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Hebrews and Work

Theology of Work Project

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Introduction to Hebrews

The book of Hebrews offers a deep foundation, as well as practical help, for understanding the value of work in the world, overcoming evil at work, developing a rhythm of work and rest, serving the people we work among, enduring hardship, bringing peace in our workplaces, persevering over long periods, offering hospitality, cultivating a life-giving attitude towards money, and finding faithfulness and joy in workplaces where Christ's love often seems in short supply.

The book is founded on one essential message: Listen to Jesus! Some believers were feeling pressure to give up on the Messiah and turn back towards the Old Covenant. Hebrews reminds them that Jesus the King, through whom the world was created, is also the consummate High Priest in the heavenly places, who has initiated a new and better covenant with concrete consequences on earth. He is the ultimate sacrifice for sin, and he is the ultimate intercessor for us in our daily lives. We should look nowhere else for salvation but entrust ourselves to Christ, living in obedience to him until he brings us into the transformed and renewed city of God. There we will find an eternal Sabbath rest, which is not the cessation of work, but the perfection of the cycle of work and rest intended by God in the seven days of creation.

Christ Created & Sustains the World (Hebrews 1:1-2:8)

The foundation of Hebrews' theology is that Christ created and sustains the world. He is the Son "through whom [God] also created the worlds" (Hebrews 1:2). Therefore Hebrews is a book about Christ, the creator, at work in his workplace, the creation. This may be surprising to some who are used to thinking of the Father alone as creator. But Hebrews is consistent with the rest of the New Testament (e.g. John 1:3, Colossians 1:15-17) in naming Christ as the Father's agent in creation. [1] Because Christ is fully God, "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" (Heb. 1:3), the writer of Hebrews can refer interchangeably to Christ or the Father as the creator.

How then does Hebrews portray Christ at work in the creation? He is a builder, founding the earth and constructing the heavens. "In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work

of your hands” (Heb. 1:10). Moreover, he sustains the present creation, bearing “all things by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:3). “All things” of course includes us as well: “For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God...and we are his house if we hold firm” (Heb. 3:4, 6, emphasis added). All of creation is built by God through his Son. This strongly affirms the creation as the primary place of God’s presence and salvation.

The imagery of God as worker continues throughout Hebrews. He put together or pitched the heavenly tent (Heb. 8:2; by implication, Heb. 9:24), constructed a model or a blueprint for Moses’ tabernacle (Heb. 8:5), and designed and built a city (Heb. 11:10, 16; 12:22; 13:14). He is a judge in a court as well as the executioner (Heb. 4:12-13; 9:28; 10:27-31; 12:23). He is a military leader (Heb. 1:13), a parent (Heb. 1:5, 5:8, 8:9, 12:4-11), a master who arranges his household (Heb. 10:5), a farmer (Heb. 6:7-8), a scribe (Heb. 8:10), a paymaster (Heb. 10:35, 11:6) and a physician (Heb. 12:13).^[2]

It is true that Hebrews 1:10-12, quoting Psalm 102, does point out a contrast between the Creator and the creation: “In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like clothing; like a cloak you will roll them up, and like clothing they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will never end.” This is very much in keeping with the emphasis on the transitory nature of life in this world, and the need to seek the enduring city of the new heavens and new earth. Nonetheless, the emphasis of Hebrews 1:10-12 is on the might of the Lord and his deliverance rather than about the fragility of the cosmos.^[3] The Lord is at work in the creation.

Human beings are not only *products* of God’s creation, we are also sub-creators (or co-creators, if you prefer) with him. Like his Son, we are called to the work of ordering the world. “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honor, *subjecting all things under their feet*” (Heb. 2:6-8, quoting Psalm 8).^[4] If it sounds a bit vain to regard mere humans as participants in the work of creation, Hebrews reminds us, “Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters” (Heb. 2:11).

Therefore our work is meant to resemble God’s work. It has undying value. When we make computers, airplanes and shirts, sell shoes, underwrite loans, harvest coffee, raise children, govern cities, provinces and nations, or do any kind of creative work, we are working alongside God in his work of creation.

The point is that Jesus is the one supremely in charge of the creation, and only by working in him are we restored to fellowship with God. This alone makes us capable to take our place again as vice-regents of God on earth. Humanity’s created destiny is being achieved in Jesus, in whom we find the pattern (Heb. 2:10; 12:1-3), provision (Heb. 2:10-18), end and hope for all our work. Yet we do so during a time

marked by frustration and the threat of death, which threatens our very existence with meaninglessness (Heb. 2:14-15). Hebrews acknowledges that “we do not yet see everything in subjection” to the ways of his kingdom (Heb. 2:8). Evil plays a strong hand at present.

