



MANNA matters

Newsletter of MANNA GUM.



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Good Work, God's Work

by Jonathan Cornford

It is a sobering thought, but most of our waking hours on this Earth will be spent in some form of work. Whether it be paid or unpaid, recognised or unacknowledged, outside of the home or inside the home, the way we approach work is a large part of the way we approach life. And if we remember that, according to the Bible, God is profoundly interested in our whole life and how we live it, not just some quarantined-off spiritual bit, then all this places the issue of work very high on the agenda of Christian discipleship.

William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury during the Second World War, once wrote that:

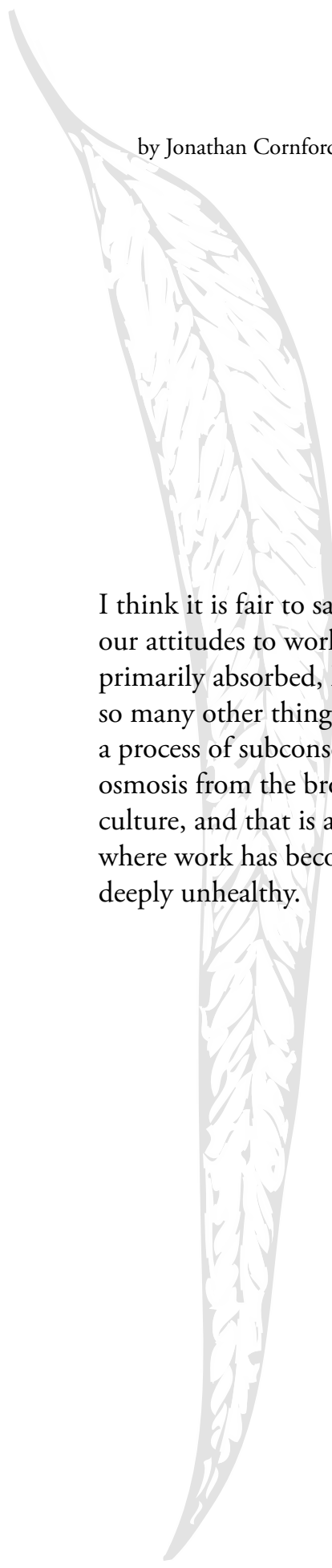
Some young [and we could add, older] people have the opportunity to choose the kind of work by which they will earn their living. To make that choice on selfish grounds is probably the greatest single sin that any young [or older] person can commit, for it is the deliberate withdrawal from allegiance to God of the greatest part of time and strength.

That is a serious claim about the importance of how we think about work; nevertheless, it is probably uncommon for Christians to treat the decisions they make about work as a central component of how they try to follow Jesus in the world.

On the whole, I think it is fair to say that our attitudes to work are primarily absorbed, like so many other things, by a process of subconscious osmosis from the broader culture, and that is a culture where work has become deeply unhealthy. On one hand, the approach of many to work is driven by ambition, the need to succeed or the quest for higher incomes, and is too often manifest in overwork, for which families and marriages pay a price. On the other hand, an unsettlingly large number of households have no member involved in any purposeful work, an absence which also has dire consequences on the health of families. In the middle are a large number of people for whom work is a source of stress and distress. How can we step back and gain some perspective on this troubling picture?

Work in the Bible

The Bible has much to say about the place of work in our lives (for the moment I am not making any distinction between formal and informal, or paid and unpaid work). Most strikingly, in Genesis 2:15 we are told that participating in work is fundamental to our created identity and purpose: 'The LORD God took the human and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.' Without some purposeful work to undertake, we are not fully ourselves. This is not just a theological proposition; where I live, in Long Gully, Bendigo, it is an observable fact: high rates of



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Scene from the mortuary chapel of ancient Egyptian vizier Rekhmire depicting slaves making bricks, c. 1400 BC.

households with no working member correlates with high levels of family dysfunction. As the Apostle Paul says, 'For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life' (Eph 2:1). (Yes, Paul really said that!)

The Bible is eminently practical in recognising that we must work to sustain ourselves and our families and affirms that there is both dignity and meaning in labouring to live. Paul says that 'Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.' (2 Thess 3:10). However, there is also recognition of the profound satisfaction that we derive from 'good work' – that is, work that is intelligently, skilfully and creatively undertaken in the pursuit of a good purpose.

