

Work as Frustration

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Preacher: Chris Thornton

[0 : 00] Good morning again. I need to grow a little. My name's Chris.

It's just a great... This is one of the great days in the life of the church. We've got five people getting baptized later on. Please just stay around. There's going to be food. It's going to be an amazing time together.

The sun is kind of trying to come out as well. So I'm hoping the water's not going to be cold. But it's a great thing because as a church, we are not just about being religious.

We're not just about having a meeting. We're a community, a broken community, but we're going on a journey together. And wherever you are on that journey, you're just welcome to come and be involved and to share, talk with each other afterwards, share food together, get to know each other, and enjoy being part of the community today.

When you're a kid, I don't know if you had a dream. Some of you did. When I was a kid, I had two dreams. They kind of followed after each other.

[1 : 12] My first dream was I wanted to play cricket for England. Okay? My second dream, which kind of came afterwards because I realized that wasn't going to happen, was I wanted to be a professional rock guitarist.

And that didn't happen either. And, you know, but I think if I look through what I was wanting and dreaming about when I was young, I had this deep longing to do something significant in my life.

Right? We all want to do something significant. And I think most of us are the same. Right? We all want to live a life which counts for something. I have met people who have said, when I was young, I had no dream.

I just had homework. But that's sad. Right? We want to have a dream of something that our lives want to count for something.

None of us want to get to the end of our lives. And as one of my students that I had, a 70-year-old guy once said, he said, I've wasted my life. And that's really sad.

[2 : 21] None of us want to say that. And so we've been looking at a series on faith and work because, frankly, most of our lives are spent working.

Like, particularly here in Hong Kong, we work the longest hours of any city in the world. Right? It doesn't matter whether you're a student, whether you're a professional. You know, from the age of three, you already need a CV to get into kindergarten.

Right? So we're all working all the time. And if we don't want to see on our tombstone the words wasted, we've got to work out, we've got to have a bigger vision for our work, which consumes so much of our life, than simply getting money or status.

Because all research shows that, actually, the only work that is meaningful is one which has a higher purpose behind it. And that's what we've been talking about. We've been talking about how our faith combines with our work.

Now, the thing is, whether you're a Christian or not, everybody takes their faith to work. Did you know that? If your faith is money, if your faith is in yourself, if your faith is in your reputation, that's what your work will be about.

[3 : 31] Yourself, your money, reputation. If you're a Christian, your faith is meant to be about the worship of God. And that's also what your work is meant to be about.

And the calling that we have, and we've talked over the last couple of weeks, is how the worship of God is to be our goal, our motivation, which then leads us into serving other people in our work through taking pride in the way we do our work, and also serving, seeing the people beyond the tasks in our work.

You know, work is a bit like the MasterChef kitchen, we said, where God gives you the ingredients and says, okay, now make something beautiful out of that this week. That's what work is meant to be like.

So work is good. Work reflects a God who works. So therefore, Monday morning should be your favorite time of the week. Right?

It is for me because it's my day off. And maybe for some of you because it's like, give me a break from the kids.

[4 : 39] But why is it that there's, why did you laugh? Why do we laugh? Because there's a gap between what work is supposed to be and our kind of everyday experience of it, right?

There is this gap. And today we're going to kind of talk, we're going to get real and talk about the frustration of work. Okay? The frustration of work. And if you're like, I love my work.

Great. Listen in. But at some point, all of our aspirations in work will experience frustration. I, even in preparing this talk, experienced the frustration of work.

So let's kind of have a look at it. Remember we said work is anything that's not leisure. Okay? Anything that's not leisure. So we're going to look in just a couple of parts. We're going to look at what's wrong with work.

Okay? And then finding hope for work. What's wrong with work? And finding hope for work. Okay? So have a look in your bulletin.

[5 : 40] There's just a couple of passages there. We'll kind of, we'll flick through a little bit those two passages. So what's wrong with work? Genesis 3. God makes this incredible, beautiful garden.

