

# Toil

*weary?*

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To Daniel Walker, a man of true faith in Jesus  
and a discerning spirit. (Daniel 1:19-20)

## **Introduction:**

It's the *in-between* time. So much of it. More of it than not. Packing. Unpacking. Sorting. Cleaning up before, cleaning up after. Paperwork. Contingencies. Repairs. More repairs. Returns. Check-ups. Follow-ups. Waiting. Rushing. Getting from this end to that end. Gearing up. Psyching up. Getting through. Trying to wind down. Wondering. Wandering.

This, my friend, is not an attitude. This is simply reality. The stats. The breakdown of the clock each day.

God said it would be like this. Check out these verses, and then let's consider...

***'God said to Adam, 'Because you ate from the tree from which I said, 'You shall not eat of it,'***

***Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life.***

***It will produce thorns and thistles for you...'***

(Genesis 3:17-19)

1.

Writing this I'm nearly fifty years old. Five kids, two still at home. Twenty-seven years married in about two weeks. Honestly, I'm tired. I'm a social worker, my wife a teacher.

I've become conscious of just how much of life is pure effort. Even the good times. In order to have a 'good' time – some friends over for something to eat, to drink – the amount of time it takes to prepare, the energy, the cleaning, planning, communicating... just to make that brief, good time happen!

Now think of that ten-day vacation. A year of planning and saving? Tickets and insurance in case a storm or virus or wreck on the highway make you miss the plane. Work extra hard to leave things in order, and then come back to work backed-up. Daily stress on the vacay includes: *Is our room nice? Noise on the corridor? Food good quality? Worth the money? Everybody happy? Anything lost? Anything stolen?*

Listen, I'm not trying to be depressing here. I'm just at a point where I'm seeing – and feeling – the struggle. Moses put it this way:

***'Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures; yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow...'***

(Psalm 90:10)

2.

We all feel it. That's why we enjoy – even need – those sad songs, the melancholic movies. The Greeks had tragedies and 'pathos' for catharsis, to cleanse their souls. Solomon put it like this:

***'It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart.'*** (Ecclesiastes 7:2)

Even kids feel it. In fact, I think kids feel it more purely than adults, because they have not yet discovered and honed denial and the pursuit of pleasure. So they feel the rivers of sadness, of life's brokenness. They do. But they stand so steady. They hope. They smile. They care more deeply than they can express.

I remember when my two boys, Isaac and Daniel, were only four and three years old. We were sitting at a table together with some cookies to share. I asked Daniel for a bite. He said 'No'. I pretended for only a split second to be sad, dropping my eyes. Isaac nearly started crying and shouted, '*Daniel, give dad some!*'

I suddenly realized the full emotion that little kids carry in their chest. Isaac's heart nearly broke when he thought I was feeling sad.

Nearly twenty years later, just yesterday, I was feeling the 90:10 ratio of life's toil to life's joy,

and I found myself daring to think, to question, why I even brought kids into this life of sorrow.

It's important to let the truth of sorrow into our vision. But it is equally important, even truthful, to allow that breeze of hope to meet us there. When you let that sad song touch your spirit, there is a type of healing in that touch. Like, just expressing the sadness relieves some of the sadness. Not all of it. But there is a promise there, a hope that resides there.

I even feel it in writing this, right now. I am daring to express a vision of heaviness, risking accusations of pessimism or depression. But I know this is different. This is simply daring to stop for a minute, and actually feel the burden of life, the real one. The one upon me, not the one I muster up in moments of self-pity. And here, here in the truth of life's brokenness, of God's curse on the land, I discover another truth of God. Not a curse, but a cure. A blessing that God himself has spoken into this place, to redeem it, to open a door back to paradise.

***'On those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned.'*** (Isaiah 9:2)

3.

I admire workers. All of them. Yesterday I was walking through a store, and just seeing workers stock shelves, price items, carry, move, deliver...

Work – actual effort, toil - is now in the very blood, the fabric of daily life here on earth. God said it would be. So just having a job, and working it, is being in step with life on God's terms. Paul wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica and said:

***'Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life; you should mind your own business and work with your hands... so that your daily life will win respect... and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.'***

(1 Thessalonians 4:11-12)

There is virtue in having a job and being hard-working.

I need to remember that. I often get a sense of insignificance – not significance – in the mundane. I forget that the land has been cursed, and the mundane is now a real part of living, an important part, a necessary part.

4.