In Exodus chapter 35, a passage generally too obscure and boring for modern readers, there is a fascinating picture of what good work looks like in the instructions given for the construction of the tabernacle and its paraphernalia. Critically, for a people who have just been liberated from slavery in Egypt, the passage begins with yet another reminder to keep the Sabbath – good work can only be good when it has boundaries and limitations placed upon it, and balanced with time for rest and relationships. Those who are to undertake this good work are those with a 'willing spirit', those whose 'heart was stirred', and those

who are 'wise-hearted' (most translations these days say 'skilful', however the old King James rendering is probably closer to the sense of the meaning). How interesting that the critical job criteria are wisdom and orientation of heart – not criteria that are high in today's job application processes.

In the Biblical vision, good work has a central place in the good life.

In the biblical vision, good work has a central place in the good life. However, as in all things, the Bible also lifts the veil on the dark side of work. For the fallen Adam and Eve cast out of Eden, and then for Cain after them,

the vision of good work had become a curse of futile toil. Their distance from God is immediately evidenced in their experience of work as hard labour (Gen 3:17-19). In Exodus, the archetypal story of liberation for God's people is a story of liberation from (amongst other things) bad work – bad because it was work under compulsion and under bad conditions, and bad because it was work serving a bad purpose, which was the building of Pharaoh's empire.

The Bible also asks critical questions about our attitudes to work, the sort of work we undertake and the underlying motivations of our work. Perhaps most importantly, the Bible is consistently scathing about devoting our working lives to the pursuit of a hollow dream of wealth, comfort and success: 'You fool!', Jesus says when he tells the story



of a man who wasted his life in the pursuit of wealth and comfort (Luke 12:20). The biblical challenge is to think critically about how we invest our limited time and energy on this Earth:

Why spend your money on what is not bread,
and your labour on what does not satisfy? (Isa 55:2)

This prompts us to think about what things are actually worth our labour.

But there is also a danger that, whatever the purpose of the work, the work itself becomes its own end – the thing that is valued above all else, the thing that supplies all meaning and sense of purpose. In biblical language, this is called idolatry, and it is a consistent refrain of the prophets that humanity is consistently drawn to worshipping the work of its own hands (eg. Isa 2:8).

Moreover, not only is the Bible interested in the underlying motivations and purpose of our work, it is fundamentally concerned about the ethics of the work we do. There is no room in the Bible for any justification

of work that involves harm to other people and to the community as a whole. Much of the work of the prophets is given to exposing and denouncing the systematic injustices of the ‘respectable’ world of commerce and business. In the eyes of the prophets, just because something is legal or even standard practice, does not make it acceptable and does not change the fact that people are suffering because of it:

The Lord enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor? (Isa 3:14-15)

Of course, the most profound ideas about work in the Bible are found in the New Testament. The New Testament writers are distinctly uninterested in how ‘important’ our work is or what our place in society is. Whoever we are and whatever our skills or position or lot in life, there is one big idea about work that applies to us all – we are called to participate in the work of God. This core idea is articulated in many different ways, again



By Shelley Knoll-Miller, see pages 8-9 for more.



and again. Most profoundly, the resurrected Jesus says to the disciples in John 20: 'As the Father sent me, so I send you' (v.21). And what is Jesus' work that has now been entrusted to us? Paul puts it most succinctly in 2 Corinthians:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. (2 Cor 5:18-20)

The job with which we have been entrusted is nothing less than participating in the healing of the brokenness of the world. This means working to restore the broken relationship between humanity and God, the broken relationships between people, and the broken relationships between people and creation. This is such a big job that we all have a part and we are all needed – there is no such thing as unemployment in the Kingdom of God!

Paul expects that members of the Christian community will be involved in widely varying work. However, he urges all of them to think about how their work, whatever it is, can play some part in God's work. Although there are many jobs to be done, and many different things needed, the most important thing is to think about our work in terms of the contribution it makes to the community (1 Cor 12:7). Paul talks of 'co-workers in Christ' (Rom 16:9), being involved in 'good works' (Eph 2:10), 'works or service' (Eph 4:12), and work that 'builds up' rather than pulls down (1 Cor 10:23-24). 'So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.' (Gal 6:10)

Living out good work

So how do we use the biblical vision of work to inform the choices that we make in a world in which unhealthy attitudes predominate? Most of us would admit that we are unhappy about some aspect of how work unfolds in our life. While this is an important and necessary realisation, we must also realise that we cannot "solve" it all in one fell swoop. We need to think about what changes we can and should make carefully and prayerfully, and learn to accept the things we cannot change (for the time being at least). Some things we will be able to act on immediately, and some changes we are going to need to work towards over a longer period of time, perhaps even years. Below is a range of things to think through.

