

**WORK
WORTH
DOING**
TOM HEETDERKS



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ABOUT THIS BOOK

As we waved, our older son drove to the street's end, beyond our limited view, and into his future. We wailed our loudest goodbyes. "We love you!"

In his discolored car, he had all of his few possessions, including fresh-out-of-the-oven brownies from his loving mom. He had just graduated from a nearby university and was on his way to start his first professional job in a Midwestern city far away.

"The days are long, but the years are certainly short," I said to my wife. And while we stood there, any further words of consolation fell faintly to the ground. I looked at her for a time, reflecting on our two decades as parents. I pondered our younger son, who at the time was a college sophomore, and our daughter, who was a high school senior, and then a few hours later, I penned a fatherly love letter to our children.

This book grew out of that short letter. If you're trying to figure out what to do with your life, this book was written for you—especially if you're a student or early into your career. But I hope to encourage any reader who's wondering about or struggling with work.

I'll help you answer common work questions and connect the dots between our God, the worthiness of what you do, and who you're meant to be. Here and there, I'll invite you to check out additional input in the Going Deeper section at the end of the book, which you can read either right then or later. I've also provided

two self-assessment sections, as well as some insight for when you don't like your job and some tips for when you're looking for a job.

Last, throughout these pages, you'll see text that looks like this:

“This?”

Yes. Though we've not yet met, imagine this is a conversation between us. When you see a bolded subhead, it's as if you're asking a question or sharing your thoughts. Sound good?

“Yeah.”

And why did I include so much Scripture? Because our many years spent in work are so much more than window dressing to the claims of our faith. They're core to our Christian living. Yet in *Work: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor*, professor of New Testament Ben Witherington III stated, “If you survey the topical indexes in works of biblical and systematic theology you will find the topic *work* rarely—because it is rarely discussed in the text of such books! How odd, especially when the Bible has so much to say about work, past, present, and future.”¹

Yes, the living and infallible Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; Hebrews 4:12) has a *lot* to say about work! As president of Marketplace Leaders, Os Hillman tells us, “Work, in its different forms, is mentioned more than 800 times in the Bible—more than all the words used to express worship, music, praise, and singing combined.”² And as author D.H. Jensen noted, “Biblical narratives overflow with work. Between the opening lines of Genesis, which portray God as a worker, and the closing chapter of Revelation, with a vision of new creation, God labors. One of the distinguishing characteristics of biblical faith is that God does not sit enthroned in heaven, removed from work and willing things into existence by divine fiat.”³

To prepare your heart for this exploration of work, then, consider these Bible verses:

- “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).

- “We also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe” (1 Thessalonians 2:13).
- “The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

Although in this book I’ll assume you’re a believer, you may be someone who says *no* or *never* to Jesus’s teachings. That, however, doesn’t mean you can completely bypass what He said about your talent, work, and service. And if you’re inclined to refute the deity of Jesus, suggesting He was just a prophet or carpenter, note this: Jesus said, “All will honor the Son even as they honor the Father” (John 5:23 NASB). In addition, the Bible tells us Jesus “existed in the form of God” (Philippians 2:6 NASB), and a disciple addressed Jesus as God only to be praised by Jesus (John 20:28).

I also want to be clear about something else upfront. This book is about working, but it’s about working *only* in the context of something far more important: your life and eternity. And no matter your place in life, you’re there for a reason.

No matter your starting point—in faith and in the workplace—get ready to learn and prepare your heart for change. I promise to not only prod and challenge you, but also to encourage you along the way. Together, with an emphasis on the Bible’s work-relevant accounts of King David’s life, let’s take on some of your lingering questions. And as we talk about you and your work, be reminded of God’s love and power with every step. Almighty God is in control, and His Word says, “Blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him” (Jeremiah 17:7).

My prayer is that, in this book, you’ll discover a word, a verse, or a thought that convinces you that your work matters a whole lot more than you ever imagined.

