

Our Work Is Not in Vain

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on 1 Corinthians

In chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians, Paul conducts a lengthy discussion of the resurrection, and he applies his conclusions directly to work. “[Excel] in the work in the Lord because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58). How does a correct understanding of the resurrection—that believers will be raised bodily—ground the conclusion that our labor for the Lord is of lasting significance (i.e. “not in vain”)?

First of all, we must recognize that if life in the fallen world around us were all there were to life, our labor would be in vain. Paul’s use of the word vain brings to mind Ecclesiastes’ extended meditation on the vanity of work under the conditions of the Fall. Even if there is life beyond the fallen state of the present world, our work would be in vain if the new world were completely disconnected from the present one. At most, it would launch us (and perhaps others) into the new world. But we have already seen in 1 Corinthians Chapter 2 that work done according to God’s ways survives into eternity. In the second half of chapter 15, Paul develops this matter further by stressing a fundamental continuity between pre- and post-resurrection bodily existence, in spite of vast differences in their respective substances. “This perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:53). Our

soul does not change out of the old body into a new body—as if donning a new suit of clothes—but our present body “puts on immortality.” The old continues into the new, though radically transformed. It is precisely this continuity that lends meaning to our present existence and guarantees that our labor for God is of lasting value.

Because we know that one day Christ will return to fulfill God’s restoration of the world to his original intent, we have the confidence to work diligently toward Christ’s coming kingdom. When we work according to our abilities, God rewards our work with a fair share of the fruits of our labor.

Our ultimate goal is God’s kingdom and his glory. Love is the mainspring of God’s kingdom. When we work out of love for the people for whom Christ worked and died, our work is not in vain. It has eternal significance and survives along with us into the new world of God’s kingdom fulfilled.