When it comes to the work of the household, we have all got the wrong end of the stick.

Standards of living

If we are wanting our working lives to contribute to the greater work of God, then we cannot think about this apart from the issue of standards of living. How much do we need? How we answer this question is the central determinant of the major time allocations in our life between paid employment and other endeavours, and also in what type of work we pursue. Can we live with less? If we can answer yes to this question, then we can potentially liberate a whole realm of creative choices in the world of work (see 'Less is more: Living on a low income', April 2013; MannaCast ep. 9).

Rethinking household work

When it comes to the work of the household, we have all got the wrong end of the stick. With the Industrial Revolution, men became wage earners, divorced from the home, and household work became the lot of women, unrecognised, unvalued and isolated. Now women understandably want to abandon such stigmatised and isolated work, the result being a convenience economy in which no-one wants to undertake the labour of running a





home. Nevertheless, while women have moved more into paid employment, they still tend to bear an unfair burden of household labour.

However, there is perhaps no more satisfying work than the mutually shared and skilfully undertaken work of running a productive household economy that gives health to and strengthens the bonds of all its members. Indeed, it is hard to imagine—especially when one considers the raising of children and the care of the elderly—more important work. A healthy overall attitude to work requires both men and women to re-appraise much more positively the work of the household, and to renew a sense of partnership in it.

Non-paid work

If we are prepared to live with less, this opens up the possibility of working part-time to give more time to good work that is not paid. In Christian ministry circles, this idea has long been referred to as ‘tent making’, from the Apostle Paul’s example of making tents to fund his unpaid apostolic work. However, tent making should not be restricted to ‘Christian ministry’; it can be applied to volunteering in the community sector, working for a church community, building creative ventures in community, caring for family, or pursuing a richer, more productive, more sustainable and healthier household economy. For some people, undertaking paid part-time work still needs to be ‘meaningful’ work for them; for

others, as long as it pays the bills, is not unethical or degrading, then it is just fine.

Choosing paid employment

‘What job should I choose?’ This is the big question for many school leavers entering study, or many graduates entering the workforce. It is also increasingly a question for many who have been in the workforce for a long time. Everyone has different abilities, skills and education, and the range of options in paid employment for each one of us is quite different. If we are seeking to align our paid work, as much as we can, with God’s work, then there are a number of things to think through:

What are you good at and what do you enjoy? This is obviously an important consideration. It is true that sometimes we really are called to undertake things we don’t enjoy and don’t feel particularly good at, but mostly God wants to employ the gifts and passions that we have.

Is the work you are considering in any way damaging or harmful to people or creation? There are some jobs that Christians clearly should not do. Many people could agree that Christians shouldn’t be involved in any way with the arms industry, pornography, gambling or tobacco. Some people feel that Christians should have no part in advertising or speculating on financial markets. And there are large grey areas – what about the pharmaceutical industry, which has an appalling ethical record, but which



provides a service which can (when done well) alleviate much suffering? These questions cannot be answered here, but asking and wrestling with such questions absolutely should be part of our framework for making decisions about employment.

What contribution does this work make to the world? Can we seek employment in activities that contribute something positive to the world? It is no accident that Christians tend to be over-represented in the helping professions—doctors, nurses, carers, teachers, aid workers and social workers—and this is as it should be. However, we should remember that the world needs far more professions than these: we really do need good farmers, plumbers, mechanics, IT people, builders, and thousands of other jobs that many people hardly consider to be important. Whatever the job, the ultimate question for us all is ‘Who does my work serve?’ Does it serve my personal ambitions, does it serve someone else’s greed, or does it serve need in the world?

How do you perform your work?

Whether you choose to be a doctor, social worker, plumber or mechanic, the extent to which your work actually makes a positive contribution to the world depends entirely on *how* you do your work. Most of us have experienced how in a time of desperate need, a good doctor, mechanic or plumber – someone who does their work skilfully, sensitively, compassionately and with understanding – is something like a God-send. However, getting a bad doctor, mechanic or plumber at such a time can just add to the suffering. In essence, doing a good job (by a biblical definition) requires not just skill, but being fully conscious of the human dimension of our work – that is, its impact on people.

Whatever your work, if you are trying to follow the ethic of Jesus in your workplace, there is a very good chance that at some point it will require you to perform your work differently from the norm. What would it mean, in the context of your job and workplace, to take seriously the example of speaking truth to power, forgoing personal ambition, standing up for the weak, acting justly, and always showing concern for human need? Let’s be honest, these can be seriously inconvenient traits in the workplace, and by many standards today they may even be considered “unprofessional”.

