

Psalms 90:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.

Analysis

And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.

This closing verse of Psalm 90 completes the movement from lament over human mortality to prayer for divine blessing. After acknowledging life's brevity and praying for wisdom to use time well (v.12), Moses now prays that God's beauty would rest on believers and that their work would have lasting significance through divine establishment. This transforms the psalm's darkness into hope—though our days are few, God can make them meaningful.

"And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us" (וְיָהִי נָעִם אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ עָלֵינוּ/vihi no'am Adonai Eloheinu aleinu) prays for divine favor and graciousness to rest on God's people. No'am means pleasantness, favor, beauty, delight. This is aesthetic and relational—God's beautiful character manifested in His people's lives, making them attractive, blessed, and joyful. Proverbs 3:17 describes wisdom's ways as "ways of pleasantness" (no'am). Numbers 6:24-26 pronounces priestly blessing: "The LORD bless thee, and keep thee: The LORD make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee."

The phrase "upon us" (aleinu) suggests divine presence resting on believers like the glory cloud rested on the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-35). God's beauty on His people transforms them from the futility described earlier (v.10: "their strength labour and sorrow") into vessels displaying His glory. 2 Corinthians 3:18 declares:

"But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord."

"And establish thou the work of our hands upon us" (יְדִינוּ כּוֹנְנָה עָלֵינוּ/uma'aseh yadeinu konnenah aleinu) prays that human labor would have lasting significance. Ma'aseh (work, deed, action) encompasses all human activity and productivity. Kun (to establish, make firm, set up) asks that God would make temporary human work permanent through His blessing. Without divine establishment, all human work is ultimately futile—"vanity and vexation of spirit" (Ecclesiastes 2:17). But God can grant lasting significance to mortal efforts.

"Yea, the work of our hands establish thou it" (יְדִינוּ כּוֹנְנָה/uma'aseh yadeinu konnehu) repeats the petition with slight variation, emphasizing urgency and importance. Biblical repetition often signals emphasis. The doubled request—establish... establish—expresses desperate desire that brief human life would count for something eternal. This echoes Paul's prayer that believers' "labour is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Theologically, this verse addresses the tension between human mortality and meaningful existence. If we "fly away" (v.10) and our days are "soon cut off," how can anything we do matter? Only if God establishes our work—taking our temporary efforts and granting them eternal significance. Through God's grace, even mundane activities done for His glory gain lasting value. Colossians 3:23-24: "And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ."

Historical Context

Moses wrote this prayer having led Israel for forty years through wilderness wandering. His generation accomplished little outwardly—they wandered, complained, died. Yet Moses prays that even their wilderness years would have lasting significance through God's establishment. Indeed, those forty years shaped Israel's identity, theology, and covenant relationship with God in ways that lasted

millennia.

Ancient Near Eastern kings sought immortality through monuments—pyramids, ziggurats, inscriptions, military conquests. Yet these crumbled or were forgotten. Moses seeks different legacy: not monuments but God's beauty resting on His people and His establishment of their work. This proved more enduring—Moses's legacy through the Torah shaped Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, influencing billions across millennia. Not because Moses was great, but because God established his work.

Solomon's temple construction illustrates this principle. Skilled craftsmen spent years building—work that required strength, creativity, and dedication. Yet without God's presence filling the temple (1 Kings 8:10-11), it would have been mere building. God's dwelling there established the work, making it sacred and significant. When Israel sinned, God departed, and Babylon destroyed the temple—demonstrating that human work's permanence depends on divine establishment, not human effort.

Early church believers lived expectantly, believing Christ would return imminently. Yet 2,000 years later, we still wait. How do we live productively during this extended wait? Psalm 90:17 answers: pray that God establishes our work, making temporary efforts eternally significant. Missionaries translate Scripture, plant churches, disciple believers—work that outlasts their brief lives because God establishes it. Parents raise children in the Lord—investing in next generation's faith. Believers serve faithfully in secular vocations—displaying God's beauty and establishing His kingdom through daily work.

The New Testament emphasizes work's eternal significance when done for Christ. 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 warns that some build with gold, silver, precious stones (work that survives fire), while others use wood, hay, stubble (work that burns). The quality depends on whether work is established by God or built on human ambition. Revelation 14:13 promises: "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them."

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. What does it mean for 'the beauty of the LORD' to be upon you, and how would your life look different if God's beautiful character was clearly visible in you?
2. How do you discern which of your activities are work that God will establish versus work that is ultimately futile ('wood, hay, stubble')?
3. What would change in your daily work—whether career, homemaking, ministry, or other activities—if you prayed daily for God to establish the work of your hands?

Interlinear Text

וְיָהּ יִן	נָ עִם	אֲדָנִי י	אֱלֹהֵי יִנּוּ	עַל יִנּוּ	וְמַעֲשֵׂה ה
H1961	And let the beauty	H136	our God	H5921	thou the work
	H5278		H430		H4639
יִדּ יִנּוּ	כֹּנֶנָּהוּ:	עַל יִנּוּ	וְמַעֲשֵׂה ה	יִדּ יִנּוּ	
of our hands	be upon us and establish	H5921	thou the work	of our hands	
H3027	H3559		H4639	H3027	
כֹּנֶנָּהוּ:					
be upon us and establish					
H3559					

Additional Cross-References

Proverbs 16:3 (References Lord): Commit thy works unto the LORD, and thy thoughts shall be established.

1 Corinthians 3:7 (References God): So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase.

Isaiah 26:12 (References Lord): LORD, thou wilt ordain peace for us: for thou also hast wrought all our works in us.

Psalms 118:25 (References Lord): Save now, I beseech thee, O LORD: O LORD, I beseech thee, send now prosperity.

Job 22:28 (Parallel theme): Thou shalt also decree a thing, and it shall be established unto thee: and the light shall shine upon thy ways.

Psalms 68:28 (References God): Thy God hath commanded thy strength: strengthen, O God, that which thou hast wrought for us.

Psalms 80:3 (References God): Turn us again, O God, and cause thy face to shine; and we shall be saved.

Psalms 80:7 (References God): Turn us again, O God of hosts, and cause thy face to shine; and we shall be saved.

Psalms 110:3 (Parallel theme): Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power, in the beauties of holiness from the womb of the morning: thou hast the dew of thy youth.

Psalms 50:2 (References God): Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined.