dust.

God is from everlasting to everlasting. But our years are so limited. 70 says Moses.

And if even because we're healthy and strong, they become 80, yet they are toil. And their pride is trouble. So, what can we do? Well, Moses says, pray for joy and pray for fulfillment.

That's what the Proverbs say. That's what the preacher says. What you look for from work is joy, fulfillment, and satisfaction.

That God will take all of this work and make it part of his work. That's when our work becomes satisfying and meaningful. So work is proper to life.

We started off with that lovely symmetry of Proverbs in the first of the collection of Solomon in Proverbs chapter 10. Sloth creates poverty, diligence creates wealth. Kind of that act consequence.

And of course, you say, oh, but that isn't true. I know some lazy people who are wealthy. And I know some hard-working people who end up constantly being poor.

That is true. But the fact of the matter is that anything that we're going to have to provide for our needs and for life is going to come from work. That's what the Proverbs is saying.

And ants can teach us about this. And we looked at this in Proverbs chapter 6. They know how to gather their food in the summertime so that the harvest is happening

when that it should. And we didn't actually get to look at Proverbs 24, 30 to 34 in our talks.

But there the wise man goes by the land of the sluggard and sees the weeds growing in the field and the fence broken down and a whole scene that is completely unproductive and that creates need. So, where there is no work, there is loss. I'm always reminded of a pastor who was visiting one of those persons on the farm.

And after seeing the beauty of the yard and the animals and everything else, he says, my, what a beautiful farm God has given you here. And the farmer said, yes, God has given me a beautiful farm, but you should have seen it when God had it all to himself. Now, that's a very appropriate observation because God meant life for work.

He put us in this world to plant it and to keep it. In Genesis chapter 2, the lament at the very start of creation is there was no one there to work the ground. Work's part of what we're supposed to do.

But what we find is that this work is hard. Now, useful. I love Proverbs 14, 23, 24.

There is merit to work. The proverb says that where there is work, there will be a benefit. Now, it may not be the benefit that you expected.

But even if that toil doesn't turn out the way that you expected, it doesn't mean that it has no merit and no value. There is always merit and there is always value. And then the preacher, right at the start, lays out the conclusion of his whole little lesson.

He says, so, I worked for, I had all this wealth and I satisfied my every desire. And what did I discover? That the best thing that there is is to enjoy my work each day and to enjoy each day the food that I have. And if I can enjoy the work that I have done, if I can find some kind of satisfaction in this toil, and if I can be satisfied with the food that God has given me, I actually have the best.

I've got everything. And that is the essence of what Genesis promises us in the very beginning when God makes heaven and earth. Now, there's several things that can be said about work that are important to keep in mind.

The first of them is that work can generate wealth, and work generating wealth is a good thing, but it's not a good thing if it's not generated in an honorable way. Now, we looked at the work of wisdom in Proverbs chapter 8, that whole section where Proverbs speaks as a person, a personification. But one of the things she speaks about there is honorable wealth.

In other words, she is, wisdom is the way in which you can work so that the benefits of that work and the wealth produced by it are right and are good, and that's what

you want to have. Now, we did spend a little time on Proverbs 16, verse 26. We work to fill our desires.

Now, if we work to fulfill our desires, it becomes slavery, and the reason it becomes slavery is because our desires are never fully satisfied. To work for wealth is a bad business, and here is the preacher's observations. You know, you work all your life, and then through some misadventure, through a misfortune, you lose all your wealth, and you don't even have anything to leave your children.

Well, that's the story of all sorts of people. So, there's no, it's a fallacy to say, well, I'm going to work hard so I have something to leave my children. There's no assurance that you can leave your children anything other than the example of your character and your influence and your good teaching because we're not in control of wealth.

As the Proverbs say, wealth takes up wings and it flies away. It's gone just like that. So be careful about thinking that we're going to work for wealth, even to leave to our children, because we may end up leaving absolutely nothing, and that can happen through a whole lot of different ways, and right now in Ukraine, my dear friends in Ukraine, and I have a good number of them, are losing all of their life's work through the bombs of Putin.

They weren't in control of that, but all they're going to leave their children is rubble for very many of them, especially in the city of Kharkiv. So, what we need to remember is that the desire for more can be a trap, and the preacher says exactly the same thing that we observed in the Proverbs in Ecclesiastes 6, verses 7 to 9. Because wealth is insatiable, what use is the wisdom to earn it? You always need more. And even the knowledge that the poor person has may be simply dismissed.

No one will pay attention to it. So just because you're the wise person and just because you know, even that isn't any assurance that there's going to be a benefit. And of course, pursuing what we want can sometimes rob us of pursuing what we have.

Namely, you may want that beautiful field that you see across the road, but wanting it and desiring it may rob you of what you could have. Namely, the joy of seeing God's beauty and everything that is in it. That is what the preacher is saying in that verse.

So, as we've observed and as we have it here in the wisdom sayings in Proverbs 23, wealth is a very fleeting benefit. So, this is the main point that wisdom has to say about work. That work is an end that is good in itself.

That doesn't mean that it is not going to be busy. That doesn't mean that it's going to be a toil. But it does mean that there is a benefit that you can enjoy.

There's a benefit that you can receive as you do it. And if your work yields for you what you need for each day, and you have the wisdom to know how to live in harmony with those around you, then work has accomplished all of its purposes. And if you try to turn work into something else, such as the accumulation of wealth, or the gaining of prestige and power, or all of these sorts of things, then work is going to turn you into a slave.

And it will be a real toil, and it will be a busyness that you can never escape. So wisdom wants to bring us back to God's ideal. And what is God's ideal? Work is good, and work is necessary.

I led a session on work in our church the other day, and it began with the question, when did we get about this idea of retirement? That is, there's this point in life at which I stop working. I thought about that question because everybody's always asking me, as an old man, you know, are you retired, or when are you going to retire? And just saying that, well, retirement isn't in the Bible, doesn't seem to register very well with most people. So, I got to asking myself the question, where does this business of retirement come from? Well, you know where it comes from? It began in the 19th century, but it especially came into force in the Depression.

After the First World War, when there was a necessity to create jobs for young people. So, the idea was, of certain politicians, if we can tell old people, you don't have the right to work, you stop working, and we'll pay you so you don't have to stop working, and then young people can take your jobs, we're going to have a whole better society, and we're going to call that retirement. And now, of course, you know, we've almost made retirement an obligatory biblical kind of thing that everybody has to do.

And so, if you don't stop working so that somebody else can have a job, well, then you're sort of a tyrant of some kind. Well, let me assure you, that's human thinking, it's not divine thinking. In divine thinking, work is a part of life appropriate to every stage of life.

Of course, I don't work as I did in the 30s and 40s but don't tell me that just because I'm 73 years old, God has no longer any desire in me working in whatever way that I can. Oh, I'm certainly glad for the pensions I have. Believe me, I'm dependent upon them.

I can't earn a full living anymore. There's not everything bad about retirement. Just don't make it a religion because retired people all need work.

Work is a part of life, but make work what it is supposed to be, an enrichment of your life and not something that enslaves your life. That is the message of wisdom.

This is Dr. August Konkel in his teaching on the book of Proverbs. This is session number 22, Work and Wealth.