It should not be surprising that trying to follow the way of Jesus in the workplace – whatever the latest “best practice” fad – is highly likely at some point to bring you

into conflict with some other workers or management. Nevertheless, my hunch is that this is something that not many Christians have really thought through. There are few places in our society where following Jesus comes at any real cost; however, the workplace is one arena where participating in the good work of God might just require us to suffer. I am certainly not advocating that people go looking for workplace martyrdom, but thinking through the potential cost of faithfulness is something that every Christian should do.

Beyond work

Whatever work we do, it will never be fully good if it comes at the price of relationships with our families, communities and with God. The task-focussed nature of work tends to accumulate collateral damage, which is why the Old Testament is so strong on keeping the Sabbath: ‘You shall keep the Sabbath, because

it is holy for you’ (Ex 31:14). For us to be whole, to be a part of healing, there is a need for all work to come to a stop. ‘Be still and know that I am God.’ Good work is by definition work with limits. We need to give serious attention to finding the time and the practices that nurture health and connection, and that re-create us.

Ultimately, as in all things, the calling of a Christian approach to work (whether paid or unpaid) is to be a witness to the health, wholeness and justice—that is to say, the goodness—of the kingdom of God.

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Saint Joseph the Worker, by Ade Bethune (1914-2002).





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Living and Learning on the Land

A Family's Journey Toward Sustainable Sustainability

by Ashlee Anslow

Four days ago, we made the decision to sell our farm. On the day I am writing this, we looked at a house, made an offer, and had it accepted. I am experiencing a whirlwind of emotions. Not the least because for so long I was adamant that I would be on this farm until I died. Sometimes God has other plans.

This journey began approximately 12 years ago when a development education exposure trip had a profound impact on me and how I viewed my role as a Christian in the world, particularly in the context of climate change. I became convinced that I didn't need to save the developing world from itself; rather, I needed to drastically reduce my own imprint on this world which impacts on poor markedly more than myself.

So we began in a small unit with a little balcony and a pot plant with some herbs.

It was a rabbit hole: my husband and I delved into understanding food security, issues of climate change, food production, food miles, and living sustainably. Not long after our marriage, we moved to a unit in Sydney's eastern suburbs. This had two

When I found myself investigating how I was going to manage to fit miniature goats into my backyard, I knew we were ready for the next step.





balconies that were quite large. We proceeded to set up raised veggie beds and, to some family members' horror, chickens. I lined one balcony with Astro Turf and bamboo screening and for a while we were able to keep it quite concealed what we were up to – that is until the “hen” started crowing.

Nevertheless, my desire to provide more for ourselves instead of relying on external inputs only grew and a few years later led us to a community house we shared with two other young people. Here, we converted the front yard into a vegetable garden and the backyard had chickens, ducks and bees. Around this time our first child arrived, which is always a time of reflection and planning for the future: what did we want her to learn about where food came from, and the labour that is put into producing food which is so easily forgotten when paying cash and leaving the vegetables to rot in the bottom of the crisper?

My desire strengthened further. When I found myself investigating how I was going to manage to fit miniature goats into my backyard, I knew we were ready for the next step. Long story short, this is how we ending buying 45 acres two hours west of Sydney in the same week as my husband was made redundant for the first time and we found out we were expecting again, with twins.



About one year into our marriage I showed my husband info on straw bale houses. “That’s nice” was the essence of his reply. Needless to say, I can be persistent.

Farm life

The land we bought (and the reason it was affordable!) was a blank canvas: no services, nothing: just ten head of cattle. About one year into our marriage I showed my husband info on straw bale houses. “That’s nice” was the essence of his reply. Needless to say, I can be persistent. Next we found ourselves drawing up designs for a passive solar house and moving through the waves of council DA and building approvals.

We moved onto the farm in January 2018. During the build, I had purchased my first cows (two Jersey) and the projects began: milking stanchion, polytunnels,

greenhouses, chicken coops, pig pens, breeding pigs, redoing pig pens (because pigs are strong!), and redoing chicken coops (because fox-proof isn’t ever fox-proof enough!).

In our first year on the farm we raised our own meat chickens, processed our first head of cattle for

meat, and raised two litters of pigs as I experimented with making salami, prosciutto and bacon.

As a midwife, I have a thorough understanding of lactation, which became imperative given that over my milking journey I have spent four of the past five years milking either a cow, goat, or mixture of both every day.

