**DON'T WORSHIP WORK**

by J. D. Greear

In middle school, Alex and Peter launched their first entrepreneurial enterprise, a little neighborhood project called "Dirt Cheap Lawn Care."

After their ninth grade summer, they were both over it, but for different reasons.

Alex saw his work as a necessary evil, little more than a means to score some cash to go to the arcade, see the occasional movie, and upgrade his wardrobe from his mom's unrelenting poor choices. Because work for Alex was merely a means to an end, he got little pleasure from it. He did the least he could to earn a buck. He cut corners. He was always pushing Peter to raise prices and offered little to no perks for loyal customers.

Peter, by contrast, loved the company. He felt more alive in it than he ever had. He loved the praise that came from his parents and satisfied customers, and he loved the status that came from being a high school student with a thriving business and plenty of cash. Peter buried himself in Dirt Cheap, because in its success he saw his success. The work was hard now, but he figured real, lasting happiness was just around the corner, the prize for an extra $1,000 in revenue. As he entered his sophomore year, however, he was dismayed that the girls at school seemed to care more about wavy hair and who scored the most points in the basketball game than about his thriving business. Just a little bit more money, a little bit more success, he thought, and they'll see.

Alex and Peter continued their business on into their thirties, and then it all fell apart. Alex simply hated being at work and couldn't believe he had stayed as long as he had. Peter could never round the corner into real happiness. Though he still loved the concept of running a business, he concluded that managing a lawn care business would not deliver the satisfaction and status he craved.

Alex and Peter represent the two key ways we can go wrong with our entrepreneurial work. Alex, you could say, was idle. Peter had made his

My guess, based on the fact that you picked up this book, is that you identify more with Peter than with Alex. Many of us entered entrepreneurial work to find a sense of satisfaction, meaning, and significance. Eventually, though, we all realize we can't find those things there. Unfortunately, for many, by the time they realize it, the damage has been done. Consider these sobering statistics:

* ﻿﻿Entrepreneurs are two times more likely to suffer from depression.
* ﻿﻿Entrepreneurs are three times more likely to battle some form of substance abuse.
* ﻿﻿Entrepreneurs are two times more likely to have suicidal thoughts.
* ﻿﻿Entrepreneurs are two times more likely to be hospitalized for psychiatric problems.

There's a cost to placing all of our time, energy, and efforts exclusively in one place. Entrepreneurship, even when done in healthy partnership, is still an inherently lonely journey. After all, no matter how much people say they're "with you," no one else can take your risks, make your decisions, determine your values, or set your precedents. You're the one doing all that.

That's a lot of weight on one set of shoulders.

I can't think of a more fitting book of the Bible to address this struggle than the book of Ecclesiastes. The majority of Ecclesiastes is written by Solomon, a man with incalculable wealth, world-renowned wisdom, unmatched power, and a list of accomplishments to put anyone to shame.

And yet Solomon explained that even with all that, life often felt like hevel

—a Hebrew word that literally means "vapor" or "smoke." His success felt like a cloud: from afar it might look solid, but when you pressed into it, you would discover it was vapor.

Solomon identifies four areas of life that disappoint us, not in spite of our successes but because of them. Entrepreneurs today need to keep a close eye on each of these four areas, lest our well-intended efforts become hevel, an impressive-looking cloud... full of nothing.

**1. Pleasure ultimately disappoints.**

Solomon writes,

"Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I

kept my heart from no pleasure" (Ecclesiastes 2:10, ES). The man wasn't kidding, either. Everything in Solomon's house was made of gold. He feasted on the richest and most exotic foods from around the world. He took for himself a thousand wives and concubines to satisfy his every de-sire. (If that sounds like a bad idea to you-both practically and morally—I agree. But it shows just how far he was able to go to get whatever he wanted.) Solomon's kingdom, the nation of Israel, was at peace, larger and more powerful than it ever had been or ever would be.

But Solomon wasn't just a rich guy who happened to have a ton of money. He was also preternaturally talented. He was so well read that kings and queens from other nations marveled at his knowledge. He wrote New York Times bestselling books on every subject imaginable. He built the most impressive temple the world had ever seen. He even wrote songs that have endured for millennia.

Having done all this, what was Solomon's verdict? "Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 2:11, ESV).

In other words, "I tried to have it all. I succeeded. And it was completely, utterly empty."

Hevel. Vapor. Smoke.