All of this is crucial for understanding what Hebrews will later say about heaven and “the coming world” (Heb. 2:5). Hebrews is not contrasting two different worlds: a bad material world with a good spiritual world. Rather, it is acknowledging that God’s *good* creation has become subject to evil and is therefore in need of radical restoration in order to become fully good again. *All* of creation—not just human souls—is in the process of being redeemed by Christ. “In subjecting *all things* to them [human beings], God left nothing outside their control” (Heb. 2:8).

The Creation has Become Subject to Evil (Hebrews 2:14-3:6)

Although Christ created the world entirely good, it has become tainted and subject to “the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil” (Heb. 2:14). Hebrews says little about how this happened but speaks at length about how God is working to “free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death,” namely, “the descendants of Abraham” (Heb. 2:16); this means Abraham’s descendants both through Isaac (the Jews) and Ishmael (the gentiles)—that is to say, everyone. The question asked by Hebrews is, “How will God free humanity from evil, death, and the devil?” The answer is, “through Jesus Christ, the great high priest.”

We will explore Jesus’ priesthood in greater depth when we turn to the central chapters of the book ([Hebrews 5-10](#)). For now we simply note that the opening chapters of the book stress that Jesus’ creative work and his priestly work are not isolated from one another. Hebrews brings together both, “Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands” (Heb. 1:10) and “so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil” (Heb. 2:14). This tells us that Christ is God’s agent of both the original creation and the work of *redemption*. Christ’s work of creation leads him, after the fall, to “free those who all their lives were held in slavery” (Heb. 2:5) and to “make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people” (Heb. 2:17).

We know very well how far our workplaces have fallen from God’s original intent. Some workplaces exist primarily because we need to restrain the evil that now infests the world. We need police to restrain criminals, diplomats to restore peace, medical professionals to heal disease, evangelists to call people back to God, auto body shops to repair accidents, investigative journalists to uncover corruption, engineers to rebuild decaying bridges. And every workplace suffers greatly from the fall. Mismanagement, labor-management disputes, gossip, harassment, discrimination, laziness, greed, insincerity, and a host of other problems, large and small, impede our work and our relationships at every turn. God’s solution is not to abandon his creation, or to evacuate human beings from it, but to

utterly transform it, to re-create it in its essential goodness. To accomplish this, he sends his Son to become incarnate *in* the world, just as he was the creator *of* the world. In our workplaces, we become Christ's "holy partners in a heavenly calling" (Heb. 3:1) to both sustain and restore his creation. This does not replace the creative work that began in the Garden, but instead tempers it, and adds to it. Creative and redemptive works occur side-by-side and are intertwined until Christ's return and the abolition of evil.

Life in the Wilderness: Journey to the New World (Hebrews 3:7-4:16)

As much as the creation is therefore the good work of God in Christ, there is still a stark contrast between the present broken world and the glorious world to come. In Hebrews 2:5, the author describes his main topic as "the coming world, about which we are speaking." This suggests that the primary focus throughout the book is on creation perfected by God at the consummation of all things. This is borne out by the lengthy discussion of "Sabbath rest" that dominates chapters 3 and 4.

Throughout the book, Hebrews often takes an Old Testament text as its point of departure. In this case, it draws upon the Exodus story to illuminate the idea of "Sabbath rest." Like Israel in the Exodus, the people of God are on a pilgrimage toward the promised place of salvation. In Israel's case, it was Canaan. In our case, it is the perfected creation. The Sabbath rest in Hebrews 4:9-10 is not simply a cessation of activity (Heb. 4:10) but also a Sabbath *celebration* (Heb. 12:22).^[5] Continuing with the Old Testament story, Hebrews takes the conquest of the land under Joshua as a further sign pointing towards our ultimate rest in the world to come. Joshua's rest is incomplete and needs fulfillment which only comes through Christ. "For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not speak later about another day" (Heb. 4:8).

At least two crucial things flow from this. First, life in the present world is going to involve difficult work. This is implied by the idea of the *journey* which is essential to the Exodus story. All who have ever traveled know that any journey involves an immense amount of labor. Hebrews uses the Sabbath motif to depict not only rest, but also the work that surrounds it. You work for six days, and then you rest. Likewise, you work hard in Christ during your life journey, and then you rest in Christ when God's kingdom is fulfilled. Of course, Hebrews is not implying you do nothing *but* work—as we will see shortly, there are also times of rest. Nor is it saying that activity ends when Christ's kingdom comes to completion. The point is that Christians have work to do in the here and now. We are not supposed to plop down in the wilderness, put our feet up, and wait for God to show up and make our lives perfect. God is working through Christ to bring this broken world back to what he intended for it in the beginning. We are privileged to be invited to participate in this grand work.