I look back on all this and consider it a massive achievement: everything we have built and the education our children have received. But I also want to acknowledge some of the difficulties.

In 2019 we were in the height of the drought followed by evacuation and threat from the Gospers Mountain bushfire. I lost animals to heat stress, repeatedly discovered weaknesses in our fencing, and was called to find my





When the drought broke, we felt like all our prayers were answered and the difficulties would be over. Instead, La Niña just broke us in another way.

animals on the street. Even while we were evacuated, I continued to travel back—with fire approaching daily—to feed and water animals and keep up with the farm chores.

When the drought broke, we felt like all our prayers were answered and the difficulties would be over. Instead, *La Niña* just broke us in another way. One week ago, we eventually concreted a 15-metre (think expensive!) section of our driveway because the ground water reached the surface and produced the purest clay that even four-wheel-drives couldn't compete with. Maybe one day I will be able to look back on the videos of trucks being bogged with humour, but when you end up having to park 200 metres away from your house and cart children, bags, groceries etc. home, the weight of it all can be a bit much. My husband, particularly, has found the life of working from home on a farm with little external contact challenging to his mental health.

Over the past 12-24 months, I have transitioned from working for NSW Health to working as an independent midwife doing mainly homebirth: it's a job I absolutely love. In the process of setting up the business, it has been both fulfilling and successful in all the different ways you could define such things, but importantly it has left me without time.



I had a client mention to me recently that I must be like Hermione in *Harry Potter* and I need a time-travelling device to help me be able to re-live particular periods of time so I can fit it all in.

Needless to say, the farm suffers when there are two adults working, three children to organise, and sometimes in the deepest of nights, getting home knowing I needed to go and feed the pigs or milk the goat or cow.

I have learned to train a heifer to be milked, and I have cried over spilt milk (many times). I have had a beautiful cow think I am her calf and provide our family with litres and litres of milk. I have learned that livestock die—sometimes frequently—for a variety of reasons and there isn't much you can do about it. You shrug and say “farm life” and move on.

I have watched water tanks get to within centimetres of being empty and months later watched them overflow, and the water wash the driveway away in the process.

I have enjoyed the beauty of a meal that is (almost) entirely home-grown (lasagna where the beef, tomatoes, herbs, eggs in the pasta, and cheese was all sourced from our farm), but also the devastation when a gate is left open and you find a escaped goat feasting on a season's supply.



Sense and sustainability

But now to today. We have decided that the scale and distance of our current location is too much for us as working parents and have decided to relocate to an area which reduces our travel time and greatly increases our social supports. We will still have an oversized backyard: space for goats, vegetable gardens, bees, and chickens, but on a smaller scale and in a less demanding way.

I have learned a lot about animals, farming, gardening, drought, fire, flood, as well as myself and my resilience and weaknesses over the past five years.

I do not view leaving here as a failure because I don't think I would have ever been content until I experienced this lifestyle myself, but I also look forward to hopefully finding a balance in the future that is not just sustainable for the Earth but also my family.

Through it all, I've learned you can live sustainably anywhere from a unit to an acreage and everything in between. I often felt like I couldn't ask others (ie. MPs) to do things about climate change unless I had my own lifestyle completely in check, but I am one person and none of us can do this alone.

I often felt like I couldn't ask others (ie. MPs) to do things about climate change unless I had my own lifestyle completely in check, but I am one person and none of us can do this alone.

So I am going to settle into a smaller-scale form of this lifestyle that I love and become more reliant on some of the systems around me, because the aim isn't to live independently of each other, but with each other, in a way that can benefit the Earth.

Ashlee is a wife, mother, and homebirth midwife. A milker of cows and goats, keeper of bees, sheep, dogs, pigs, experimental gardener and salami maker who's putting one foot in front of the other, figuring out how to live a slow, resilient lifestyle whilst living and working in the crazy on-call world that is being "with women."



The Paths of Life

The Wisdom Tradition in an Information Age Part 1: Discerning the Pattern

The celebrated ode to wisdom in the middle of the book of Job repeatedly asks:

Where can wisdom be found?

Where does understanding dwell?

For many of us, however, a better first question might be *why is wisdom to be found?* In an age when our phones, TVs, and even fridges are “smart,” do we really need wisdom? What does “wisdom” even mean, and mean for us?