GOD CAN USE ANYONE

It's disgusting to think about, really. The world of work received the touch of death thousands of years ago. It happened quickly, but it happened. You can read the entire, uncensored, 600-plus word account in Genesis 3, but here are a few of the most relevant verses for our discussion:

Because you...have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it," cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, til you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return (verses 17-19 ESV).

This wasn't some cheesy martial arts movie, and the assassin didn't wear a top-knot. No, according to Holy Scripture, a heartless, evil perpetrator in the form of a serpent wreaked havoc, and the world and the vast workplace in it was wrecked.

Now you're witness to the continued forceful attacks on an already beleaguered institution, and because of this, the workplace isn't for the faint of heart. It's just not.

I don't know how you got this book, but I will say you got it at a great time. That's because the earth and the workplace have both been waiting for you for a very long time!

“They have?”

Yes. And listen to this carefully: *God can use anyone, and He wants to use you.*

Can the preceding ten words be true? Read them again. Do you believe them—really believe them? Because there’s no sorta or kinda-maybe here.

Some people find these ten words quaint; others find them laughable. That’s because they either don’t believe in God at all or have a distorted concept of Him. For many, a busy supreme being wouldn’t help us see a new opportunity, call us to an exciting challenge, or use us for noteworthy impact. And sadly, unless it’s to belittle someone’s faith in “a sky daddy” or “little baby Jesus,” a good many people are too stubborn, apathetic, or put off to even care how God might have anything to do with our work.

Know this up front, though: Although you’ll never *grasp* everything about God, you can *trust* many things about Him. Our God is eternal, all-powerful, and all-knowing. Much more than the “old man upstairs,” He’s a distinct Holy Spirit who is near, active, and inescapable throughout our world. Nothing—and no one—compares to Him. And according to Him, those ten words—*God can use anyone, and He wants to use you*—are true!

Your Creator, who will reign forever, wants to do more through you than you can possibly conceive. In Scripture, we read, “[God is] able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20).

“Okay. I hear you. You’ve given me a lot to think about already.”

Good. Now let’s look at King David, who’s profiled at length in the Bible. For a Scripture review highlighting several parts of his life (and at least one interesting fact about another anointing), check out *A* under “Chapter 1: God Can Use Anyone” in the Going Deeper section of this book. But here, let’s pick up the events when David was about 15 years old.

David is that peach-fuzzed teenager leaning against his staff over there by the hill who’s “ruddy” and has “beautiful eyes and a handsome appearance” (1 Samuel 16:12 NASB). Right now, he’s working as a shepherd for his family. But when he’s not herding animals and doing pasture chores, David passes the time playing on

his lyre and singing songs. He also messes around plenty with his slingshot, flinging stones at small targets.

For the most part, the rather forgettable, decidedly predictable days of his youth blend together. On any given hot-and-dusty day, he can be found doing pretty much the same old thing: herding sheep, slinging stones, and singing songs.

“That sounds pretty boring.”

But soon there’s a break in the story for David and his family. Their everyday house is packed with people—David’s seven older brothers; their dad, Jesse; and Samuel, who’s a judge, prophet, and religious leader. Samuel assumes the role of a high-pressure talent scout. And as he’s done before, stunningly, he’ll handpick the next king of Israel! This time, though, God limits his regal choice to a one-family candidate slate (1 Samuel 16:1).

“Sounds crazy.”

Yeah. If this were a single-day vetting for a foremost country’s throne today, the brothers would be pacing anxiously with quickened breath. Sick with anticipation, and on the cusp of untold fame, power, and wealth, they would also be dressed to impress, with faces shaved, shoes shined, and hair combed just right.

Okay, first brother up. Whoa. To his surprise, Samuel thinks he’s identified the next king already. For him, Eliab is the obvious choice. He looks around, now openmouthed, and says, “Are you seeing what I’m seeing?” More literally, from the NIV translation of the Bible, “Surely the LORD’s anointed stands here before the LORD” (1 Samuel 16:6).

Samuel is ready to declare, “You’re hired!” But God says to him, “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (verse 7).

