

Vanity of Self-Sufficiency

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Date: 15 April 2020

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- [0 : 00] Heavenly Father, we long to see your name exalted and the pride of man humbled.
And that's the aim of this psalm. So Lord, we pray that you would humble us and bring us down so low to a point where we accurately assess who we are in light of how great you are.
So that in our humility, in our emptiness, you might exalt us, you might fill us, you might be all in all.
That you might finally receive the glory that is due to your name in our lives. In Jesus' name we pray.
Amen. Psalm 127, verses 1 to 5. Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.
- [1 : 31] Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go lay to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil.
For he gives to his beloved sleep. Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb, a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth.
Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them. He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate. This is God's holy and authoritative word.
There's a famous saying that you guys may have heard of. It says, Man proposes, but the Lord disposes. It's a famous translation of a Latin phrase that Thomas DeCempis made famous through his book, The Imitation of Christ.
The Imitation of Christ. It's really a distillation of Proverbs 19, 21, which many of you are familiar with. Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.
- [2 : 48] Because there is a widespread illusion among humankind that we are masters of our own fate. But the truth is that we control an infinitesimally small fraction, a small fraction of the myriad factors in life, in the world, in society, and around us that affect us, influence us.
In fact, we are not in control at all if we really reflect on that reality. And Psalm 127 is a timely reminder of that, that we should engage all of our endeavors with conscious dependence on the Lord.
The first two verses, the first trophy, talks about the vanity of self-sufficiency. And then verses three to five talk about the blessedness of God dependency.
So let's look at verses one to two. First, it repeats the phrase in vain three times. Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.
Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil, for he gives to his beloved sleep.
- [4 : 00] The word vanity here means worthlessness or futility, that it's futile, that it is for naught, it's a waste to engage in these activities apart from the Lord's superintendence.

First, it says, unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. The Hebrew word for house is often used in scripture to refer to God's temple, the house of God.

And for a number of reasons, I think that's the original context in which this psalm was composed. And I think it had the house and the household of God in view at first.

First, if you look at the subtitle of the psalm, we know that it belongs to a collection that we've been in for a few months now, the Songs of Ascent, Psalms 120 to 134.

The consistent theme of all the psalms in this collection, Songs of Ascent, is that it captures a longing for Jerusalem and for God's temple. It depicts this metaphorical ascent toward the dwelling place of God.

[5 : 08] And secondly, the rest of the subtitle says, of Solomon. So, this means either that Solomon composed the psalm or that the psalm deals with the circumstances that are related to Solomon.

And verse 1 can be referring to the time when Solomon, of course, was building up Jerusalem and constructing the temple of God, the house of God. And then, thirdly, verse 2 says, the Lord gives to his beloved sleep.

The phrase, his beloved, is likely a reference to Solomon because we know from 2 Samuel chapter 12 verse 24 and 25 that the Lord's beloved is Solomon's nickname.

It says in that passage, in that verse, 2 Samuel 12, 24, 25, the Lord loved Solomon and sent the message by Nathan the prophet. So, he called his name, Solomon's name, Jedediah because of the Lord.

Jedediah means, literally, the Lord's beloved. It's the same word that's used here in this psalm. So, the subtitle gives us a clue to that, of Solomon. So, if Solomon wrote Psalm 127 as the subtitle seems to suggest or if that's the original background in which the psalm was written, Solomon understood that unless the Lord builds his house, unless the Lord watches over his city, even the diligent construction efforts by the greatest architects and engineers and craftsmen, builders, even the vigilant defense of the bravest military would be for nothing.

[6 : 46] It would all be waste. But this doesn't mean that the psalm only applies to Solomon's original context. We know that this poem was included in the Psalter for God's people to use in corporate worship for generations to come.

So, we know that's not the only context in which it applies. The word house is generic. It can refer not only to God's temple, but it can also refer to people's houses, literal, physical houses, or to their households, their families.

And the rest of the psalm does seem to apply the phrase more generically in that way, to build a house in a metaphorical sense of building one's family as well. And so then, we can apply this to our own lives in a number of ways, and we could ask ourselves the questions like this, what is the house that you are laboring to build in your life?

What is the city that you are watching over in your life? What do you worry about in life? However you answer that question, if the Lord is not in the picture, this psalm is telling us that it's in vain, it's futile, worthless.

If we examine our lives, I think often we substitute our own names in the place of the Lord. If you look at verse 1, unless Sean builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.

[8 : 15] Unless Sean watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. That's what I do sometimes in my sinfulness, right? What arrogance and self-importance we are obsessed with how vital we are to our families and to our society, but the Lord says, no, that's not the truth.

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. Unless the Lord builds the church, all pastors labor in vain.

we are not in control of our own lives. Our strict diet, exercise regimen for our health and well-being can be derailed by cancer or a car wreck.

Our disciplined study and diligent work for our career success can be derailed by a recession. Our best laid plans can be derailed by a pandemic. And these are only the most dramatic examples, right?

There are countless ways to demonstrate that we are simply not in control of our own lives. Now, I'm not saying forget about these things altogether.

[9 : 25] We should work diligently. We should take care of ourselves. We should be prudent. I mean, eating Oreos and drinking Coca-Cola every day, trusting that God's going to keep you healthy is not faith.

That's presumption, right? That's not entrusting ourselves to God's purposes and priorities. That's co-opting God for our purposes and priorities, right?

Similarly, being irresponsible during a pandemic and attending packed rock concerts and playing flag football with a whole bunch of people, presuming upon God's extraordinary protection while neglecting the ordinary means of protection that he has given us is not faith but presumption.

