

# (Nicaragua) I Have Labored in Vain

by David Wilkerson

---

*David Wilkerson's sermon emphasizes the common struggle of feeling ineffective in ministry while encouraging trust in God's unseen work and purpose.*

**Duration:** 44:15

**Scripture:** Isaiah 49:1, Matthew 6:33, Romans 8:28, 1 Corinthians 15:58, Galatians 6:9, Philippians 1:6, Hebrews 4:15

**Topics:** "Ministry"

---

## Description

In this sermon, the speaker shares the story of a missionary who became discouraged after five years of laboring in a certain nation without seeing any results. Despite God's promises, the missionary felt empty and dry, pretending to be happy at conferences while secretly hurting inside. Another missionary, David Livingston, also experienced a similar feeling of laboring in vain after 23 years of work in Africa. The speaker also mentions George Bowling, a missionary who gave up his wealth and comfort to serve in Bombay, India, but also felt like his work was in vain. The sermon emphasizes the importance of not losing hope and continuing to trust in God's promises, even when it seems like our efforts are fruitless.

---

## Transcript

This recording is provided by World Challenge Incorporated. You're welcome to make additional copies for free distribution to friends. All other unauthorized duplication or electronic transmission is a violation of existing copyright and other applicable laws.

This recording cannot be posted on any website. However, written permission to link to the World Challenge and or David Wilkerson homepages may be requested by emailing info at davidwilkerson.org. Other recordings are available by calling 903-963-8626 or by writing to World Challenge Incorporated, Post Office Box 260, Lindale, Texas, 75771. Now God's laid something special on my heart this morning.

If I put a title to it, it's simply this. I have labored in vain. I have labored without results.

You'd be surprised who said that. Those are not just my words. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we came from miles around. We thank you for the fellowship. We thank you for the time to be together.

But these are life and death times. And you want to speak to us. We don't want to just be stirred in our hearts.

We want the word to change us. Something we take home with us. That we can remember.

That it will encourage us. And change us. And bring strength to us.

Come upon me this morning. Give me the word from your heart. You've been faithful.

And you'll be faithful to this people this morning. In Jesus' name. Amen.

A missionary told us about his time when he went to conferences. The Lord had called him into a certain nation. He'd been there five years.

He said God had made him promises. God was going to bless him. He's going to see many results.

Many people saved. But after five years. He could see no results.

He became discouraged. Nothing that he was promised came to pass, he said. But he would go to a missionary conference.

And he put on this front. He put on this fake front. And he would smile.

Everybody thought he was doing wonderful. People would come up to him. Asking for help.

How are you so happy? We're facing problems. He'd give people advice. He'd say oh God's doing great things.

But he was hurting in his heart. Because he was empty. And he had grown dry.

Totally discouraged. Because others were being blessed. And he was seeing no blessing in his life.

He thought he would have a prison ministry. The prisons did not open to him. He went back to his mission field.

Became so discouraged. He went home. In a letter that I received.

He said I was empty. I failed God. He got a job driving a truck.

And for a number of years he lived in total despair. And it took years for him to come out of that problem. The Lord did bring him out finally.

But he said I labored in vain. I spent all those years. And nothing happened.

Now if you're here this morning. And you have thoughts. That you have labored in vain.

Those things you expected to happen. The promises you believed God made to you. And they have not come to pass.

And you have to say honestly. I believe I've been laboring in vain. If you feel that way.

You're in good company. You're in the company of spiritual giants. I hear people say.

Praying men should not feel that way. Men who walk with God and pray. Should never feel that they've labored in vain.

Let me take you down a list of men. Everyone I mention to you. Were spiritual giants.

Elijah. He came to this place. He said.

God take my life. My fathers failed you. I'm no better than my fathers.

All I've done is in vain. King David. He said I want to escape to a wilderness.

If I had wings right now I'd fly away. I would stay in that wilderness. You see he's saying I have.

Come to the place where I've labored in vain. Even Paul the apostle. Carried with him a thought.

That it's possible to be laboring for the Lord. With the possibility of being a castaway. The great Bernard.

One of the greatest writers of our church fathers. Much of our theology today is based on Bernard. And before he died.

He said I have accomplished almost nothing. Many of my writings have no purpose. John Calvin.