Speaking of the mundane and the curse, let's consider that a little deeper.

So God cursed the land and made life – food, profit – toilsome. Provision was no longer a 'low-hanging fruit'. It had to be strived for, sweated for. Not the original plan, but the consequence.

Consequence of what?

Well, art depicts it as Adam reaching for the forbidden apple. The Bible makes the story actually very simple – metaphorical and/or literal - all contained in the first two chapters of the Bible. Simply put, God made people, set them in Paradise to live, love, enjoy God and life for all eternity. But he made them in his own image, with choice in the very core of the soul. They could choose God. In fact, they *had* to choose God, if they wanted God in their life. It was a true, healthy relationship between mankind and God.

Mankind chose to do his own thing. He used his choice to choose self over God. The eating of the forbidden fruit was Adam choosing to be his *own* god, rather than be in relationship with the true God.

In doing so Adam ushered into God's 'garden' and creation, a spirit of rebellion, death, envy, selfishness. He opened a window to everything



that was not of God, and let it come into God's creation. By this choice of the soul – to reject the true God – death came in, and toil became the path to survive.

This rejection of God, and all that expresses it, is sin. Toil in life is a result of our sin, our rejection of God.

5.

Some days – or rather, moments – I am overcome with the sorrow of all people, every person. Just the yearning in people's souls.

Recently I saw a small child wanting to show his mom a toy in a store. He was calling to her, saying, *'I just want you to see this.'* His mom was calling back from a short distance away, *'No, we are not going to look at toys today.'* I saw the little kid just staring at the toy, and then walking away, back to his mom. I was impacted by the longing, the desire, that even a small child has for things in life that they cannot have. Sometimes these desires may not be necessary, but other times they truly are deep and necessary, but still out of reach. Everyone, everywhere, lives this.

Life is broken to the core. Broken *at* the core. We unplugged it, when we pulled away from God's giving and reached for our own taking. Unrequited life now lives us. Life inside out. Life inverted. From the youngest of ages, we live and learn and yearn and strive. We toil. It's too much.

***'When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.'*** (Matthew 9:36)

At times Jesus just sat and cried with people. At times he was overcome with people's plight.

(John 11:35,38) Through his prophets he also calls us to ***'weep with those who weep.'***  
(Romans 12:15)

This picture of Jesus brought to tears by our tears, gives me strength to walk on when I'm overcome by people's suffering. Being overcome is OK, and not the end of the line. Jesus wept, but he went on and broke open a healing balm, anointed our heads, our hearts, with healing. If he can weep, I can break down sometimes and weep. But if he walked on and made a way, I can walk on that same way and share his hope with others.

This picture of heaven, of the sheer equality and dignity and joy, comes to my mind often:

***'Come, all you who are thirsty,  
come to the waters;  
and you who have no money,  
come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
without money and without cost.'***  
(Isaiah 55:1)

6.

Equal and disparate. Differences in life, between the poor and rich, are so extreme and yet so slight. All at the same time.

The toil of the poor is constant. That's the only word I can think of. They have no prize for their work, like rest or comfort or vacation. Work – just to have work – *is* their prize.

Jesus taught us to pray, '**Give us this day our daily bread...**' That prayer, provision for the day, this day, is the prayer and the lifestyle of the poor. Amazing that the Lord's prayer for all people, is a prayer the poor can pray and live every step.

And yet when Jesus saw the rich young ruler coming towards him (**1. Rich 2. Young 3. Ruler**), '**he looked at him and loved him.**' (Mark 10:21) Jesus loves the rich. Jesus sees them as needy as the poor. More, in fact. Jesus spoke these words to the rich Christians of Laodicea:

**"You say, 'I am rich...' But you do not realize you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked."** (Revelation 3:17)

In many senses the very poorest among us are the richest. With humility coursing through their veins, they are the most beautiful people in every way. And they hold the highest prize here and now ('faith'), and the highest inheritance in

heaven.

***'Has not God chosen those who are poor in this world to be rich in faith?'*** (James 2:5)

***'And without faith it is impossible to please God.'*** (Hebrews 11:6)

***'Jesus said, 'The last will be first, and the first will be last.'*** (Matthew 20:16)

If I do not honor the poor, and consider them better than myself (Philippians 2:3), I lack wisdom, I lack truth, and I will lack reward.