And he tells humans to go and create, like to have fun and create culture out of this garden. Create society. And he said, everything in this garden is on the menu except one tree.

Okay? You can eat from anything. But don't eat from that one tree. Because I want you to listen to my voice. I want you to trust me. Don't eat that one. Everything else is yours.

There came another voice which said, God doesn't want your best. He's lying to you. You know, you could have a better way, a better life if you do things your way.

Live your way. And so Adam and Eve listen to that voice. They choose to listen to the voice of Satan, eat from the forbidden tree, and it rips apart their relationship with God.

[6 : 44] It rips apart their relationships with each other and their relationships with the creation around them. You know, J.R. Tolkien, who wrote The Lord of the Rings, after writing it, he wrote another book which is called The Cimmerillion.

It kind of has some of the background to The Lord of the Rings. I don't know if anyone's read it. But he tells of, in this story, he tells of this place called Villanore, which is this kind of beautiful paradise.

And then Sauron, who if you know, he's the bad guy, okay, Sauron tries to win over all the elves to himself. And he says this. He says, The elves listened to Sauron.

He was still fair in that time, and his motives and those of the elves seemed to go together. The healing of the desolate lands. They all wanted a great life. Sauron found their weak point in suggesting that helping one another, they could make western Middle-earth as beautiful as Valinor.

It was really a veiled attack on the gods. An incitement to try and make a separate, independent paradise. What he's saying is this.

[7 : 52] He's saying, what happened in the garden was just like that. Sin is basically trying to set up a rival kingdom to God and saying, hey, we as humans, we can rely on ourselves to make the perfect world for ourselves, and we don't need God to help us with that.

Thank you very much. You see, we want a kind of little vision of heaven on earth. And that's kind of what sin, the Bible calls sin, is. We set ourselves up as God, and God can kind of be on the side.

How do we do this? Well, I mean, there's an atheist writer called Alan de Botton. He wrote a book, a very interesting book, called Religion for Atheists. And in it, he says this. He says, It's the secular whose longing for perfection has grown so intense as to lead them to imagine that paradise might be realized on this earth after just a few more years of financial growth and medical research.

We sincerely trust that the combined powers of the IMF, the medical research establishment, Silicon Valley, and democratic politics could together cure all the problems of mankind.

We want to make kind of heaven on earth. And though we might not just kind of have those big visions, we all have our own little world that we want to have, don't we?

[9 : 12] You know, a way that we think life should be and how we can make a difference. You know, if you're young, you may think you can change the world. If you're a little more seasoned, you may be a little bit more cynical, okay?

And you may be just thinking about, okay, I just want to create my world for my kids and make my life a little bit happier and my family. Some of us are so lost in the busyness of life that the world that we're trying to create is like, I just hope I meet that deadline.

I just hope my test results are good. I just hope I get to level three in that game. And that's our world, the perfect world that we're trying to create. But there's a problem.

There's a problem. And you run into it in verse 17 in the passage. It says this. To Adam, he said, What's he saying?

He's saying, Work was good, but now the ground is cursed. Work is cursed. Work is good. It's not a curse, but it's a curse. It's painful.

[10 : 36] It's hard. It's difficult. You know what I mean? You know, there are thorns and thistles now in work. What once was perfect gardening, pure joy, now is kind of a mix of pleasure and frustration.

This world can never fully be the paradise that we want it to be. If you don't believe me, just look in your workplace. Right? When I was growing up, I experienced some of these thorns and thistles.

Because Romans 8 verse 17 says, Creation was subjected to frustration. Another translation says futility. Work can sometimes feel pointless. Because growing up, I used to have a garden.

We used to grow vegetables in our garden. And my job was to weed the garden. Okay? I know many people in Hong Kong don't have gardens, but I used to weed the garden.

And there's something beautiful and satisfying about when you've just cleared everything and it's just nothing there left. It's beautiful. Perfect. No more weeds. Just vegetables. So I'd go back. The next day, I'd come back.