The second point concerns weekly Sabbath rest and worship. It is important to note that the author of

Hebrews does not address the question of the weekly Sabbath, either to affirm it or to condemn it. It is likely that he assumed his readers would observe the Sabbath in some way, but we cannot be sure. In Hebrews the value of weekly rest is governed by its consequences for the coming Kingdom. Does resting now connect us more deeply to God's promise of future rest? Does it sustain us on the journey of life? Is keeping Sabbath now an act of faith in which we celebrate now the joy we know will be fulfilled in eternity? It certainly seems that some sort of Sabbath rest (however that might be worked out in any given community) would be an ideal way to remind us that our labor is not an endless cycle of drudgery leading nowhere, but rather purposeful activity punctuated by worship and rest.

Seen in this light, our weekly work routines—the six days, as much as the one—can become exercises in spiritual awareness. When we feel the bite of the curse on work (Genesis 3:16-19) through economic breakdowns, poor management, gossipy coworkers, unappreciative family members, inadequate pay and the like, we remind ourselves that God's house has been badly damaged by his human tenants, and we long for its complete restoration. When our work goes well, we remind ourselves that God's creation, and our work in it, is a good thing, and that in some measure our good work is furthering his purposes for the world. And on our Sabbath, we take time for worship and rest.

Our Great High Priest (Hebrews 5:1-10:18)

The central section of Hebrews is dominated by the theme of Jesus as our great high priest. Taking Psalm 110 as his guide, the author of Hebrews argues that the Messiah was destined to be “a priest according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 5:6), and that this priesthood is superior to the Levitical priesthood which supervised the religious life of Israel. According to Hebrews, the old priesthood, under the Old Covenant, could not genuinely take away sins but only remind people of sins by the endless sacrifices offered by imperfect and mortal priests. Jesus' priesthood offers one definitive sacrifice for all time and offers us a mediator who always lives to intercede for us. We will highlight here the implications of these two themes of *sacrifice* and *intercession* on how we go about our work.

Christ's Sacrifice Makes Possible Our Service (Hebrews 5:1-7:28)

Jesus, through his self-sacrifice, succeeded in taking away human sin forever. “When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, ‘he sat down at the right hand of God’.... For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (Heb. 10:12, 14). “Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself” (Heb. 7:27). This complete atonement for sin is often referred to as “the work of Christ.”

It may seem that the forgiveness of sins is a purely church or spiritual matter with no implications for

our work, but this is far from true. On the contrary, the definitive sacrifice of Jesus promises to liberate Christians to live lives of passionate service to God in every sphere of life. The text highlights the ethical—that is, practical—consequences of forgiveness in Hebrews 10:16, “I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.” In other words, we who are forgiven will desire to do God’s will (in our hearts) and will receive the wisdom, vision, and ability to do so (in our minds).

How is this so? Many people regard church activities in roughly the same way as some Israelites regarded the rituals of the Old Covenant. If we are to get on God’s good side, such people reckon, we need to do some religious things, since that seems to be the sort of thing God is interested in. Going to church is a nice, easy way to meet the requirement, although the downside is that we have to keep doing it every week so that the magic doesn’t wear off. The supposed good news is that once we meet our religious obligations, we are then free to go about our business without too much concern about God. We won’t do anything heinous, of course—but we are basically on our own until we refill our buckets with God’s favor by attending church again next week.

The book of Hebrews lays waste to such a view of God. While the Levitical system was a part of God’s good purposes for his people, it was always meant to point beyond itself to the future definitive sacrifice of Christ. It was not a magical favor dispensary but a canteen for the journey. Now that Christ has come and offered himself on our behalf, we can experience the genuine forgiveness of sins through God’s grace directly. There is no further point in making perpetual ritual cleansings. We have no buckets that need to be—or can be—filled with God’s favor by doing religious activities. Trusting in Christ and his sacrifice, we are in the right with God. Hebrews 10:5 puts it as clearly as can be: “When Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me” (Heb. 10:5).

None of this, of course, means that Christians shouldn’t go to church or that rituals have no place in Christian worship. What is crucial, though, is that the consummate sacrifice of Christ means that our worship is not meant to be a self-contained religious exercise sealed off from the rest of our lives. Instead, it is a “sacrifice of praise” (Heb. 13:15) that refreshes our connection with our Lord, cleanses our conscience, sanctifies our will, and thus frees us to serve God each day, wherever we are.

