

In the Lord your labour is not in Vain

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[0 : 00] Verse 58. The apostle says, Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.

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Well, we come to a new year, and I'm sure in some things you probably are planning something new for the new year.

Perhaps some changes, some new resolves, some hope of progress in the period that lies ahead. Perhaps that's not the way you think at a new year. I suppose it's the way that I tend to think. I wonder and plan what this year is going to hold to some extent.

[1 : 32] And there's some things, when we do our planning, and when we do our thinking, and when we do our hoping, there's some things that need to change about ourselves and about what's around us.

Some things need to change. And there's some things that must not change. And that's the emphasis that the Apostle brings at the end of this chapter.

He's begun this argument in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, and it really is, although it's long, it is one long argument.

It's all one point that he's making, but he starts off at the very beginning, saying, now, I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.

So he's got this word, you stand in this gospel, hold fast. And then, he talks about the resurrection in between, and he gives arguments for why we must believe in the resurrection, why we must hope in it, but then he comes back to it at the end.

[2 : 48] Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord, or, sorry, knowing that in the Lord your labor, is not in vain.

Things change. My elder, or one of, well, we had one elder in my congregation, and he actually died around this time last year, which was a big upheaval for our congregation, unexpected.

But he used to say, if you want a white post to stay white, you've got to keep painting it. You know, sometimes, in order to keep things the same, you've got to keep reforming them.

You've got to keep going back to what they were at the beginning, and had some kind of change.

Our church is changing. The world around us is changing.

For your congregation, you've had changes in the previous year, and perhaps you planned changes in the year that lies ahead. In Scripture, in the important things of Scripture, change is talked about.

[4 : 09] When the gospel comes to sinners, it always tells them they must change. They must repent. They must receive the gospel. And, when it comes to believers, it's interesting that the repeated emphasis in Scripture in the New Testament is, don't change.

Now that you have received the gospel, hold it. Hold fast. Don't change. Don't be moved. The world and the devil, and perhaps our own lusts, will want to move us.

And, we can change imperceptibly. We can be carried along with something. And the apostles come back often to this emphasis.

Don't change in the main things. In the main things. Please don't misunderstand me. There's loads of little things, insignificant things in one way that have to change.

Practicalities, they have to change. They have to get worked out. But in the important things, we have this exhortation from the Lord, from the apostle, by the word of the Lord.

[5 : 31] Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.

Well, let me consider with you this verse. And, I am kind of doing it under three headings, as is often the case. I want to look with you, first of all, at this exhortation to be steadfast and immovable.

There's possibly some distinction, some significant distinction between steadfast and immovable. I haven't quite perceived it, so I'm just going to take them really as the same thing.

Both of them are saying, don't move, just stand. And, and, then I want to look with you at this second exhortation, which is, that we should abound in the work of the Lord.

Always abounding in the work of the Lord. And then he gives a, a word of comfort, when he says, know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.

[6 : 38] So that's the three areas that I want to look at with you. steadfast and immovable. My dear brothers, be steadfast and immovable.

He is particularly talking about the doctrine of the resurrection here. Well, he's telling them to stand in all their doctrines, in the whole gospel that came to him, the way that they heard it, the way that they believed it, the gospel that changed their lives.

But particularly, the subject under debate at that time was the resurrection. And in that one, he's saying, be steadfast, be immovable.

He is implying that there's, there's those that want to move you. There's a temptation to shift your ground. One of the doctrines that was very unpopular in the days of the apostles, and if you have any interest in the early church fathers or ever going back and reading some of their writings in the first two or three centuries, it's interesting that the debate that they took up most often against the pagans, against the people that were around them, was about the resurrection.

They were always standing on the resurrection. Because the Greek philosophy of the day, they didn't mind if you talked about sin.

[8 : 18] They didn't mind if you talked about heaven or hell. They didn't mind that. They were perfectly at ease with that kind of thing. People in our day don't really like the talk of hell, but they didn't mind it.

The thing that they would not agree with that was absurd to them was the resurrection. That there was going to be some physical coming back to life.

They were intelligent, scientific sort of people and they said that's impossible. That's absurd and what's the point in it anyway? Doesn't the soul just go to heaven and stay there?

Why do you need a resurrection? That's ridiculous. That's the sort of thing that they said.

Remember when the apostle Paul preached in the Ariok, he preached on Mars Hill to the Athenians and they listened to him so far.