[11 : 48] And there were these little tiny green shoots growing again. Little weeds. And you'd be like, oh. And then you'd go out. But the next time, I was like, okay, I'm going to try and get all the deep roots out. So I'd go deeper.

Try and get all the roots out. I'd go away. Come back the next day. And there was nothing there. And I was like, this is great. And then it rained. And I came back the next day.

And triple the number of weeds were there than before. And, you know, if you do that again and again, eventually you come to the point of saying, well, what's the point?

What's the point of doing it? Right? And that's gardening. But isn't it the same with your garden, maybe your email inbox? You know, you clear it on Friday. Come back again Monday.

10,000 emails. Right? You know, sometimes work can feel pointless. I read about this amazing mobile app, which has been downloaded over a million times.

[12 : 45] It's called Don't Get Fired. Has anyone played it? Okay. You can download it afterwards. Okay. Let me give you a little kind of a little sneak preview. Basically, it simulates the struggles of retaining your job in a Korean working environment.

Okay? Okay? Stay with me. In the game, what you've got to do, you've got to advance at a snail's pace through completely fruitless internship interviews, not knowing why you're not getting the result you wanted, until finally you get a job and you start right at the bottom.

Okay? And everybody treats you like dirt, and you're doing ridiculous hours for demanding bosses who show you no appreciation at all, and you have to kind of suck up to them just to get more work from them.

And you don't really know what the work's about anyway, and who's benefiting. And then afterwards, they give you projects which you've almost completed, and then they scrap them because they changed their mind.

And then they blame you when your colleagues are not working enough, and you're not working enough. But if you find that you're working too much, your health score goes down to zero.

[13 : 56] Okay? And then after battling through all of that, you get fired for working too hard. And that's the game. Go and download it afterwards. Go and download it afterwards.

And I read one Reddit user who said, I don't have to play this game. I'm living it. And the article that I read, I mean, his comment was, it's all but impossible to fulfill one's ambitions while staying sane and healthy at the same time.

In this respect, as pre-professional training goes, high school kids could do worse. In other words, every job has some aspects of it where you feel like, what's the point of this?

Is this really my life? Work can sometimes feel pointless. And even if you do love your job, and I hope you do, Ecclesiastes 2 says, I hated all the things that I had to do under the sun because I must leave them to the one who comes after me.

And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish. You may have done a great job in your work. You may be a great manager putting a bad company to rights.

[15 : 10] But then sooner or later you'll move on. And you have no idea if the next guy is going to completely destroy all the work that you've done. Right? We have no idea.

Work can feel pointless. That's one thorn. Another thorn that comes in. It's okay, if you're feeling depressed now, we're going to get to some hope later. Another thorn, it's not just pointless sometimes, but it can sometimes feel fruitless.

If you look in the passage again, Romans 8.22 says, What's it saying?

It's saying, in creation and in our lives, there are some things we envision doing. We want to give birth to. Right? I don't know what your dream is.

You want to give birth to. But we never seem to quite fully be able to get it out, to give birth to. And we're in pain. It causes you to go, oh. And Pastor Tim Keller illustrates this kind of sense of feeling of like, I'm not being as productive as I want to be.

[16 : 23] But we're in pain.

And he's trying to protect this one leaf. Just trying to get it right. Every time it's just a little thing he's got to work on. And it just takes him longer than he expects. And every time he tries to get on with the painting, something interrupts him all the time.

Maybe it's a sick neighbor's wife he's got to go take to the hospital. And he's a kind person, so he tries to help out. But all the time, just something stops him from getting on with this. And finally, when he gets to nearing his death, he starts weeping.

And he says, as he realizes, I'm never going to finish all I wanted to do. At his death, the new occupants of his house find the canvas.

And in the middle of this huge canvas, all there is, is one little leaf that he's done. That's the sum of his life's work. And it's hung in an obscure gallery where very few people ever notice it.

