

# God's Work in the Life of His Servants

by Vance Havner

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*Vance Havner emphasizes the importance of faithfulness, humility, and trust in God for a successful ministry, and encourages listeners to live for Jesus and seek a deeper experience of God.*

**Duration:** 37:31

**Scripture:** Psalm 66:16, Psalm 84:6, Matthew 11:6, John 1:29

**Topics:** "Work Of God"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the unchanging nature of the gospel. He uses an analogy of tasting different concoctions to highlight that the water of life, representing the gospel, does not need any flavoring or new labels. The preacher also mentions the advancements in science and technology, but reminds the audience that despite these changes, the truths of sin, judgment, eternity, and salvation remain the same. He shares personal experiences and challenges faced in his ministry, including the influence of new ideas and the Scopes trial. The sermon concludes with the preacher encouraging the audience to be faithful stewards and to trust in God's timing and plan for their lives.

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## Transcript

Now, I cannot make a musical contribution to this service, but I can make a testimony, and that's what I want to do, give a word of witness, and I don't know of a better portion of scripture for that than Psalm 66, beginning at verse 16. Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul. I cried unto him with my mouth, and he was extolled with my tongue.

If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me, but verily God hath heard me. He hath attended to the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God, which hath not turned away my prayer, nor his mercy from me.

With your kind indulgence, I'd like to reminisce for a bit. At my age, we're supposed to be retired and in a rocking chair drawing our social security and talking about the good old days that weren't so good, after all. My memories begin with an old home in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, set on a hill with the lights at five towns visible from our front porch of a night, and on the west, the mountains standing like silent sentinels along the skyline.

That was before 1914. There's a book out called The Good Years, America just before the First World War. America was a young giant.

We'd won the Spanish-American War. Teddy Roosevelt had sent the fleet around the world. We were growing and prosperous and still had patriotism and a lot of other things that we're running a little short on, a lot short on these days.

God gave us a morning. Mordecai Ham used to have a sermon on the sinking of the Titanic in 1912. Some of you old-timers remember that.

And God was giving us an object lesson, Ham said, but we didn't learn it. That great ocean liner, you know, a beautiful thing, best they'd ever built. And it was guaranteed not to sink.

And the only thing it ever did was sink on the first trip over here from England. And what sent it down was an old-fashioned hunk of ice out in the ocean. As though God were trying to remind us of how puny is the best we can do against some of the old realities.

Well, I never knew the day when I did not feel called to preach. I don't know how you work that out theologically, but that's your problem. At 12, I stood in the old church and asked them to license me to preach.

And three years later, I was ordained. I didn't know much. Fact is, I not only didn't know anything, but I didn't even suspect anything back in those days.

And in those days when a man felt led to preach, he didn't get out a pen and a pencil to figure what income bracket that would put him in and what the fringe benefits would be and whether he'd be appreciated for what he was worth, which wouldn't go for much appreciation. Anyhow, I started out without social security and without financial security, but thank God I had eternal security. The happiest man in the world is a young Christian before he's met too many Bible scholars.

And that was my privilege back in those days. When Amos went up to Bethel to preach, no ministerial committee had ever invited him. He hadn't sent his manuscript up to headquarters to have some scribe in a swivel chair who never had done any preaching go through it with a red pencil to make sure there wasn't anything in it to disturb the status quo, not Amos.

Kyle Yates said his time had not been spent in a divinity school. He was unwilling to be classed as a member of the guilds who made their living by bowing to the wishes of the people and preaching a pleasing message that would guarantee a return engagement. Amos wasn't looking for a return invitation when he went to Bethel.

Fact of the business is he wasn't asked up there the first time. He didn't take the teeth out of his sermons in Tekoa and gum it up at Bethel. And when they said to him, Dr. Amaziah especially, who was the court preacher and was embarrassed at this country preacher, what do you mean by preaching judgment in our city? We never had it so good.

But Amos said, that's not the way I heard it. And Amaziah said, go back to the backwoods. You don't belong on the boulevards.

Where are your credentials? And Amos said, I'm not a prophet by profession. I am not a prophet by parentage. I'm not the son of a prophet.

