

I Have Labored In Vain

David Wilkerson:

Would it shock you to know that Jesus experienced the feeling of having accomplished little?

In Isaiah 49:4 we read these words: “Then I said, I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nought, and in vain....” Note that these are not the words of Isaiah, who was called by God at a mature age. No, they are Christ’s own words, spoken by One “called...from the womb; from the body of my mother...The Lord...formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob again to him, (and to gather Israel)” (49:1, 5).

When I came upon this passage, one that I’d read many times before, my heart was in wonder. I could hardly believe what I was reading. Jesus’ words here about “laboring in vain” were a response to the Father who had just declared, “Thou art my servant...in whom I will be glorified” (49:3). We read Jesus’ surprising response in the next verse: “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nought” (49:4).

After reading this, I stood to my feet in my study and said, “How wonderful. I can hardly believe that Christ was this vulnerable, confessing to the Father that he was experiencing what we humans face. In his humanity, he tasted the same discouragement, the same despondency, the same woundedness. He was having the same thoughts I’ve had about my own life: ‘This isn’t what I perceived was promised. I wasted my strength. It has all been in vain.’”

Reading those words made me love Jesus all the more. I realized Hebrews 4:15 is not just a cliché: our Savior truly is touched with the feelings of our infirmities, and was tempted in all ways as we are, yet without sin. He’d known this very same temptation from Satan, hearing the same accusing voice: “Your mission is not accomplished. Your life has been a failure. You’ve got nothing to show for all your labors.”

Christ came into the world to fulfill the will of God by reviving Israel. And he did just as he was commanded. But Israel rejected him: “He came unto his own, and his own received him not” (John 1:11).

Why would Jesus, or any man or woman of God, speak such despairing words as these: “I have labored in vain”? How could the Son of God make such a statement? And why have generations of faithful believers been reduced to such despondent words? It is all the result of measuring little results against high expectations.

You may think, “This message sounds like it applies just to ministers, or to those called to do some great work for God. I can see it being meant for missionaries or the Bible prophets. But what does it have to do with me?” The truth is, we’re all called to one grand, common purpose, and to one ministry: that is, to be like Jesus. We are called to grow in his likeness, to be changed into his express image.