[17 : 50] And aren't many of our plans a little bit like that? You know, how many, like even as Angeline was saying, how many weeks can you honestly say, everything I wanted to get done this week I managed to do?

Right? There are so many interruptions that come in. Kids get sick. TV shows distract us. You know, and we wonder, am I actually getting anywhere? You know, people used to talk about midlife crisis.

You know, now they're talking about quarter life crisis. Right? Because we feel like, am I achieving? I even have a pastor friend. He's written about 10 best-selling books. He's, and he's in his late 40s.

I spoke to him. He said, you know, sometimes I feel like I just haven't done anything with my life. And I'm like, but I haven't even written one book. But, you know, it doesn't matter how successful you are.

You listen to people who are geniuses, and they all say this. I just can't quite get there. Yeah. And, and to be honest, it's not just work circumstances.

[18 : 55] The worst thing about work is people. Right? Wouldn't work be wonderful without the people? You know, have you ever tried doing a group project with people?

There's always someone who's a slacker. Someone who's a control freak. Someone who points out everybody else's problems but won't admit their own. And someone who gossips behind your back. Even thinking the work of parenting.

You know, you're trying to help your kids. They have an important test. You know that they need to study. And so you're trying to help them to study.

But for some reason, they just don't want to study. They resist. They refuse. And so inside, you're trying to help them.

They're not helping themselves. Where do you get to? Do you ever get frustrated? And then in frustration, we often lose our temper.

[19 : 53] And we shout. And then you feel bad about yourself. Because that's not the kind of parent you wanted to be. And it kind of, the cycle goes on. Because the thorns are not just other people.

They're also ourselves. Right? They're also ourselves. Sometimes we don't even match up to our own expectations of ourselves. And as I think through so many things, like, all of these different things, I don't know how often you've said, I'm just so frustrated.

Ever said that? Have you said that this week? I've said that this week. And do you know what that actually means? Frustrated is just a kind of polite way of saying, I'm angry. Right?

It is. And Romans is saying to us, you know, we're angry because the world is not the way I want it to be. It's not the way it should be. And the passage in Romans is saying, that's right.

It's not the way it should be. That's why we groan. And you're not alone in groaning. You're not alone because the whole of creation groans. God, the Spirit, even groans because it's not the way it should be.

[21 : 05] Sometimes work can feel pointless, fruitless, frustrating. Now, if there's no God or no other hope beyond this world, then that anger is completely irrational.

Okay? It's a bit like shaking your fist at a mountain for getting in the way of blocking the sunset. Okay? It's like, that's the way the world is. But we've all got to deal with this.

And we have, there are so many great things in our work. But when these frustrations come, how do we deal with them? Some people try to escape. You know, self-medicating.

Do you know the rate of alcoholism among NGO workers is huge? Did you know that? Because what they have is they start with this dream of trying to make a difference in the world. And then they come up against governments and systems and the people themselves who don't want to help.

And where do they go? They turn to alcohol. And some of us here know that same thing. Some of us here are turning to alcohol to help us with that frustration.

[22 : 07] Others turn to coffee, chocolate, living for the weekend. You know, I've got one friend who works simply to go on holiday. Okay? No sooner has she come back from holiday than she's booking the next holiday because that's why she works.

But if you do that, then you're failing to face reality. The problems, the thorns are still going to be there. Right? Still going to be there. And what this passage is telling us is God subjects the world to frustration in hope of something.

Because when you're frustrated, when things are not going your way, that's God's megaphone calling to you to take a step back and say, you're not God and it's not your world and you can't be the king of your world.

Because making a perfection out of this world is not going to happen. C.S. Lewis once said, Frustration is that thing telling you don't put your hope in your work to satisfy you.

That's like taking an elephant ice skating on a frozen pond. It's not going to hold the weight of your expectations. So you might have a great job. You might have great colleagues and a great boss, great kids.