I'm a prophet by providence. The Lord took me. That's the only credentials anybody needs to preach the gospel.

You know, in the last few years, we've had Generalissimo's and Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and Franco and some others. And Amaziah at Bethel was a sort of a preacherissimo. We have some preacherissimos today.

Every once in a while one comes out. The trouble is, he does moreissimo than he does preaching. And there's not much to what he has to say.

Amos didn't know anything about that. He called things by their right name and didn't see any sense in beating around the bush. He didn't go to Bethel to make his preaching acceptable.

He went up there to make it available. He didn't go up there to make them like it. He may have went up there to see that they got it.

And that was enough. Billy Sundy used to say, they tell me I rub the fur the wrong way. I don't let the cat turn around.

That's a good policy. When the cat's going the right direction, you're stroking the cat. When the cat's going the wrong direction, the sparks will fly.

When I started, some of my critics said, well, he's a boy. He won't last long in the ministry. They never do.

But I think 63 years is long enough to give it a try. I had a fire in my bones and I was weary with forebearing and I could not stay. But I made many mistakes and I had to learn the hard way.

My first pastorate was out in the country after World War I. New ideas were beginning to go around. A little later, we had the scopes trial, the monkey trial in Dayton, Tennessee. And it's a sign of the times today that people applaud Clarence Darragh, the infidel lawyer, and make fun of William Jennings Bryan, the great Christian who stood on the other side.

And that's not to our credit either to take that attitude. Harry Emerson Fosdick was coming into prominence and I was impressed with what looked like a new approach. I thought maybe the gospel needed to be adapted to the modern mind.

But the fire went out of my bones. I gave up my church and I went back to my old home in the hills. And that winter, my father died, a bit disappointed, I think.

And folks were asking what became of the boy preacher. I had nowhere to preach. God closed all the doors.

One day I came across two lines out of a poem that I've never been able to find since. How sad will be the days in store when voice and vision come no more. I remember how that impressed me and put me under conviction.

I'd lost my voice. I'd lost my vision. But God who had called me knew my frame and remembered that I was dust.

I got hold of Gresham Machen's book, Christianity and Liberalism. And God made it clear to me, if you dismiss these newfangled notions and go back and preach the plain gospel of your boyhood, I'll make a way. I did.

And he did. And I had to go back to that same church where I had preached it the other way and preach it straight for three years. And to this good hour, and it's been a long time, I've never lacked in a message or in a place to preach it.

You see, I left the novelty shop for the antique shop, got back to old things again. We don't need something new today half as much as we need something so old it'd be new if anybody tried it. They say sometimes he told us nothing new.

Well, that's a compliment. Truth is unchanging, and yet truth changes. Truth's like a river.

You never see the same river twice. You see water and you see the course of the river. You don't see the same river twice.

Water that you never saw before going by now. And so there's a sense in which truth changes in its adaptations and in its applications, but in its essence, it remains the same. The sun's old-fashioned, but without it, we grope in darkness.

Air is old-fashioned, but without it, we gasp and we die. Water's old-fashioned. We've never found a substitute, and without it, men go mad.

I heard of a bottling place where they wanted to try out some of their new drinks, so they blindfolded one of the fellows and made a taster out of him. They had a number of glasses of their various concoctions, all in a row, and a glass of water down at the end of it. He went down that line tasting and smacking his lips, and when he got to that glass of water and tried that, he said, I don't know what this is, but it won't sell.

Well, it doesn't need to sell. And let me tell you the gospel, you don't have to flavor it up, and you don't have to put a new label on it. The water of life remains the same through all the changing ages.

Don't you get excited because we've split the atom and gone to the moon, sins as black and hells as hot and judgments as certain and eternities as long and salvation just as free as it ever was. Let's make it contemporary, though, and bring it up to date. You give me a church full of folks who will live as though Jesus died yesterday and rose this morning and was coming back tonight.

They'll turn the world upside down. Living, He loved me. Dying, He saved me.

Buried, He carried my sins all away. Rising, He justified freely forever one day's coming. Oh, glorious day.

