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THE SANCTITY OF LABOR

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You may have heard about a little boy who ran to his mother and asked, “Is it true that God made people from dust and that we turn to dust when we die?”

The mother answered, “Yes, dear, that’s true.”

The little boy said, “Well, there’s someone under my bed, but I don’t know if he’s coming or going!” That’s an old joke, I know, but it’s sort of traditional for teaching in Genesis.

We talked last week about the intimate act of creation of mankind, and of the enormous complexity of the human being--physically, socially, emotionally, chemically, any way you want to look at it. We were also discussing the author’s perspective regarding the fact that agriculture was not yet established, without which there can be no other aspects of civilization.

And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed.

And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

In Genesis chapter 1, which is the overall picture of creation, mankind is presented as the final and greatest act of creation, male and female; and so mankind is in the mind and heart of God. Genesis 2 shows us this final creation with a few more details. It’s clear that man is the epitome of creation in Genesis chapter 2, but we also see that God has certain things to show man about himself and his world. In other words, Adam was the student and God was his Teacher.

I want to pause here and talk about education because humans are really remarkable in this respect as well. We are creatures who absolutely depend upon education from our parents or others. Humans do not transmit knowledge through instinct as animals do; we have to actually teach our posterity, in every generation, the things they must know to survive and to carry on the cultural values and traditions of previous generations. We do not possess an innate knowledge of science, mathematics, language, art, agriculture, law, medicine, or technology. These things must be taught. There is of course the potential for these things in children, but they must be instructed. Children can learn to read and do math, but they are not born knowing how to read and do math. Education is, therefore, of great importance to us.

There was an uproar this past week because the President delivered a speech to school children. Some people felt that the President was trying to indoctrinate children with his particular political beliefs, especially since children were advised to find ways to “help” the President. You may or may not remember that back when the first George Bush was President, he also delivered a speech to school

children, after which the leaders in Congress launched an investigation, stating that he had used government funds to deliver propaganda to children. I guess you could say that people get all “wee-weed” up when we feel that someone may be teaching our children something to which we object. The reason for this is that we understand the importance of education and we want to transmit as much of what we understand to be good and right as we possibly can to our children and grandchildren.

Animals do not have a system in place to teach their posterity. They operate by instinct. Every generation of Monarch butterflies flies thousands of miles to a very specific place in Mexico. They have no parental guidance in this matter; they just know where to go. How is that? How is it that corals of the same reef release their spawn at the same time? Millions of spawn are broadcast simultaneously so that in the overwhelming numbers a few will survive the predators and live to form new colonies. Scientists understand that it has to do with the cycles of the moon, but how do the corals know to use the moon? Honey bees perform a dance to show other bees where to find nectar, indicating direction and distance, without any formal training. Birds do not have to be shown how or where to build nests. Baby sea turtles hatch the same night and head in the same direction--to the sea! Animals do not need an education, but man does! While it's true that certain animals do learn some behaviors, and others can be taught by man (such as drug sniffing dogs and performing animals), animals do not need to be taught everything by the previous generation in order to function.

We see here that God is both the Creator and Educator of this first man, Adam. He shows Adam his new home, a garden in the land of Eden. Notice that Eden is not the garden; rather, the garden was located in a land named Eden, and Eden was “eastward.” These are important details. Remember, the author is writing as one looking back at those first days, but the writer is writing many years, perhaps centuries,¹ after the events that are recorded. At the time he wrote, places had been given names as the population had expanded and people moved into different areas. This account then has several marks of historicity. It is not written as a myth but as a genuine historical narrative. At the time of the writing, the writer and his immediate audience lived to the west of the land of Eden. The writer gave his audience a short geographical depiction of the land as it existed when the events he recorded occurred, but in a location with which they were familiar. It would be as if someone told you about something happened out west in Arizona: you may never have been to Arizona, but you have a general idea about where it is and what you might expect to find there. Likewise, in a land called Eden, God produced a garden for this first man. The thing to note here is that the location was real to the writer and to his immediate audience.

