

Meaningful Labors That Last

Psalm 90:17

Mother's Day, May 10, 2020

Calvary Baptist Church, Findlay, Ohio

Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children. And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; Yea, the work of our hands establish thou it. (Psalm 90:16-17)

How do you deal with feelings of emptiness and worry? Or what about fury and frustration? At its core, what is life all about? When your hopes and dreams come crashing down, how do you pick up the pieces? What gives your work significance? Whether it is school work, household chores, business ventures, the workplace, or even yard work, is it really meaningful? Does it count for something? Can we really find significance – and give our efforts and energies over to meaningful labors that last? We can. By crying out to the Lord we can throw our energies into meaningful labors that last. This is all part of God's great grace in the secret place. Today we celebrate this grace on Mother's Day.

Overview: Psalm 90, the Prayer of Moses, the Man of God

Moses was used of the Lord to lead God's people out of Egypt in the Exodus. Many passages of Scripture refer to the Exodus as the greatest demonstration of God's power in the Old Testament. In the Exodus, Israel became a nation – rather than merely a collection of families. But those who had been freed from Egypt [rebelled in the wilderness, at great personal cost.](#)ⁱ Ultimately, in reaction to their rebellion, [faithful Moses became furious Moses.](#) According to Numbers 20, he lost the privilege of leading his people into the Promised Land.ⁱⁱ So every episode of the wilderness wanderings could have left the people feeling

empty and exasperated. But with the help of Psalm 90, we can discover wonderful blessings in those wilderness wanderings.

Psalm 90:1-2 emphasizes the matchless nature of our glorious Lord. Our Creator, our Eternal God, is also our dwelling place. This psalm, the oldest psalm, introduces a theme that dominates the rest of the psalter. God is our dwelling place, our fortress, our shield, our refuge and our high tower. To call the Lord their dwelling placeⁱⁱⁱ must have been a refreshing reminder for wilderness wanderers. Their circumstances were continual reminders about the devastating consequences of sin and rebellion (Psalm 90:3-11). Grudgingly, the people were trudging along toward their graves in that wasteland. In such miseries, people long to hear news of God's mercies. And applying one's heart to gain wisdom (v. 12) becomes a matter of great importance. Seeing an oasis of mercy in the midst of dry and dusty destruction, Moses prayed. In verses 13-17, Moses emphatically cried out for God's mercy to give meaning to their pitiful existence. Could something lasting be established to end their worries and replace their empty exasperation? Could they find meaningful labors that would last?

In the last two messages, we^{iv} have labored together to cry out for God's mercies. In verses 13 through 17, we can see this urgent pleading:

- 1. Cry out to the Lord to turn to us as a nation. 13**
- 2. Cry out for the satisfying mercies of the Lord for us all. v.14**
- 3. Cry out for the Lord's grace in life. v. 15**
- 4. Cry out to see the Lord's glory on display. v.16**
 - a. Pray for God's glory to be seen now.**
 - b. Pray for God's glory to be seen in the future.**

(In other words, let God's glory always be on display.)^v

Think about the enormous implications of what Moses wrote next: **Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children. And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; Yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.**

For whom did Moses pray for enlightenment in verse 16? He wrote, “Let thy work appear unto thy servants.” He prayed for those who would submit to the Lord as God’s servants. Israel had rebelled and wandered. Moses prayed for those who would submit – that their eyes would be opened to God’s work. Exasperation and worry are the lot in life of those who cannot see the Lord’s work. But Moses prayed that God’s work would appear to His servants. And he prayed that the children of God’s servants would see God’s glory through their humble work. This is a wonderful Mother’s Day prayer as well.

c. Pray that God’s glorious beauty would be upon His servants. v.17

“**And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us!**” The root word translated “beauty” is found twenty-eight times in the Old Testament. It can be translated as “pleasantness, beauty, kindness or favor.”^{vi} For instance, the name of the Lord is pleasant and it is pleasant to sing praise to His name. (Psalms 135:3; 147:1). Psalms 27:4 speaks of the beauty of the Lord: “One *thing* have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.” By faith, we can behold the beauty of the Lord in His dwelling place. (Long before there was a temple in Jerusalem, David beheld the Lord’s beauty by faith.) And Moses prayed that this beauty would be “upon us.”

