

# LABORS OF THE ANCIENTS

## A SERMON

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“I sent you to reap that whereon you bestowed no labor; other men labored, and you are entered into their labors.” John 4:38

THESE words, as the connection shows, must be understood spiritually; because in a preceding verse you have these words, “He that reaps receives wages,” that is, spiritual wages, spiritual reward, “and gathers fruit unto life eternal: that both he that sows and he that reaps may rejoice together. And herein is that saying true, “One sows, and another reaps. I sent you to reap that whereon you bestowed no labor: other men labored, and you are entered into their labors.” This did not imply that the disciples themselves also would not have to labor, but rather, fairly implies that they were furnished with such a good store to begin with, that they might go on with good spirit and good heart to labor, because they were furnished, with such, a good store with which to go on. And if this was true, which of course it was, of the disciples, with how much more force will the words apply to us, that we are sent to reap that whereon we have bestowed no labor! other men have labored, and we have entered into their labors. Of course, the other men here I take to have been the prophets, all the Old Testament prophets and saints; and, the disciples had the advantages of their labor; they could look over the Old Testament, and reap what the prophets had sown, and hereby they entered into their labors. And, we have not only the Old Testament, but we have what the Old Testament saints longed for, and that is the New Testament, Hence it is that, John the Baptist was the greatest of all the prophets, because he, could say what no other prophet could; no other prophet could use the Savior’s name sacrificially in the present tense, as did John the Baptist, Behold the Lamb of God, which takes away the sins of the world.” And then the least apostle, was greater in the gospel dispensation than John, because the apostles could, use the past tense; they could point, to the accomplishment of the work, they could point to the victory won, they, could point to the salvation wrought, and to the righteousness brought in. I shall therefore, notice the words of our text as they apply to us. I shall not divide the text in the usual way, but shall take up its spirit and import; and, in so doing, to show how we enter into the labors of those that are gone before us, the first thing shall be to show what their labors were. And I will take a two-

fold view of their labors, and then, if time permit, just show how we also, in following them, are to labor also.

First, then, they labored to bring forth God's truth, and to abide by it; and secondly, they have left us those examples which we are to follow; these are the fields in which we are to reap.

First, then, they labored to bring forth God's truth, and to abide by it. And hence you find in the first chapter of Peter a very beautiful representation of that truth which they labored to bring forth, and which they honestly, and to their eternal advantage, and to our eternal advantage also, abode by. I will first remind you here of the truths which the prophets brought forth, because there are two or three things connected with them very striking. The apostle Peter evidently gives a summary of those truths in the first paragraphs of the first chapter of his first epistle. The first is that of elective consecration to God. "Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ;" this is one truth they brought forward. And look at the beautiful connection, "Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ." Why, it seems here, then, that election is essential to consecration to God; it seems here that there is no real consecration to God until we receive the great truth of eternal election; it appears here that we have no right reception of Jesus Christ until we receive this great truth concerning him. For election does very mightily concern him, because the people are chosen in him. So that when the Holy Spirit brings this great truth into the soul, it cuts off, as all you that are Christians must perceive, not only all false confidences, but it cuts off all necessity for any false confidences, all confidences in the creature whatever, and you are led to see that the whole of it, from first to last, is by grace. Your enmity against God's order of things becomes slain; you fall in with that order, and are led to see that if everything be not settled in this way, you can have no hope of things being settled in your favor. And then mark another thing, "Through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience." So that election is to be obeyed, it is a truth that is to be obeyed; we are to bow to it, we are to submit to it, and to acknowledge that his choice prevented ours, to acknowledge that we have not chosen him, but that he himself has chosen us. And then, lest we should be led astray upon this matter, lest we should be led to look at election as being something apart from Jesus Christ, it goes on to say, "And sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ." This, of course, means that peace of mind which we realize with God by Jesus Christ. But if you take eternal election away, and make the salvation of your soul conditional, what peace can you have? You know what a poor creature you are, and you know how easily you are moved, and you know what a rebellious nature you have, and what a wicked, heart you have, and you know that in one moment your wicked heart may undo all your hope, may destroy your confidence, take you out of the hands of God the Father, if he held you conditionally; and out of the hands of Jesus Christ, if he held you conditionally; and out of the hands of the Holy Spirit, if he held you conditionally; but if he holds you absolutely, and Jesus Christ, God's dear Son, has met everything for you, never think of settling things with God in any other way. Now this is one truth, then, which the prophets labored to bring forth; and we range over the Holy Scriptures and we see this truth, we learn this truth, we love this truth, and as the apostle Peter presently informs us, rejoice in the same. Thus, then, they labored to bring forward the great truth of eternal election as being essential to our welfare, for who but the great God could inscribe the names of sinners in the Lamb's book of life? who but the great God could undertake to save us? If he undertook to save us, it was because he would do so; and what is that but his own sovereign good pleasure? As he said to his