It should be noted that this creation of a garden is *incidental to* God's instruction of this first man. While it is true that God created plants on the third day, there is no reason to think that He was restrained from making a few more for the sake of instructing His most special creation, man. The creation week was not over; God had not yet rested from creating and making; and apparently it suited his purpose to show Adam his power and love by making a special place just for him. In effect, God was giving Adam an education--about God Himself, about Adam, about creation, about beauty, and most especially about His love of man. His instruction was both practical in forming trees for food and artistic in making trees for beauty. From Adam's point of view this is very important to the story--Adam's relation to God and to nature; but in the overall picture of creation given in Genesis chapter 1, the creation of man is the focal point. Genesis 2 fills in more details of the sixth day than Genesis 1 does.

¹ Adam lived to be 930 years old according to Genesis 5:5.

There are two special trees in this garden, the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. We're going to come back to the first of these shortly and to the other in a different sermon. For now, let's just note that they are there. We'll also note that it is a *garden*, not a *forest*. It is a garden that has trees for food and beauty, but it is first and foremost a garden.

And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads.

The name of the first is Pison: that is it which compasseth the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold;

And the gold of that land is good: there is bdellium and the onyx stone.

And the name of the second river is Gihon: the same is it that compasseth the whole land of Ethiopia.

And the name of the third river is Hiddekel: that is it which goeth toward the east of Assyria. And the fourth river is Euphrates.

The author here gives a geographical description that is very plain and straightforward. There is nothing of a sense of mythology here; it is a simple geographical survey. However, the description given does not match any place in the known world. We do know of two rivers that are listed here, the Euphrates and the Hiddekel. We know from ancient records that the "Hiddekel" is a name for a river we call the Tigris. But the Tigris and Euphrates river are not connected along with two other rivers, unknown to us, diverging from a single source river. We know where Ethiopia is (it is called *Cush* in Hebrew but translated as *Ethiopia*, since Cush in ancient times is Ethiopia today), but Ethiopia is not surrounded by a river. Is the Bible wrong?

My answer is a resounding "No!" The author is describing a land that did exist in his day, but no longer exists in ours. The entire face of the earth has changed because of a scenario described in Genesis chapters 6-9, the Great Flood, which we will come to eventually. It is the very fact that the Bible records something like this, something that we can no longer find, and was no longer in existence at the time Moses wrote the books of the Law, and the fact that it is written so plainly, that give this account credibility. If the events of Genesis 6-9 are true, then it stands to reason that the geography recorded here could never be found.

I want you to think about the Age of Exploration. You know, the time of explorers such as Christopher Columbus, Ferdinand Magellan, Henry Hudson, James Cook, and so on. When they found a new area, how did they name it? They very often gave names from people or places which were already familiar to them. Thus we have New York, New South Wales, and many others. And it's not all that uncommon for us even today name people after places. My college friends Daren and Melinda named their first son Shiloh, which is a place in the Bible and also my hometown here in Georgia.

Apparently people have had this trait for a very long time. The name *Havilah* is a name we also find given to two children from different families--children who were born after the events of Genesis 6-9, and consequently after the original land of Havilah was destroyed. We also find a child named Cush, which our translators, as I said earlier, translate as *Ethiopia* when the name is applied to a location. It appears that the Hiddekel and Euphrates rivers were rivers named in memory of the originals that existed before the Great Flood.

This ancient writer is describing a geographical location which no longer exists, but existed at the time of his writing. Notice that he uses the present tense in his description: “The name of the first *is* Pison”; “The gold of that land *is* good.” This is all very real to him and his audience--not imaginary or mythological.

After describing the river that started in Eden, ran through the garden, and then split into four distinct rivers, the author describes the next interaction between the man and his Maker:

And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.

God gives Adam an *education* and an *occupation*, both of which require *communication*. Did God make Adam just to be His little slave? That seems cruel. No, God is good and He pronounced His creation to be “very good.” There was no injustice upon Adam. Remember, creation was made for Adam’s benefit, not Adam for creation’s benefit. God wanted to show Adam the *blessings* and *benefit* of living in harmony with his surroundings, of taking God’s creation and making something of his own from it, of seeing the results of his own efforts. God intended for man to work and see the rewards of his work. Even today, there are many people who enjoy working the land. Gardening is the number one hobby in America.

