

ALL WHO ARE WEARY



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FINDING TRUE REST
BY LETTING GO
OF THE BURDENS
YOU WERE NEVER
MEANT TO CARRY



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Chapter 9



INSIGNIFICANCE

Your Labor Is Not in Vain

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

• 1 CORINTHIANS 15:58

It is the ordinary that groans with the unutterable weight of glory.

• ROBERT FARRAR CAPON

A FEW YEARS AFTER I became a mom, a friend asked me, “What has surprised you most about motherhood?” My answer wasn’t the messiness or sleeplessness or feeling like I didn’t know what I was doing. Those things overwhelmed me, but everyone told me I would fight tiredness and feelings of inadequacy as a mom. I knew they would be a part of life with little ones.

“It is way more boring than I expected,” I replied without much thought. My words startled me. I was busy all the time. I had a never-ending list of tasks and little arms constantly gripping my shirt, needing

something from me. Even so, I couldn't help but feel bored by the tedium.

Maybe that's terrible to admit, but especially during the toddler to preschool years, I've struggled with the monotony of my days. I wholeheartedly love my kids, and those years bring a particular brand of hilarity and joy. But the season of molding Play-Doh into snakes and reading books with three words on each page and following around tiny humans who can barely walk without injuring themselves has not been

What a discouraging reality it would be if the significance of life could only be found in its highlights.

my favorite. And I think the root of my boredom during that time stemmed more from a seeming lack of purpose than merely not enjoying toddler-aged activities.

I like to feel productive, like I'm making a difference. I want my work to matter. And I know motherhood matters; of course it does. But when we break the big picture down into the nitty-gritty details of life, it can be hard to

remember our work makes a difference. Raising my kids matters, but does cutting grapes in half matter? Does vacuuming the kitchen floor only to have it covered in pasta noodles five minutes later matter? Why continue to do our everyday tasks when they all too quickly get undone or when we don't see tangible progress?

Even if we aren't parents, we all have days when we wonder if our mundane work has any real significance. Maybe we experience a highlight here and there, but they are the exception. What do we do about everything in between? We're just sitting in another meeting, paying another bill, making another appointment. We're writing, creating, tending, helping, and working in whatever role God has set in front of us, and sometimes we can't help but wonder: *What's the point?*

What a discouraging reality it would be if the significance of life could only be found in its highlights.

When we don't see results from our work or our work gets undone or we're not sure if our vocation is even important in the first place, our everyday lives can feel insignificant. But the significance of our lives and work doesn't hinge on the flashiness of our highlight reel. It doesn't have anything to do with our achievements or how many people notice our work.

Our work is significant because God uses our ordinary faithfulness, nothing can be wasted on Jesus, and the new creation life has already started.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ORDINARY FAITHFULNESS

During the time of the judges, Israel was in a season of unrest. They seemed to live in a cycle of disobedience, judgment, rescue, and then disobedience all over again. A famine came over the land, and a man named Elimilech, his wife, Naomi, and their two sons traveled to the land of Moab. Elimilech died, the two sons married Moabite women—and then the sons died. Now, in the midst of famine in a land not her own, Naomi is a widow with two widowed daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. The women are in vulnerable positions, unable to support themselves with no economic or social status.¹

Naomi hears there may be food back in Israel, so she heads home and urges her daughters-in-law to return to their mother's house. Maybe there, they can prepare to remarry and start a new family.² Orpah agrees, but Ruth clings to Naomi, pleading to stay with her.

The two women travel back to Bethlehem: Naomi returning to the land she knew well; Ruth arriving as a foreigner. She had grown up in enemy territory, worshiping other gods. But she's given up her own people and sworn to care for Naomi even through death. One commentator explains that "Ruth's decision to be buried in Naomi's land

would show that she was totally setting aside her former allegiances and dependencies to cast her lot in with Naomi.”³ Ruth is all in. She’s fully committed to Naomi, and therefore fully committed to Israel and Israel’s God.

The women need food, so Ruth gathers grain in the field of a man named Boaz, a well-respected relative of Naomi. Boaz provides for Ruth, and she ends up boldly asking him to marry her. He agrees, thus inheriting the cost of providing for both Naomi and Ruth and any children who would come after.

Our work doesn’t have significance because we did it, but because of what God does with it.

We don’t know Ruth’s name because of her résumé. Hers is not a story retold for generations because of the degrees she obtained or the number of people she impacted while she was alive. She doesn’t speak to crowds. She doesn’t write bestselling books. She doesn’t earn millions. She doesn’t have social status. She doesn’t perform

miracles. She doesn’t prophesy or teach or do any work we often deem significant or meaningful. What does she do, instead?

Ruth picks up barley from the ground. She supports her mother-in-law. She figures out a way to survive. She takes one step of faithfulness after another in her very ordinary—and very hard—life. According to the world’s standards, this poor widow from a rival nation didn’t accomplish much at all.

This story is one of unwavering commitment. It’s about steadfast love and faithfulness shown between Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz. But the greatest significance comes at the very end of the book when the narrator wrote: “Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron, Hezron fathered Ram, Ram fathered Amminadab, Amminadab fathered Nahshon, Nahshon fathered Salmon, Salmon fathered Boaz,

Boaz fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David” (Ruth 4:18–22).

Ruth’s story is not about what she did but about what God did through her. It’s about how He used her steadfast love and faithfulness to preserve the entire people of Israel and make way for the One who would save the world. The last few verses of the book of Ruth trace her genealogy through King David, the most famous and honored king of Israel. We can easily gloss over that list of names, but let’s not miss the weight of what’s written in these final few verses. Scholar Daniel Block explained:

This book and this genealogy demonstrate that in the dark days of the judges the chosen line is preserved not by heroic exploits by deliverers or kings but by the good hand of God, who rewards good people with a fulness [*sic*] beyond all imagination. These characters could not know what long-range fruit their compassionate and loyal conduct toward each other would bear. But the narrator knows. With this genealogy he declares the faithfulness of God in preserving the family that would bear the royal seed in troubled times and in rewarding the genuine godliness of his people.⁴

Our work doesn’t have significance because we did it, but because of what God does with it. The first chapter of Matthew traces Ruth’s descendants all the way through to Jesus. Look at the providence of God in watching over Ruth, who wasn’t even an Israelite, and guiding her to take ordinary, faithful steps to bring about the birth of the Son of God!

Ruth couldn’t have known she would be the great-grandmother of King David. Even the narrator of her story would have had no idea her steadfast commitment would one day lead to the birth of the Messiah. Yet this is so often what God does. This is how He works. He doesn’t

need our grand acts or our lists of achievements. He doesn't need anything from us at all. Instead, He wants to use our faithfulness.

We're not given the backstory, but I wonder if it was a mother who packed five loaves and two fish for the boy who offered them to Jesus (John 6:9). I wonder if the boy had a mom who sighed to herself, tired of making his lunches each day. Did she feel unimportant or overlooked? Did the boy come running back home to her, breathlessly shouting about how a teacher named Jesus made that meal feed thousands?

I think of Timothy's grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice, two women mentioned briefly by Paul, not because of their accomplishments, but because of their faithfulness. When Timothy was young and these women taught him the truth about God, did they ever wonder if their efforts would make a real difference (see 2 Tim. 1:5 and 3:15)?

And the story of Job—he had everything. The house, the kids, the reputation, the money. Still, it wasn't those things that God used to work in his life and impact believers for thousands of years afterward. It was his faithfulness—even after he sat alone in the town dump, scraping his sores with the shards of a pot.⁵

God is not impressed by what we bring or limited by what we can't. Everything we have is from Him in the first place. What matters in the kingdom is not our status or abilities, but whether we've been faithful with what we've been given.

Faithfulness means there's something we're banking on that we cannot see. There's a result to come that we can't quite get our hands on yet. We're willing to play the long game instead of looking for instant gratification. And when we trust God to use whatever we have for the kingdom, the burden of insignificance falls away. We don't have to fear that our very ordinary lives are a waste because the apostle Paul wrote: God can do "far more abundantly than all we ask or think, according to the power at work within us" (Eph. 3:20).