disciples, "Fear not, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure," it is not any good in you, but "it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Then comes the abundant mercy of God the Father. See how beautifully these truths are placed. First, election gives us sanctification, obedience, and the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ. So if you took election away, then you would not have the Holy Spirit to sanctify you, to unite you to God, for "because you are sons he has sent forth his Spirit;" and if you took election away, then you never would have been a believer, for it was because you were ordained to eternal life that you are brought to believe; and if you took election away, then there would be no sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ, that blots out all your sins, and makes the Lord nothing to you but a God of love in all the perfections of his nature, and in all his dealings and purposes with you and concern in you. Then the apostle Peter steps on a little further, and he says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy has begotten us again unto a lively hope." Now you see election is placed in the right position; it is placed where it is needed; for if he had not chosen us, nothing could have been done for us. All originated in that; every spiritual blessing is according to that. Now just see where the apostle Peter places the mercy, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy has begotten us again." He came to us when we were dead in sin, when we were full of blindness, and enmity, and ungodliness, and everything infinitely repulsive to a holy, just, and blessed God; but he came to us there in his abundant mercy, "according to his abundant mercy." So, then, when you began to see your sinner-ship, it was, though at the time unknown to you, by the abundant mercy of God towards you; when you began to pray, it was by his abundant mercy towards you; when you began to see Jesus, it was by his abundant mercy towards you. And this abundant mercy brings us into a lively hope. And now just see how it places our way to the inheritance; "has begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled, and that fades not away." But, before he names the inheritance, see how beautifully he sets forth the way in which we are to come to that inheritance; "begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead;" and that resurrection of Jesus Christ is to carry us into the inheritance. But how is that to carry us into the inheritance? Why, because Jesus Christ in his death has put away all sin, past, present, and to come. God has so arranged matters that he has a justice which must be satisfied; and you, neither before you were called by grace, nor since you were called by grace, you have not satisfied that justice, nor done anything towards it. But Jesus Christ has; he has settled everything, he has answered entirely for you, and therefore, having answered entirely for you, your great privilege is to reap, to gather in this blessed truth, that Christ's resurrection was founded in the efficacy of his death; "brought again from the dead by the blood of the everlasting covenant." Here, then, is grace undertaking our cause, and here is mercy coming to us in our guilt and misery; here is an inheritance, and here is the resurrection of Christ as the way to that inheritance. It is not a conditional inheritance. Here is wheat ripe for the harvest; and he that reaps these blessed truths receives them into his faith, and love, and understanding, and abides by them; he does indeed receive wages, he does indeed get fruit unto life eternal, for these truths will last forever, these promises will live forever, these doctrines will live forever; and if my soul be identified with them, then truly I shall come again with rejoicing unbounded, unrestrained, and that forever, bringing my sheaves, these blessed truths, blessed promises, with me. But then mark another thing; see where he places the power of God. As though Peter should say, Now Satan will say, Well, it is true you are chosen through sanctification unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus, and there is abundant mercy, and a lively hope, and there is the resurrection as the way to it, and there is the inheritance; but now how about getting there? "reserved in heaven for

you.” There is the inheritance safe. Now let us ask the question, Is there any difference between the safety of the inheritance and the certainty of the people getting possession of it? There is the inheritance “reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” Now, then, if anyone be here that says, “Ah, such a doctrine as this will lead to carelessness;” if so, then you are a damned wretch, if you live and die with such a sentiment as that. Your own wicked heart may lead you to carelessness, but God’s truth will never lead to anything but that which is good; for I am sure, when these blessed truths are received in their order, and power, and glory, they will so endear the Lord, that you might as well tell me the more you love an object the more careless you will be about it. No, for “wherein you greatly rejoice.” You greatly rejoice in eternal election, you greatly rejoice in the sanctification of the Spirit, you greatly rejoice in obedience, in obeying the Lord; yes, his biddings, as the old divines said, are enabling, and often, before you are aware, in his service, your souls make you like the chariots of Ammi-nadib. In his abundant mercy, that has brought you from death to life, you greatly rejoice; in the resurrection of Christ, because that is the resurrection of all his people, you greatly rejoice; in the inheritance reserved for you, you greatly rejoice; and in that power that keeps you unto it you greatly rejoice.

