**[Should (Reformed) Missionaries Care About Results?](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/missionaries-care-results/)**

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Over the years, a common aphorism I’ve heard among Reformed missionaries is “Faithfulness is what matters, not fruitfulness.” Instead of tirelessly aiming for spiritual fruit, these workers rest in the truth that, in ministry, “the results are up to God.”

Of course, this perspective has biblical warrant. As Paul writes, the primary job requirement for gospel stewards is faithfulness ([1 Cor. 4:2](https://www.esv.org/verses/1%20Cor.%204%3A2/)). Furthermore, Christian ministers can’t take ultimate credit for any fruit from their labors. One plants, another waters, but God gives the growth (3:5–7).

However, in our appropriate focus on faithfulness, we shouldn’t overlook a complementary Pauline goal: the pursuit of gospel fruit. For Paul, resting in God’s sovereignty doesn’t equal resigning to futility. Instead, the most faithful missionaries are those who lovingly labor to see lasting results—results that lead to our joy and reward, and ultimately to the glory of God.

**Suffering Loss**

[First Corinthians 3:10–15](https://www.esv.org/verses/First%20Corinthians%203%3A10%E2%80%9315/) vividly pictures Paul’s desire for lasting fruit. Incidentally, this passage falls in the middle of his discussion of divine sovereignty and ministerial faithfulness.

The apostle describes gospel ministry through the metaphor of a construction site. Christ is the foundation, and different craftsmen build on it: incorporating gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, and straw. On the final day, the fires of judgment test and manifest everyone’s work. If someone’s work survives, “he will receive a reward.” If it’s burned, “he will suffer loss” (vv. 14–15).

**Resting in God’s sovereignty doesn’t equal resigning to futility.**

I’ve often wrestled with this illustration. *How do we know which works will survive and which will burn? What kind of reward is Paul referring to, and what does it mean to suffer loss?*

To answer these questions, it’s helpful to locate Paul’s illustration in context. In the immediately preceding and following verses, Paul writes, “You are . . . God’s building” (v. 9) and “You are God’s temple” (v. 16). The most straightforward interpretation of Paul’s metaphor is that the building is the church, and the building materials (gold, stones, wood, and straw) are individuals.

If that’s true, Paul is using this metaphor much like Peter does ([1 Pet. 2:5](https://www.esv.org/verses/1%20Pet.%202%3A5/)), where people are the building blocks that make up the church’s structure. However, unlike Peter’s illustration, Paul’s assumes some in the visible church aren’t actually “living stones.” They’re sticks and straw that won’t survive the flames of God’s judgment. Why does this matter for missionaries? Because when their work is consumed on the final day, they experience personal loss.

**Labor in Vain**

As Paul acknowledges elsewhere, missionary labors can be in vain. Gospel ministers can lose those they’d seemingly once won. You can come to the final day and have nothing to show your efforts ([Phil. 2:16](https://www.esv.org/verses/Phil.%202%3A16/)). If your converts abandon the gospel, succumb to temptation, or fail to endure, your work is wasted ([Gal. 4:11](https://www.esv.org/verses/Gal.%204%3A11/); [1 Thess. 3:5](https://www.esv.org/verses/1%20Thess.%203%3A5/)). Without a legacy that survives, in vain the builder strives.

Since that legacy is *people*, it’s constantly in danger. The building materials can burn. Yes, it’s true that, in the Lord, our labors are never completely in vain ([1 Cor. 15:58](https://www.esv.org/verses/1%20Cor.%2015%3A58/)). Faithful gospel ministry is inherently valuable, no matter the results. Yet we should be careful not to let this theological truth swallow up all others. In the context of his ministry among the Corinthians, Paul knows they may have believed in vain (vv. 1–2), and his labors could turn to loss.

Thankfully, by the time Paul writes 2 Corinthians, he’s hopeful this won’t be the case. He’s comforted by their growth in grace and looks forward to the day when, standing before the Lord, he’ll boast of them, as they will of him ([2 Cor. 1:14](https://www.esv.org/verses/2%20Cor.%201%3A14/); cf. [Rom. 15:17](https://www.esv.org/verses/Rom.%2015%3A17/)). Like those in other churches, these believers are his pride and joy (cf. [Phil. 4:1](https://www.esv.org/verses/Phil.%204%3A1/); [1 Thess. 2:19–20](https://www.esv.org/verses/1%20Thess.%202%3A19%E2%80%9320/)). *They* are his reward.

**Parental Love**

Recently, I heard a preacher say, “The object of our joy must not be the outcome of our work.” At first, those words ring true. Missionaries shouldn’t be mercenaries who only care about results. However, when Paul describes himself as a builder and farmer, he’s not thinking about mere products; he’s thinking about people. He’s passionate about those he loves like a spiritual parent.

No, the ultimate object of Paul’s joy and reward isn’t his ministry labors’ results. Yet, like any parent, Paul’s happiness is clearly connected to the outcome of his disciples’ faith ([2 Cor. 7:7](https://www.esv.org/verses/2%20Cor.%207%3A7/); [1 Thess. 3:8](https://www.esv.org/verses/1%20Thess.%203%3A8/)). It’s not hard to imagine him echoing the words of John: “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth” ([3 John 4](https://www.esv.org/verses/3%20John%204/); cf. [1 John 1:4](https://www.esv.org/verses/1%20John%201%3A4/)).

Conversely, Paul can talk of his motherly anguish ([Gal. 4:19](https://www.esv.org/verses/Gal.%204%3A19/)) and constant anxiety ([2 Cor. 11:28](https://www.esv.org/verses/2%20Cor.%2011%3A28/)) for struggling believers and churches. In such situations, did Paul need someone to remind him “the results are up to God”? I don’t think so. That would be like telling a grieving mother not to worry about her wayward and wandering children. What if you casually consoled her with this truth: “In parenting, faithfulness is what matters, not fruitfulness”?

Of course, missionaries can obsess over outcomes in an unhealthy way. But if we rest in God’s sovereignty such that we’re resigned about results, it reveals we don’t love people the way a parent does her child or the way Paul does believers in his care. If missionaries aren’t laboring for lasting fruit, we’re not truly faithful.

**Results to the Glory of God**

We shouldn’t try to separate faithfulness from fruitfulness. The two go hand in hand. Nor should we presume a conflict between working for results—even the joy of our reward—and glorifying God.

**If missionaries aren’t laboring for lasting fruit, we’re not truly faithful.**

When, like Paul, we have the privilege of seeing believers and churches grow to maturity, we can and should rejoice. We can be proud of our work and look forward to a reward. We can boast in what God has done, knowing it’s ultimately owing to his work in us ([Rom. 15:15–18](https://www.esv.org/verses/Rom.%2015%3A15%E2%80%9318/)). He gets the glory for anything accomplished through our ministries.

God receives greater glory as more and more people are transformed by the gospel. Paul’s objective as Christ’s ambassador makes this clear. He was set apart and sent out “to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of [Christ’s] name among all the nations” (1:5). Results in missions directly contribute to God’s glory. And I believe that purpose still applies to missionaries today. If we’re passionate about God’s glory, we should be passionate about gospel fruit.