**2. Even the best business wisdom sometimes fails.**

Here's Solomon again: "I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all" (Ecclesiastes 9:11, ESV).

Sometimes you do everything right and things just don't work out.

You take a calculated risk, but the timing is off, so your venture falls flat.

You reach out to everyone in your network to help a new business off the ground, but they're tied up with other projects and unable to help. An unforeseen event changes the market, and what once seemed like a sure thing suddenly becomes shaky.

Every entrepreneur knows that individual choices matter. This is why you read all the best books on leadership or creativity or marketing. You know that, by and large, wise business practices win out over foolish ones.

But that general principle isn't an ironclad law. Sometimes life just feels, well, unlucky. And when (not if, but when) that happens-when your wise business practices don't automatically lead to success—your whole life doesn't have to crumble. Instead, you can understand that God's wisdom and God's plan are better than anything we could come up with.

**3. In the same way, worldly justice systems eventually fail us.**

This one is even more troubling, because it's not just a matter of bad timing or bad luck. It's a matter of injustice. As Solomon notes, "There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: the righteous who get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked who get what the righteous deserve.

This too, I say, is meaningless" (Ecclesiastes 8:14).

We've all wrestled with this painful reality at some point. Sometimes on this earth good goes unrewarded and evil goes unpunished. Even worse, there are times when evil not only goes unpunished but seems to be rewarded as a path to success.

Should we hold people accountable for injustices in business? Absolutely. Insofar as it lies within our power, we should not only model integrity but also insist on integrity all around us. But we also have to acknowledge what Solomon knew: corruption often wins. And if our entire worth is built on our entrepreneurship, that reality threatens everything.

**4. The fruit of our labor crumbles.**

Solomon writes, "I hated all the things I had toiled for 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? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless" (Ecclesiastes 2:18-19).

We've seen that happen through history with kingdoms, personal for-tunes, sports teams, and business succession plans. It takes a lot of skill and wisdom to build something fruitful. It takes surprisingly little to undo it.

We may (and we should) think through succession plans. We may (and we should) codify our values in our institutions so that they outlast us. We may (and we should) raise up leaders to carry on what we've built. But there are no guarantees. One day, like it or not, we will have to take our hands off our enterprises.

You may be a little uncomfortable with everything I've written so far. It's not that you disagree with Solomon's wisdom. But you've heard this kind of reasoning used to justify an amoral (or immoral) approach to life. After all, if nothing we do lasts, and if justice can fail us, then why care about doing the right thing? Why not just live it up and leave the mess for someone else to clean up?

Fortunately for us, Solomon doesn't go that route. Life may seem like hevel, but if we step back just a bit further, Solomon encourages us to see a bigger picture-one in which we gladly realize that entrepreneurship can't deliver satisfaction, meaning, or significance, because we already have those things in Christ.

Here are Solomon's four truths to help you avoid the dangers of entrepreneurial hevel.

**1. Realize that you were created for God!**

St. Augustine said it over 1,500 years ago: "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in [God]." Satisfaction, meaning, and significance are not found in success. They are found only in our identity as God's children.

When we root ourselves in that identity, the vicissitudes of life can only push us around so much. Success will still feel great; failure will still feel terrible. But with a firm anchor in Christ, success cannot intoxicate us, nor can failure devastate us.

The book of Ecclesiastes ends with Solomon realizing that the only thing left for us to do, in light of all that is meaningless, is to fear God and keep his commandments. Our relationship with God and our life that flows from it matter above everything else.

**2. Arrange your life around the certainty of judgment.**

Death and the judgment of God are two of the only absolute realities in your life. That judgment could come for you this afternoon; it could come in seventy years. But come it will.

We all want to ignore this reality, because let's face it: it's not fun to meditate on death. But uncomfortable realities don't simply disappear when we ignore them. In fact, they become even more dangerous.

There's a great (and startling) analogy for this that I've heard attributed to seventeenth-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal. He describes life as a giant party, full of happy people, loud music, and dancing, during which a monster unexpectedly bursts through the doors, grabs a random partygoer, mauls them in front of everyone, and drags their bloody corpse out of the room. Everyone watches in horror, and after it's over, they stare at one another in stunned silence for a few moments.

But then the band kicks back up and everyone returns to their frivolity, putting the horrendous display out of their minds. This horror is repeated every few moments until it becomes apparent that the monster is eventually coming for everyone in the room. Yet still the party goes on.

That monster, Pascal said, is our impending death.

