

GENESIS 3:17-19 THE STORY OF THE MAN

How do you measure the happiness of people? Here is one way. Facebook has developed something called the “Gross National Happiness” index. It involves all sorts of formulas and computers, but the basic work is comparing the number of positive words on the Status Updates with the number of negative words on the Status Updates. (For those of you who don’t know what Status Updates are, they are your way of describing what you are thinking or doing at any given moment. “Tom Stein...is rejoicing in the beauty of spring.” “Tom Stein...needs a shower.” “Tom Stein...hates the Chicago Cubs.”)

So when are people the happiest? You can guess. Weekends and holidays. Why? Because that is when most people are not working. You probably did not need me or Facebook to inform you of that. Think of your workplace, your school, or even your home. We greet Monday with general misery. We welcome Friday with widespread giddiness. I measure it this way. I believe people drive more like maniacs on Friday than any other day of the week. Why? They are rushing to do what they have to do, so they can be free to do what they want to do.

We are in the second scene of the five scenes of the story of our God, our world, and our lives. The awesome creation of the first scene has been tarnished by the awful fall of the second scene. In response, God speaks. He tells the serpent that he will battle Satan, and he will defeat Satan. He warns the woman that she will have pain in her relationship with her children, and problems in her relationship with her husband. Now God speaks to the man about his life, although his words will affect both the man and the woman. As we walk through these words, we will find a curse that affects work, but we will also be reminded of a grace that redeems work.

Let’s start with **THE CURSE**. Where is it? What is it? When is it?

WHERE IS IT? Just as God did not curse the woman herself, he does not curse the man himself. God says to the man, “Cursed is the ground because of you.” At the creation, God had given the plants and the trees to the man for food, and he put the man in the garden to work the garden and take care of it. That ground was created good. But now it is cursed. The place of man’s dominion will now be the place of man’s frustration. He will walk upon that soil, and he will rely upon that soil, but that soil will display the effects of this curse.

We sense and we see this. We see droughts that dry the soil. We see floods that saturate the soil. We see bugs and blights that destroy the soil. But we see more than this. We see an entire creation that does not work as well as we would like, and that sometimes hurts us. We see earthquakes. We see hurricanes. We see coal mines explode. The creation “groans.” Throughout all the creation, we see the effects of this curse.

WHAT IS IT? In other words, what will this curse mean for the man? God says, “Through painful toil you will eat of (the ground).” Just as the woman will feel pain in childbirth, the man will feel pain in his work. As you work that ground, you will perform toil that will be unhelpful to your body and unsatisfying to your soul. You will work and work and work, and you will see thorns and thistles appear. They are no help and no use. But still you will labor “by the sweat of your brow.” You will come home at the end of a tiring day, and you will be frustrated by how hard you have worked, and how little you have gained.

We see this with the ground, but we also see this in all of our labor “under the sun.” Have you ever had a job, or done a job, where you worked very hard, but at the end of the day, had little more than pain in your body and frustration in your spirit?

I think of working at Kroger in high school. For a high school job, it was a pretty good job, but one aspect of it was awful. I worked in the ancient days when soda pop was sold in bottles, and you would return the bottles to the store and get a nickel back for every bottle you returned.

But what happened to the bottles after you returned them? Let me tell you. They would accumulate everywhere, and then the store manager would bark at me or someone else to go “sort bottles.” I would go back to a small, fenced-in space, facing west toward the summer sun, and I would have to sort the bottles by

manufacturer. All the Coke product bottles went in crates in one section, all the Pepsi product bottles went in crates in another section, and so on.

People would leave bottles that were chipped or broken, so I had to constantly be careful about being cut by the glass. People would also leave bottles with soda pop still in them, so as I sorted the bottles, the bees would want to join me. The soda pop companies were supposed to pick up the bottles so they could reuse them, but sometimes they would take too long to pick them up, and I would stack the crates higher and higher, until one day one of the piles of crates would fall with a great crash. What a mess.

But maybe worst of all, I would come into work the next day or the day after, and there were more bottles, often in shopping carts, trailing out of the bin, through the storage room, and all the way in to the corner of the back of the store. It never ended!

That is my story, but I am sure you can tell one like it. Or, young people, someday you will be able to tell one like it. We all experience this. Painful toil. The sweat of your brow. Thorns and thistles.