They listened to him and all the things that he said. You can read about it in Acts chapter 17. But then when he told them about the resurrection of the dead, then they mocked him.

[9 : 27] They were used to listening to all sorts of ideas about the resurrection. That was a bridge too far and they mocked him. Well, Corinth had a very similar sort of culture to Athens.

It had a lot of philosophy and oratory and all sorts of advanced forms of thought and education. And here we find the Corinthians from within their own midst.

Some people are bowing to this pressure and others saying, no, we don't really need to believe in a resurrection. That's not the most important thing. You can just imagine the way that they were saying.

They would be saying, well, we believe in that Christ died for sins. We believe in forgiveness of sins. We believe in life everlasting. They would have kept all sorts of doctrines, but they say, but we don't believe in the resurrection.

It's not necessary. We'll make an insignificant point that we can disagree about. We'll agree to disagree. And the apostle says, this is the gospel.

[10 : 39] Don't be moved. Don't let the pressures around you move you what is external or what is internal. We find this emphasis in quite a number of other places in scripture.

I don't want to proliferate too many references to other texts, but it might be helpful just for me to highlight a few.

In Philippians, the apostle says, and it's very similar, he says, my beloved brethren, whom I love and long for, my joy and my crown.

It's quite similar to the way he begins this, therefore my beloved brothers. But he says this in the Philippians, my beloved brethren, whom I love and long for, my joy and my crown. Stand firm then in the Lord.

And to the Colossians, similarly he says, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of gospel that you heard.

[11 : 46] And 1 Peter, chapter 5, he talks about resisting the devil. Resist the devil. Firm in your faith. Stay steadfast in your faith. Not moving, because the devil wants to move you.

And in the book of Revelation, interestingly, some of these churches that are addressed at the beginning, they're commended for just standing. And the people in Thyatira, who are in a wicked church, a church that really has shifted, but there's some people that haven't, and the Spirit says to them, just, I'll lay on you no other burden, just hold fast what you have, just you stand steadfast. Well, that's the emphasis here, and that's the word that comes to us. I'm sure that if one of the apostles could address us and write an epistle to us today, it would include a verse a bit like this. They would see, they would perceive where it is that we are most likely to be moving, and they would address us about it, and they would appeal to us, stand firm, brothers.

We love you, we want you to do well, so stand firm. It's sort of military language. One of the, well, there's a movie that sometimes comes on TV, and you might have seen it, I don't know which it normally comes, or often comes on around this time of year, it's called Zulu.

[13 : 19] And it's, well, it's a famous battle that took place at a place called Rourke's Drift in 1879. And it's one of the most famous British battles, because 150 British soldiers just stood firm against 4,000 Zulu warriors.

150 against 4,000. And they just held their ground and they got so many Victorian crosses as a result of it. Do you know, there's something like that that the Lord calls us to.

The world wants you to change. The world doesn't like our particular emphases. I think particularly the world doesn't like us talking about sin.

And the world doesn't like us talking about hell. And the world doesn't like us talking about God creating the world. And the world doesn't like us talking about what we would call morality.

About marriage the way it's intended. The world doesn't like us talking about that. That we're against homosexuality. Why?

[14 : 35] Is it significant? Is it something we can just debate about? No. It's about repentance. repentance. We call people to change, to repent.

And in all these things we need to just hold ground. The world is against us but don't move beloved brothers.

Well the second thing he says is always abounding in the work of the Lord. This is an exhortation to us today.

Yes we have to stand fast in the faith as we have it and be immovable. And it's not just enough just to stand on your doctrine because God hasn't just saved us so that we stand on doctrine.

He's saved us so that we are living beings going about his work in this world. He has prepared good works in advance for us to do. He wants you to bear fruit.

[15 : 41] And so the apostle says be always abounding in the work of the Lord. Let's consider this because this is an exhortation to us as well.

What is it? What does it mean to be abounding in the work of the Lord? If I just said it to you, you know, this year, go out into this year intending to be abounding in the work of the Lord?

Well, what would you think? I think for many Christians, and I don't know if that would be the case here, but for many Christians, I think they instinctively think, well, the work of the Lord is to get people to come to church.

I've noticed that sometimes when we talk about bearing fruit, the Bible talks about bearing fruit, and I've often had discussions with people and they think bearing fruit means making converts.

That's just the way that they've put on these glasses and that's how they filter the word of God, and they say, bearing fruit, doesn't that mean making converts? And actually, interestingly, if you go and look at it, bearing fruit never means making converts.