Now Peter well knew the path of the heaven-born soul; he knew it was not all joy, and he then brings in the trials of the people of God, with a threefold qualification. “Though now,” he says, “for a season;” it is only for a season; never mind. Some of you have a cloud now, it will go off by-and-bye; very sadly now, it will go off by-and-bye; very much tried now, go off by-and-bye; very dissatisfied, and very unhappy, and very restless, it will go off by-and-bye; it is only for a season. Ah, says one, I am afraid it never will go off. Well, your fearing it will not hinder it. You know the disciples feared they should never see the Lord Jesus Christ again, they thought they had been deceived; but they did see him again, according as he had said, “I will see you again, and your hearts shall rejoice.” There is not a single trouble without a needs-be. “Though now for a season, if need be.” There is for all the people of God a needs-be. But suppose they bring the afflictions upon themselves. Well, suppose the Lord is their keeper, and foresaw they would do it. And suppose that John and Peter were both in the same hall, and suppose John had a relative among the priests, and suppose that priest took John into a part of the hall where no one could get at him to tempt him to deny the Savior; and suppose Peter, having no friends there, went in, and was in a part of the hall where he was tempted to deny the Savior, and did deny the Savior. Could not the Lord have prevented that? Is there not some degree of divine sovereignty in governing these matters? And when the Lord spoke of Peter’s denying him, what are his next words? “Let not your heart be troubled.” What, not if I do that, Lord? No; “you believe in God, believe also in me.” I will settle it for you; I will pray for you, that your faith does not fail. “Let not your heart be troubled.” There is a mysterious needs-be in the deep counsels of God, and by-and- bye, when God has made use of those mortifications which many of his people must undergo, he will turn the mortification into a consolation; he will turn the mortification into exultation, and the end shall prove that this sickness, or trouble, or affliction, or whatever it might be, was not unto death, but for your good, and for the glory of God. Thus, then, it is only for a season, and there is a needs-be. But then comes a third qualification; it is not for your destruction, but only for “the trial of your faith.” There is another reading of that passage, which I myself prefer, “That the *proof* of your faith, being more precious than of gold that perishes, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.” Now do not lose sight of the idea there if you can help it. The proof of your faith; that is, your faith proving to be real; that is

the apostle's idea. So, if you can hold fast the truth through reproaches, scandals, slanders, and when your brethren cast you off, and when your brethren sell you to the Ishmaelites, and when your brethren sell you into Egypt, and when your brethren turn against you, and think, "We have got rid of him at last; he is gone," it came to Joseph's turn at last. Now if your faith can hold fast the truth as it is in Jesus through it all, then that faith proves to be real. Now money in a temporal sense answers all things. The apostle's idea there is that gold, that which is purified and proved to be gold, will bring and command the comforts of this life, that is the idea there intended. Now transfer that idea to faith. If your faith proves to be real, it will bring you consolation, and bring you salvation, and eternal redemption, bring you everything. Faith is that true money that answers all things. So that if you have faith, if you have no money, you are a rich man; you are rich in faith, because all the promises belong to him that believes. God is the God of the man that believes. So, then, if you hold fast the truth, though persons may sink in your estimation (as many hyper parsons have sunk sixty degrees these last twelve months in my estimation, God knows whether they will ever rise again, I do not know), truth will rise higher and higher, and become dearer and dearer to your soul. Now that faith shall be "found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ;" at the threefold appearing of Jesus Christ; at his past appearing, wherein he has obtained eternal redemption; hold that fast, do not give up the perfection of his work; second, his present appearing in the gospel, as your way of walking with God; third, his future appearing at the end of time; unto them that look for him shall he then appear without sin unto salvation. If your faith be real, it will hold fast these blessed truths. Thus, these men labored to bring forth these truths, and we are sent to reap, to enter into their labors. Now the apostle Peter represents Christians as rejoicing before these trials, "wherein you greatly rejoice," and then he shows that they should rejoice after these trials; for he said of Christ, of this salvation, that is ready to be revealed in the last time, "Whom having not seen, you love; in whom, though now you see him not, yet believing, you rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory; receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls."