HE IS WORTHY OF IT ALL

Watchman Nee, a Chinese church leader in the twentieth century, told a story of walking along a city street in his hometown in 1929, ragged and in poor health. He ran into an old professor, and the two men stopped at a tea shop to talk. The professor looked him up and down and said, “Now look here; during your college days we thought a good deal of you, and we had hopes that you would achieve something great. *Do you mean to tell me that this is what you are?*”⁶ Watchman Nee had spent his life leading the church in China, and all this professor could see was a washed-up shell of a man who should have done so much more with his life. According to the professor, Nee had wasted his life.

“Waste,” Nee wrote: “means, among other things, giving more than is necessary. . . . Waste means that you give something too much for something too little. If someone is receiving more than he is considered to be worth, then that is a waste.”⁷ Jesus, he points out, is never too little. He is worthy of *everything*.

When Mary, the sister of Martha, anointed Jesus with expensive perfume, Judas thought it was a waste, but not because he wanted to use the money from that ointment to serve others. For starters, Judas was a thief and took what he wanted from the moneybag. But he also did not understand the worthiness of Jesus. If he had, he would have known that no amount of ointment poured out on Jesus could ever be a waste (see John 12:1–8).

In his vision, the apostle John saw a sealed scroll that no one was worthy to open. He wept because of it. But one of the elders said, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals” (Rev. 5:5). John sees a Lamb who takes the scroll, and the living creatures and elders around sing, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have

made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth” (vv. 9–10). Then thousands upon thousands of voices shouted around the throne. “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” (v. 12). In this chorus John witnesses in his vision, “Every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea is giving glory to God and to the Lamb.”⁸ If we think Jesus is unworthy of whatever we have to offer, then we do not know the real Jesus.

The death of Christ, His victory over sin and death, His resurrection, and His forever rule and reign make Jesus worthy of *everything*. If that is true, then nothing we do for the glory of God in the name of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit is a waste. Paul told the Colossian church, “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:17). None of it is insignificant. None of it goes unnoticed by our Savior who is worthy of it all.

LIVING AS A NEW CREATION

For many years, I wrote online about food. I blogged about recipes, took photos, and shared dishes I enjoyed. At the same time, I worked for a hunger-relief organization. I remember thinking, *Is this okay?* I felt a very real dissonance between my hobby and my day job. I wasn’t sure whether it was even appropriate to spend my days creating in my kitchen and savoring new dishes when the rest of the week I talked about severe hunger and malnutrition around the world. What value did creativity have in a world that’s starving?

Before I threw in the towel and gave up on my creative work, I started to dig into what Scripture said about beauty, art, and specifically, food. I was once again reminded of how God tells His people throughout His Word to feed those who are hungry and care for those who are in need. I also began to see more clearly how God gave us food not

just for sustenance, but also for delight. He gave us meals as a way to remember what He's done. He provided grains, grapes, and olives so that we could enjoy and create even more beauty with what He's given (see Ps. 104:14–15). Even the way we eat and drink can be done for the glory of God and the good of His kingdom.

When Jesus rose from the dead, it was the very meeting of heaven and earth. His resurrection was the beginning of a new creation, a new way of living and working in a new kingdom. Therefore, those of us who have been raised with Christ are called to live a different way. We “put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Col. 3:10). How we live now is meant to reflect who God is and the new creation that will one day come in its fullness. “If anyone is in Christ,” Paul says, “he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17).

Here and now, we live as new creation people in a broken and hurting world. That means we create beauty because the new creation ruled by Christ is beautiful. We work for justice because God is perfectly just. We feed the hungry because we have been invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb with the Lamb of God. What we do now is a foretaste of what's to come—and that gives our work deep, lasting significance.