What is it that gives life beauty, when it seems so beastly? Some try to find beauty in a bottle of alcohol. At the beginning of the crisis, news reporters stood outside a bar in Illinois. When they told one of the patrons that the governor would be closing all of the bars at the end of the day, she was stunned. She pointed to a nearby liquor store and said that she was headed there to buy bottles. She said, “I’m not going through all of this sober.” For some, that is the only answer in a life that seems beastly and

meaningless. A report released this week by the Well Being Trust was horrifying. It indicates that, in this crisis, as many as 75,000 more Americans “will die from drug and alcohol misuse and suicide.”^{vii}

Is life worth living? The philosopher Albert Camus once wrote, ““There is only one really serious philosophical question, and that is suicide.”^{viii} Why would he write such a thing? It is because life is either worth living or it is not. One author wrote, “[Camus’] philosophy of the absurd has left us with a striking image of the human fate: Sisyphus endlessly pushing his rock up the mountain only to see it roll back down each time he gains the top.”^{ix} Isn’t that the way life feels sometimes? Isn’t it exasperating? Doesn’t it seem empty? Do we have answers to share with others? Yes, and our answers are here in Psalm 90. When you can see God’s glorious beauty, life is worth living.

We have been blessed to sing a hymn recently based on a poem written in 1773 entitled, “Light Shining in the Darkness.” The author said about his bouts of deep depression, “I was a stricken deer that left the herd.” In a private hospital he took up Bible reading and was converted to Christianity.”^x When this poem was included in a hymn book, the author included this handwritten note about his poem. “The Poet . . . was stricken with madness. [H]e sought a coach; drove to the Thames intending to drown himself, but the coachman passed the spot which had fixed upon and drove him home. Upon his recovery, he wrote the [illeg.] ‘God moves in a mysterious way.’”^{xi} We have been singing William Cowper’s hymn, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” but now we know more of what it meant to him. During a deeply depressing time, Cowper’s poem included the words, “Deep in unsearchable mines of never failing skill, He treasures up His bright designs and works His sovereign will.” Cowper went on to achieve literary success in the eyes of the world. “But perhaps Cowper’s most meaningful works were the hymns written during fits of despair. It is said that on his deathbed he exclaimed, “I am not shut out of heaven after all!”^{xii} Submitting himself to the Lord, Cowper found genuine meaning in his labors. The

beauty of the Lord is what makes life worth living. This is God's grace in the secret place. And we can do significant work. By crying out to the Lord we can throw our energies into meaningful labors that last.

Now put yourself in Moses' place. What had he seen that was beautiful? Each sunrise and sunset testified of the Lord's beauty, just as they do today. But perhaps he was thinking of the wonder of the Lord at the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-6). Or perhaps it was the terrifying beauty of God's deliverance when He parted and piled up the sparkling waters of the Red Sea for His people (Exodus 14:21-22). Where would he look in the wilderness to see the beauty of the Lord? Others could see the bare rock outcroppings in the wilderness. By faith, Moses could see the Lord's perfections. He wrote, "He is the Rock, His work is perfect: for all His ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is He" (Deuteronomy 32:4).

Moses might have been dwelling on the exquisite beauty of the Tabernacle with all its splendid furnishings (Exodus 25-27). Perhaps it was the kindness of the Lord in His abiding presence: the pillar of cloud to lead them by day, and the pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:21-22). This cloud would have risen from the Holy of holies to spread above them, like a giant tree. Truly, the Lord was their dwelling place and this was awesome and beautiful. But Moses undoubtedly was looking beyond what his eyes could see to behold the beauty of the Lord by faith.

Today we know that the Tabernacle and the cloud were merely a shadow of what was to come: God's coming to earth. In John 1:14, 16-17 we read about Jesus Christ, "**And the Word was made flesh, and dwelled among us, (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. . . . And of His fullness have all we received, and grace for grace. For the law was given by Moses, *but* grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.**" Now by faith we can look forward to the fulfillment of God's prophecy in Revelation 21:3, "**And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying,**

Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God."

The mercy seat^{xiii} at the center of the Tabernacle undoubtedly captured Moses' attention as he cried out for God's satisfying mercies (Psalm 90:13). He could see the great beauty of God's redemption. But Moses did more than behold the beauty of the Lord God. He prayed, **"let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us!"** Note the words "our God" and "upon us." What a personal, relational way to pray. Moses prayed for a transformation for his frustrated, exasperated people as they plodded through the wasteland. The beauty of the eternal God could be "upon them" and Moses prayed that it would be so. Today, so many of our mothers, with their shining faces (Ecclesiastes 8:1), help us see God's beauty.

Today we can see this beauty in passages such as 2 Corinthians 3:18: **"But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord."** We are praising the Lord as we sing the hymn ["Glory to Glory!"](#). We can see the beauty of the Gospel and its transforming effect upon us in [2 Corinthians 3:18-4:6](#).^{xiv}

According to [2 Corinthians 4:6-18](#),^{xv} this is why we do not faint. Yes, our bodies are perishing, but we have this treasure in the clay pots that we call "our bodies." Just trying to live for this earthen vessel misses the point of life. In fact, that approach is guaranteed to leave us groping for meaning – without form and void. But there is a beautiful wonder when God opens our eyes to the beauty of the Lord. **"For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ"** (2 Corinthians 4:6). At the Creation, God said, "Let there be light and there was light!" When God opens the heart of a sinner (Acts 16:14), He gives them the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Those who see the significance of Christ dying for their sins, and rising again the third day see this. They see the light of the knowledge of

the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. And the beauty of the Lord our God – the beauty of His redemption – is upon them. But it's fascinating what happens when someone trusts Christ.

