

New York Times Bestselling Author

BETH MOORE

chasing vines

Finding your way to
an immensely fruitful life



CHASING VINES





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INTRODUCTION

Here's what I know after decades of life and ministry among myriads of people: *we all want to matter*. The yearning to matter is no respecter of persons. Man or woman; adult or child; religious or irreligious; rich or poor; black, brown, or white—such a longing is sewn in permanent thread within the fabric of every human soul.

The great relief is finding out that the hope is not deferred. You do matter—already—without making one single change. But everything changes when you let your Maker show you why you matter and how He can take all that concerns you and, sooner or later, here or there, subtly or astonishingly, make it matter.

We were created to contribute, fashioned to bring who we are and what we have to the human mix to add some measure of benefit. This was true even in Eden's unmarred paradise. God said to Adam and Eve, in so many words, *Add to it! Work the ground! And the two of you, be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth!*

Jesus elevated the concept to another stratosphere by taking individuals He'd given abundant life to and, by the power of His own Spirit, making their contributions matter not just temporally, as He did with Adam and Eve, but eternally.

By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. . . . You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide.

JOHN 15:8, 16

This idea that our lives matter has been tailing me for as long as I can remember, but now, as I get closer and closer to the finish line, the concept practically haunts me. When I get to the end of my life, I want to know that it meant something. I want to know that my life, in all its fits and starts, mattered.

If you feel the same, it's not just us—God wants our lives to matter too. He means for us to be profoundly effective. That longing in us to contribute, to do something worthwhile, isn't just a self-consumed dream. If we follow Jesus, that's what we can hope to expect from life.

And being fruitful isn't some stale and banal duty. It directly affects how happy we are, because engaging in what God is doing is the only thing that gives us true satisfaction and peace. God is invading the globe with the gospel of Christ, pursuing people from every tongue, tribe, and nation, offering them life, faith, love, hope, deliverance, joy, and a forever future where He reigns as King. Nothing happening on earth is more meaningful or exhilarating. And as we bear much fruit, we get to be part of it.

I know what it's like to fear not being seen. I know what it's like to worry that I'm not of use. I know how easy it is to feel giftless

in a gift-driven society. If you're anything like me, you long to contribute. You long to matter. And you know what? You do.

You don't have to settle for just making it. In Christ, you can make it matter.

+ + +

I have been enamored with Christ's teaching on the vine and the branches since I cut my teeth on Bible study, and I've taught about His call to fruitfulness as an essential part of life's satisfaction for at least twenty years. The spectacular thing about Scripture, however, is that, like no other book held in human hands, its ink may be dry but it is the furthest thing from dead. The words are alive and active, and the Holy Spirit who inspired them can animate the most familiar passage and spring it to fresh life in your soul.

It happened to me in Tuscany a year ago, on a dream trip I took with my daughters, Amanda and Melissa. Beyond the self-centered joy of being with the two of them, my hope for this trip that we'd been planning for ages was to reward them. They didn't ask for the mother they got. By the time my daughters were four and one, I was away virtually every other Friday night—usually just for one night, and their daddy took charge. A few nights a month may not sound like a lot at first blush, but no little girl wants her mommy to leave. Forty years of ministry exacts a toll on a family. Yet my three main people, Keith, Amanda, and Melissa, have somehow managed to resist the woeful punishment of seething resentment. I am blessed beyond expression, inconceivably graced, and pray that God will return it to them in eternal rewards.

But since we aren't in heaven yet, I thought maybe He wouldn't mind getting a jump on it and blessing them with something temporal that I got to be in on before I was so old I couldn't tell the girls apart. I had in mind something that would almost certainly

be useless to the Kingdom except for building up the souls of three Jesus-serving women with good coffee, good food, good conversation, and if laughter is good medicine (and the Bible says it is), enough good laughter to anesthetize a battalion. The Lord didn't seem to object.

I was determined to pay for three round-trip tickets to Italy with frequent flyer miles, not only because I'm cheap, but also for the pure symbolism of returning a deposit to them for all the times I'd boarded an airplane to who-knows-where. It took nearly every mile I'd stashed, but each one was worth it.

Seven hours later, we landed in Florence, the famed cradle of the Renaissance, where we added twenty miles of calluses to the soles of our feet before waving a sad goodbye to Michelangelo's *David*. By the time we boarded a flight back to the States, we had toured Siena, hit up Naples, drove the Amalfi Coast, and stayed several nights in Positano, the iconic spot we'd been promised would be our all-time favorite. We took a motorboat to lunch, rode a ferry to Capri, and spent our final nights in Sorrento. The adventure certainly qualified for a trip of a lifetime—everything we three American women wanted it to be and more. But none of those stops were the scene of my unexpected romance.