N. T. Wright said it this way:

But what we can and must do in the present, if we are obedient to the gospel, if we are following Jesus, and if we are indwelt, energized, and directed by the Spirit, is to build *for* the kingdom. This brings us back to 1 Corinthians 15:58 once more: what you do in the Lord *is not in vain*. You are not oiling the wheels of a machine that's about to roll over a cliff. You are not restoring a great painting that's shortly going to be thrown on the fire. You are not planting roses in a garden that's about to be dug up for a building site. You are—strange though it may seem, almost as hard to believe as the resurrection itself—

accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God's new world.⁹

Sometimes our work can feel insignificant because we have an anemic view of the resurrection. The resurrection is about raising us to eternal life with Christ, absolutely. But it is also about God establishing a new kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. He is doing a new thing (Isa. 43:19), and in His grace, He invites us to participate in that work.

Our acts of service, creation of beauty, works of justice, words of teaching, care for creation, everything aligning with who God is and what His kingdom is about is not for nothing. All our work done through the power of the Spirit to honor God and serve our neighbor, build up the church, and bring glory to God is all part of living out our resurrection life here on earth.

Paul takes a whole section of his letter to the Corinthians to explain that the resurrection is real and has drastic implications for how we live *now*. Then, 1 Corinthians 15 ends with him saying, "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (v. 58). If the resurrection is true, we have good and holy and sacred and exciting and sometimes even very ordinary work to do.

The work of the Lord unquestionably includes the overt and essential practices of teaching God's Word, telling others about the gospel, and all the "spiritual" activities many of us readily associate with living a Christian life. But it *also* includes everything else the Spirit calls us to do in order to reflect the kingdom and the character of God.

Musician and author Andrew Peterson talks about the difference between work being "overtly Christian" or "deeply Christian."¹⁰ We need both. We need the bold and unashamed preaching of God's Word. We also need our art, our music, our child-rearing, our attitudes at work, our gardening, our everyday faithfulness to be a reflection of a deeply Christian way of living.

As Peterson wrote:

It is our duty to reclaim the sacredness of our lives, of life itself. And the first step is to remember—to remember the dream of Eden that shimmers at the edges of things, . . . to remember that work and play and suffering and celebration are all sentences in a good story being told by God, a story arcing its way to a new creation.¹¹

OUR HIDDEN LIVES

The film *A Hidden Life* tells the story of an Austrian farmer, Franz Jägerstätter, who was executed by the Nazis in 1943.¹² Jägerstätter, a devoted Catholic, refused to fight for the Nazis or align himself with Hitler in any way. The beauty of the film, in my opinion, is in the ordinariness of life it displays. Much of the film shows Franz and his wife, Fanni, working their land, raising animals, and refusing to give into the daily pressure of the townspeople who could not understand why this couple would betray their nation.

Toward the end, after suffering and grief, after being disowned and enduring all kinds of physical toil, Fanni says a line I won't soon forget. The movie shows her going about her daily tasks without her husband, sweating and dirty and worn. She works the field, tends to the sheep, and slices apples at a table. With a soft and surrendered voice, she says, "The time will come when we will know what all this is for. And there will be no mysteries. We will know . . . why we live."¹³

I breathed deeply when I heard her words. Belief like Fanni's frees us from the lie of futility and infuses our work with meaning. The pouring out of our lives, the daily trying to live as a new creation person, words of kindness, unseen acts of service, the creation of beauty—there is purpose in all of it.

The movie finishes with a quote from George Eliot, a nineteenth-century English novelist. She wrote, “For the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”¹⁴

The work of those standing on public platforms matters. But so do the hidden lives of people walking an unglamorous, ordinary, and even painful road of faithfulness.

REFLECT

1. What parts of your ordinary life do you struggle to find purpose in? What tasks leave you asking, “What’s the point?”
2. Consider the story of Mary pouring perfume on Jesus’ feet (see John 12:1–8). Who do you identify with in that story? What do you think your response would have been to Mary’s actions?
3. Your labor in the Lord is not in vain. How does knowing that truth change the way you go about your work and life? What would you do differently if you fully believed that your work for the kingdom will last for eternity?

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