It's a sad day for a preacher when he loses his voice and his vision, and they don't all do it when they're failures. It's possible to have a big church and a reputation and be popular. Popularity is dangerous.

Demas left Paul having loved this present world. One reason I think he fell is because his name means popular. The preacher may be pastor of Ichabod Memorial Church, having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof.

He may belong to Sardis and be part of it, having an aim to be alive when he's dead. He may be a Shorn Samson, shaking himself and not aware that the power of God is departing. And if it ever occurred to you,

beloved, you can call it any kind of a blessing you want to, but all through the Bible, the men who came to a new, a deeper experience of God were men who were already well fixed and successful as their work went.

And so if you think tonight, if I speak to some preacher, some Christian who thinks you're doing pretty well, remember that in the case of Job, he set a record for faithfulness to God. Isaiah was a marvelous prophet already. Joshua was the captain of the people, but he had to have a meeting with the captain of the Lord of Hosts.

Daniel had set a record for stability in the face of temptations. John on Patmos had already been a successful apostle, and yet they came to something greater in later years. I'm one of the older generation.

It bothers me about my friends, some of them who somehow get the idea, well, I've had it, there isn't anything much for me anymore. Now, let me tell you, dear sister and dear brother out there, how do you know, but what's your last chapter? Maybe the very best. I'll be 76 in October, and for the last four years, God has opened a new chapter in my life that has meant more to my ministry than ever before.

Take a little encouragement from that. I've been brought to some fresh experiences and new dimensions and a new note. It can happen any time.

The great awakening in Nineveh didn't start with Nineveh. It started with a runaway preacher. It started with Jonah.

Many a revival and maybe one in your church is waiting to begin, not in a place, but in a preacher. When I got into the will of God, I thought it'll be good going from here on. Don't you ever fool yourself.

The minute you start out to live for Jesus Christ in dead earnest, you make yourself the target of the devil. The average church member doesn't cause the devil enough trouble today to even get his attention. But if you start living for Jesus and mean business about it, you're in trouble.

I remember in 1938, I was preaching through Iowa. I remember that one night I preached in Creston, Iowa. Went to bed that night and couldn't sleep.

Next night, couldn't sleep for two years. I don't know how I lived between insomnia and depression. I don't know how I made it.

I didn't take any kind of sedatives. It kept going. And yet God began to open doors for what I'm doing now.

And I said, Lord, this doesn't make sense. Any doctor would have told me to get quiet somewhere. And yet a different bed every week, different water, different food, different climate.

Lord, I can't do it. No doctor would have prescribed it. And I couldn't get clear guidance.

It's easy to write a book about guidance, preach a sermon about guidance, sometimes pretty hard to get it. And finally, I said, Lord, maybe it's like an electric eye door. Maybe this thing's not going to open till I walk in.

So here I go. If I'm wrong, stop me. And he hasn't stopped me for 38 years.

As I look back, now I have confirmation that I didn't have before. God's not always going to send you a special delivery, tell you exactly what to do. Sometimes you must make the move, give God the benefit of the doubt.

Do that. Be willing to do either way. Not have any druthers about it.

Then make the move. And even if you were mistaken, God will take care of you about the business. God is our father.

I won't forget, however, that I was in for trouble. I started out in 1940. My first date was to be Grand Rapids, the mail trotter mission.

Got as far as Moody Institute, came down with the flu. They put me in Augustana Hospital and the devil sat on the foot of the bed. Said, now what are you going to do? Giving up your church? Can't preach.

I'll never forget the dismal days that I spent there. I had turned down an invitation to Florida Bible Institute for a conference. I wired the man and told him I'd come.

The doctor said, go south. You've got no business going to Grand Rapids in January, fresh from North Carolina. And as frail as you are, go on back.

And I went back. And in that lovely school down there, I met two people who have meant a lot to me. A long, lean, lanky North Carolinian came up to me one of the very first days I was there.

Said, I'm Billy Graham from Charlotte. He was a student. And then a young lady took mercy on this poor, sick preacher.

Fixed some soup that he could eat and would leave it at my door and tap gently. Then scoot away before I could get out to thank him. She knew the way to a man's heart, you know.