But we are sanctified for service. “See, God, I have come to do your will, O God,” says Christ (Heb. 10:7). Service is the inevitable outcome of forgiveness by God. “How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!” (Heb. 9:14, NIV). [6]

Ironically, then, a focus on Christ’s priestly, heavenly work should lead us to be of tremendous practical, earthly service. The sacrifice Christ offered, which leads ultimately to a renewal of heaven, as well as earth (Heb. 12:26; see also Revelation 21:1) was enacted here on earth. Likewise, our own service is

performed here in the rough and tumble of everyday life. But we walk and work in this world in the confidence that Jesus has gone before us and completed the same journey we are on. This gives us confidence that our labor for him in every area of life will not be in vain.

Christ's Intercession Empowers Our Life and Work (Hebrews 7:1-10:18)

Lech Walesa

Lech Walesa's path to becoming the president of Poland reached its pivotal moment on August 14, 1980 when he jumped a fence to get *into* the sufferings of workers in the Lenin Shipyards in Gdansk. He had previously been fired from his job there as an electrician for his role in protesting against Poland's communist government in 1976. But Walesa jumped into the fray once more and was elected head of the shipyard's strike committee. The workers' demands were met, but workers in other Gdansk enterprises asked Walesa to continue striking in solidarity with their struggles. He agreed and quickly emerged as the national leader of the Solidarity Movement for political reform.

Solidarity was recognized by the Polish communist party, but pressure from the Soviet Union quickly led to a government crackdown. Walesa was arrested but returned to leading the movement underground upon his release. Eventually Solidarity succeeded in lifting martial law, forcing a contested parliamentary election, establishing a non-communist government, and breaking Soviet control over Poland. Walesa was awarded the Nobel Peace prize in 1983 and became the first democratically elected president of Poland after the fall of communism.

The Catholic Church supported the Solidarity movement and may have headed off further repression party when Pope John Paul II invited Walesa to a high-profile visit to the Vatican in 1981. Walesa credited his faith with the inspiration and strength needed to lead the movement. "No one throughout the world gave us the least of a chance to break Communism down," he said. "It happened quite simply. We knelt down and prayed."^[7]

Priests in ancient Israel not only offered sacrifices for the people, they also offered prayers of intercession. Thus Jesus prays for us before the throne of God (Heb. 7:25). "[Jesus] is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25). "He entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf" (Heb. 9:24). We need Jesus to be "always" interceding in the presence of God on our behalf because we continue to sin, to fall short, to stray away. Our actions speak ill of us before God, but Jesus' words about us are words of love before the throne of God.

To use a workplace metaphor, imagine the fear a young engineer might feel when he is called to meet the chief of the state highway department. What will he possibly say to her? Recognizing that the project he is working on is running late and over budget makes him more afraid. But then he learns that his supervisor, a beloved mentor, will also be at the meeting. And it turns out she is great friends with the chief of the highway department from their days back at university. "Don't worry," the mentor

assures the engineer, “I’ll take care of things.” Won’t the young engineer have much greater confidence to approach the chief in the presence of her friend?

Hebrews emphasizes not only that Jesus is a high priest, but also a high priest in solidarity with us. “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). To return to a verse we discussed earlier, Jesus speaks to God of the “body you have prepared for me” (Heb. 10:5). Christ came in a genuine human body, and he really did embrace life as one of us.

In order to be a faithful high priest, the author reasons, Jesus has to be able to sympathize with the people. He cannot do this if he has not experienced the same things they have experienced. And so he states quite carefully that Jesus *learned* obedience. “Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb. 5:8). This does not mean, of course, that Jesus had to learn to obey in the way we do—by ceasing to disobey God. It means that he needed to *experience suffering and temptation first-hand* to qualify as a high priest. Other verses make the same point in equally expressive language, that Jesus’ sufferings “perfected” him (Heb. 2:10; 5:9; 7:28). The full meaning of “perfect” is not only “flawless,” but also “complete.” Jesus was already flawless—but *to be qualified as our high priest*, he needed those sufferings to complete him for the job. How else could he genuinely relate to us as we struggle in this world day by day?

What is most encouraging here is that this suffering and learning took place in the setting of Jesus’ *work*. He does not come as a kind of a theological anthropologist who “learns” about the world in a detached, clinical way; nor as a tourist popping by for a visit. Instead he weaves himself into the fabric of real human life, including real human labor. When we face struggles at work, then, we can turn to our sympathetic high priest with the full assurance that he knows first-hand what we are going through.

Realizing the Faith (Hebrews 10:19-11:40)

Following Jesus is hard work, and only faith in the eventual fulfillment of his promises can keep us going. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). We need faith that the promises God has made are true, however unlikely that might seem in the present circumstances. A more precise translation of this verse helps us see the practical importance of faith. “Now faith is the *realization* of things hoped for, the *proving* of things not seen.”^[8] “Realization” is particularly appropriate here, because the double sense it has in English perfectly captures the nuances of the examples of faith given in Hebrews 11. When we at last see things clearly, that is one form of realization. We finally understand. But the second form of realization is seeing things made real, when what we hoped for has finally come true. The heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 realize things in both ways. Taking up the second half of the verse, they are so convinced of what God has said that they

prove it by what they do.