My undoing was rural Tuscany. The place was otherworldly. We stayed three nights at an inn twenty minutes from Siena, light years from our lives in Houston. The inn was built on a hillside in the upper quadrant of a vineyard, overlooking other hills that rolled in crestless waves into the horizon. I could stand on the grounds and turn around and around, and every direction I looked, I saw vines.

We weren't savvy enough to time our stay in Tuscany at the tail end of the harvest, or we'd have been insufferably proud of ourselves. Instead, it was an incontrovertible gift of grace to us



WHEN I GET
TO THE END OF
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meant
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neophytes—an unexpected present from God wrapped in ribbons of green, violet, brown, and gold. The only thing we had going for us is that the gift was not wasted on us.

On our way into town by taxi one Tuscan morning, winding through her undulating hills, we saw the last of the harvesters walking the rows—inspecting the vines and clipping the final heavy clusters of fruit. Captivated, I felt like I was watching live reenactments of some of Christ’s own parables (Matthew 20, 21). It was not lost on me that one of His final exhortations to His disciples was, essentially, “Be immensely fruitful” (John 15:5-8).

The trip was just supposed to be a sightseeing vacation, not a Bible study tour, but I couldn’t help myself. I figured if Jesus spent so much time talking about vines, the closer I got to them, the more I stood to learn. If I was going to understand what it means to follow Jesus, I couldn’t skim over this or chalk it up to an extinct cultural phenomenon, gone the way of head coverings and purification rituals. I needed to follow this undeniable tug on my heart.

And that’s where I fell in love, my nose pressed to the window of the taxi, my palms on the glass, like someone trying to escape a carload of kidnappers. That was the beginning of my grape crush. It was Giuseppe Verdi who famously said, “You may have the universe if I may have Italy.” Ah, and you, Giuseppe, may have Italy if I may have her vines.

The image of the vineyard has consumed me ever since that trip, instigating a chase from cover to cover in the sacred pages, to shelves of commentaries and dictionaries. It has sent me into hours of interviews with experts on everything from planting vines to processing grapes into wines, and into a stack of books halfway to the ceiling on the same. With every piece of research, my fascination with vine and branch imagery has grown. God put the song

of the vineyard on my phonograph, set the stylus to vinyl, turned up the volume, and swept me off my feet.

Perhaps you know how the parable goes: sometimes you find a hidden treasure, and in your uncontainable joy, you save up, go back, and buy the whole field (Matthew 13:44). I found a cluster of grapes on a gorgeous vine and couldn't stop myself until I'd dug up the field.

And I don't want to keep the treasure I found in Italy to myself. I want to share it with you. There's a taxi waiting with an open seat. I'll scoot over if you'll climb in, and if you're willing to put your heart into it, you might just fall in love too.

+ + +

In her poem "The Summer Day," Mary Oliver asks an unforgettable question deeply worth pondering:

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?*

That wild and precious life of yours matters—to God and to the world. Not a drop of it is wasted.

Your work matters.
Your gifts matter.
Your tears matter.
Your pain matters.
Your joy matters.
Your hopes matter.
Your dreams matter.
Your successes matter.

Your failures matter.
Your relationships matter.
Your memories matter.
Your childhood matters.
Your past matters.
Your future matters.
Your present matters.

God uses it—all of it. In the hands of the Vinedresser, nothing is dropped. Everything matters.

God wants you to flourish in Him. Every last thing He plants in your life is intended for that purpose. If we give ourselves fully to His faithful ways, mysterious and painful though they may be at times, we will find that it's all part of the process that enables us to grow and bear fruit. Those Tuscan vines will have nothing on us.

And so we find ourselves at a crossroads. If we have guts enough to believe that we were created by God to flourish in Christ, we have a choice to make. Will we sit idly by and wait for it to happen, as if our cooperation isn't part of the process? Or will we set out, light on our feet, with hearts ablaze, and give chase to this call to flourish?

Amid all the vine-chasing we have ahead in these pages, here's the best part: I think we'll find that, all along, the Vine Himself has been chasing us. "Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life" (Psalm 23:6, MSG).

The grapes are ripe. The vineyard awaits. Come, join me in the chase.

PART 1

The Vineyard

The LORD God
planted a garden.

GENESIS 2:8

CHAPTER 1

plant

Eight years ago, in a fit of urban angst, Keith and I pulled up stakes and moved to the country. I'd said I'd never leave that city house. I'd sworn he'd have to bury my cold, stiff body in the backyard, where the bones of our family pets rested in as much peace as our new puppies would allow them. I'd raised two little girls there. They'd driven their Big Wheels up and down that driveway, then their bikes. They'd pulled out of that same driveway, cars bulging with suitcases, towels, and brand-new bedspreads when they'd driven off to college.

