

FINDING MEANING IN WORK PART 4 | WORK AS SELFISH ACT

When we left SA I was earning roughly the equivalent of around \$20 000-00 per year – sounds horrific right? A large part of our desire to move stemmed from a sudden & very real understanding that we couldn't sustain ourselves (Tanya & I had been married about 5 years then) or raise a family. We'd started out in ministry with a very altruistic idea of calling and general excitement of being where God wants us to be, and doing what he wants us to do – and ended up realising that this wasn't sustainable long term. We wanted more, right? We can couch that in more spiritual terms, but ultimately we wanted to be in ministry – but also be better off, be able to raise a family, maybe buy a house, or own a car that wasn't 25 years old. There's always that tug of the heart for more.

No sooner had we established ourselves here – and the economic realities for earning more and living better than we ever had, suddenly you can have more and do more – and the stuff you have doesn't look as nice as the stuff you want!

A friend of our used to describe it as the middle class' condition – our houses are never big enough, our cars are never fancy enough – we always want the next big thing. I guess I thought I was better than that – turns out I'm not.

Guess I want to disabuse you of the notion this doesn't affect pastors – ask Keith, every conference he goes to he will be asked at least 3 times how big his congregation is – whether you're a pastor or a business owner, a farmer or a labourer we always seem to look to measure ourselves, the stuff we have & the jobs we do against each other

But in doing that we fundamentally forget the single most important idea – that we are created by God for his pleasure, that the skills and gifts that he has given us and that we earn our living through – are just that gifts. That fundamentally our value comes from our creator & not the job we have.

Ultimately I think we can understand, that no matter we are – no one can live a life purely to serve the

interests of others, even the most morally loving and beautiful people – Keith – fall victim to vanity, self-interest and glory seeking.

I joked about pastors asking how big your church is; but YP are the same – we can derive our value from the size of yg we run, it's something that I have to fight

But ultimately work is selfish.

Genesis is a great example of this shift – work from selfless to selfish.

Adam & Eve are gifted this beautiful place of bounty and beauty – they are stewards of it, placed there to cultivate it to name all the animals, to enjoy all that God created it for – on top of all that they get to take long walks with him in the evening – it's perfect. There's balance, right?

By chapter 4 – Cane & Abel are at each other's throats – eventually which will lead to Cane's murder – but the cause of the fight? Cane's ability to produce this exceptional fruit, the labour of his hands – causes such rage & jealousy that his brother ultimately murders him

By Genesis 11 we're suddenly a far way from long walks with God in the garden? Of naming animals, and wandering around as innocent as lambs - by chap 11 we come to the famous tale about the tower of Babel – technology is the means to power.

I guess building the tower is not the bad thing here, right? Someone figured out how to make bricks – that kind of tech allows you to build higher bigger and stronger – they used God-given skills and talents to achieve this – they want to make something big, build a city.

The second more dangerous reason for the building is this – that they could make a name for themselves – for their own glory honour and fame – and let's face it, that really hasn't changed much today? People who build massive towers – just love to stick their name all over it



In a biblical sense – ‘to make a name for one’s self’ is to construct an identity – we either get our name from the magnificence of who God is and what he’s done for us, or make a name for ourselves through what we can do with our hands and in Genesis 11 we’ve long already long forgotten the one who created us who shaped us and the purpose behind the skill and gifts he’s given us!

Building a ‘tower that reaches the heavens’ – suggests there is spiritual value to their pursuit of this giant building, that it is designed to compete with God – they’re using their gifts and skill not honour God but to compete with him

God comes down in judgement on them – confuses their language and scatters the people – sin has consequences is the message.

Babel is a case study of it is important that building in any collective endeavour it is important that it is grounded beyond just itself, and building for the sake of building – in God himself.

The reality is that more things change the more they stay the same. Right?

Just as the people of babel build their massive tower – we continue to do the same for ourselves – whether it’s the Empire State building in New York, or the Burj Khalifa in Dubai – we continue to build towers for ourselves, symbols of our power & strength – but do little to honour the God that gave us these things

Ultimately – we don’t do these things to serve others – but to look down on them, and make ourselves bigger.

Now I confess to never having built anything much larger than a one story holiday home – and even then I was a labourer rather than the architect – and then left early cos I had to go back to uni - and although I know we have a few builders & architects here – not many of them would be putting their own names on the buildings they design & build...

But does this ring true for you? That we make our work about us, about the honours we get from it, the rewards we extract & we forget so often

Are our selfish work habits redeemable? Can God use people like us – forget where the gift comes from?

The story of Esther is a great case study for this – and the good news is the answer is ‘yes’ he totally can.

The Jewish people are in exile – scattered throughout the Persian empire. We get to see this played out in the OT in 3 different narratives – the book Esther, Nehemiah as he rebuilds the walls and city of Jerusalem & Ezra as he rediscovers the book of the law.

Esther’s story opens as we are told that King Xerxes has disposed of his queen Vashti – she was too bold with him, and he was displeased, so you know...

Never one to dwell too much on loss, Xerxes is on the hunt for another queen to replace the one he lost – comes across Esther, a young and beautiful Jewish girl – she pleases him, so he marries her

Most readers of this story would be fairly offended with this beginning of this story –

1. she doesn’t state her faith publically (like Daniel does and we see some of the consequences he faces as a Jew in a pagan court) she hides it,
2. she sleeps with a man she’s not married too – she makes this series of moral compromises to get to within a hair of the seat of power, she sees her opportunity and she goes for it.
3. There is no sense in which we understand that she does this for her God or her people, it is entirely self-serving.