Hebrews gives us the practical examples of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and others from the Old Testament. They were all looking forward to the fulfillment of God's promise for something better than their present experience. Noah had faith in the righteous world beyond the flood. Realizing that faith meant building an ark to save his household (Heb. 11:7). Abraham had faith in the coming kingdom (or "city") of God (Heb. 11:10). Realizing that faith meant setting out on a journey to the land God promised him, even though he did not know where he was going (Heb. 11:8-12). Moses had faith in a life in Christ far surpassing the pleasures he could have claimed as a son of Pharaoh's daughter. Realizing that faith meant "choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin" (Heb. 11:25-26). These hopes and promises were not completely fulfilled in their lifetimes, yet they lived every day as if already experiencing God's power to fulfill them.

Faith like this is not wishful thinking. It is a taking seriously of God's self-revelation in scripture (Heb. 8:10-11), combined with a "repentance from dead works" (Heb. 6:1), a perseverance in "love and good deeds" (Heb. 10:24), and an ability to see the hand of God at work in the world (Heb. 11:3), despite the evil and brokenness around us. Ultimately faith is a gift from the Holy Spirit (Heb. 2:4), for we could never hold on to such faith by our own force of will.

This was a crucial message for the audience of Hebrews, who were tempted to throw away their hope in Christ in exchange for a more comfortable life in the here and now. Their eyes were fixed not on future glory, but on present deprivation. The book's word of exhortation is that the promises of God are more enduring, more glorious, and indeed *more real* than fleeting pleasures in the here and now.

If we are to *realize* the faith God has given us, we have to work in the midst of the tension between God's promise for the future and the realities of today. On the one hand, we should fully recognize the provisional, finite nature of all that we do. We will not be surprised when things don't work out as we had hoped. "All these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised" (Heb. 11:39). Situations arise where our best efforts to do good work are thwarted not only by circumstance, but by the deliberate misdeeds of human beings. This may cause us grief, but it will not lead us to despair, because we have our eyes fixed on God's city to come.

Sometimes our work is thwarted by our own weakness. We fall short of the mark. Consider the list of names in Hebrews 11:32. When we read their stories we see clearly their own failures, sometimes significant failures. If we read about Barak's timidity as a general (Judges 4:8-9) through human eyes, we likely would see no faith at all. Yet God sees their faith through his eyes and credits their work by his grace, not their accomplishment. We can take heart in this when we also have stumbled. We may have spoken harshly to a coworker, been impatient with a student, ignored our responsibility to our family, and done our work poorly. But we have faith that God is able to bring about his intent for the

world even in the midst of our weakness and failure.

On the other hand, *precisely because* we have our eyes on God's city to come, we seek to live according to the ways of that city to the greatest possible extent in every aspect of daily life and work. The heroes of the faith in Hebrews realized their faith in all kinds of workplaces. They were people "who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight" (Heb. 11:33-34).

Imagine a building contractor—a fitting illustration for a book concerned with God's cosmic house-building. The contractor has a clear vision of life in God's coming kingdom. He knows it will be characterized by justice, harmonious relationships, and an enduring beauty. As a person of faith, he seeks to *realize* this vision in the present. He stewards the earth's raw materials in the construction of the home, creating a home of beauty but not wasteful opulence. He treats his workers with the concern and respect which will be characteristic of God's future city. He shows heavenly love to his clients by listening to their hopes for their earthly homes, trying to realize those hopes within the constraints of money and materials. He perseveres through troubles, when the antique radiator is two inches too long for the bathroom, or when a carpenter cuts the main, horrifically expensive joist two inches too short. He accepts that an earthquake or hurricane could destroy all his labors in minutes, yet he puts his whole self into his work. Amidst both the joys and the frustrations, he wants to live out the values of God's city by showing consistent love to others in the quality of his personal relationships and in the quality of the houses he builds. And he trusts that every building, frail and imperfect as it is, is a witness day by day to the great city to come, "whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10).

Enduring Hardship, Pursuing Peace (Hebrews 12:1-16)

Hebrews moves from providing examples of faithful saints to providing challenges for the people of its own day. Like the rest of the New Testament, Hebrews describes the Christian life as full of hardships. We are to endure these hardships as measures of God's fatherly discipline. Through them, we come to share in Christ's holiness and righteousness. Just as the Son came under discipline and so was perfected (Heb. 5:7-10), God's sons and daughters undergo the same process.

