

REVOLUTIONARY WORK

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'You grow up, you work half a century, you get a golden handshake, you rest a couple of years and you're dead.' So said David Brent in the sitcom *The Office*.

'Sometimes life hits you in the head with a brick ... I'm convinced that the only thing that kept me going [when I was fired from Apple] was that I loved what I did. You've got to find what you love ... If you haven't found it yet, keep looking. Don't settle.' So said Steve Jobs at his commencement speech for graduates at Stanford University in 2005.

'Follow your dreams,' urged Richard Branson.

Yet the mantra of the modern twenty-first-century middle classes – 'Listen to your inner voice. Be true to yourself. Follow your passion. Your future is limitless.' – was dismissed as 'completely garbage advice' by David Brooks, a columnist for *The New York Times*, when he gave his commencement lecture at Dartmouth College in 2015.

So who is right? What is work really all about? There is no doubt that Jobs is right that work will fill a large part of our lives. This is particularly true of those of us who have long commutes

to work, or who work in jobs with long hours or who are paid so little we have to work at more than one job. For many of us we will spend more than half our waking week at work.

Brent is certainly right too. We work hard, we rest for a few years – maybe more – and then we are dead. We are not even remembered once we have left our workplace. One friend of mine was once the vice president of Lloyds and quite literally a household name in the world of insurance. He took me to the top of the Lloyds building a couple of years after he retired. As we came back down out of the office he paused. ‘Three years ago,’ he said, ‘everybody would know my name. Now nobody even recognises me.’

Nor is there any doubt that Brooks is right to say that being true to yourself and following your dreams is a middle-class mantra. The vast proportion of the working world has no choice in their work. They cannot do anything other than what their parents did at work, or are restricted to what the local factory prescribes or the major employer dictates. So whatever they may dream, they have little opportunity to realise it as Richard Branson has.

For those of us who are in the fortunate position of being able to choose what work we do, this mantra that we should fulfil our potential can be utterly enslaving. A couple of years ago, after I had given a talk on fear, I sat next to a young lad. I turned to him and asked, ‘What are you most frightened of?’

‘Not fulfilling my potential,’ he said. In a world with endless opportunities, how can we possibly fulfil our potential?

The purpose of this book is to explore the biblical view of work. As we do so, we shall assess some of the approaches and

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attitudes to work that our popular culture holds. We are going to find that the Bible's teaching on work is not only liberating but also exhilarating and refreshingly realistic. We do not need to be enslaved by our work or totally depressed by it. As we put our work in its rightful, God-given place, we will find real joy and lasting purpose as we work for God.

WHAT IS THE POINT OF WORK?

GENESIS 2:4–17

⁴This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens—⁵and no shrub of the field had yet appeared on the earth and no plant of the field had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no man to work the ground, ⁶but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground—⁷the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

⁸Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. ⁹And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

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¹⁰A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. ¹¹The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. ¹²(The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.) ¹³The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. ¹⁴The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. ¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.'

THE DIGNITY OF WORK

To gain a proper perspective on work we need to go back to Genesis. 1:26–27 declares,

Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.