Where is the curse? Upon the ground. What is it? The promise of painful toil. *WHEN IS IT?* God says to the man that this painful toil will continue “all the days of your life.” It will continue until “you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” When is it? It is for this whole life! You will never be able to escape this curse in this world. You might be a hundred years old, and you will shimmy under the front of your car to pull the plug that drains the oil, and it will stick, and you will yank it, and you will knock the drain pan with your elbow, and the oil will splat all over you! You can work so hard, and you can think you have mastered your environment, and there you are, ingesting motor oil.

I think of the parable we call the Parable of the Rich Fool. He has toiled hard, and he has defeated enough of the thorns and the thistles to accumulate a good crop. He says, “This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’”

Then God reminds him that on that very night, he will lose his life. God also could have said what his Son said elsewhere. What about the moth? What about the rust? What about the thieves? You work and work and store and store, but your gain will be lost - maybe sooner than you think, for you live in a world where the ground is cursed, and the dust of death awaits you, and so much of your work will avail you nothing.

It is good for me to know this. I must accept that I live in a world like this. I can work and work and work and work, but I will still suffer pain in my body and struggle with emptiness in my soul. If I am a country boy, I will always have to face another drought, or another flood, or another scourge. If I am a city boy, I can build quite an empire, but I may lose it in a moment. I am tempted to expect so much of this world, and my work. But this curse reminds me that the world is broken, and I can neither fix it nor flee it. That could lead me to despair. That may lead me to cynicism. But it ought to lead me to realism.

The dishwasher explodes. The crabgrass returns. The ladder cracks. The roof leaks. The computer crashes. My well-crafted plan is rejected by my boss. My stock portfolio tanks. My car disintegrates. It is hard, but it is reality, in a world that lives with this curse.

A student of the Bible once said that our greatest problem in this world is homesickness. We long for a place where all is safe, and all is well. But we are not there. Here, we have all of those problems and more. Will you accept this? Will you realize that you cannot create heaven on earth, because heaven and earth are not the same in this age?

We read these words, and we sense and see the curse. But more is here. We have to sense and see **THE GRACE**. We must sense and see providing and redeeming grace.

The *PROVIDING GRACE* is threaded through the very words of the curse. Take another look at what God says. “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.” The man will have painful toil, but what will he do after his painful toil? He will eat. God will provide through that toil - he will provide the food the man needs to survive and thrive. Two more times in these verses, God promises this eating. Despite the curse, despite the toil, despite the pain of body and frustration of

spirit, God will provide.

Have you ever noticed how much these early chapters of Genesis involve food? God tells the man and woman not to eat of a certain tree. They eat of it. Now, although it is through eating that they have rebelled, it will be through eating that God will provide. The same God who curses, pours grace into that curse. He could have sentenced this man and woman to starve to death. He could have cut off all provision from them. But in his grace, he provides.

He still does. I just finished reading a book about the history of food. (What a great choice for the week of a churchwide 25-hour fast!) As the population of the world has grown, as people have been fruitful and multiplied, some have wondered if we would have enough food for all of us. In God's provision, our ability to produce food has kept pace, and even exceeded, the pace of population growth. You say, "But we still have famines." Yes - that is an effect of the curse. But especially today, famines occur because people and governments hoard more than they need, and fail to ensure that food gets to all the places it needs to go.

God's providing grace. We say "grace" before meals. Do we realize that every bit of the food we eat, is a gift of grace from the God who could have cursed us to eternal death, but instead gives us food to sustain life? When I think that way, I begin to despise the thought of wasting food. I see it in public. I see it here. If my eyes were bigger than my stomach, I would rather eat too much, feel too full, and carry an extra pound or two, than waste what God has provided. I encourage you to search your heart and habits about this. Every morsel of food is a sign of God's providing grace. Do we receive it that way, and treat it that way?

Yet as we look here and look ahead in our story, we also see *REDEEMING GRACE*. We have already seen the promise of a Redeemer in verse 15. A child of the woman will defeat Satan. We believe this is Jesus. So how does his redeeming grace enter our story of painful toil?

We start with this. We work for the King. The living, dead and risen Jesus is the King of our lives. We live for him. So if we know him by faith, we know we have the grace to keep working on this earth. We have the help and hope we need.

