God in Dot.Com Valley

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Palo Alto, Silicon Valley, and the images come thick and fast: giant software and technology corporations with names like Sun Microsystems, Oracle or Cisco Systems; techno-geeks announcing breakthroughs in digital discoveries; 20-something entrepreneurs roaring from meeting to meeting in their Jaguars and Ferraris.

There is an element of truth in these images of this pleasant California community that is host to Stanford University, the intellectual hothouse for many of the original Silicon Valley Internet geniuses. But it is the commercial whirlwind that has funneled through the 30-mile-long valley since the start of the digital revolution a few years ago that ought to be the lasting image.

That's because Silicon Valley's instant-wealth frenzy may be creating one of the most humanly distorted communities in recent American history.

"My biggest struggle is that around me are people of the same age who are becoming millionaires every day," says Wheaton College-educated David Friedman, just 26, co-founder of a dot-com startup called . "The challenge in Silicon Valley is to be successful, yet faithful."

It's not as easy as it sounds.

Almost all really high-paying jobs require arduous working hours and frequent interruptions of leisure and family time, but success in Silicon Valley appears to demand workaholism of an extreme nature. Twelve-hour work days at most dot-com startups are virtually required if you are going to be part of the team. There also is a perverse one-upmanship in the degree of professional pain entrepreneurs inflict on their lives.

“One of the badges of honor at Silicon Valley,” says Friedman—who wisely at this stage is not married—“is to attend business meetings that begin at 12:30 at night.”

The ever-beckoning holy grail behind such devotion is that the dot-com enterprise may suddenly be valued as a mega-million dollar corporation by offering its shares to the public through an IPO (initial public offering), making speculative investors think they may have discovered the next Microsoft.

Even for Christians in high corporate positions here, the stress can seem unbearable. One executive explained that when he worked at a well-known Silicon Valley corporation, new executives were sized up by whether they would “drink the Kool-Aid.”

The cynical meaning: Would they drink poison, if necessary, if the company required it, just as more than 900 Americans did in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978 when ordered to commit suicide by their cult leader, the Rev. Jim Jones?

“There is a sense here that you either go with the flow [of frenzied working hours] or you will be neutralized by the competition,” comments Rev. Mark Lauterbach, senior pastor of the First Baptist Church of nearby Los Altos.

Yet the Bible has an enormous amount to say about money: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil,” says Paul with brutal frankness in 1 Timothy 6:10, adding, “Some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (NKJV).

In Silicon Valley, those griefs have become apparent to pastors called in to counsel couples whose marriages are breaking up or whose children have concluded that absentee parenting is the norm.

“These are lonely people,” Lauterbach says. “They live very unbalanced lives.”

To redress that balance, Lauterbach likes to remind his congregation that God’s perspective on time and work is quite different from Silicon Valley’s. “I think one of the key issues is telling people that God is not accommodating Himself to the pace of the Digital Age. People need to be reminded that relationships and ministry cannot be hurried.”

Or bought. Here, where the measure of human worth can focus on wealth or wealth-creating skills, Lauterbach reminds his congregation: “Christianity is not about what we are doing but what grace has done for are far greater in your significance and dignity than you realize.”

God has known this since before IPOs were invented. Pray that Silicon Valley discovers it.