Rebuked from on high but somehow resolute to finish the task, Samuel proceeds to assess each of the remaining brothers. Disappointingly, though, as far as he can tell, the suitability of fraternal pickings seems slim to none. He utters something like, “Jesse, are these all your sons? Did all of your boys know I was coming today?”

Jesse admits he has another son but says he's basically the runt of the litter, not someone anyone with a sharp eye for talent needs to see. Essentially, it's as though he's saying, "Folks, move along. There's nothing to see here." After all, only one job—an entry-level job at that—is on this son's starter-kit résumé: boy shepherd.

As a last resort, Samuel requests to see this son anyway, and as David enters the scene, God declares to Samuel, "Rise and anoint him; this is the one" (verse 12).

David is more than dirty and smells like free-range sheep. (He also wouldn't have shaved because, well—how do I say this?—he didn't need to yet.) But as his passed-over siblings look on, their jaws hitting the dirt, their kid brother is anointed the next king of Israel.

Him? Our little brother! Are you serious?

Are you with me so far?

"Yes. God chose David even though he didn't seem like king material."

That's right. Here's a singular, priceless takeaway for you to treasure always, a spirited and affirming message I'll repeat many times in this book: No matter how improbable it seems, God can and will use anyone to accomplish His purposes.

Now let's go back to those ten words: *God can use anyone, and He wants to use you.*

When you read that, do you think your shortcomings are so unique that those words can't be true? Do you believe you're just too young or too inexperienced? Because if you do, I'd like you to remember a pregnant-out-of-wedlock teenage girl named Mary, who became the mother of Jesus.

If you're feeling too uncertain to believe those ten words, check out Jonah's and Joshua's stories in Scripture to see how God used them despite their initial misgivings.

Do you feel written off? Learn about a tax collector named Matthew, who became one of Jesus's disciples.

Are you unwanted? Recall that Joseph, who later became rich and powerful, was so undesired that his own brothers sold him into slavery. (You can find Scripture references for all these stories in *B* under "Chapter 1: God Can Use Anyone" in *Going Deeper*.)

Today, if God has anything to do with it (and He has to do with everything), a

soon-to-be torchbearer somewhere in the world may be rather tired of life, drifting between *I don't know* and *I don't care*.

Perhaps that drifter looks a lot like you.

You might say, "God's not going to use someone like that!" Uh, are you sure? Because when He's not tapping a talking donkey to deliver a message (Numbers 22:28), just look at the seemingly weak, unlikely, and foolish individuals with far-from-perfect records He chooses and uses throughout His Word. It's an amazing pattern we see over and over again.

No one thought David would be "the one." But God said, "He's My choice!" Next to no one thought Peter, Rahab, Moses, Daniel, or Esther would be the one. And these days, few believe they're the one either.

"Why is that?"

Well, very often, we have a limited view of ourselves because we've bought into the deceits we've been told. Yet the Bible says God has a plan for each of us. You, for example. You've been preciousy chosen, divinely anointed, strategically placed, and fully empowered to work with God. You're uniquely equipped for the good works He's prepared for you alone to do. Ephesians 2:10 says, "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (ESV).

Are you feeling limited? If you are, get ready to stop feeling that way. As God's awesome workmanship, never forget whose you are—forevermore.

"You're right. Feeling limited isn't great."

No, it isn't.

Back to David...

After being anointed king as part of the Lord's perfect plan, David returns to his shepherd role. That's right. After being chosen as his country's next ruler, he goes back to the grit and grime of herding sheep and slinging stones. And for several years that follow, he does pretty much this same thing.

Put yourself in his well-worn sandals. Can you imagine what he was thinking that whole time? What David was doing in the dirt must have felt to him

like a long way from the throne; so to say the least, this had to be a puzzling time. (*Was the anointing a dream? Or was I punked by my father and brothers?!*) It's a safe bet that this boy shepherd never imagined that, someday, he would be considered the greatest king of Israel, his kingship would be eternal through Jesus (2 Samuel 7:8-16, 29), and God would describe him as "a man after my own heart" (Acts 13:22).

But David was always working, and God was always working on David.