The father of Calvinism. John Calvin is one of my favorite commentaries. I love to read the works of John Calvin.

But this is what he said in his dying day. All I have done has been in vain. It has been of no value.

He said I know the wicked will lay hold of this message. But I repeat it. All I have done is in vain.

David Livingston. One of the great missionaries of all time. Raised up many missions and ministries in Africa.

23 years laboring in Africa. The slave traders followed him into Africa. Everywhere he established a mission.

The English slave traders came and followed him. Let me read to you his last words. The only thing I have done is opened up Africa to the slave trade.

My mission societies are not bearing fruit. After 23 years of labor. My work seems to be in vain.

I have labored in vain. My favorite missionary. Of all the missionaries I have ever read.

His name is George Bowen. 150 years ago. He was a rich man in Long Island in New York.

A very educated man. He gave up everything. And went to Bombay, India.

He gave up his missionary support. And he took on the Indian garments. And he began to live in a little shack.

A little room in the heart of the worst of Bombay. I have his biography. And I'm praying about publishing it.

There's no other biography that so touched my life. No one opened up Jesus to me more than George Bowen. 40 years in India.

Out on the streets every day. Under the sweltering sun and the heat and the rain. Hand published books and tracts.

And passed them all over Bombay. They thought he was crazy. The mission societies, some of them gave up on George Bowen.

He slept on the top of a wooden desk. And in 40 years. He had no converts, not one.

But when George Bowen died. Bombay fell at his feet. The government.

Every denomination. Said this is a Christian. If we ever accept Christ.

We want the Christ of George Bowen. And his words are still ringing. A few weeks ago.

I was reading through his biography. And I was shocked at what I read. Here's what he said.

In his dying days. I'm the most useless being in the church. God bruises me and crushes me.

With disappointments. He builds me up. Then he permits me to fall down into nothingness.

I can sit with Job. And I sympathize with Elijah. Because after all these years.

All I can say. I've labored in vain. You say how could that be? Giving your life to a vision that God has called you to.

And you don't see the results that you expect. George Bowen went to India. Such a man of prayer.

The godliest man I've ever read about in modern times. All the wonderful things he expected. And though he did not see the results.

Never one day did he give up. And he came to the place. He never measured his ministry by anyone else's ministry.

Because the last ten years of his life. When he got on a bus. Everybody turned.

He didn't say a word. But Christ was shining through this man. And they bowed as he passed by.

Because his one desire. Was to be like Christ. Whether he had results or not.

He would emanate Christ in his life. He said if all they see is Jesus. Now is it going to shock you when I tell you that these words that I just gave you.

I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing. All in vain.

Are the words of Jesus. If you don't believe me. Go to Isaiah 49.4. Please go there if you will.

Isaiah 49. Why don't we just start at verse one. Listen O Isles unto me and hearken ye people from far.

The Lord has called me from the womb from the bowels of my mother. Hath he made mention of my name. Every theologian knows and believes that that's Christ.

He hath made my mouth like a sharp sword. And the shadow of his hand hath made me. He has made me a polished shaft and a quiver hath he hid me.

And he said thou art my servant O Israel. In whom I will be glorified. Now stop for just a moment please.

This is not Isaiah. This has been proven by Bible scholars for a numbers of years. This is he who has been called to bring Judah back to God.

He has been called to bring Jacob back to God. Verse four. Then I said I have labored in vain.

I have spent my strength for nothing. And in vain. Yet surely my judgment is with the Lord.

My work with my God. And to prove that these are the words of Christ. In verse five.

Now saith the Lord that formed me from the womb. To bring his servant to bring Jacob again to him. Though Israel be not gathered.

Yet shall I be glorified in the eyes of the Lord. And my God shall be my strength. Look this way if you will please.

The father sent his son on a mission. To bring Jerusalem to bring Israel back to the father. Jesus said I did nothing on my own.

All that I heard my father say I did. He had been made sharp as a two edged sword. And he was faithful in his calling.

And you know the response of Israel. In Hebrews. You don't have to turn to Hebrews 415.

He is touched with the feeling it's our infirmities. He is tempted in all points as are we. Now friends look this way for just a moment please.

When I first read these words of Jesus. I refused to believe it. I got up in my office.