[23 : 46] And you feel like, oh, that sounds very depressing today. What does the Bible say? The Ecclesiastes 4 says, Enjoy what you've got. Enjoy what you've got.

It's not all bad. There is fruit in the garden. There is beauty. Enjoy. It's a gift of grace. Okay? So don't go away thinking, oh, life's terrible. No, there's a gift of grace.

Take pleasure in your work. But realize that sooner or later, you're going to experience the thorns. Right? You're going to experience the thorns. If you want to know what your thorns are in life, complete this sentence.

My work would be great if... Fill in the blank. If that colleague just wasn't there. If I finally managed to finish that project.

If... Fill in the blank. That's your thorn. Fill in the blank. Fill in the blank. So... That's really the problem. That's what's wrong with work. It's fruitless.

[24 : 44] It's pointless sometimes. There are thorns which get in the way of us really enjoying it. But now, how do we deal with it to find meaning and meaningful work in this?

You need hope. Okay? You need hope. So here's the second thing. Finding hope for your work. You know, even writing this sermon, many of us will have forgotten it by lunchtime.

So why would you bother persevering to do it? Verse 20 says, For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its Joan's choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay, and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

You see, every thorn you face is an opportunity for you to find hope in God's work, not your work. Because there is hope which lies outside of this frustrating world.

It's a glory where there will be a freedom to work without pain. There will be companies which truly function and don't have employees which take sick leave just at deadline time.

[26 : 03] There will be a place with no thorns, no thistles. It's a paradise where God dwells supremely in his glory and beauty, and he's going to put the world to rights.

Work will be satisfying. You will look forward to going to work on Monday morning. And those deep aspirations, those longings to be significant in our lives, God says, I am going to fulfill those.

I will fulfill those. You see, Viktor Frankl, who was a Jewish survivor of concentration camp, he said, Life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose.

You see, when you see that God is working a bigger plan, like Angeline said, there is an eternal plan. There is something which is so much greater than just the little moments of frustration that we go through.

That he is bringing you into a paradise, and he says he's going to work it all for good. He's going to turn everything around. He's going to redeem it. When you see that that is not wasted, no thorn is wasted, then it gives you power to wait patiently and to persevere, which is what he says in verse 25, to hold on to him and his work.

[27 : 27] Because you see, in that story that Tolkien told when Niggie dies, he's put on a train to the heavenly country. And just as he's nearing the station, out of the corner of his eye, he sees a tree.

Finished. And he runs out. And that's the tree. There's his tree. Complete. Full.

The wind is blowing through it, just as he'd imagined it would be. But he'd never been able to get there. You see, his dream hadn't died.

Because there is a heavenly city where NGO workers who want to see healing and justice will see healing and justice. Where whatever the deepest aspirations and frustrations and things you're longing for, whether it's your family, whether it's a project, God will work through, and you will see there will be a birth.

There will be a birth. And God will be the one who does it. That's what he's saying. There will be a freedom and a glory of the children of God.

[28 : 42] Someone once said, with hope comes inevitable letdown. Therefore, one will stop being so angry when one stops being so hopeful. Just assume that life is going to be pretty crap and you won't be disappointed.

But the Christian message says, no. The Christian message says, be hopeful. Not in now. Put your hope in God and what he's working out because his plans are for good.

That means you can work with your ambitions, with whatever you're wanting to do right now, with purpose, knowing that it's not wasted, no matter how frustrated you feel at times. It is not wasted.

You will see the fruit one day. And that gives you strength to persevere. It's not pointless. It's not fruitless.

I don't know if you're a perfectionist, but hope frees you from being a perfectionist now.

[29 : 42] You know, because what perfectionists, they take doing something well to an extreme. You see, we look for the perfect job. We look for the perfect strategy, the perfect technique to make your family right.