Most days, this would-be king still put a stone in his sling, swung the sling around his head, and jettisoned the stone toward a target. Once in a blue moon it was to kill a wild animal, but beyond that rare instance, this finely honed skill had about as much value as one-hand clapping, beatboxing on a unicycle, and—as much as I appreciate this one—artfully folding napkins into cute animal shapes. That is, not much (or so it seemed).

Later, Jesse calls David in from the fields and, in a father-son talk, informs him that a few of his brothers are involved in a battle. David isn't old enough to fight, but his father wants him to go to the front line and deliver food to his siblings.

Early the next morning, David leaves his flock in the care of another shepherd and sets out with a knapsack filled with cheese, cracked wheat, and bread. And then, in the storied Valley of Elah, he sees the armies from Philistia and Israel on opposite hills. A battle-tested, larger-than-life Philistine dominates this scene.

“Goliath.”

Yeah, Goliath is topped in a helmet and covered in a full-body, bronze-scale tunic. He has a javelin, a sword, and a short-range spear. And behind this intimidating killer and his revolting taunts, the Philistines are on the cusp of capturing the mountain ridge near Bethlehem and slicing King Saul's kingdom in two. The king and his Israelite army are terrified.

Among all gathered, however, is one Israelite who views this situation differently.

“David.”

David asks, “Who's this man who's allowed to talk this way?” And to the mouth-opening surprise of those gathered, he goes to King Saul, clarifies the

financial incentive for winning the fight, and requests to battle the trash-talking adversary.

The king scoffs, “You’re just a shepherd!” Even David’s brother Eliab tries to disqualify him because of his lack of training. He jeers, “Why have you come down here? And with whom did you leave those few sheep in the wilderness?” (1 Samuel 17:28). Essentially, he tells David he’s ill prepared and to go home.

Hmm. In a single Bible chapter, David is dissed by his powerful king and one of his own brothers.

“Why the disrespect?”

In the eyes of others, David is too young and inexperienced. As far as they’re concerned, this impudent kid is removing the training wheels before he’s earned the right to do so. And he’s a shepherd—one of the least respected professions of the day.

Saul tells David he won’t send him into battle. However, as is soon clear, the king has no alternative. And with a turn in the story, as a last resort, he equips the bright-eyed walk-on with armor.

Quickly, though, David sheds this needless covering, and our fledgling fighter grabs his leather-pouch sling. Then he proceeds, as he has for many years, to pick up a few stones. He’s more than prepared. And you know where this (and one of the stones) is headed.

David not only believes those ten words—*God can use anyone, and He wants to use you*—but he adds an exclamation mark. He doesn’t limit God or himself. And to the shock of all within earshot, he proclaims, “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD” (1 Samuel 17:45). Then, with his game face on, he runs at Goliath.

And the most-talked-about death match in 3,000 years begins.

Our young slinger sends a stone rocketing toward the too-big-to-miss target. This time, rather than a bear, lion, or imagined target, though, his bull’s-eye is perhaps a pimple on a swaggering man’s forehead.

David’s slinger skill—that skill of seemingly little value—turns human history on its head. The now-victorious Israelites chase the Old Testament’s quintessential bad guys to the gates of Goliath’s hometown.

“Yeah, I remember the story.”

Those winning smiles, however, don't last long. Later, David is hunted like an animal by the most powerful person in the land—the jealous, maniacal King Saul. And for the next decade or so, this obedient shepherd is on the run, hiding in caves and surviving off the land.

Then at the perfect time, this hero-turned-fugitive gets a new job. Any guess?

“Senior shepherd?”

Incredibly, anointed and now more than prepared for the role, David becomes the second king of Israel. Roll the credits:

GOD

As you look ahead in your own life, take an infusion of inspiration from this familiar story. Don't live another day with a confused view of who you are. Never again take your lunch pail, hard hat, or latest fashions to a worksite without supreme purpose. And in line with the broader message of these pages, get your boots or shoes or even slippers on solid ground regarding what work and the workplace can be.

“Got it.”