It is the most common thing in the world for us to interpret our hardships as divine punishment. Those who oppose us may even view it as such, hurling our very real sins and faults in our faces. But Hebrews reminds us there is no punishment for those who have been forgiven through the all-sufficient, once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. "Where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin" (Heb. 10:18). Our loving Father will *discipline* us (Heb. 12:4-11), but discipline is not punishment (1 Corinthians 11:32). Discipline is hard training, but it is a form of love, "for the Lord disciplines those

whom he loves” (Heb. 12:6). Let no one pretend to interpret our hardships as God’s punishment. “He disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness” (Heb. 12:10).

This discipline is not only for our personal benefit. Hebrews goes on to exhort Jesus’ followers to “pursue peace with *everyone*, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” The “peace” of which Hebrews 12:14 speaks is the full notion of the Hebrew *shalom*, which conveys an ultimate state of justice and prosperity, shared among the whole community. It is the final goal of salvation. It is captured in another way later in the chapter with the imagery of the holy, heavenly city of Zion in (Heb. 12:22-24).

We know how hard it is to endure hardship and pursue peace in our work. Having received the promises of God, we naturally hope they will immediately make our work more pleasant. We want to be fruitful, to multiply our wealth, to gain authority—all good things in God’s eyes (Genesis 1:28)—and to enjoy friendships (Genesis 2:18) in and through our work. If instead we encounter hardship, money troubles, lack of power, and difficult coworkers, endurance may be the last thing on our minds. It may seem much easier to give up, quit, change jobs—if we have the choice—or to disengage, slack off, or pursue a rough justice of our own making. Or we may grow weary or lose heart, remaining at our work but losing interest in doing it as a service to God. May God give us the grace to endure difficult workplace situations! The hardships we face in our work may be God’s means of discipline for us, to grow us into more faithful and useful people. If we cannot maintain integrity, serve others, and pursue reconciliation in the midst of difficult jobs, how can we become like Jesus, “who endured such hostility against himself from sinners” (Heb. 12:3)?

For an application of this passage, see “Prepare for Hard Times” at [Texas Nameplate Study Guide](#) by clicking [here](#).

Shaking Things Up (Hebrews 12:18-29)

One of the widespread misunderstandings of Hebrews is that it pits the heavenly (uncreated) world against the earthly (created) one, that it anticipates an annihilation of the cosmos while heaven remains as God’s unshakable kingdom. Such a misunderstanding might seem to find support in texts such as Hebrews 12:26-27. “At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, ‘Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.’ This phrase, ‘Yet once more,’ indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.”

But upon closer examination, we see this is not what the author is saying. Hebrews 12:26 declares the heaven will be shaken as well as the earth, so that whatever “removal” takes place affects both realms. Hebrews describes the heavenly world as a “creation” just as much as the cosmos (Heb. 8:2; 11:10). It speaks of resurrection (Heb. 6:2, 11:35), which is a reclamation, not an annihilation, of creation. It

understands the cosmos (Heb. 1:2-6, 11:3) to be the inheritance of the Son. It proclaims that the offering of Christ was a bodily, in-this-world event of flesh and blood (Heb. 12:24; 13:2; 13:20).

Moreover, the language of shaking in Hebrews 12:26-27 (drawn from Haggai 2) actually points towards *judging* and *perfecting*, not destroying. In keeping with the imagery of Hebrews 12:18-24, the “earth” and “heaven” probably correlate with the Old Covenant (Mount Sinai, which could be touched) and the New (Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem). The effects of the shaking are both present and future. Ultimately, shaking is the removal of whatever is imperfect or sinful from both heaven and earth.

The Haggai reference—and the argument of Hebrews as a whole—indicates that the ultimate result of this shaking will be the filling of God’s house, his temple, with glory. The entire cosmos becomes God’s temple, cleansed and reclaimed. In Haggai 2, the shaking of heaven and earth leads to the *realization* of the peace on earth we are exhorted to pursue earlier in Hebrews 12. “‘In *this place* I will give prosperity [*shalom*],’ says the Lord of Hosts” (Haggai 2:9).

What is transient, then, is not the created world, but the imperfection, evil and strife that infect the world. Pouring our lives into God’s kingdom means working through the *creation* and *redemption* that belong to the advancing rule of Christ (Heb. 7:2). It does not matter whether we are fry cooks, educators, athletes, managers, home makers, ecologists, senators, fire fighters, pastors or anyone else. The way to participate in Christ’s kingdom is not to abandon “worldly” work in favor of “spiritual” work. It is to persevere—with thanksgiving to God (Heb. 12:28)—in all kinds of work under the discipline of Christ.