In the Bible, while intelligence and knowledge are certainly closely-related concepts, someone need not have (formally) studied a single day to possess *hokhmah*, the main Hebrew word for wisdom. In Exodus 31, a certain Bezalel is said to possess great *hokhmah*, along with understanding and knowledge, in his ability to work with metal, wood, and stone. Here, to be wise is to be skilled with one’s hands as well as mind. In this same sense, when Moses invites all the Israelites to help in making the Tabernacle in whatever way they are able, we read:



King Solomon in Old Age, by Gustave Doré, 1866.

by Jacob Garrett

Far more than book-smarts or theoretical reasoning, wisdom in the Bible is a kind of practical skill. In its broadest sense, to be wise is to be *skilful at living* itself.



*'Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you' (Prov 4:6).
Detail from Wisdom Defending Youth from the Arrows of Love, by Charles Meynier, 1810.*

Every skilled [wise] woman spun with her hands and brought what she had spun—blue, purple or scarlet yarn or fine linen. And all the women who were willing and had the skill [*hokhmah*] spun the goat hair. (Ex 35:25-26)

The same goes for other skills, such as seafaring, farming, or the ordering of one's household. Far more than book-smarts or theoretical reasoning, wisdom in the Bible is a kind of practical skill. In its broadest sense, to be wise is to be *skilful at living* itself. Essentially, biblical wisdom means understanding how the real world really works: if you are a sailor, it means understanding winds and tides; if you are a king, it means understanding the ways of the court and politics; if you are a parent, it means understanding children. This becomes particularly relevant when we come across a proverb like this one:

A bribe is a charm to the one who gives it;
Wherever he turns, he succeeds. (Prov 17:8)

Is this an endorsement or recommendation of bribery?
What about:

The rich rule over the poor,
And the borrower is the servant to the lender (22:7)?

Does this imply the rich and those who lend are right to lord it over the needy? Or does the wise person simply

observe that this is the way things so often go? Certainly, careful observation is central to biblical wisdom: it is no accident the wise tend to be those who are able to accurately discern a pattern to life. That there is such an ordered pattern to the cosmos is a foundational axiom of the book of Proverbs; it rests firmly on the belief in a creator God who makes and maintains it. The world itself therefore becomes a source of wisdom and true knowledge of God, a place where even little creatures like ants, rock badgers, locusts, and lizards are named 'the wisest of the wise' (Prov 30:24) from whom we should learn.

The wise life

Careful observation leads the sages of Proverbs to speak as if there were a "grain" to the universe just like the grain of wood such that, as one scholar puts it, 'those who go against the grain get splinters'. We live in a world where

as churning the milk produces butter,
and as twisting the nose produces blood,
so stirring up anger produces strife. (Prov 30:33)

Things follow a certain pattern. Wisdom is the art of seeing this and ordering one's life accordingly. Proverbs, in particular, is at pains to stress this point, personifying the path of wisdom and the path of folly as the choice between two women living entirely different lives. Again and again, we are urged to pursue "Lady Wisdom" at all

costs, not to let sound judgement and discernment out of our sight, and to flee from the crafty and seductive “Dame Folly”, whose ways may seem good for a time, but ultimately

her house leads down to death...
None who go to her return
Or attain the paths of life. (Prov 2:18-19)

Importantly, ‘the paths of life’ in Proverbs are thoroughly grounded in *this life*, here and now. The sages are not counselling that we ought to be wise and do right, despite setbacks and sacrifices, only because we can expect a reward after death. Far from it. Rather, they firmly believe that to ignore the way of wisdom and righteousness is to *miss out on life now* in a world where what is good for others is also good for us. That is, because of the way the world is made and maintained by a good and wise God, the life of wisdom is not a life of *restriction* but one of *fullness*. Whether it comes in the form of divine judgement or simply “what goes around comes around”, Proverbs repeatedly suggests that to be a fool or to do evil

To ignore the way of wisdom and righteousness is to *miss out on life now* in a world where what is good for others is also good for us.

(which are almost synonymous) is a form of self-sabotage: it is swimming against the current of the cosmos—against the divinely established way of things. Many proverbs admit such a course may bring success in the short term, whereas an upright person certainly can face much hardship; but even in such cases, the book maintains that it is better to be poor with wisdom and righteousness than to be wealthy and committing injustice, and

better to be lowly in spirit and among the oppressed than to share in plunder with the proud. (Prov 16:19)

Proverbs like these hint that, despite divine order, things are not always as they should be: the fact is that bribes often work and the rich routinely deny the poor justice. After all, proverbs are not promises: ‘All hard work brings profit’ (14:23) is not a maths formula. Such

maxims ought to be taken in the spirit they are given: rules of thumb to be applied judiciously—generalities rather than automatic laws. In general, things like diligence, honesty, and care for others often bring benefit, while laziness and arrogant or idle talk regularly bring ruin, but not always.