But inch by inch, the city had tried to smother us. Every field where we'd walked our dogs, held hands again after quarrels, and cleared our clogged-up lungs of odorous air had been strategically buried under concrete. By the time the fourth storage unit went up within a four-block radius, we were howling at the moon.

We took Keith's parents with us. They lived within a minute

of our front door and had moved to our subdivision so we could share life with them and care for them. We couldn't move without them, and we had no idea if they had the energy—emotional or physical, either one—to pick up and put down all over again. We decided to pop the question over taco salads at their house later that week. “Here’s what we’re thinking. Would you help us find a sliver of woods and go with . . . ?” They were in the car before we were.

That move changed a lot of things for us. Our pace of life slowed, we exchanged the sound of traffic for a nightly chorus of frogs and crickets, and my commute to work went from freeways to two-lane roads, only some of them paved. But perhaps the most surreal change of all stemmed from the plot of land we dug up to make our own vegetable garden.

Once you spend time digging around in your own little patch of dirt and tasting the fruit of your labors, it's hard to eat a tomato the same way again.

And since God is the ultimate Gardener, I have to believe He feels the same way.

+ + +

“In the beginning.”

Creation brought out the earthy side of heaven. On the third day, God created dirt and liked it. In light of His all-knowingness, perhaps we should be more Presbyterian about the matter and say that He liked dirt, so He created it. It is a poor soul who confuses dirt with filth or soil with soiled.

Dirt drapes this spinning rock we call earth with a fine epidermis—pocked, porous, and thirsty. Dirt accommodates ants with both heap and hole. It memorializes every creature afoot,

lizard and leopard alike, with at least a fleeting footprint. The dirt under an elephant's toenails may end up as sunscreen for his delicate hide when he tosses it by trunk onto his back.

The fact is, in the hands of the consummate Potter, dirt is raw material for His wheel.

When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground, and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground . . .

GENESIS 2:5-6

The writer appears to make a point of the sequence of events. There was land but no bush or plant of any kind. No holly, jasmine, or juniper. No hyssop for painting doorposts red. No hydrangea for vases on tables full of bread. And there were no humans to miss them. There was only mist—rain in strange reverse. It came from the underside of the earth, wet enough to dampen the dust if someone wanted to make a mud pie.

The LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed.

GENESIS 2:7-8

After bringing the universe into being by nothing but His voice, God thrust His hands downward into the soil (*adamah* in



GOD LIKES
WATCHING
THINGS

grow.



Hebrew) and fashioned a human (*adam*). Both man and the patch of ground that God ordained to busy and sustain him were the stuff of divine touch. Direct contact.

The English word *human* literally means “a creature of earth,” from the word *humus*, or ground.¹ The humble word *humble* comes from the same origin and means “lowly, near the ground.”² God appointed gravity to keep us there.

The idea of God at arm’s length is a comfortable thought, particularly since the Almighty Himself claimed His arms were not short. We could imagine the Creator with arms long enough to keep His face from getting dusty through the whole creative ordeal, but blowing breath into the human’s nostrils sketches a different posture.

Here we have a Maker leaning low, near to the ground. Here we have God who is high and lifted up but is now bending over, animating dust. God, mouth-to-nose with man.

+ + +

Right about now you might be wondering why, in a book about vines and vineyards, I’ve gone all the way back—literally, to the beginning. My grandmother Minnie Ola Rountree used to say I was one of those people who would recount the invention of the sundial if you asked me what time it was.

I admit it. I am obsessed with origins. I’m also convinced to my bones, and cheerfully so, that most people find origins fascinating, once they see the connections. Before we can mine the riches of vines and grapes, we need some context. We need to set the scene for the vineyard—we need to get down on our knees and dig around in the soil a bit to find out why the process

of growing things is important to God, and therefore why it's important to us.

The LORD God planted a garden in Eden.

GENESIS 2:8

The reason planting is so crucial to appreciating the process is because it is spectacularly deliberate. In life, so many unexplainable things happen that can make a person feel like everything is one enormous accident. Some dots never do seem to connect. Your present job may appear to have nothing to do with your last job. You may feel like what you were trained to do has no link to what you're actually doing.

We long for continuity, for some semblance of purpose—anything that might suggest we're on the right track. Instead, we feel like ashes, leftovers from a bygone fire, blown aimlessly by the wind. We feel like we're not even important enough to be forgotten, because we were never known in the first place.