And I'm walking back and forth. I said Jesus. If these are your words.

Then I'm overwhelmed. God has allowed you. The father has allowed you.

To enter into my infirmity. Into my life. And to feel and experience what I'm going through.

I began to weep before the Lord. You could feel as I do at times. I've labored in vain.

I have not seen my expectations fulfilled. You say well. Haven't you accomplished a good bit in your ministry.

The Lord allowed me to. Bring to birth the teen childless ministry around the world. A Bible school.

The evangelistic crusades around the world. A church in New York City. But you see those are not my expectations.

My expectations go far beyond anything that you can see with your human eye. You know. I really feel sorry for pastors.

Whose only expectation. Is to keep up with the crowd. And to produce some great thing in the eyes of man or God.

See God didn't call me to start some great ministry. He didn't call me just to build some great church. You can have all of those things and do all of these things.

And miss the real expectation God has placed in our hearts. I look back over everything God has allowed me to accomplish in my life. And I feel like that's all in a box and I'm standing outside the box.

And I'm thinking of the day that I stand before God. When I have to answer before Jesus. About my own life.

About my own motives. And why I wanted to do these things. And to give an account.

In the past few years. My expectation has been singular. To be more like Christ.

To be like Christ in my home. And a few years ago. I preached a message in a pulpit in New York City.

How to be like Christ. And I preached from the pulpit. It begins in the house.

It begins with my wife. If my wife can't see Jesus in me. I have not learned to be like Christ.

I heard of a well-known evangelist. I will not name. Healing the sick.

Mightily used of God. And another pastor's wife was sitting with his wife. She said, what's it like living with such a great man of God? She said, I don't know.

That's not the man that comes home to me. I don't know that man in the pulpit. After I preached that message.

I went home to my wife. I said, honey, I have not been like Jesus. To you like I want to be.

And it has to start here in our house. Every day. I want to be a little more like Christ.

I want to be like Jesus. And I was sincere. These were my expectations.

More than my last days. I want Jesus to be seen in me. I want so much of Christ.

I want people, even when I sit in a restaurant. I want them to see and feel Jesus. So after a number of weeks.

Feeling very holy. Very righteous. I'm sitting in a restaurant.

And a waitress kept looking at me. Walking back and forth. And she came up to me.

And I'm thinking. She sees Jesus. It's working.

I've tried so hard. And I think I'm getting it. I think I'm getting to that point.

There's a famous man in the United States. Who's the biggest pornographer in the world. His name is Hugh Hefner.

She comes up to me. She said, are you Hugh Hefner? A pornographer. My wife turned to me.

She said, you're trying too hard. That's not how you become like Christ. It's trusting in the work of the Holy Spirit.

I tried harder. Did the dishes. Sweep the floor.

I did things I've never done in my life. And I kept trying to be like Jesus. Trying to be like Jesus.

A week later. I kind of lost it. I had a little argument.

I said, honey, how did I do this week? She said, well. I'll give you a poll this week. But not a Christ.

She said, we set expectations. Jesus was a man. He was a human.

And he was God. And he would have these expectations. And see.

This sense of laboring in vain has to do with one thing. We measure our present accomplishments against our expectations or how we compare to others who are being blessed. I have to confess I have a problem over my lifetime.

I've never much felt holy. And I see a holy man. A very righteous man.

And I would feel inferior. I could never measure up to that person. But you see, I don't know that man.

If we go around comparing ourselves with others. If you come to this meeting. And you compare yourself with me or anyone else here.

Let me have an hour with you. Let me tell you what I'm going through. Let me tell you about my battles.

And you'll feel good about yourself. Jesus came to Jerusalem. And he began to weep over the city.

And he began to weep over the city. He said, Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I wanted to gather you under my wings as a mother gathers her hen. Can you imagine the pain in Christ's heart? He was called from his birth to bring Jerusalem to its knees.

And they called him names and they seek to crucify him now. And he's weeping over the city. He sees judgment coming upon that city.

And I believe that's when he uttered these words that Isaiah quotes. I've labored in vain. I spent my strength for naught.

And in vain. The many things I read in this book this to me is one of the most encouraging. Now maybe you are not like this.

Maybe you are very self-assured. If you're a young man you will feel that security. But you will remember what I'm saying one day.