Hospitality (Hebrews 13:1-3)

Amidst the various concluding exhortations in Hebrews 13, two have a special relevance for work. Let us begin with Hebrews 13:2, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Heb. 13:1-2). The verse alludes to Abraham and Sarah entertaining visitors (Genesis 18:1-15) who turn out to be angels (Genesis 19:1), the very bearers of the promise of a son to Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 18:10), which figures so prominently in this book (Heb. 6:13-15; 11:8-20). These verses also remind us of the many acts of hospitality by Jesus (e.g., John 2:1-11; Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14; John 21:12-13) and those who followed him (e.g., Mark 1:31; Luke 5:9), and parables such as the wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1-4; Luke 14:15-24).

Hospitality may be one of the most under-rated forms of work in the world—in the modern Western world, at least. Many people work hard to practice hospitality, even though for most people it is unpaid work. Yet few, if asked what their occupation is, would say, “I offer hospitality.” We are more likely to see it as a diversion or a private interest, rather than a service to God. Yet hospitality is a great act of

faith—that God’s provision will bear the expense of giving away food, drink, entertainment and shelter; that the risk of damage or theft of property will be bearable; that time spent with strangers will not diminish time with family and friends; and, most of all, that strange people are worth caring about. Even if we have to go out of our way to give it—to prison, for example, or worse (Heb. 13:3)—hospitality is one of the most significant acts of work or service that human beings can do (Matthew 25:31-40).

In addition, almost all workers have the opportunity to practice an ethos of hospitality in the course of their jobs. Many people work in hospitality industries. Do they recognize that they are fulfilling Hebrews 13:1-3 when they provide a clean, well-maintained hotel room, or a healthful, delicious dinner, or cater a party or reception? No matter the industry or occupation, every interaction with a coworker, customer, supplier, client, or stranger in the workplace is a chance to make others feel welcomed and valued. Imagine if Christians had a widespread reputation for hospitality in the course of their ordinary business?

Money Matters (Hebrews 13:5-6)

The second work-related exhortation in chapter 13 concerns the love of money: “Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you’” (Heb. 13:4-5). This command to be free of the love of money suggests that financial pressures were among the special problems faced by the original readers of this book. This was already indicated in Hebrews 10:32-36 and indirectly by Hebrews 11:25-26. Perhaps the emphasis on the future “city” (Heb. 11:10; 12:22; 13:14) was stimulated in part by their experience of economic and social alienation from their present city.

We have full confidence of protection and provision by our God, but in no respect does this guarantee that we will enjoy lives of material prosperity. Jesus never promised us an easy life, and our hard work may not be rewarded in this life with wealth or luxury. The point of Hebrews 13:5-6 is that the Lord will provide all that we need *for a life founded on faith*. Of course, plenty of faithful believers have experienced severe financial hardship, and have even died from exposure, thirst, hunger, disease and worse. They died that way *through* faith, not for a *lack* of it. The author of Hebrews is perfectly aware of this, having recounted Christians who suffered torture, mocking, flogging, imprisonment, stoning, being sawn in two, death by the sword, destitution, persecution, torment, and wandering across mountains, deserts, in caves and holes in the ground (Heb. 11:35-38)! Ultimately God’s promises and our prayers are fulfilled just as they were for his Son—through resurrection from the dead (Heb. 5:7-10). This book operates with a transformed economic vision, that our needs are met in the advance of God’s kingdom, rather than in our personal prosperity. Therefore if we have nothing, we do not despair; if we have enough, we are content; and if we have much, we sacrifice it for the sake of others.

The warning against the love of money does not stem from a discovery that God's kingdom in creation, the material world, is somehow less spiritual than God's kingdom in heaven. It stems, rather, from the startling awareness that in a fallen world, the love of money creates an attachment to the present order that stands in the way of our working towards the transformation of the world. If money is the chief reason we take a job, start a company, run for office, join a church, choose our friends, invest our resources, spend our time, find a mate, then we are not living by faith.

Working Outside the Camp (Hebrews 13:11-25)

Fish Guts and the Kingdom of God

Nancy Matheson Burns, CEO of food distributor Dole & Bailey, describes reconsidering her career choices when she became a Christian. [9] At the time, she was a fish buyer for her company. She spent her days up to her ankles in fish guts, as she describes it, contending with guys blasting her with foul language, surrounded by calendars with pictures of naked women. "I've got to get a job doing something holier," she thought. "This is no place for a Christian." So she applied for a job selling advertising for Christian radio stations. But she couldn't shake the feeling that God put her in the fish guts for a reason. When she read passages such as this one in Hebrews, she noticed God usually kept Christians in difficult places, rather than whisking them away from them. So she decided to try an experiment. She bought a bunch of calendars with decent pictures. She took them on her rounds, tore down the girlie calendars, and put up the decent ones right in front of the guys' faces. "Now you have something better to look at," she said, "I hope it helps you have a better day."