Those who mix their faith with the promises of God (Hebrews 4:2), are radically transformed in another way: they become strangers and pilgrims in this world. **“These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of *them*, and embraced *them*, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country”** (Hebrews 11:13-14, 1 Peter 2:11). As strangers and pilgrims in the wilderness, the Israelites were seeking a country: the Promised Land. As pilgrims and strangers in this world, Christians are seeking a country: heaven with our Lord. Today, we can pray with Moses: “let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us!” This is all part of crying out to see the Lord's glory on display.

This brings us to the fifth urgent cry from Moses. It's also in verse 17, and it's repeated for emphasis. “. . . and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; Yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.”

5. Cry out to the Lord to establish the work of His servants. 17

Do you ever wonder if you are accomplishing anything? This world can leave you feeling hollow, irritated and worthless. Is there a way to end this feeling of emptiness? The picture in Psalm 90:5-6 is worth a thousand words. Under the curse of sin and death, humanity is like withering grass. How do you overcome this empty frustration? Moses' example gives us the answer: pray! What did Moses pray during those four decades of wilderness wanderings? “Establish Thou the work of our hands upon us, yes the work of our hands, establish Thou it.” This is a direct assault on those feelings of empty exasperation.

This is a prayer for strangers and pilgrims to pray. But let's put this to the test: Did God establish the work of Moses' hands? During their time in the wilderness, the Lord used Moses to write the first five

books of the Bible. It would be hard to overestimate the significance of Genesis through Deuteronomy. These are foundational for everything else written in the Scriptures. God established the work of Moses' hands. But you don't have to be Moses to find meaning. Every one of us has been designed by God to fulfill specific tasks to glorify Him. "Work" at its most basic level is simply creating order out of disorder. When you write, you use the letters of the alphabet to form words. When you do the laundry, you take a hamper of random clothing and make it orderly when you wash it, fold it and put it away. When you do your taxes, you take random information and place it in forms and logical statements. Watch this work happen the next time you do the dishes – disorder become orderly. When you cook, you use random ingredients to make delicious, nutritious meals. And you can say, "Whether therefore you eat or drink or whatsoever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). And Moses prayed, "Establish the work of our hands upon us." In other words, by crying out to the Lord, he prayed that they could throw their energies into meaningful labors that last.

This is a far cry from "God helps those that help themselves." God caused His work to appear to His prayerful servant, Moses, and God established the work of Moses' hands. Notice that connection: it is God's work, God's people put their hands to that work, and God establishes the works of their hands. Submissive servants see the work of God and set their hands to it in such a way that their children see God's glory. When God's humble servants obeyed Him, He promised to bless them (Deuteronomy 14:29). This is meaningful work that lasts – quite the opposite of withering grass.

Earlier in the message, we saw how the Gospel gives the blessing of God's beauty to God's people. How can we be sure that, as believers, we are not living fruitless, empty lives? The Apostle Paul gave us careful instruction about this in Philippians 2:14-16. Get rid of murmuring and disputing (yes, even during times of trouble). Shine as lights in the midst of a crooked and perverse world. And to avoid emptiness (and leaving the Christian leaders around you feeling empty) **"Holding forth the word of life;**

that I may rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain, neither labored in vain.” It’s

important that we keep holding forth with the light of the Gospel. God will not forget your labor of love (Hebrews 6:10). He will establish the works of your hands and reward you.

Surely Mary Ball must have wondered about these things. This dear widow would frequently walk to a rock outcropping on her property to cry out to the Lord. Her husband had died years before, and now she was raising six children alone. But she prayed and God established the work of her hands. So powerful was the effect of her prayers, that today a plaque has been placed on that rock outcropping. This marker is in Fredericksburg, Virginia near the intersection of Washington Avenue and Pitt Street. Because you see, Mary Ball Washington’s oldest son, George, led a ragtag army to defeat the greatest superpower in the world at that time. George Washington’s father passed away when he was only 11 years of age. But after his mother’s passing, George would write, “, "The honorable mention which is made of my reverend Mother; by whose Maternal hand (early deprived by a Father) I was led from Childhood."^{vi} The marker in her honor reads, “Meditation Rock, Here Mary Ball Washington prayed for the safety of her son and country during the dark days of the Revolution.”^{vii} After George Washington completed two terms as President of the United States, he returned to his plantation home to work as a farmer. “King George III, when told that Washington had surrendered power, at the peak of his powers . . . remarked if true, "Washington will be regarded as the greatest man in the world."^{viii} And the hand that rocked that cradle led to the formation of a truly great country in this world.