Now I come to their labors. I thought I would set forth the truths first, and show what blessed truths they are; I thought I would be clear upon this first part. Now in the next words we get at the spirit of the prophets and of course of the apostles; and may it be our lot to share more largely than ever in the spirit there indicated. Of which salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently." So, then, this eternal salvation, decisive and complete in all its parts, is that the prophets have inquired for and searched diligently. "Who prophesied of the grace" the same grace which had come to them, "that should come unto you." And so, it is. Now mark the object of their inquiry. I wish to be guided by the Lord in speaking, and more than ever do I desire to speak the words of truth and soberness; but I fear, friends, that in the day in which we live there are thousands that profess the name of the Savior that do not inquire and search diligently for such a salvation as this; for they throw election out, or, if they do not throw it out, they blend it with something that makes it as bad as throwing it out. And as to the certainty of eternal possession, that is another doctrine that is known in reality to none but those that feel their need of it. Now, then, the prophets inquired and searched diligently for this sure and eternal salvation. "Who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you;" not prophesied you should come unto the grace, but that grace should come unto you. And now mark again their earnestness. "Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow." You observe here they connect one thing with the other; they see that the death of Christ is inseparably connected with the eternal welfare of his people. "I

am the good shepherd; my sheep shall never perish.” Those two truths are put together; so, they were by the prophets. Now these, then, are the doctrines, the truths, that they labored to bring forth, have put upon record, and stood by; and he that receives these prophets thus in the name of a prophet shall receive their reward, the same reward; he that receives these righteous men in their testimonies shall receive the reward of righteous men; he that receives these in their testimonies receives Christ, and he that thus receives Christ receives God. Is it not a very remarkable thing, it strikes me so, that if the question were put, What is that particular order of things into which the angels are so fond of prying? what is that order of things in which they so delight? They are elect angels, they are holy angels, they are mighty angels, they are heavenly angels, they are immortal spirits; they are infinitely, without exception, and eternally happy. What is that particular, amidst the whole range of myriads of worlds, wonders of nature, and wonders of providence, what, above all others, is that order of things into which angels seek so earnestly to look? These very things we have been speaking of this morning. “Which things,” said the apostle Peter, “the angels desire to look into.” And the apostle said that the angels learn by these unfolding’s of the wisdom of God in the salvation of the church the manifold wisdom of God. This is one sample, then.

I may come now, hastily, to the examples set us. And I hardly know where to begin, hardly know which to choose of the examples. They have labored in a way of example. We know which chapter will present us in a very comprehensive form the example set us; and we are directed to the prophets as examples of suffering, of affliction, and of patience. Therefore, all I can do in this part is simply to remind you of the 11th of the Hebrews. Let us abide by the more excellent offering, as did Abel; let us abide by the same order of things as did Enoch; let us abide by the same grace as did Noah; let us abide by the same sworn covenant that Abraham did, and that Isaac did, and that Jacob did; let us abide by the same order that Moses did. Well, now, it is a very pleasing thing, if you reflect upon it, to think that you are brought to receive the same truths, and that you take their example, and that you abide precisely by the same things. Now a Wesleyan could not say that, not with truth. You, Wesleyans, whom I respect very much, because of the many excellences about you, and for your zeal, but you cannot with truth say that you abide by this order of things. Now you follow that out; the Lord help you to look at it; and if you have grace in your heart you will get a little more light in your head, and you will find out that you have not yet seen one half nor one quarter of the privileges of the Christian. You are running about now with the notion that you may be saved today and lost tomorrow; that God may love you today, and hate you tomorrow. No, no, no; there is no such thing as that in the new covenant. There were such things as that in old covenant temporal matters, but not in this new covenant, in which the apostle Paul says of those that have left us a good example, he says, “These all died in faith.” And they were reckoned dangerous sort of people in the estimation of some. I was thinking over this subject this morning, and I said, That is just me. What is just you? say you. Why, what the apostle said of those that died in faith. I like it uncommonly well. I am such a poor creature, I am glad there is a way for me to creep in; Christ is my hiding-place from the wind, covert from the storm, as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land. “These all died in faith.” What did they do? They saw “the promises,” so do I; “afar off,” so do I. I see the promises fulfilled in relation to the mediation of Christ, but I see them afar off as yet in the resurrection at the last day. “And were persuaded of them,” so am I; and embraced them,” so do I; “and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.” They confessed that this world was not their home; they confessed they had a better home that they were seeking, they had a better country they were looking forward to, so have I. “For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they