***'He who gives to the poor, loans to God.'*** (Proverbs 19:17)

***'He who mocks the poor insults their Maker.'*** (Proverbs 17:5)

And my friends, poverty is not just about money. There are 'poor in spirit', there are disadvantaged physically and mentally, there are those who are poor in opportunities and protections, poor in friendships and community. We are called to protect the poor.

7.

Just to survive you have to work so hard! The needs of even one day are substantial, and one full working day is no joke. Jesus put it this way:

***'Each day has enough worries of its own.'***  
(Matthew 6:34)

And for this reason, just prior to this line, Jesus said, ***'Do not worry about tomorrow...'***

Again, it is important to remember that Jesus taught us to pray for, to ask for, our *'daily bread'*. He stands with us today, here and now. He touches us here. He provides today. He'll be with us tomorrow, but his presence is in the present. Here. Now. Don't worry about tomorrow.

So in our 'toil' to provide, working hard and working long, we can get it wrong in two ways. First, even though we might be worrying about – or working for – today's provision only – i.e. staying in the moment, not worrying about tomorrow - we will step over God's presence to prioritize our work. He might be calling us to trust more today, stress less. Our *'daily bread'* might be our focus, but all in our own strength, not in prayer and faith. Our stress and frustration show this. This event with Mary, Martha and Jesus captures this. Martha was working hard for the moment, for the 'daily bread' experience, for Jesus and his disciples, and yet missed Jesus himself:

***‘As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”***

***“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed - or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”*** (Luke 10:38-42)

Secondly, in our toil, we might get carried away with provision – or possessions – generally, and very much for ‘tomorrow’. We call it prudence, financial planning or ‘peace’, but God sees the heart and calls it avarice, love of money, pride, lack of trust in God’s provision. Jesus tells this story:

***‘Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”***

***Jesus replied, “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?” Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”***

***And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’ Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.””***

***“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’***

***“This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”*** (Luke 12:13-21)

So we can be *‘in the moment’* people, OK with the call to focus on just today, *‘our daily bread’*, but still be too stressed, worried, and over-work. We can miss Jesus on the daily, as did Martha. On the other hand we can be people who don’t heed the call of Jesus to focus primarily on today – today’s needs, physical and spiritual – and toil for wealth and worldly security for tomorrow, for the next day, for years ahead. Jesus called this man a *‘fool’*.

How do we calibrate our spirit? How do we focus on work and provision in a way, every day, that honors Jesus?



Well, we have to *follow* Jesus each day. We walk with him, keep in step with him. We name him as our highest treasure, our prize, call his love ***'better than life'***, and be willing to suffer to hold on to him. We don't just follow; we take up our *cross* and follow. (Psalm 63:3; Mark 8:34)

My friends, the only *'striving'* that God really does put on us, is the striving to enter God's rest. (Hebrews 4:11) What this means is that we *'toil'*, as it were, to be genuine in our love of Jesus, our walk with Jesus, and let his presence be present in every area of our lives. This is intentional. This is prayerful, and quietly worshipful. This is reading and meditating on his words, and letting his words come alive in our words and our thoughts and actions.

***'Therefore, let us strive to enter his rest.'***  
(Hebrews 4:11)

Instead of work itself being our *'toil'*, our stress, we should be striving to bring Christ into our work. The toil – not burdensome, but meaningful – should be crowning Christ as king in our daily work for *'our daily bread'*.

***'Jesus said, 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'***  
(Matthew 11:28-30)

8.

Loneliness oppresses people. It presses down on people. They turn to desire, perversion, food, drink. Not all badness in a person comes from loneliness, but much darkness does grow from that dark space.

I met a young man, homeless and living in his car. He would park in the woods at night. He worked on and off at gas stations. He suffered from schizophrenia with paranoia. I sat in on his intake assessment with the psychiatrist. She asked him if he ever heard voices, or had a special mission. He said yes. When she asked him about the first apparition of his 'intergalactic deity', he said he was six years old, had been orphaned, was going to be sent to live with his dad in another country. The deity appeared to him here and said, *'Greetings, lonely one.'*

That always stuck with me.

I see very successful men – pilots, engineers, CEOs, etc. – who harbor secret, perverse lives. Highly successful, deeply lonely, secretly lost and inwardly twisted around.

We live a very short life. It moves at the speed of light towards its own end. Look around you at people. They are young, but not that young. They are ageing. Just look. Almost as if we are born old. Nearly over from the get-go, from the start. The Bible teaches us that life is mortal

because of our sin, because of unplugging ourselves from God who made us, from his holiness. We are also told that we were made with a call, a cause, to seek for God, reach out and find him. (Acts 17:25-27) We're told that *'eternity is in our hearts'*, and that creation *'pours forth speech'* about God, and that our hearts should know this, and should seek him. (Eccl 3:11; Psalm 19:1-2).