There will come a time when you look at your life and you look over your life and you look at the things that you've accomplished. And this thing will come up inside of you. I have not fulfilled my purpose.

I have not seen what I wanted to see. And sometimes when we don't see it we try to make it happen rather than just trust in the Lord and just leave the results to Him and learn to grow in the Spirit and allow the Holy Spirit to make us more like Christ. That's why we go off for all of these things that are coming to the church.

That's why many times we see everything that is happening in the church. In the United States they have what they call wrestling churches now. They remove the stage.

They put a wrestling ring in and they are having wrestling matches. I saw a tape of one of these so-called Christian professional wrestlers. They sang a few songs.

The wrestlers jumped into the ring banging seats over their heads fake blood terrible violence. Then they stop give a 15 minute message. And you see if you really don't know who you are in Christ if you are trying to accomplish something in the flesh you will wind up without a word of God.

Jesus now looks out over Jerusalem and He sees the armies that are going to come within 70 years. And He weeps. He weeps in sorrow for the people.

But there is something in His heart. There is a cry. Have I labored in vain? There is this wonderful thing that brought Jesus out of it.

Go back to Isaiah Isaiah 43 49 Verse 4 Then I said I have labored in vain I have spent my strength for nothing and in vain. Now stop for just a moment. Look this way.

Everywhere I go I meet pastors and I meet Christian workers and I meet ministers that have come to this conclusion I am not doing anything I am ineffective I am not accomplishing anything and what I have done I don't see the results and I am speaking to some now in the spirit there is something deep inside your heart you are judging yourself you are judging yourself by what you see it's not that you are jealous of other people it's not that you want what they have but you say what about me Lord what about my calling I want you to know that Jesus did not linger in this part you can be discouraged but not be in sin you can be downcast but not be in sin Paul said I am downcast but I am not in anguish I have not given up he said everyone has turned against me and that was not so that was not

so he had people praying for him all over Asia that comes out later in Corinthians but you came to this conference you said God I have not seen what I believe you promised me in your marriage among your children some of you have prayed for my son my daughter for years and I have not seen it yet I have dealt with pastors in their seventies 75 and 80 years old after years of ministry a depression that sense I didn't see what I wanted to see one man that you would probably know can't seem to bring him out of it he has done so much around the world but you see this thought he can't shake this thought and listen to what Jesus says I spent my strength for nothing and in vain and here is the word of the Lord yet surely my judgment is with the Lord and my work with my God now listen to me and

this is the heart of my message Jesus said I'm not going to judge myself that's the work of my Heavenly Father I don't know what's happened I know the word did not fall in vain you and I have no right to judge us the Bible does say judge yourself that you be not judged but that has to do with sin but when it comes to your ministry when it comes to the work of God you don't know what's happened most of what you think is a failure God has planted seed and something is growing in your young person in your teenager you can't see it but God planted a seed there are other ministries you think have died they didn't die a seed has been planted and Jesus said I have this thought that I labored in vain yet I will not judge it I say it again you and I have no right to judge anything in our past if

it's sin it's under the blood don't bring it up again God has no controversy with you all is well with the Lord and all of your past failures I don't care what happened just about when you think you are a failure the Lord comes along and gives you a token for good and He embraces you and says no you have not failed because you love me now more than you have ever loved before and that's what God is after let's stand I'm going to ask the Holy Spirit to come to you right now and remove now that root that stronghold that I

failed I labored in vain that's a lie the devil planted in your heart now in Jesus name lay it down pluck it out right now stop judging yourself He shall judge us on that day and you will rejoice when you see all of the good work coming back every word you spoke for Jesus

every rightful thing that you did God has blessed it will you thank Him that it's not in vain thank Him that it's not in vain thank you Jesus encourage our hearts encourage our brothers and sisters lift up their spirits I pray and let the glory of the Lord be manifested I believe you need to praise the Lord with your lips let's give Him thanks He has not failed us He has not failed you God is at work in you God is at work and He has good thoughts for His children oh blessed be the name of the Lord

---

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/14/SID14609.mp3>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/david-wilkerson/nicaragua-i-have-labored-in-vain/>

# *Grow in Your Walk with Christ*

---

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

**[www.sermonindex.net](http://www.sermonindex.net)**