And she was willing, thank God, to risk the rest of her life with a half-sick preacher with very little money and not at all sure that he could do what he started out to do. It takes some kind of sanctified grit to do that. And I pay her tribute tonight.

It took me a long time to find her. It's 40 years old nearly. Well, Israelites, 40 years in the wilderness before they ever got over in the promised land.

I never bought a car while I was 66 years old. I wanted to think it over. But we started out in 1941.

And we never cracked up for all those years. And I can say tonight only this. All the way my Savior leads me, what have I to ask beside? Can I doubt his tender mercy, who through life has been my guide? Today I watch sometimes the scramble for seats in the synagogue, the scramble for degrees.

You think that you can't be a preacher anymore. No church is going to have you unless you have three or four degrees. That would rule out some of the biggest preachers, some today.

The scramble for recognition, knowing the right people, the religious politicking. You don't have to put your name in the pot at headquarters. You don't have to know any key men if you know the keeper of the keys.

You don't have to wait for some talent scout to find you, some committee to recommend you. God's waiting list, he's got a long one and he's shorthanded. The harvest is plenteous and the labors are few.

And the eyes of the Lord run to and fro all over the earth to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him. Not show them strong in his behalf, but show himself strong in their behalf. I know some dear people who are waiting for the Lord to use them.

God doesn't use me. I've said it already, but I want to say it again. God's using every one of you tonight as much as he can, but not all that he could.

Now, if you can move over from can to could, you're getting somewhere. God is using every one of you to the full extent of your usability. You increase your usability and God will use you.

I don't think God ever had anything big in mind when he made me. Our ministry has been low key and simple. We've operated on a shoestring.

I've got no organization, no foundation except the one that's laid by faith in his excellent word. Never got out any brochures, advertised myself with my picture on it. If I ever sent out a brochure with a picture of mine on it, I never would get any invitations anywhere to pray.

I never had a secretary. I wouldn't know how to dictate a letter. Never wrote but \$200 in my life.

That is when I was a boy and I was starting the school. My daddy told me that dirt, debt, and the devil were all related and to stay as far away from all three as I could. I don't have any radio program, no television program.

Don't get out a magazine. I don't know how I make it. Never been on drugs.

Never been an athlete. Haven't got out a book on sex. And the new woman, whoever she is, just plain preaching.

Somehow I'm still at it. Some of you folks think it won't work anymore. So you're trying to dress it up and bring it up to date.

It'll work. And bear witness tonight, I'm supposed to be through preaching. Maybe, you never know when, but I want to say it to the glory of God that when you endeavor to say what you think God wants you to say, he'll find you a place to say it.

And I like these plain Christians. I've got a friend down in Florida who's, he's a remarkable Christian. One day we were riding along, he said, Well, Brother Hebner, I've never had any spectacular Christian experiences.

I guess you'd call me just plain vanilla. I like that. When I grew up on the farm and we had ice cream, we had to work for it.

Cake ice and a sack of sugar and all the rest of it and crank all afternoon. And finally we had something that was wet and sweet and cold. But, you know, I enjoyed that then.

I believe more than I enjoy now these concoctions smothered in goo. And sometimes I feel like saying, Lord, just make me plain vanilla. I like that kind of preaching.

You don't know when you sit down to this new stuff. Now you don't know whether you're supposed to eat it or admire it. I believe we need more of vanilla Christianity.

It's plain faithful day in and day out. We've got two words, fabulous and fantastic. I don't know what we'll do when we have to quit using them.

We're wearing them out. I don't think they'll last long. The Bible doesn't say a word about us being fabulous and fantastic.

It does say it is required of stewards that a man be found faithful. That's all God ever asked. That's fair enough, isn't it? That's what he asked.

But in 1973, I've been praying for a deeper experience of the Lord. I found myself praying, Lord, at any cost. Bring me to the place where I can sing and not lie about it as I have done.

Once earthly joy I crave, so peace and rest. Now thee alone I seek. Give what is best.

I didn't know what I was asking for. You better watch what you ask God for. He'll take you up on it.