It's difficult to balance this sometimes because presumption often masquerades as faith and faithlessness often masquerades as wisdom. And Numbers 13-14 give us a good example give us good examples of both.

After the Israelite spies returned from surveying the land of Canaan, the land that the Lord had promised to give them, they bring a discouraging report saying, all the people we saw in it are of great height and there we saw the Nephilim, the sons of Anak who come from the Nephilim and we seem to ourselves like grasshoppers and so we seem to them.

[10 : 43] So think about it from a worldly perspective. Would you want to go fighting against a society full of LeBron Jameses? Would you want to fight against a society full of Olympic athletes even when they outnumber you?

That makes no sense. That is stupid. That is worldly-wise foolish. And so at that point people lose courage and rebel against the Lord saying it would have been better for them to stay in Egypt but Joshua and Caleb challenged them saying, the land which we passed through to spy it out is an exceedingly good land.

If the Lord delights in us He will bring us into this land and give it to us. A land that flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the Lord and do not fear the people of the land for they are bred for us.

Literally, that's like, I guess that's Hebrew idiom for saying piece of cake. You know, they're bred for us. Their protection is removed from them and the Lord is with us.

Do not fear them. Now the people, however, don't listen to Joshua and Caleb and they try instead to stone him to death forcing the Lord to intervene and show up in His glory to put the fear of God back into their hearts.

[11 : 51] And as a punishment for their faithfulness the Lord decrees that Israel will have to wander the wilderness for 40 years and none of the people who grumbled against Him will enter the promised land. Only their children and Joshua and Caleb who are faithful to Him.

And now at that point people regret what they have done and they proceed to march toward battle against the Amalekites and the Canaanites despite the fact that the Lord had already declared that He's no longer with them in battle.

And so it says in Numbers 14 verses 44 to 45 Now this episode is a picture of a contrast between faith and presumption.

Joshua and Caleb had faith that God would give them victory in line with His purposes and priorities. The people of Israel on the other hand vacillated between faithlessness and presumption which are actually two sides of the same coin because both have man rather than God at the center of their outlook.

Measuring their military strength up against that of the Canaanites and judging their prospect for victory purely in human terms without putting God in the equation and then losing courage and refusing to go up in the battle.

[13 : 18] That's faithlessness. Of course from the point of worldly wisdom it was stupid and foolish to fight when your strength is small compared to that of your enemies but it's not stupid if God is on your side.

Likewise insisting on going up into battle when you are outnumbered and when you don't have God's special assurance of deliverance thinking that you could win that's presumption.

we have to avoid both. Now in our area where we live in Cambridge a city full of competent people self-sufficient people we more often find faithlessness masquerading as wisdom.

Many people are anxious and fearful because they believe that they are masters of their own fate and that is the truth if you come to grip with it a terrifying possibility if that is true.

But verse 2 exhorts us otherwise it says it is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest eating the bread of anxious toil for he gives to his beloved sleep.

[14 : 28] So let me ask you these questions what keeps you up at night? What preoccupies you with anxiety? maybe it is what people think of you maybe it is concern of keeping yourself and or your family and friends healthy maybe it is making sure that you are getting paid and putting food on the table maybe it is advancing your career being successful you might you know be more careful with sanitary things and social distancing than anybody else in the world you might work more hours than anybody else in the world you might study harder than anybody else in the world you might be more gifted than anybody else in the world but it is all in vain if the Lord is not with you in your endeavors that is the vanity of self-sufficiency especially for the Christian and then in contrast in verses 3-5 the psalmist gives us this picture of the blessedness of God dependency he says behold children are a heritage from the Lord the fruit of the womb a reward notice the contrast in verse between verse 2 and verse 3 it's described as the bread of anxious toil that we lose sleep over always toiling trying to earn our way towards survival and self-advancement and contrast that with the phrase of verse 3 the fruit of the womb of reward not anxious toil but a reward that God graciously gives and this is the picture of what happens when the Lord builds a house the Lord builds the household children are a heritage through the womb a reward it's given by the Lord not earned by clawing our way and pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps and then verse 4 continues so the two images of building one's house and one's household and of watching over a city guarding a city in verse 1 both of those have their kind of matching sections in verses 3 to 5 children are heritage fruit of the womb of reward and our children that we're blessed with when we're in our youth they grow up and are able to stand with us to defend us and to come by our side like arrows in the hand of a warrior this is the city this is the household that is built up securely that is protected by the Lord and that is described not as in vain it's not vanity but rather it is blessedness our own striving and our own and our own self-sufficiency is vanity but our striving in the Lord in God dependency is blessedness verse 5 blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them he shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate and and ultimately like all the psalms and like all passages of scripture this is fulfilled in the Lord Jesus who is the who is described in 1 Corinthians as the builder the one who who builds the household of God ultimately in in the strength of the Lord in the spirit of the Lord and he does everything well and and he was a picture

during his life of being completely entrusted to his father saying and doing only what he saw his father say and do and and in in perfect example of that he died on the cross in obedience to the father in perfect submission not not working for the bread of anxious toil but trusting his father resting in him and out of that came the fruitful the fruit of the womb a reward the fruit of many children in the household of God all of our salvation and and and that is what gives us all when we hope that even even when the circumstances in this world are not ideal even when things are not going the way we would like it is God dependency that is blessed not self-sufficiency and and when we trust in him and live in that way God we our lives too will be fruitful in much the same way Jesus life even though it may have looked like a tragedy from a worldly point of view was fruitful towards salvation of many so let's um