We have help. In a world of painful toil, we wear out in body and spirit. But we can do what God calls us to do, in the strength of Jesus. Sometimes when I run, I grow so weary that I must pray as I run for God's strength. In the same way, as I work in this world of pain and frustration, I must pray for the help of Jesus. I must believe I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

We also have hope. In a world of painful toil, we hope for a day of no more pain. This earth and heaven are not one, but one day they will be one. I believe we will work on the new heavens and new earth, and I believe it will be work as God made it to be. It will be invigorating, satisfying work. Sometimes we get a taste of this now. But someday we will get an eternity of this, and this hope brings joy and peace.

We work for the King. With his help, and with his hope, we work today for him. The Reformed and Protestant traditions strongly teach this. Jesus redeems our work. We work for him, so our work has meaning and value, even if it is still painful. Martin Luther famously described the maid, sweeping the floor and glorifying God in the sweeping, not just because she may sing a hymn while she sweeps, but because God loves clean floors. This is true. We work with energy and integrity, because we want to honor God in all that we think, say and do.

I needed to sort soda pop bottles for the glory of God. Students, you need to do schoolwork for the glory of God. A farmer bails hay for the glory of God. A tech guy operates on computers for the glory of God. A mom changes diapers for the glory of God. You work hard - with energy. You work honestly - with integrity. You glorify God, for with the help of the king and in the hope of the king, you are working for the King.

But I believe we must say a little more. The redeeming grace of Jesus does not just mean we work for the king. It means we work for the Kingdom. In Matthew 13, Jesus tells the Parable of the Weeds. In the kingdom of God, just like in a field, good seed is sown. But weeds come. The weeds could be pulled, but pulling them might destroy the good wheat that is growing alongside those weeds.

We read that parable, and we talk about how there are true believers in the kingdom, and fake believers in the kingdom. Right - but just take hold of the image that drives the story: the sowing of good seeds. In God's kingdom, God's people are to sow good seed for God's kingdom.

Do we see ourselves as planters of seeds? Do we realize that we are workers not just for the king, but for the kingdom? Here is the difference. Let's say you are a butcher. You "butch" really well. Mrs. Jones is always pleased to see how well you carve her rump roast - with just the right amount of fat left, and with just a little bit of carving flair. Great - you work for the King, so you should carve that rump roast with energy and integrity.

But is that all? Will you stand before God and say, "Lord, I hope you are pleased, because I left the right amount of fat on the rump roast. I worked with energy. The rump roast was always ready on time. I worked with integrity. I never overcharged Mrs. Jones for the rump roast." That is good, but that is not all, because if you are in union with Jesus Christ by faith, God calls you to plant seeds for the kingdom.

Maybe you ask Mrs. Jones how Mr. Jones is doing, and you listen to the answer. Maybe you realize that Mrs. Jones has some real burdens in her life, and you try to find ways to encourage her. Maybe Mrs. Jones asks how you are, and you tell her how God is providing for you in the butcher business. Maybe you go home and pray for God to show you how you can show Jesus Christ to Mrs. Jones. Maybe you own the butcher shop, and you can sow seeds with words. Or maybe you do not, and you can only sow seeds with deeds. But your ultimate desire is to do more than cut the rump roast right. You want to love that woman, as Jesus would love her, so that she can see his love and be blessed by his love.

The redeeming grace of Jesus. It gives help and hope in our work for the King today, but it also reminds us that we are all on a journey, and we want that journey to end for others where it will end for us - in a place of no more painful toil, with nothing but invigorating, satisfying work.

Is that how you see your life? Is that how you see your labor? Are you working for the King? Are you working for the Kingdom? God has put seeds of faith in your heart. Will you sow them, and pray for God to stir the soil of the hearts in your life?

Charlie Peacock is a man whose work is art. He once wrote, "My life and my art are going to tell a story whether I try to or not. They will tell a story that says, 'This is what a follower of Jesus is. This is what he is about. This is what he believes. That is what he thinks is important.'" Is it important to you, to work for the kingdom, even as you work for the King?

We are living a story where work is hard. But we are also living a story where God provides for us through our work, and where God calls us to work for Jesus, and for Jesus' kingdom, in our work. Whether it is Monday or Friday, or any other day of work, may our stories be stories of seed-planting. And may God bear kingdom fruit through us, for the sake of the Savior who reverses the curse, and redeems our work.