It may not be what you expected. He took away the other half of my life when we had anticipated old age together. And when this dear young lady sang the second number tonight, that got through to me.

Are you sure, dear friend out there, that you're willing to give up the sunshine for the rain? Give up the comfort for the pain if it's what God wants and if it'll make you a better Christian and a better witness? It's one thing to sing it. I thought God was going to heal her, but he didn't. In my daily light, it read right in the middle of all the sickness, this sickness is not unto death, but that God may be glorified.

And I grabbed that and I said, I believe that's my verse. I told my pastor that I believe God's going to raise her up, but he didn't. Then I went back and looked at my verse again, and Jesus said it about Lazarus, and Lazarus died too.

But my Lord meant there's something beyond this immediate death of a purpose beyond, not in the next world, but now. And I found that out. And I wrote that little book that so many of you've been telling me about here again, read, never had such a response to anything in my life, never knew there were as many people with heartaches.

I have become a chaplain to the lonely in the past few years. It's been a marvelous experience. Americans have more amusement and entertainment than any nation on earth.

We've never gotten lonelier people anywhere on earth than we have in America. Lonesome in a crowd, lonesome in the middle of everything, turning to liquor, turning to drugs, turning to everything under the sun. Just plain lonely.

I went out to a big church in Texas, single adults had a conference, and they said, talk to us one time about loneliness. And a dear friend of mine said to me recently, I don't believe you ever get to where you can say Jesus is all I need till he's all you've got. And sometimes you have to get around to that.

Paul said, all that I want, now there was a man for you. The only stocks and bonds he had were stocks for his feet and bonds for his wrists. Sitting in a jail waiting to have his head chopped off.

Said my ambition in life is that I may know him and his. Him, the power of his resurrection, the fellowship of his suffering, and conformity to his death. Most of us, what we want is, what we like is me and mine.

That's what we want. When you get through to him and his, it may be a rough road, but the end is glorious. Oswald Chambers lay in his deathbed and took this same verse that I laid hold of and thought God was going to raise him up, but he didn't.

But Mrs. Chambers took his wonderful writings, put them in the book, going around the world. So I've learned to let God do the thing the way he wants to. When my dear one died at 2.15 on Sunday morning and I preached at 11.

I preached about John the Baptist sending his delegation to Jesus saying, are you the one or do we have to start looking for somebody else? That was a low mark for poor John the Baptist. But my Lord didn't reprimand him. He didn't reprove him.

He said the best thing he ever said about John the Baptist. When John said the poorest thing he ever said about his Lord, he said, go tell him that things are, I'm running on schedule. Blind or seeing, the deaf or hearing, the lame are walking, the lepers are cleansed, and the poor have the gospel preached and then the forgotten beatitude.

Nobody knows this one. Blessed is he whosoever shall not be offended in me. Blessed is the man who doesn't get upset by the way I run my business.

That's what I want to be. And then I found in Psalm 84.6 that the righteous man goes through the valley of Baca, the valley of weeping, and leaves a well. There's a new song out.

I've seen the music, but I haven't heard anybody sing it yet. Leave a well in the valley. God sends you through dark valleys that you may dig a well for somebody else who's coming along.

Fanny Crosby could have sat around the rest of her life and grumbled because they put a polis on her eyes when she was a baby and blinded her for 90 years. But she didn't. She started digging wells.

To God be the glory, blessed assurance, redeemed, how I love to proclaim it. All the way my Savior leads me, draw me nearer, Jesus, keep me near the cross. He hideth my soul, Jesus, is tenderly calling, Savior, more than life to me.

When Jesus comes to reward his servants, rescue the perishing. Someday the silver cord will break. I shall know him, pass me not, O gentle Savior.

That's just a few of them. And not a Sunday goes by that we don't drink from some of those wells. She dug a well in the valley.

That's why God sends you through some valleys. So I want to testify tonight that God has granted me the prayer of my heart. Now also when I am old and gray-headed, O God, forsake me not.

Until I have showed thy strength unto this generation, and thy power to every one that is to come. Put down Psalm 71, 18, make a red ring around it. You're going to be old sometime, maybe, and take that for yourself.