The work was not mere toil or drudgery. It was work that was suited to Adam, and something he directly benefited from. This tells us two very instructive lessons about work: first, it is honorable and has purpose. God ordained work in a perfect world. Second, there is reward in work. There is incentive. Take away either the *purpose* of work or the *reward* for it, and work becomes drudgery and worse. Outside of that perfect world, we find throughout history and all over the world abuses of work in the forms of slavery or serfdom, in which individuals are worked against their wills for the benefit of another, or in the form of Communism or Socialism, in which case the individuals work for the benefit of the state. Take away a man’s purpose and individual reward, and you’ll destroy his willingness to work. I’ve also seen this in the unionized factory in which I worked, where individual workers would do as little as possible because their incentive to work hard and be promoted based on effort was replaced with a set of guaranteed promotions. In fact, the union had strict rules about going beyond one’s own specific tasks. The funny thing is, those with the guaranteed promotions through union membership were some of the least satisfied workers I’ve met. That was my experience but I’m sure it holds true with many--there’s a whole entertainment industry built on catering to underachievers and slackers who hate their jobs.

You may have heard the advice, “Do what you love and you’ll never work a day in your life!” I believe that is largely true, even though we no longer live in a perfect world. There will be some days that are tough, and some tasks that we will probably never really enjoy; but the truth is that we can find purpose and reward and enjoyment in our vocation.

The Bible has a lot to say about the subject of work. After all, it was important enough to God to institute work as a way of life on the very day of man’s creation, and it was part of an entire system that He declared to be “very good.” Work is right and proper in God’s eyes, while idleness and laziness are not!

Some people think, “Well, if I could just win the lottery, then I wouldn’t have to work anymore.” The truth is that wealth can only be retained through hard work, which is why it very often happens that

lottery winners end up going bankrupt.² Proverbs 13:11 says, *“Wealth gotten by vanity shall be diminished: but he that gathereth by labour shall increase.”* The Bible also warns against being lazy. For example, see Proverbs 21:25: *“The desire of the slothful killeth him; for his hands refuse to labour.”*

On the other hand, labor is often linked to worship and service to God. There are many verses that deal with this, but let me read to you from Psalm 128 verses 1 and 2: *“Blessed is every one that feareth the LORD; that walketh in his ways. For thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands: happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee.”*

You may have seen a bumper sticker that reflects America’s current political landscape: “Spread my work ethic, not my wealth!” I’ve no desire to delve into politics here, but I will say that our nation has been a leader in productivity due to a national culture of individual work that had both purpose and reward. While it is true that there have been abuses of the system in which at times some people have exploited others, from the robber barons of the nineteenth century to the corrupt corporate leaders such as those at Enron to the vast ponzi schemes of Bernie Madoff, we have to note that there will always be a certain level of corruption because of the innate selfishness of certain people. But is there likely to be less corruption if we put the government in control of labor and incentive? No, and you don’t need to look very far to see examples, from millions in Medicare fraud that we cannot stop to the current financial mess we are in due to the corrupt practices of the government sponsored agencies Fannie Mae and Freddy Mac. Corruption will always be with us; but if we put the government in charge of our lives, we will have no way to combat that corruption.

The American system of free market capitalism has made America the most productive, most wealthy country on earth, now or at any other time in the world’s history. We still have the right to seek out labor that is purposeful and rewarding. However, they system is built on the idea that those who lived under it would be a moral people who restrained themselves. Our founding fathers recognized this. At the conclusion of the Constitutional Convention, a man asked Benjamin Franklin what form of government the body had given them. Franklin replied, “A republic, if you can keep it.” The less we Americans restrain ourselves, the more the government will inevitably grow. The Bible predicts this very cycle in Prov. 28:2:

For [because of] the transgression of a land many are the princes thereof: but by a man of understanding and knowledge the state thereof shall be prolonged.

The lesson for us today is that work is honorable because it was established by God Himself in the context of a perfect world. We work best when our work has both purpose and incentive. Anything outside of these parameters is an abuse. Finally, our work must be honest, or there will be an increased need for government oversight.

² See <http://www.bankrate.com/brm/news/advice/20041108a1.asp> for a few examples.