[16 : 56] If the Lord enables you to speak a word in season to someone, if the Lord enables you to lead someone to Christ, praise be the Lord, it's what we long for, please don't misunderstand me.

But actually that's not the work of the Lord that is specifically given. Although it seems to me that in our churches, evangelicalism generally, that we seem to have brought in this emphasis.

It's more important to try to get people in than to actually do what the Bible calls the work of the Lord.

This isn't what the apostle had in mind at all when he wrote to the Corinthians and when he told them to be abounding in the work of the Lord. He was wanting them to stand.

He was wanting them to hold the truth. He was not wanting them to water it down as the temptation was so that they could get the other Corinthians to come into their churches.

[18 : 01] That was not what his emphasis was. You know what it says about what he said about them? In verse 19.

What was it like to be a Corinthian Christian at that time? Well, he says, if in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

What does that tell you about the kind of life that they lived? The struggles that they engaged in? Here was a little group of people, well maybe they were quite big, but outnumbered by the world around them of course, and if they just got on with their Christian living, do you know, from the world's point of view, they were of all people to be most pitied, because they didn't engage in all the fun that the world was doing, or some of it anyway, they didn't benefit from what the world would say were all the benefits of life.

Actually, they were ostracised. They looked ridiculous, because they weren't as philosophical as was a people of that day elevated philosophy, they weren't like that they were a sort of absurd little group that didn't quite fit in of all men to be most pitied.

What does the apostle mean when he says abounding in the work of the Lord? Oh, we can take all the epistles and we can look at it and we can look at their emphases prophecies and really what he's saying to them is what the Bible says to us about our work is it's personal holiness, it's purity in our lives and in our worship, in our conduct, it's knowing the truth and holding the truth, it's keeping ourselves unspotted from the world, that's how James puts it, he says this is true religion and undefiled before the father, help orphans and widows in their distress, that's part of your work of the Lord as well, doing good where you can, for the Lord's sake, not so you can boast about it, but for the Lord's sake, because it's right, because the

[20 : 37] Lord desires what's good and also keeping yourself unspotted from the world, now you go and read through the epistles, I challenge you to read through the epistles and look for the emphases, can you read in any epistle and find an emphases that says your work is to get people into church, I challenge you to look, you won't find it, the emphases in all the epistles is personal, holiness, godliness, purity, worship, that's our work, that's our labour, that's what we are to abound in, and we do long for people to come into church, you know sometimes in the way that the, in the things the scripture commands us to do, there's something counter intuitive, you know you can't convert anyone, god converts people, you can pray for them to be converted, you long for them to be converted, how we long that there would be a lot less empty pews, maybe this time next year, that would be wonderful, we long for it, we pray for it, may the lord change our land, but you know in the scriptures, we actually find that if we abound in the work of the lord, if we actually put that particular emphasis aside, and we get on with the work of holiness, and godliness, that the lord actually uses that to bring people to himself, remember what

Peter says to wives who are married to unbelieving husbands, wives, how do you know that you won't win your husband, and he says this is how to do it, without a word, by respectful and pure conduct, he holds out a little bit of hope to believing wives, married to unbelieving husbands, if you just conduct yourself respectfully, purely, your husband is going to see that in you, and you can win him without a word, Peter also says about, well he sort of applies that more widely in the same chapter, it's 1 Peter chapter 3, he applies it more widely, he talks about people, well in chapter 4 he talks about people will be surprised when you don't just rush with them into all the things that they're doing, if you just stand apart because you want to be holy, people are going to notice it, and some of them are going to come to you and say, why do you do that, why don't you do the things that we do, when I was in university, well before

I went to university I had been in the army for a year, and before that I'd been in a boarding school for two years, I'd kind of been away from the family home and I did try to live a godly life, but I can tell you it was a pretty weak period in my life spiritually, and when I went to university I said to myself, right, I am just going to, I must get back to some spiritual strength, I must stand firm and all these things were not stood firm as I should, and one of the things that was going to be an absolute non-negotiable for me was church on the Lord's Day, the Lord's Day was going to be kept holy, I

was not going to study on the Lord's Day, I was going to worship on the Lord's Day, I was not going to play sport on the Lord's Day, for the first year in university I didn't play football with the football team because they trained on Sunday, and they played games on Sunday, and in my second year some people came to me and said, because we played some football with them at other times, they said, you're quite good, you should go on the football team, and I said, no, I worship on Sunday, I go to church on Sunday, I don't play sport on Sunday, well, the next thing I heard, they had spoken to the guy who was the coach at that point, and said, look, there's this guy, he might come on the football team, but he's not going to play on Sunday, is there any way you can work this out?