Now, before we get too far along, let's get clear on what this thing called work is all about. In his book *Work, The Meaning of Your Life—A Christian Perspective*, Lester DeKoster wrote, “Work is the form in which we make ourselves useful to others.”¹

“That's it? That's the whole definition of work?”

No, there's more. As a sacred responsibility, your work should glorify God and uplift others. Jesus said the two most important commandments in Scripture are to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind and to love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37-39). In the marketplace, as an expression of your love, to love well is to work well. These commands establish the purpose of your work

and should guide everything you do in your labor. Rightly considered, then, your work isn't just what you do in a job; it's what you intentionally do with your living. That's what work is.

“Are you talking about my job too?”

Yes, I'm talking about *all* work.

“But how is my job a sacred responsibility? I don't work for a church, and I won't be shepherding anytime soon. Besides, for the most part, isn't work just something you do because someone gives you money to do it?”

I understand what you're saying. I do. But here's what's troubling: If you put your job into a little economic-exchange box—that is, *I'll give you my time and effort if you give me something in return*—you won't realize the radical power of labor or grasp the breathtaking potential of work in God's plan.

“Uh, breathtaking potential?”

Yes! And during our time together, I aim to transform your thinking about work. That's because the God who “determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name” (Psalm 147:4) is the same God who sets the marketplace in motion, determines the number of occupations that exist, and calls by name the person He means to have each job. The Lord who created and sustains the universe and everything in it is the same Lord who creates, guides, and sustains the workplace and the many tasks in it. The Creator who spins objects in orbit and “stretches out the heavens” (Job 9:8) and “performs wonders that cannot be fathomed” (Job 9:10) is the same Creator who wants to use you in His marketplace.

Indeed, the everlasting Father has work for you to do specifically, and this unique work is a blessing. As Pastor Maltbie Babcock said more than a hundred years ago, “Be strong! We are not here to play, to dream, to drift; we have hard work to do, and loads to lift; shun not the struggle—face it; 'tis God's gift.”²

“My work is a blessing... a gift?”

Yes, work is possibly the most bewildering, truly remarkable, and utterly time-consuming blessing you'll ever receive.

“Bewildered? That’s how I feel when I get a fruitcake for Christmas.”

I get it. If you feel bewildered about work, you’re certainly not alone in feeling that way. Martin Luther, a leader in the Protestant Reformation centuries ago, once said, “The world does not consider labor a blessing.” He added, “Therefore, it flees and hates it.” But he also said, “The pious who fear the Lord, labor with a ready and cheerful heart; for they know God’s commandment and will. . . Your work is a very sacred matter. God delights in it, and through it He wants to bestow His blessing on you.”³

In the face of average, upsetting, or seemingly lousy work, I know my words can come off as out of touch and mockable. They’re certainly easier to type than to cherish on a shop floor. But seeing all work as a blessing is possible when we recognize God’s passion for what we do each day!

So if the work you do is bewildering, reflect on whether you believe the Holy One really says, *You’re on your own.*

Attend to my words if you think what you’re doing is a waste of time.

Press pause if you labor each day as if your job isn’t worth your time or God’s attention.

But then as we take a closer look at you and your work, get ready to learn more about God’s love for you and the indisputable worthiness of *all* your labor.

Oh, and just in case you’ve ever wondered, it’s not true that the world has only one fruitcake that people just keep passing around.

FURTHER REFLECTION AND APPLICATION

David’s well-honed skill in slinging stones altered history, but his well-rehearsed songs made an impact on a nation forevermore. Among all pleasant-sounding options, King Saul sought David’s musical abilities to soothe his demon-haunted mind (1 Samuel 16:14-23). With his music, David moved from the shepherds’ hills and an audience of distant stars to the royal courts and an audience with his country’s first king.

The everlasting Lord had a plan for David that involved years of herding sheep,

slinging stones, and singing songs. So let me ask you—with no concern for the apparent value of the task, hobby, or activity—what are you doing today to lay the groundwork for tomorrow? No matter how silly or average your undertakings may seem, offer your time, practice, and experiences to our Lord in prayer. He has a plan for *you*.