Do you? Do I?

A short life made by God, in which we are destined and called to seek God.

Do we?

Then the lights go out. And only those who plugged back into the eternal Light come back to life.

***'In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.'*** (John 1:4)

9.

I remember I had only been married about a year, living in student housing downtown Dublin, Ireland. My young wife and I, one rainy night, went to a random Christian service at the YMCA on George's Street. A preacher from Scotland was visiting. I can't remember how we heard of it, nor why we felt we needed to go. Probably because some humble people who were part of this event were praying that the Lord would move hearts around the city and draw people.

I cannot remember who the speaker was, and I cannot remember one thing he said. But I do remember that he had a type of conviction, passion, that touched my soul. I do remember walking home that night and feeling a new flame in my own spirit.

So in a sense, as I think back on this, I took away a *'living word'*. It's not that he spoke, I listened, and I came away impressed by him, or even by what he said. No. What happened, rather, is he spoke, and his words and spirit were actually given to me. I came away with a prize. I came away with the gift. He gave something away to me. I left with it.

This is the essence of true ministering. It is a pouring out, and impartation. People you minister to, take you away with them, as it were. You die to give them life. People don't leave from your ministering feeling more awe and

honor for you. No. People leave feeling more honored *by* you and *by* God, and you personally are not very strong in their memory. This is true giving, true ministering.

John the Baptist poured out his life to make a way for Jesus. When the way was made, Jesus walked it, and all eyes turned to Jesus. Eyes turned away from John. John's followers, his helpers, felt this. They brought it to John's attention. At that moment John said of Jesus, **'He must become more, and I must become less.'** (John 3:30) And in a worldly sense, John became so much less! He was imprisoned, where he upheld a strong testimony and witness to God, and for this he was beheaded.

Do you minister like this? Do I? Do we disappear so that others can appear? Do we give blood?

Christ ministers like this. Christ became empties himself to pour *into* us.<sup>1</sup>

**'This is the mystery of God revealed: Christ in you.'** (Colossians 1:27)

Jesus told his disciples that they should be glad that he was leaving – disappearing - so that he could pour out his Spirit in them. He left physically to become more to us spiritually. (John 14-16)

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 2:7; 2 Corinthians 8:9

We no longer toil alone, my friends. Now, by the outpouring of Christ's Spirit, we are never alone. Even in death, we live. We can whisper his name and know his presence, even in the darkest space of our lives. There is no lonely job, lonely road, where Jesus cannot accompany us. There is no cold space that Jesus cannot warm with his Spirit.

***'Where can I hide from your Spirit?'***

(Psalm 139:7)

10.

I feel really low sometimes. Often, if I'm honest. I just feel overwhelmed by the toil of life. This is one reason – my own struggle – that I have a heart to encourage other people.

I want to encourage people in two ways.

Faith for now:

First, I want to encourage people to have faith to bring God's Spirit into this place, this moment, and change it. ***'Your kingdom come on earth...'***

I want to remind people – and myself – that in Jesus I can pray, I can ask, that his Holy Spirit comes into a place of toil and changes it. That God's peace and rest and healing and hope can come into a place – *a job, a home, a relationship, a day of the week, a city* – and actually change it.

Hope for our future:

Secondly, I want to encourage people that it is OK that we long for heaven. It is OK, and encouraging, to remember that we will cross a line one day and enter Paradise, where all things are made new.

***'He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or***

***crying or pain.***' (Revelation 21:4)

Jesus drew strength from the joy '***set before him***'. (Heb 12:2) He lived in the moment, and brought heaven to earth, but he had his eyes fixed on the unseen, on what it was all for and would all become one day.

Abraham was the same. He walked with God here on earth, he toiled in the desert for many years, but '***he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.***' (Heb 11:10)



11.

We are told in Scripture to build one another up with encouraging words, to remind one another of the power of the resurrection to come and of the value of our faith and good works. (*1 Thes 4:18; Gal 6:9; Heb 10:24-25*)

Encouragement doesn't just happen. We lose strength and faith to draw Christ's Spirit into our toil here and now, and we lose vision of heaven just moments away. We need to remind one another. We need to encourage one another.

***'So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.'***  
(2 Corinthians 4:18)

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