The fish guys began to like her and respect her. Some days she was the only person who treated them with respect. She found she liked them too. She appreciated their work, and she enjoyed supplying her customers with fresh, safe, quality fish. Over time she rose to become CEO, and she turned the company into a workplace where all people are treated with dignity and respect, and leaders are selected and trained for the ability to serve employees, customers, and suppliers.

The third work-related exhortation in chapter 13 is to "go to [Jesus] outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured" (Heb. 13:13). According to Heb. 13:11-13, "the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp," outside the realm of the holy, in the place of the unclean. "Jesus also suffered outside the city gate," outside the camp, in the realm of the unholy, "to sanctify the people by his own blood." Hebrews thus draws the lesson that we should journey outside the camp, too, and join Jesus there.

Doing the work of Jesus' kingdom entails suffering along with Jesus. The phrase "bearing his disgrace" echoes the faith of Moses, who chose the "disgrace of Christ" over the honor and treasures of Egypt (Heb. 11:24-26). This "disgrace" was the loss of honor and possessions mentioned earlier in the book. But sacrificing our possessions, privileges and status may be the only way we can help others. "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God" (Heb. 13:16).

Many Christians work in places “outside the camp” of holiness. Sometimes we feel that to follow Christ well, we need to find holier workplaces. But this passage from Hebrews shows us that the opposite is true. To follow Christ fully is to follow him to the unholy places of life.

Conclusion to Hebrews

Hebrews summons us into the world of God’s promise to Abraham, a promise to bring all humanity into the sacred space of his kingdom. It announces the fulfillment of God’s will to incorporate all the cosmos into the sphere of his own holiness. As a people on pilgrimage into God’s kingdom, we are called to invest our lives, including our work lives, in the cosmos whose architect and builder is God. The book of Hebrews exhorts us to be content with what God provides, and to work for peace (*shalom*) and holiness for all. We are to gladly suffer the loss of honor and possessions for the joy that lies ahead of us. In this journey, we are supplied, emboldened, and encouraged by God’s Son, the true priest whose self-sacrifice opens a way for the world to be purified and restored to what God intended from the beginning. Even in the midst of our suffering, thanksgiving is our basic attitude and wellspring of perseverance. Christ calls us to make the values of his kingdom known within the economic, social and political structures of the fallen world. This requires escaping the trap of living for money. What we do, and what we refrain from doing, are both predicated on these values. We have one work—whatever our occupation—and one ambition, to “do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever” (Heb. 13:21).

ENDNOTES

- [1] See Sean M. McDonough, *Christ as Creator: Origins of a New Testament Doctrine* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2010).
- [2] See Robert Banks, *God the Worker: Journeys into the Mind, Heart and Imagination of God* (Sutherland N.S.W.: Albatross Books, 1992) and R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 118-123, for a discussion of God's work.
- [3] Moreover, the citation of Psalm 102 fits in a stream of passages that feature the cosmos as that which was created through the Son and is in process of being cleansed.
- [4] Old Testament quotations in Hebrews are always from the Septuagint, the ancient Greek-language translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. For this reason, they do not always correspond closely to modern translations, which are based on the Hebrew Masoretic text rather than the Septuagint.

- [5] J. Laansma, *I Will Give You Rest: The Rest Motif in the New Testament with Special Reference to Mt 11 and Heb 3-4*, WUNT 2/98 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1997).
- [6] We have used the NIV here because of a quirk in the NRSV translation, which reads, “worship” instead of “serve.” “Worship” is indeed a possible translation of the Greek *latreuein*, which like the Hebrew *abad*, can mean either “worship” or “serve.” But in this context, the NRSV is alone among major translations in translating it as “worship.” The NIV, TNIV, NASB, KJV and others render it here as “serve.”
- [7] The Nobel Foundation, "The Nobel Peace Prize 1983," http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1983/walesa-bio.html "Lech Walesa," *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, <https://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/634519/Lech-Walesa> and Sarah K. Clarke, "Lech Walesa Tells His Story of Faith at Seton Hall," *Newark (NJ) Star Ledger*, December 5, 2005.
- [8] Walter Bauer (Author), Frederick William Danker (Ed.), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), under *pistos*. The King James Version is closer to the Greek than some of the modern translations: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”
- [9] Nancy Matheson Burns (guest lecture in the Doctor of Ministry program at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Hamilton, MA, March 22, 2000).