Our perceptions can be very convincing, but God tells us the truth. Nothing about our existence is accidental. We were known before we knew we were alive. We were planned and, as a matter of fact, *planted* on this earth for this moment in time (Acts 17:26).

When Jesus told His disciples, "My Father is the gardener" (John 15:1, NLT), He wasn't using random imagery to sketch His point. Jesus' Father had waited no longer than Genesis 2:8 to go on record that He is a home gardener. Goodness knows, He could have afforded to contract it out, but we get no glimpse of angelic landscapers.

For those who have a whiff of imagination, the scene here is God Himself with hoe and spade. It's God who's afoot with herbs and bulbs. It's God with the knack and no *Farmers' Almanac*. In

our corner of the world, where most flowerpots are screenshots, it's grounding to remember that humankind's first culture was horticulture. Every time we use the word *culture*, we're talking gardening. In Latin, *cultura* means a cultivated land.

The Bible uses gardening terms for the acts of God time and again. In 2 Samuel 7:10, God is described as appointing a people and not placing them, but rather planting them where He wanted them. Psalm 94:9 says God planted the ear on man, and according to Luke 22:51, Jesus could also clearly replant one, should that be necessary. Words like *rooted* and *uprooted* and *grounded* all speak the language of horticulture.

Out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.

GENESIS 2:9

God made to spring up. It's a wonder that God would choose to slowly grow what He could have simply created grown. Why on earth would He go to the trouble to plant a garden forced to sprout rather than commanding it into existence, full bloom? Why leave His desk and get His pant legs soiled?

Because God likes watching things grow.

+ + +

Several years passed from the time we hatched our dream of moving to the country until the moving vans pulled up to our curb. We spent countless evenings driving the outskirts of Houston in search of a small chorus of trees whispering "Welcome home" to four city-weary warriors. We finally found them down a long dirt road that was only one car's width.

To preoccupy ourselves through the drawling, hair-pulling, haggling months of home building, we had a rectangle of land ploughed up for a vegetable garden. All spring long, we made the drive out to those woods on dirt roads so rock pocked it sounded like our tires were driving over Bubble Wrap.

Once we reached our destination, our only amenities were four rusty lawn chairs we'd leave leaned up against a pine tree. We'd unfold them, their stiff joints screeching, and brush pine needles and spiderwebs off the seats. As long as the bird droppings were dry, we'd just go ahead and sit on them. Country living demanded a certain heartiness, after all.

We watered those mounds, walked the rows, steadied the stakes, and pulled up the weeds. But most of the time we just sat in those four lawn chairs and stared that garden down, willing our little plants to grow. And lo and behold, they did. Even a fallen Eden recollects how to delight fallen humans. Our tomato plants were a little on the leggy side, but the stems were spry and sinewy. Every tiny orb was love at first sight.

"We grow our own food," we'd say over and over while we sat in our lawn chairs gnawing our drive-thru Kentucky Fried Chicken down to the bones.

When our melons were no larger than boiled eggs, we swore we'd enter them in a contest and win. We railed about pests gnawing our squash. We used words like *blight* and *nymph* and *hornworm* like we knew what they meant. Keith and his dad turned into ten-year-old boys, cussing and spitting and poorly digesting. His mom and I clawed at mosquito bites and wished for verve enough to squat behind the bushes. It was the best of times.

I was neck deep in commentaries, studying a Bible lesson, when I got the call at work. "We have a ripe tomato."

Before the sun could set on that beginner's paradise, we farming

posers were sitting foursquare in our lawn chairs, Big Pops holding up a tomato no bigger than a five-year-old's fist, like Rafiki holding up Simba. He drew his pearl-handle pocketknife from his faded overalls with ceremonial slowness and slid the short, stained blade through the meat twice to quarter it. Juice dripped merrily into his palm. There was no rinsing. No salting. No adding to. No taking away.

Grinning from ear-to-ear, with tomato pulp atop our chins and seeds between our teeth, we waved our firstfruits before God with gleeful hearts and received it the way the earth offered it.

Have you ever wondered why God goes to the trouble of sanctifying us? He could instantly zap us into His image the moment we decide to follow Jesus, or He could transport us into heaven the moment of our conversion. Why would He opt for taking us through the long, drawn-out process of planting, watering, pruning, and harvesting? But sure enough, He rolls up His sleeves, puts palms to the dirt, and begins putting the pieces of our lives together in a way that matters.

I think it's because He's not looking for a store-bought tomato. He wants the real thing, raised by His own hands, hard won as it is.

To a gardener, grown is overrated. It's growing it that makes the fruit sweet.