Perfectionism perfectionism is about trying to control your world to make it like a little heaven on earth. Do you know that? That's what perfectionism is. And what you're doing, you've crossed the line from doing work well to trying to be God.

Okay? Now, trying to be God is a pretty stressful job description. And if you're a perfectionist, you'll know that your stress levels get high at certain moments. Right? Because much of my frustration with other people comes from the fact that they're not living up to my expectations of how the world should be.

Right? But I'm not God and it's not my world and He's going to fix the world. It's not for me to fix the world. So I can leave that job to Him and get on and work well.

Some of us here remember, you need to remember this hope because you feel like the monotony of work. You feel lost in your work.

[30 : 58] You feel frustrated where you are in your career. Some of you need to remember there is a tree that is coming. Some of you love your work too much.

You put your hope all in your work. And it's not just you who feel the form. Your family and other people feel the forms, the choices that you're making. You know, I can be so concentrated on my work that I make other people feel like they're an interruption.

Right? Even those closest to me. And you know, when it gets like that, people, you know, begin to lash out, begin to say things that I shouldn't because they're frustrating me. You're stopping me from doing my work.

And I've stopped seeing people. That's a lot of what workplace demands and abuse is about, trying to use people to make your world work the way you want it to.

Right? And we've stopped loving people. And we've become a thorn. And your frustration, I don't know what your frustration has been this week, but your frustration and anger, if you've had that this week, that's probably because you're trying to be God.

[32 : 06] You know, and we don't do a good job of it. So where do we go? When frustration, anger, that's the sign. You've gone from doing your job well to looking to be God.

The world is frustrating. It's a call in the frustration to turn to Him. But when I turn and lash out and I get angry with other people, that's the sign. I've gone too far.

Work hard. Don't place your hope in your work because there are thorns. So what do we do?

We need to surrender. The Bible calls us, whether you're a Christian or not, to surrender your hopes in your work to Him and allow Him to take your dreams and ambitions and you just get on and work to His praise and glory.

Verse 32 says this, If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He, not along with Him, graciously give us all things?

[33 : 14] You see, the reason why you can say, God, I can leave it to you to fix the world is because God has seen the thorns and the thistles in your life.

He knows the frustrations that you go through. You know, there are things which stand against us, things of accusing us not of doing a good job, not being where we should be.

whatever the thorns are for you. I, just a few weeks ago, there were a couple of instances where I was feeling frustrated and overwhelmed with a particular task that I had to do.

And I felt only I could do it. Only I could do it. And then a friend came along and said to me, hey Chris, it's okay. I'll hand you that.

I'll deal with that. You leave it to me. Do you know what that was like? It was like, light came into my world. It's like freedom. Oh, you mean I don't have to do it?

[34 : 20] The Bible says, if you're a Christian, if you're not a Christian, you've got to let go of trying to fix the world because God has already come down and he's worked for us.

He's done that task of being able to fix the world that we could never do. On the cross, he's the only one who said, it is finished. He's finished his work.

He's done it. On the cross, Jesus had thorns put into his head in a crown. The thorns that you and I face on a daily basis.

He took them. And he offers a great exchange. He says, give me your frustrations. Give me your thorns. Give me whatever is getting you down right at this moment.

Give it to me. Your selfishness, your anger, whatever it is, and I can provide rest for your soul in the midst of the difficulties because you don't have to fix the world because that's my job.

[35 : 23] I'll do it for you. You see, there's true rest if you come to Christ and he's saying to you, will you come?

Will you come? Will you come? Rest from trying to fix your world. Rest from trying to create everything perfectly. Rest from the stress of trying to be God of your universe.

Surrender to me. You can trust me because if I have overcome the greatest thorn, which is death itself, if I can do that, don't you think I'm big enough to handle the thorns in your own life?

Come to me and find rest for your soul. No matter what the frustrations in your work are, there is hope that he's going to make it all new. He's going to use it.

But right now, he is here for you. He knows you. He hears you. Come to him. Let's pray. Let's pray.