Thomas Ken was a bold pastor during the late 1600’s in England. So bold was he that when his adulterous king asked Ken to provide lodging for the king’s mistress, Ken refused. The king admired courage, and for that boldness later rewarded Thomas Ken with the leadership of churches in that region. But you know Thomas Ken for words that he wrote in his evening and midnight hymns.^{ix} And

these words, that we now refer to as “The Doxology” are helpful to us. They help us to see that by crying out to the Lord we can throw our energies into meaningful labors that last.

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;

Praise Him, all creatures here below;

Praise Him above, ye heav'nly host;

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Pastor Gordon Dickson, Calvary Baptist Church, Findlay, Ohio, May 10, 2020

ⁱ Trouble on the Fruited Plain, parts 1 and 2 (Numbers 13-14) accessed at

<https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermons.asp?keyword=trouble+on+the+fruited+plain>

ⁱⁱ Anger Danger, Numbers 20:1-13 accessed at <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=92117918296>

ⁱⁱⁱ “Most frequently [the Hebrew word {ma’own}] designates the Lord’s dwelling place, i.e. heaven (always qualified with the word “holy”) and the temple (Ps 26:8). Finally it portrays the Lord as a refuge for his people (Ps 71:3; 90:1; 91:9).” Carl Schultz, “1581 [הוּוּ](#),” ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 654.

^{iv} Pastor Rodney King and I have enjoyed working together to accurately convey the truth of Psalms 90 and 91. Audio:

<https://www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?currSection=sermonstopic&keyword=Psalm+90+%26+91&keyworddesc=Psalm+90+%26+91&seriesOnly=true&sourceid=calvaryfindlay> YouTube video:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLA0vhnMTrI7QxINkiCRdFd5KAIJ17KKZl>

^v Pastor Rod’s message video with graphics is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_60X8MgEzc

^{vi} Marvin R. Wilson, “1384 [וַיַּו](#),” ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 585.

^{vii} The COVID Pandemic Could Lead to 75,000 Additional Deaths from Alcohol and Drug Misuse and Suicide. Well Being Trust & Robert Graham Center Analysis, Projected Deaths of Despair during COVID-19 accessed at <https://wellbeingtrust.org/areas-of-focus/policy-and-advocacy/reports/projected-deaths-of-despair-during-covid-19/>

^{viii} Albert Camus, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, citing Camus’ work “The Myth of Sisyphus (MS,3) accessed at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/camus/>

^{ix} Ibid.

^x E.B. Batson, “[Cowper, William](#),” ed. J.D. Douglas and Philip W. Comfort, *Who’s Who in Christian History* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992), 178.

^{xi} Elizabeth Gettins, Rare Book of the Month: A Man Driven by ‘Amazing Grace,’ Library of Congress blog Accessed at <https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2017/08/rare-book-of-the-month-a-man-driven-by-amazing-grace/>

^{xii} Vinita Hampton Wright, “[The Gallery—Hymn Writers’ Hall of Fame](#),” *Christian History Magazine-Issue 31: The Golden Age of Hymns* (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1991).

^{xiii} The Mercy Seat was a “Gold slab placed on top of the ark of the covenant with cherubim attached to it on either end, termed the mercy seat in many English versions of the Bible (cf. Ex 25:17–22). The Hebrew word for which “mercy seat” is the translation is technically best rendered as “propitiatory,” a term denoting the removal of wrath by the offering of a gift. The significance of this designation is found in the ceremony performed on the Day of Atonement, held once a year, when blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat to make atonement for the sins of the people of Israel (Lv 16). Because of the importance of this covering on the ark and the ceremony associated with it, the Holy of Holies in which the ark was housed in the temple is termed the “room for the mercy seat” in 1 Chronicles 28:11.” Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “[Mercy Seat](#),” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1441.

^{xiv} Audio sermon: From Glory to Glory <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=17191252255442>

^{xv} Audio sermon: To the Glory of God <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=17191252255442>

^{xvi} Craig Shirley, “Why Many Mothers are Martha Ball Washington” Newsmax, May 6, 2020 accessed at <https://www.newsmax.com/t/newsmax/article/966350/310>

^{xvii} Meditation Rock, Historical Marker Database, accessed at <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=9194>

^{xviii} Craig Shirley, op.cit.

^{xix} Thomas Ken, Hymnary, accessed at https://hymnary.org/person/Ken_Thomas