I'm back where I started, nobody but me. But I have found that his grace is sufficient. I'm shipwrecked on God and stranded on omnipotence.

My times are in his hand. Nobody can pluck me out of his hand. I'm graven on the palms of his hand.

I call that having the situation well in hand. That's what he said. As I look back now, beloved, things that used to puzzle me, happenings in my past, I can begin to make out now the lineaments, the lines of the unseen hand.

That's a sweet old song too I wish people would resurrect, the unseen hand. I can begin to make out now some of the outlines of things that once didn't make sense. And I'm on my way home.

Some of you have heard me say it, but I want to say it over. When I was a little boy growing up out there in the country, my dad and I had an understanding that I was to be home no matter where I went in the afternoon. I must be home before dark.

We didn't argue about it. We didn't have much dialoguing back in those days. Father did the monologuing.

He believed he was the head of the family and the rest of us were inclined to agree with him. I find myself today saying, Lord, I'd like to get home before dark. For instance, I'd like to, if it suits the Lord, go before I lose my faculties and can't preach anymore.

I've seen some sad sights in that field. Oh, a dear man in Alabama, a rugged man, had great churches, preached in Tremont Temple as one of them. Looked like the very picture of ruggedness.

I went to see him just shortly before he passed away. And I'm afraid when he looked at me, my face must have, in spite of everything, registered how I felt. They'd take him to church and he'd sit there and cry.

And I can't imagine, I can't imagine that. And I said, Lord, I'd like for you to take me before I go to pieces. Dr. Culbertson loved those lines.

Lord, when thou seest that my work is done, let me not linger on with failing powers. A workless worker in the world of work. I love that.

And God took the doctor before he became an invalid. Well, it doesn't always work out that way, you know. We must leave it with the Lord, but you can have your druthers and God doesn't mind you telling him.

And then I say, Lord, I'd like to get home before dark, before I make some big mistake in the very last chapter, because you can do that. If you're saved, you're saved. But you're never safe as far as your testimony is concerned till you get home.

And I know full well that sometimes that awful blunder can happen. The last chapter, you make some blunder and they'll remember that and forget every blessed thing you did back up the road. And they'll all say, oh, yes, he was the one, she was the one that made the big blunder in the last chapter.

Anthony Eden was a wonderful prime minister of Great Britain. He followed Churchill, a striking man, gifted, brilliant. But he made a blunder at Suez in that matter.

And now when you talk about Anthony Eden, folks will say, Eden, oh, yes, Eden. He was the fellow that got mixed up over at Suez and the thing didn't work out. And so I say, Lord, I'd like to get home before that kind of dark.

And finally, it's turning dark in this world. The lights are going out. Fast falls the even tide.

The darkness deepens. Lord, with me abide. The great short story writer, O. Henry, lived in my town of Greensboro.

The last words he said on earth were, I don't want to go home in the dark. I don't know what he meant, but I know what I mean. Now, it may get darker before it gets brighter, but the lowest ebb will be the turn of the tide, and the darkness is going to precede the dawn.

And I started out as a boy to preach. My father went with me at first, of course. Then when I was old enough to travel, he'd always meet me at the little railroad station at Newton, North Carolina.

That old train would pull up and stop, and I'd look for him standing beside that little old Ford with that old blue serge suit on that hadn't been pressed since the day he bought it. And I'd go up to him, and the first thing he'd say would be, how did you get along? It's been a long time since I've seen Dad. But one of these days, my train's going to roll into the Grand Central.

And I expect to see him not with the old blue serge suit, but in the robes of glory. And I wouldn't be a bit surprised if the first thing he'd say would be, how did you get along? And I think I'll say, Dad, do you remember when I was a kid, I supposed to get in before dark? I want to shake on that, because by the grace of God, I've made it home before dark. And I pray that for every one of you.

Make sure of it. Let's stand, please. Father, help these dear people all to know that there's one way to make it home for sure, and that's the way of the cross that leads home.

All other ways lead the wrong direction. There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but then there are for the ways of death. And help us who name thy name, that we may diligently be faithful to the very finish and make it home before dark.

We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

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