And without me asking for it, they changed the football, they, from that point onwards, for the next three years I was there, they never played a match on Sunday, they never trained on Sunday, they reorganized any matches that would have come up, so that it would be on a different day.

[25 : 35] Now I didn't go out to try to convert any of them, but some of them asked me about it, and some of them were converted, there was one guy who was converted, I didn't have anything to do with it, he just looked and said, yeah, it's different, and there were some people that were interested, and sadly never really went much further, it was counterintuitive, I never set out that I would even attempt to convert anyone on the football team, they bent over backwards for me, because they looked and they said, he's different, that's the sort of counterintuitiveness that we find here, that's why we are to be abounding in God's work, and God will touch people's hearts with that, your holiness and your firmness will have an effect by God's grace on one or two, will, but it will.

Finally, he says, and here's a, here's a comfort, here's a word of comfort after these exhortations, he says, founding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord, your labour is not in vain. we can go back earlier in the chapter, back to verse 12, and, well, down to 14, I'll read again at verse 14, because he says, if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain, everything you do has been pointless, so now he comes to them and says, know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord, and he's again, particularly talking about this in terms of the resurrection, in terms of the age that is to come, that their labour would not be, that they would know that it's not in vain.

There's a passage in Isaiah, which I love, there's so many passages in Isaiah that we love, there's one that I love, particularly Isaiah chapter 49, verse 3 and 4, this is speaking about Christ prophetically, who is the servant of the Lord, it says, he said to me, you are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified, but I said, so here the prophet speaks about Christ who is the servant, but then he puts words in Christ's lips, and the response is, but I said, I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing, and vanity, yet, surely my right is with the Lord, and my recompense with my God, and the prophet goes on, and God says, it's too small a thing that I will give you the land of Israel, verse 6, it's too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to bring them back the preserved of Israel, that's too small a thing, I will make you as a light for the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth, I love that verse, and what it means in the New Testament, because it is speaking about Christ, and do you know that if you look at Christ's ministry, nobody laboured like Christ laboured, nobody did, for three and a half years, what he accomplished, is astonishing, he was at the end of his energy so often, he was sleeping in the boat as they went from here to there, he was staying up all night, he went round every single village of Israel, he planned it out, he sent his disciples ahead, he trained them, he laboured with them, he talked to the crowds, he exhausted himself, himself, and at the end of his ministry, when he was going to be crucified, what did he have to show for it?

[30 : 00] Really, if it was, if we judged our Lord's ministry by what we would call earthly success in this, you know, for a minister in this life, we would say he was a failure, I say that reverently, he wasn't, but what did he have to show for it?

He didn't have many followers, they hadn't made him king, he hadn't won Israel to himself, and you can see why prophetically, it was as if he said, I had spent my strength for nothing and vanity, yet, my reward is with the Lord, he trusted in God, that it was not in vain, it looked like it was, but it wasn't, what did God give him?

The Lord said, you've laboured within the bounds of Israel, your whole ministry, you've been in this little patch of earth, but it's too small that I'll give you Israel, I'm going to give you the whole world, that's what Christ obtained, God gave him the whole world as his reward, that's a great example of labour not being in vain in the Lord, the Lord is no man's debtor, you labour for him, he will give you

a reward, a great reward, and maybe, maybe to really have it, it will wait for that resurrection, for that day when Christ comes, that's what we long for, because he brings with him his reward, maybe you won't see it on this side of glory, but know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord, whatever you do, whatever stand you make, whatever ostracisation you face, whatever sacrifice you make for the Lord, know this, your labour is not in vain in the

Lord, the apostle addresses them, as I'm sure he would address us, and as the Lord is addressing us in these verses, my beloved brothers, why are these things being said to you?

Because God loves you, and he wants you to do great things in your life, now, and he wants to reward you, he wants you to be saved, he wants you to be steadfast, he wants you to have a reward awaiting you, so, my beloved brothers, be steadfast and movable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labour is not in vain in the Lord, well may the Lord bless these things to us.

[32 : 36] Amen. Amen. Amen.