

“Labor Gain”

As we gather for worship on this Labor Day weekend let us consider some of the things the Bible says about labor.

- **“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you...by the sweat of your brow you will eat your food”** (Genesis 3:17-19). One of the long lasting consequences of Adam and Eve’s sin for future generations, like us, is that labor or work is going to be hard and exhausting.
- **“If a man will not work he shall not eat”** (2 Thessalonians 3:10). God provides for our earthly needs and gives our lives purpose through labor.
- **“...whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”** (Matthew 25:40). As we labor for the good of our fellow man God is pleased.
- **“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men”** (Colossians 3:23).
- **“Therefore,...stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain”** (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Those Scripture verses remind us that while labor can be hard and challenging, there is much to be gained from our labor. Yet even though that is true, our labor often seems like a pain, a burden, rather than a blessing. The people of Israel living in the 400’s B.C. were feeling that way. Listen to Malachi 3:14-18.

¹⁴ **“You have said, ‘It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty?’ ¹⁵ But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape.”**

¹⁶ **Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name.**

¹⁷ **“They will be mine,” says the LORD Almighty, “in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him. ¹⁸ And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.**

This week I would encourage you to read through the book of Malachi. It's only four chapters long and it's a good reminder that our modern problems are not so modern. The things we see happening in our world, in our country, and in our churches today were also happening in the world, in Israel, and in the Jewish church in 400 B.C. The book of Malachi reads like a conversation that God is having with weary Christians. Weary Christians in Israel were saying this to God 2400 years ago: **"You have said, 'It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty?' ¹⁵ But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape"** (vs. 14-15). Some in Israel might have literally been saying that out loud, but I suspect that many weary Christians were only thinking that and it showed in the way they lived their lives. If you read through the book of Malachi you will see how they showed that. Offerings to support Gospel ministry that weren't exactly generous and flowing from a heart that says, "God, you are my first priority and I am thankful for all of your blessings." Christians, including public ministers, who were weary of standing up for, proclaiming, and living the truth of all of God's Word because they were having doubts that doing that is worth the persecution and sacrifice involved. Christians who were frustrated with what is going on in the world and in their own country as the glory days seemed to be gone and they were wondering why God wasn't stepping in to do anything about it. And all of this was leading the Christians in Israel to either walk away from the Christian faith altogether, or become lukewarm in their Christianity as they tried to keep one foot practicing Christianity while the other foot was blending in with the values of the unbelieving world. Does any of that sound very 2020? Yes, Solomon was absolutely right when God inspired him to say 2900 years ago, **"What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun"** (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

If we are honest with ourselves, each of us has to admit that we aren't all that different from those weary Christians in Israel 2400 years ago. And as we consider the Scripture passages I opened this sermon lesson with we could add to the above list. On the one hand we are thankful for our jobs whether that is our paid employment, school, extracurricular activities like sports or music or dance, work around our homes, and caring for our family, but yet at times we complain about such labor because it can be hard and challenging. We complain about those who refuse to work and are looking for the government to bail them out and yet how often do we fail to give our best effort in our labors and fail to give the example that we are doing all things to glorify God. We see people in this world that have physical and spiritual needs, but we are too focused on ourselves to help them. How often do we allow ourselves to become discouraged, to think that our Gospel ministry work is a waste of time, to just go through the motions of Gospel ministry work and to decrease our involvement because we aren't seeing the visible results we were hoping for or its someone else's turn to step up? On this weekend that we celebrate God's gift of labor and what a gain it is for our lives, how often don't we think, speak, and act like labor is a pain and a burden, not a blessing?

So what is the solution to us more often seeing labor as a gain and not a pain? There is

no miracle cure during our earthly lives for this because Genesis 3 makes it clear that one of the consequences of sin being present in this world is that labor is going to be challenging and not always completely satisfying. However, there is hope in our battle against this affliction and part of the solution is seeing this as a daily battle in our lives as we commit ourselves to embracing labor as a gain and fighting against the thought that it is a pain. That's what some in Israel did 2400 years ago. **"Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name" (vs. 16).** This is the Christian life. Christians talking and encouraging each other in the Christian faith. God is listening. Part of this dialogue between Christians and between Christians and God is recognizing our sins and being repentant. That is what is going on in vs. 16. And if we want to think, speak, and act more often like labor is a gain and not a pain then we need to repent of the many times we have failed in this regard. And God notes our repentance in his scroll of remembrance and he comforts us with these words. **"They will be mine," says the LORD Almighty, "in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him" (vs. 17).** Right after these verses Malachi goes on to talk about Judgment Day. Be comforted that on the day God judges all people to Heaven or Hell for eternity that he is going to judge you and me to Heaven. Why? **"They are mine...my treasured possession."** Why would he look at sinners like us in that way? **I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him."** Did you notice the irony of that verse? God the Father did not spare his own son, Jesus, from experiencing the punishment of Hell and death, but he is willing to spare you and me. God the Father placed the full responsibility for your sins and mine on Jesus and punished him instead of us. He did that because he wanted to have compassion on us. He did that so that we might know that we belong to him and that he treasures us. He did that so that on Judgment Day we can experience the awesome feeling of being spared the eternal punishment of Hell that we have rightly earned in order to spend eternity enjoying the pleasures of Heaven.

Never forget that. Create your own mental scroll of remembrance and read it every day. You, repentant sinner, are loved by God. You belong to him and are treasured by him for eternity. Because of Jesus labor on your behalf this is true. Remember that every day and see yourself looking at God's gift of labor as just that, a gift and a gain in your life. And also look forward to these gains. **"And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not" (vs. 18).** While we won't always see this distinction on earth, we will on Judgment Day and for eternity. And finally, **"Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" (Matthew 25:23).**