The question that the book of Esther answers is – can a person who is morally spiritually and culturally ambivalent be used by God? The book of Esther says yes.

By the start of the 4th chapter of Esther – we understand that Haman – a royal high official has convinced the king that the Jews are a danger to his empire – and that he has managed to wangle a decree that at some future date will allow the neighbours of Jew throughout the empire to rise up against them, and plunder their wealth (Esther 3:1-15)

One of Esther’s relatives – Mordecai a Jewish leader contacts her and tells her that she will need to use her power and influence in the palace to help her kinsmen.



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For anyone one this would be a huge request! We know what he did to Queen Vashti for being a little uppity – but this is in a sense even more dangerous – her place in the palace is tenuous at best – based almost entirely on her ethereal beauty and the omission of her heritage.

Mordechai's words echo throughout the book when he says; "who knows but that you have come to your position for such a time as this?" Esther 4:14.

I think many of us kind of know what it's like to be in Esther's place right now – maybe you have a sense that you didn't earn your position the 'right way', or you've had told clients that work was done in a specific way, when you know it hasn't – or maybe there is stuff going on in your work place that you know you should have spoken out about – but you know I will threaten your position.

Esther finds herself right there – tasked with saving her people, but understanding that will make her incredibly vulnerable. In this time & place falling out with the King had real consequences, death being a real possibility

Esther explains to Mordechai that she can't approach the king unless he specifically asks for her; "...unless the King extends the golden sceptre to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king." Est 4:11.

Mordecai responds that he does indeed know this – BUT (Est 4:13-14), that she risks losing everything if she doesn't make a stand. If the Jews are save – but she does nothing she'll be viewed as a traitor, but if the Jews die and she could be found out later and lose her life anyway – this is your time is the implication (Est. 4:14)

He appeals to her sense of call or vocation – unless you use your abilities your clout your influence to serve others – this palace is a prison to you – you may think you have nothing because you're always straining for more – but God has given you sooooo much, and he's called you off the bench onto the field to play – not just sit on the side-lines.

It's natural for her to find her identity in the palace – to find meaning and purpose within her position – but if

you're unwilling to risk your place – then the palace owns you.

When he says to her; "who knows but that you have come to your position for such a time as this?" Esther 4:14. – the word 'come' can be translated better as 'brought' - "who knows but that you have been brought to your position for such a time as this?" Esther 4:14.

Mordechai is reminding her that she didn't put herself in this position – but it was grace that brought her to this place – her beauty was a gift from God, nor did she create the opportunity that led to her obtaining this position.

Esther makes a choice – her desire to stay on the side-lines changes – she instructs Mordechai to gather all the Jews in Susa and too fast and pray. "the when you have done this, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish. Est 4:16.

We know the end to this story – Esther through her courage is able to bring the matter to Xerxes and unmask the hatred and calculation of Haman, and prevent the slaughter of thousands of Jews.

We could stop here, right. And say – use Esther's example as a way to be inspired to stand up for people in your work place, don't see influence as a way to move ahead, but use it to serve others – and as good as that is, and by all means do that! It's not enough – cos let's face it – our resolve seldom lasts that long, right?

Or you might just over compensate – and instead of being a 'secret' Christian at your work place – become the super obnoxious one.

Rather let's look at Esther just as an example, but as a signpost – a giant neon arrow pointing us to

→ God created us – gave us everything we have – and sustains our lives in the minutest and beautiful ways – but we chose not to live like that's a reality

→ We live as if everything we have is ours – to make our own names great

Esther **identifies** with her people – and **mediates** for them – her people are condemned, she stands with them – and condemns herself, and because she identifies herself with them – she is able to mediate for



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them – the only one who can – come before the king, and save her people.

Remind you of anyone? Starts with a J?

We can see Esther not just as an example of goodness, but as a pointer to Jesus

And Jesus as one who does these things for us – Phil 2:11 - who stands in your place, and mediates on your behalf.

We can begin to see the value that God places on & within each of us – and when we see how much we're loved,

our work becomes so much less selfish – when we see how much we are loved – we see our gifts and skills for what they are – acts of Grace -all the things in our work life – your influence, your resume, and all the benefits that it brings you – just become things.

You can risk them, spend them and lose them – you're free.

Esther did what she did because of some vague understanding that God is a God of grace, she didn't know what we know – of Jesus real and revealed to us in all Gods glory

We know so much more of his grace and our value to him now – we have a book full of interactions that God has with humanity – from Genesis to Revelation, the story of his son sent to show who and what he is

Our value and purpose underlined in bold – you are loved, you are more than what you do, you are more than what you have, you are more than – it is a licence to live in the fullness of the knowledge that

We are in this place because of God grace - & we get to extend that others

REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

Do you think it's too much of an assumption to say that on some level work is a selfish act? Why\why not?
Have you ever made a purely selfish career decision that you regretted\did not regret?

How would you respond to Mordechai's plea if you were in Esther's place?

How can we be mediators of God grace in our work places? What are you doing now, or need to do differently in the future to demonstrate the goodness of God to those in our work places? Has there ever been a time when you made a stand ethically, morally or on behalf of someone else in the work place? What happened?

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