Chaos and control

What happens if we forget there are exceptions to these “rules”? We risk ending up like Job and his friends, locked in deep and agonising debate over false premises. The book of Job portrays its human characters, each in their own way, all falling into the same error: they reason that since God upholds justice, rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked (which is true), this means *all* suffering must be due to sin (which is false). Their faulty logic leads them to take the pattern as law.

While the three friends see Job’s suffering as proof he must have sinned in some way, Job’s wife suggests he should abandon the God who has repaid his upright conduct with calamity. Job refuses both these options: he clings to his righteousness *and* to his God, craving an explanation. But when God finally appears, no explanation is given. In fact, Job *never* finds out why he suffered so much. Rather, even though he manages to fend off the pious-sounding but over-confident verdicts of his friends, Job still insists his suffering means God must be in the wrong. His own faulty logic still needs correction.

Yet correction comes in a form we may not expect, as the divine speeches at the end of the book seem to completely ignore the flawed assumptions of the human debate. Instead, they are designed to broaden Job’s view of God’s



Behemoth and Leviathan, by William Blake, 1825.



sovereignty and his incontestable right to manage the world as he sees fit. While some people read the flurry of rhetorical questions levelled at Job simply as an attempt to bludgeon him into submission, this view misses the great invitation being made here. God is offering Job a cosmic tour of the universe, showing him the depth and breadth of divine government: it extends from the turning of the stars and the foundations of the Earth down to the intimate details of a doe's pregnancy and the flight paths of eagles. Notably, the speeches show very little interest in human affairs or God's role in judging them. Instead, we find God revelling at length in the beauty and wildness of untamed creatures and unpeopled places. Tellingly, we learn God not only 'sends rain on the just and unjust alike' (Matt. 5:45) but also

to water a land where no human being lives,
a desert with no-one in it,
to satisfy a desolate wasteland
and make it sprout with grass. (Job 38:26-27)

The biblical God has far more on his mind than simply the rightness or wrongness of human actions, and far more in his care than human persons alone.

Even more curiously, God seems content—even delighted—to allow Leviathan a place in his world: a fearsome sea creature reminiscent of the chaos dragon of Canaanite myth of whom even gods and heroes are afraid, yet the LORD can pull him in with a fishhook and put him on a leash like a pet if he chooses. Scholars debate the exact nature of Behemoth and Leviathan, but at least one part of their meaning is clear: both beasts exist beyond all hope of human control, yet nothing in the world is too dangerous or threatening for God. The book of Job therefore suggests that mystery remains at the heart of God's orderly world: we are not in control, God is; his purposes go far beyond human affairs and no calculus can hope to capture him.

So how ought we to live?

No wisdom book engages with this puzzling side of life more directly than Ecclesiastes. Famously, the main Teacher figure recounts how he spent a great deal of time, money, and effort in the attempt 'to see what is good for humankind to do under heaven during the few days of their lives' (Ecc 2:3). Along the way, he interrogates riches, status, hard work, bodily pleasures, and even wisdom itself to see what, if anything, is to be *gained* by this life under



'Who cuts a channel for the torrents of rain, and a path for the thunderstorm, to water a land where no man lives, a desert with no-one in it...?' (Job 38:25-26).

the sun. He discovers each has its limitations: a fool may inherit and squander all your hard work when you die (so why work yourself to death?), while ‘whoever loves money never has enough’ (5:10; and what is it *for* anyway?), pleasures, while good, lead nowhere in themselves, and even though ‘wisdom is better than folly’, still, ‘like the fool, the wise person too must die’ and neither will be long remembered (2:12-16). After a thorough investigation, he decides

no-one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out. (Ecc 8:17)

Yet this life is not “meaningless” as many translations have it. Rather, it remains ungraspable like smoke; enigmatic like a veiling mist. In the end, the Teacher does not throw his hands up in despair: he holds his hands out in trust. He affirms the goodness of creation and the many joys to be had in life, but does not shy from acknowledging it is full of difficulty, too. The twin realities of death and God serve to contextualise and clarify the rest of life: we are not (and can never be) the makers or the masters of our destiny. This is a key reason why ‘the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom’ (Prov 9:10): the skilfully-lived life is founded on the worshipful acknowledgement of our finite and dependant creaturehood before our creator. *True wisdom therefore cannot be separated from relationship with God* who is at the centre of the cosmos, and not, as we habitually assume, ourselves. Such a relation to the Creator flows into every aspect of our lives, from sharing our bread ‘with the fatherless’ and not denying justice or ‘the desires of the poor’ (Job 31), to recognising that the value of non-human creation resides not primarily in the use we can make of it (as mere “natural resources” or “ecosystem services”), but because God made it, delights in it, and cares for it.

