

Trinity College Cambridge  
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**FROM (BEFORE THE) CRADLE TO (AFTER THE) GRAVE**  
**Working**

Genesis 1: 27–2: 3    Revelation 21: 1-6a

Will Morris

I'd hardly sat down before the inevitable question came. I'd just preached in Chapel and I was sitting on High Table, so the question was a little more tentative, a little more apologetic, than it sometimes is. But it was the same question. "So you're a Christian," it always begins, "do you . . ." there's a slightly embarrassed pause ". . . do you really believe that stuff about the creation story?" I give a deep, but silent sigh; an imperceptible inhalation. I put on an understanding, sympathetic (or is it empathetic?) half to three-quarters smile. I start, "Well, no, of course, it's a metaphor, an allegory . . ." The look of relief on the other face: Thank God their expression says – not literally, of course – thank God he's not a swivel-eyed zealot; a Trinity grad gone bad. But inside me a voice is screaming. First, how stupid, how unsophisticated, how anti-intellectual do you think I am? And, second, yes, yes, yes, actually in a way I really do believe it.

Before you reach for your room key and head for the exit, let me be clear. I don't believe that the world was made in six days, or in any other biblically revealed chronology. I do, however, believe – profoundly – that God made the world, and that there was some purpose in that making. But if that marks me out from atheists, it also marks me out from many other Christians. For me, the God of Genesis is not only present in worship in the Temple; not only present in cloistered contemplation; not only present in hymns, and pews and altars. The God of Genesis, the God I see, is a worker, a creator, who made humankind to play a role in the whole of his created world. A God who himself values work, and who put us here also to work. Not to work aimlessly, or selfishly, or even simply to survive, but to work for a purpose. But what purpose? In a world of multi-national corporations, and 24/7 connectivity, and rising inequality, what purpose?

To think about that let's go to the second reading. You'll have noticed that I've chosen pretty much the bookends of the Bible, literally the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, and, of course, another passage from another book that marks you out as part of the swivel-eyed crowd: the Book of Revelation. And before you ask the question, no, I don't take it literally. But then I was never meant to – it is explicitly a vision, a dream. But if Genesis sheds light on God's purpose from the beginning, then Revelation sheds light on God's purpose at the end. Eschatology, if you like your theological words. In the beginning is creation, in the end is perfection. All that has been imperfect is made perfect, and all is set right. But this is not about going up to heaven and sitting on fluffy clouds; this is about earthly things being perfected. The new Jerusalem. We do not go up to heaven; heaven comes down to earth. The city of God replaces the human city.

But is there just some gigantic temporal gap between the beginning and the end, between that perfect start and that perfect finish? Is there only a fallen world of imperfection and sin; or, perhaps, simply an extended period of clock-watching until the final day? I don't believe so. In between the beginning and the end there is a middle. That middle links to both, and is as much of God as either of the others – and most especially in the form of Jesus, who in his resurrection is the link between creation of the beginning and the perfection of the end.

However, and to be clear, this question of the middle is not an abstruse theological debating point. Many, probably most of you, within a year or two will head out from here into the world of paid work. And here's the question: is that going to be forty wasted years? A period between the interesting stuff you did here, and the golden years of fulfilling retirement? Is the middle simply blank time, just treading water; or might the God who created the world have something slightly more, well, creative in mind for those years?

Genesis is part of the key to answering this. The idea that even though we may have deformed it through greed or carelessness, work is something that God is interested in. And not just interested in, but something central to his purpose. And Revelation sheds light on that purpose. Although it is God who will make the world perfect, what is being perfected is the world that we have helped him make – both things and people. What is being perfected is something built, or made, or influenced by us now as God's hands on earth. What we have made is not perfect, often it is deeply imperfect. But it is that raw material with which God will work at the end.

So here you are, between the Alpha and Omega, the cradle and the grave. What are those godly opportunities? How is it that you might work with God, and God with you, at work?

At a very simple, personal, perhaps evangelical level, could it be a place where you exercise personal responsibility, and behave ethically? Not fiddle your expenses, and always cut square corners. Deliver an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. Can you work with God, God through you, to set that example?

*But there's more.* Could it also be a place where you carry out the gospel imperative to care for those who are in need, for those who need help? Your fellow workers may not be literally hungry, or prisoners, or naked, as in the parable. But there are plenty of people with whom you'll work who really do feel trapped. Who feel imprisoned by circumstances. Imprisoned by the need to earn something, anything, to put bread on the table for their family. Imprisoned by an inability to imagine something better, or by blind ambition that drives them ever harder and away from friends and family. Those people are prisoners in an office rather than a jail. Can you work with God, God work through you, to help those people?

There may be those you work with who are starving for respect, or a little love or friendship, or just a little fulfilment. And those people are truly hungry. Or your fellow workers may feel incompetent and out of their depth, or ugly, or unbearably different. And under the spotlight at work these people are in a very real sense naked. And it is your job, your duty, your obligation, but also your opportunity, your privilege, your joy, to make things better, to build something with them, however imperfect. Can you work with God, God work through you, to help those people?

*But there's more.* Could it be the place where you exercise your talents, your God-given talents, to reach true fulfilment? A place where you exercise your skills to create products and services that other people want and need to make their lives better. A place where, if you get it right, you create employment for people that gives them dignity; that allows them to look after their families; that allows them in turn to share their good fortune with others? Can you work with God, God work through you, to create those things?

*But there's more.* Could it be a place where you can work for justice and for ethics? Where you can try to ensure that what your business, or government department, or university does, contributes in some way to the common good? Where, be it ever so slowly, and even though you may be the smallest fish in the biggest pond, you can try to make sure that the next decision that is taken is slightly better than the last one? Where you can fight for what you believe – gently, respectfully, but persistently – fight within the workplace and make a real, tangible difference to those around you? Can you work with God, God work through you, to achieve that?

The God of Genesis, the God of Revelation, is interested in things big and small, but, overwhelmingly, is interested in us and in our lives. And that means not just the big events, whether at the beginning, or the end, or on a Sunday; but the middle, the now, our everyday work. I believe that God created the world, and that, as foretold in the resurrection of Christ, will perfect that world at the end. And I believe that God created us to be in relationship with him – again as modelled by Jesus – to help him in his work until that time. But not just to worship, not just to contemplate, not just to sing and praise, but to work. In my worker-God I find the answer to that question of the middle time, to where I am now, where you will be, between the beginning and the end. The answer to what happens between Alpha and Omega, to what I should do – what I have been created to do – between the cradle and the grave. So let me ask you the question one more time: will you give meaning to the middle of your lives by recognising the potential of your workplace and of your work? Will you recognise it as a place and time where you can work with God, and he through you, to make our still imperfect world a slightly better place?

Amen.