This reality shouldn't terrify us. For believers, we know what lies on the other side of death. But it should sober us and moderate our expectations in life. We have only a short time on this earth. And only a fool would live as if he were going to live forever. So, as Solomon says, know how to count your days, and then make your days count.

**3. Decide what God wants from you and pursue it.**

And when I say "pursue it," I mean really go after it. Be willing to take a chance on it. Could you fail? Certainly. But God delights in those who risk greatly for him. That's as true in business as it is in missions.

Solomon writes, "Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap" (Ecclesiastes 11:4). Here you have a farmer who never sows his seed because he is so scared the weather will not cooperate. What if it doesn't rain? What if there is a sandstorm? An earthquake? A meteor shower?

As we've seen throughout Ecclesiastes, Solomon acknowledges that we can't control things, and there is nothing in life that guarantees success— not great skill, careful planning, or even righteous living. You have to embrace that truth and still work with wisdom and planning. Solomon writes just a couple verses later, "Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let your hands not be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that" (Ecclesiastes 11:6). In other words, don't let the uncertainty of life and the possibility of failure paralyze you.

In this life, nothing is guaranteed, even if you do it right. But risk is okay. Not all risk, mind you. Not foolish and reckless risk. But some risk is right and wise, even inevitable.

If we, as entrepreneurs, want an ironclad divine promise of success, we're just not guaranteed that in life. But that's not supposed to discourage us from taking wise, well-calculated risks.

**4. Seek happiness in the present, not the future.**

Solomon explains that we have a real temptation to always try to find happiness "out there." But happiness is not around the next corner. It's a gift from God for the present. You should look for it now, not later. If you're not happy, Solomon says it's not primarily a problem with your circumstances but with your relationship with God. "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). That's it. After everything that Solomon talked about, his conclusion is that we are to look to God, to fear him and obey him in the time we have.

Pascal, in his Pensées, said that the tragedy of many successful people is they never actually learn to enjoy life, because they are always living to enjoy it later. He writes,

*We never keep to the present.... We are so unwise that we wander about in times that do not belong to us, and do not think of the only one that does; so vain that we dream of times that are not and blindly flee the only one that is. ... Let each of us examine his thoughts; he will find them wholly concerned with the past or the future. We almost never think of the present, and if we do think of it, it is only to see what light it throws on our plans for the future The present is never our end. The past and the present are our means, the future alone our end. Thus we never actually live, but hope to live, and since we are always planning how to be happy, it is inevitable that we should never be so.*

For the believer, that need not be true. God has good things in store for

his children-not only in the future, but today.

A few years ago, the opportunity came up for me to be the president of the Southern Baptist Convention. I was legitimately excited about it. Now, I'd like to say that all my excitement was about how great of an opportunity this was to leverage a role for the advancement of the gospel. A lot of it was.

But I was also excited by the newness of it. Here was a new challenge and a new platform, both of which whispered to my heart, Perhaps this is the opportunity that will make you happy.

During this time, my wife, Veronica, told me something incredibly helpful regarding fame. She said, "Fame is making yourself accessible to a bunch of people you don't know about at the expense of those you do." I realized she was right. My quality of life is better when I am available to people close to me, and newer and bigger exploits can sometimes take me away from them. That's not to say God doesn't call me to that sometimes (in the end, I took the role), just that I shouldn't be deceived about where happiness comes from.

Even in earthly terms, happiness, Solomon says, comes from the quality of relationships in the present, not the quantity of exploits in the future.

I point this out because I fear that many entrepreneurs will look around at their lives many years later and realize they gave away their greatest moments to get to some elusive future that didn't deliver what it offered. The apostle Paul says, "Godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Timothy 6:6). The greatest gain God can give you is not more stuff or a new challenge or a bigger platform. The greatest gain he can give you is the ability to enjoy what you have.

Centuries after King Solomon, another powerful man rose to power. By the time he was in his twenties, he had conquered an empire astronomically larger than Solomon's-around two million square miles, nearly twice the size of modern India. He established cities that would last until the present day. Despite being a military man all his life, he never lost a battle. We know him today as Alexander the Great.

Alexander might have conquered more of the world than anyone else.

But still he was unsatisfied, wishing for "another world to conquer." He worshiped his empire, and it made him miserable.

Don't be like Alexander. Submit your entrepreneurship to God and be excellent at it, but don't turn it into a god. Don't serve your work, but use your work to serve God and serve others.