The wisdom literature is unwavering in its conviction that if we try to seek our own gain against the created order, attempting to exploit the world and other people for our own ends, all that ultimately awaits us are grief and frustration. As Old Testament scholar Iain Provan says,

each one of us will, sooner or later, come face to face with reality: the reality that God has created human beings in his image to love and honor him, to love and respect their neighbors, and to look after the planet on his behalf. That is just how the universe is.

Provan also warns against a particular risk for Christians today. He argues that if, contrary to the wisdom outlook, we narrow our view of the religious life to the mere salvation of our souls, we will inevitably fall prey to western consumer visions of life, falsely assured we have ‘an insurance policy for the next life in [our] back pockets’. In doing so, even while professing Christian faith, the self can easily remain the centre (*my* happiness now, *my* salvation later) with almost no meaningful difference between the way we live and that of others around us. By contrast, the biblical sages saw salvation as something that contains our whole lives: every day we have the opportunity to acknowledge and live in line with created reality as it truly is—a wild, mysterious, moral universe, abundant in life for those who humbly seek God—or to

chart our own course, seeking what seems good ‘in our own eyes’ (Prov 12:5), fruitlessly chasing our own gain. In the next edition, we will explore further the implications of a wisdom disposition toward the stuff of daily life: things like money, possessions, and care for our neighbour.

Every day we have the opportunity to acknowledge and live in line with created reality as it truly is—a wild, mysterious, moral universe, abundant in life for those who humbly seek God.

Perception and reality

It is a common feeling that the *right* thing to do is rarely the thing we actually *want* to do. The example of the wise woman of Prov 31 who ‘opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy’ can feel like a burden: real hospitality and generosity take both time and energy. The biblical sages are under no illusions here. However, they hold that this is a problem far more with perception than with reality. They maintain that if we truly understood how the world works, and if we really knew what was good for us—that is, if we actually possessed “an accurate grasp of the whole of reality that is wisdom”, as one scholar puts it—then the perceived dichotomy begins to break down, and way of wisdom becomes our delight. Not that any of us fully attain it, of course; the sages never claim wisdom can be wholly ours. Instead, to the question

Where can wisdom be found?

Where does understanding dwell?

Comes the only possible answer:

God understands the way to it

And he alone knows where it dwells.



*A blue tongue skink calls the simple to learn wisdom (Prov 30:24-28).
By Phoebe Garrett.*



Have you got questions
you would like to be addressed
in a *Manna Matters*
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jonathan@mannagum.org.au
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News from Long Gully

We are going to have a go at a Q&A column for *Manna Matters*. Are there any questions that have been bugging you that you would like us to have a go at? Email them in, and we'll see what we can do!


I have been busier with speaking engagements over the last few months. The standout was a two-week trip to WA organised by Tearfund and Amos Australia. I spoke almost every day, covering topics such as “the whole gospel”, “good news for the poor”, “economic witness” and “the vocation of God’s people”. A personal highlight was taking part in Perth’s famous and long-standing urban mission intensive week, AMUC. It was great to make some new connections and new friends amongst the Tearfund and Amos networks in WA. Tearfund (formerly TEAR Australia) will be well-known to *Manna Matters* readers; Amos is like a smaller Perth-based version of Tearfund pursuing impressive grassroots development partnerships in Indonesia, East Timor and Cambodia. Check them out: amosaustralia.org.


The rest of my speaking engagements were with churches, some in person and some over Zoom, mostly around a biblical vision of ecology. Get in contact if you would like me to speak at your church.


Jonathan Cornford

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About Manna Gum

Manna Gum is an independent non-profit organisation that seeks to:

1. *Help Christians reclaim and practise Biblical teaching on material life; and*
2. *Promote understanding of the ways our economic lives impact upon ourselves, others and the earth.*

Manna Gum is motivated by a vision of renewal of the Church in Australia as an alternative community that witnesses to the Kingdom of God.

Please contact us if you would like us to speak to your church, group or organisation; or if you would like more information about our work; or to discuss how we could support you and your church/group/organisation to explore some of these issues.

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