had been mindful of that country from where they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned,” So might I. “But now they desire a better country,” so do I; “that is, a heavenly; wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God.” We have not come to the worst yet; that is, what the Pharisee would reckon the worst. What is that, say you? If it had said that they saw the *precepts* afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and did the best they could with them, I should almost think that part of the Bible was not inspired; I should think some Pharisee had slipped that paragraph in. It is not said that God gave the covenant to Abraham by precept, but by promise. Well, you say, what have you to do with the precept, then? It depends what you mean. If you mean conditionality, my answer is, the precept was given to Christ. Jesus Christ was made of a woman, made under the law, and under the precepts, and met those precepts in his obedient life, and all the conditions of law and justice in his atoning death, has risen triumphant from the dead, and the promise is yea and amen, and if you get to heaven it will not be by the precept, but by the promise. At the same time, we glory in the precept as connected with the promise; but we are not saved by our preceptive obedience, though we love that obedience and delight therein; our eternal life and eternal welfare are all inherited by the promise of the blessed God. Now when you are sometimes unusually cast down and distressed and everything seems to go against you, I will ask you this question, Where do you seek comfort then? Do you seek comfort in the precept? You know you do not. Come, now, be honest about it, do not be dishonest, you know you do not. You know it is some promise; if the Lord is pleased to give you some promise, you can lean upon it. But if the Lord came to you, I was going to say, as Jacob did to the Lord, If the Lord do so-and-so, if the Lord had said to Jacob, Now, Jacob, if you do so-and-so, poor Jacob would not have lifted up his feet and have gone on his journey very joyfully. But the Lord’s promise was positive, yea and amen; there was Jacob’s consolation. Therefore, do not be too proud to own that when you are in trouble it is the promise that you lean upon. Thus, then they labored and we enter into their labors. Follow their example, and rejoice in the example they have left us. But what shall I say to the latter part of that chapter? What was it Satan seemed to do? He seemed to me to be suffered to do everything except sever the people from the love of God, except destroy their faith, and destroy the promises: that he could not do; but everything else he seems to have done. They were tortured, they were sawn asunder, and imprisoned, and suffered all sorts of things that Satan and the world could devise; lost comfortable homes for which they had industriously and honestly labored; driven out of their homes because of their love to God; wandered in sheep skins and goat skins, in deserts and in caves of the earth: of whom the world was not worthy. So, then these men have set us an example; and if God supported them, he can support us; if he gave them the victory, he can give us the victory.

But there is another view; not only truth, and an example set before us that we may reap and gather fruit unto life eternal, but there is another view which I have not yet given; indeed, I knew I should not be able to say one quarter of what this subject contains; but I must not close without taking another view, and that is this; that these men have, I now take the prophets and apostles, that these men have by the Holy Ghost set before us another class of things, which I have not named, and into which we enter, and the fruits of which we reap, and have done many times. And what is that? Well, that which is implied in that question, “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” If the Lord saved one Manasseh, he can save another; if he cleansed one Naaman, he can cleanse another; if he gathered in one heathen, Ruth, he can gather in another, If he opened the eyes of one Rahab, and gave her a faithful heart, and justified her being led by his Spirit, he can deal the same mercy to another; and if he saved a thief, one thief, he can save another; if he saved one Magdalene, he can

save another; if in the heart of one poor woman, that kissed the Savior's feet, washed them with her tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head, anointing them with costly ointment, he could implant his grace, he can bring others to his feet with the same experiences. Now, then, we are sent to enter into all these labors. We have these truths, these examples, and these mercies presented to us. We may thus in a different sense, and yet not in a way of contradicting them, quote the dear Savior's words: "Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest." So, these blessed truths, they come in their ripeness, they come in their perfection.

I shall have no time, I see, to talk about your doings, which I had intended to do; but upon this doctrine of entering into the labors of others we have a beautiful illustration, and with that I close, in the 6th of Deuteronomy. The Israelites were sent to reap that whereon they had bestowed no labor, and to enter into the labors of others. "When the Lord your God shall have brought you into the land which he aware unto your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you great and goodly cities which you did not build, and houses full of all good things which you did not fill, and wells dug which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you planted not; when you shall have eaten and be full, then beware lest you forget the Lord, which brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. You shall fear the Lord your God, and serve him, and shall swear by his name." Now let us have the meaning. "Great and goodly cities, which you build not." How are we to spiritualize that? I know how I should do it if I were called upon to do it. I should say those cities were all a type of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the city of refuge; he is the holy city; and I am sure I have not built that city; I did not build Jesus Christ, God himself built him, made him the antitypical city. And what are the houses full of good things? Jesus Christ, the antitypical house, the antitype of all these types; and in him dwell all good things; no evil in him, all good things. "And dug wells which you did not dig." So, the Lord Jesus Christ has brought to fight the wells of eternal salvation, rising from the depths of God's everlasting love. And then just mark how it closes, it closes with a paradisiacal idea, "vineyards and olive trees:" the one denoting cheerfulness, the wine; and the other denoting peacefulness, the olive: "vineyards and olive trees, which you planted not." Jesus Christ is the vine Jesus Christ is the true olive; and so all this will end in that paradisiacal blessedness darkly and slightly typified by those things.