

Psalm 127: A Song of Meaning

Theme: A life not built on God is meaningless.

Psalm 127

- 1 Unless the Lord builds a house, its builders labor over it in vain;
unless the Lord watches over a city, the watchman stays alert in vain.
2 In vain you get up early and stay up late, working hard to have enough food—
yes, he gives sleep to the one he loves.
3 Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord, offspring, a reward.
4 Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons born in one's youth.
5 Happy is the man who has filled his quiver with them.
They will never be put to shame when they speak with their enemies at the city gate.

Icebreaker: Have each member of the group answer the following questions. These questions allow the conversation to start off in safety and fun.

- What was one of your dream jobs when you were younger?
- What work would it have taken to achieve this position?
- Why did you decide to choose an alternate career?

Opening Prayer:

Heavenly Father, eternal watcher and sustainer, help us to understand this week's psalm. Not simple to understand it in our head, but to feel in our heart and to live in in our lives. May it reframe our story and reshape our perspective as we walk with you and ascend to your house. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Opening Meditation: Listening Prayer

At the start of the session, you will read through Psalm 127 three times. You can use the version above (Christian Standard Bible), another version, or three different versions.

Have your group sit and listen. Invite them to listen for a theme in this Psalm. Listen for repeated phrases that are echoed in this psalm. Listen for words or ideas that resonate with them. Listen for God to speak to you through this psalm.

Discuss:

- What was something that you heard, felt, or experienced while listening to this psalm?
- Were there any word or phrase that resonated with you in this Psalm?
- What do you think is the central theme or message from this psalm?
- Did you sense any connection between this psalm and other scripture?
- What questions about this psalm came to mind as you listened?

Sermon Discussion: This past Sunday we explored Psalm 127 in worship. Take some time to review the sermon, discussing the themes, application, and questions

- What were some of lessons of Psalm 127 that were discussed during the sermon?
- How did these lessons connect with you and your spiritual life?
- How were you encouraged to apply the lessons from this psalm to your life?

- Share any questions or concerns that came to you from this week's sermon?
- How can the lessons from this Psalm help you on your spiritual journey?

Opening Quote: Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

Psalm 127 shows a way to work that is neither sheer activity nor pure passivity. It doesn't glorify work as such, and it doesn't condemn work as such. If we want simple solutions in regard to work, we can become workaholics or dropouts. If we want to experience the fullness of work, we will do better to study Psalm 127.

Unless/Vain: In verse one of Psalm 127, two statements are made that begin with "unless" and ends with "in vain."

- What is the primary message in these two statements?
- What might the psalmist mean when they say, "Unless the Lord?"
- Why might a person's efforts be "in vain?"
- What does it mean that a person's work/effort is "in vain?"

Perhaps Psalm 127 echoes the words of Solomon in Ecclesiastes 1:2

(KJV) *Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.*

(NIV) *"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher, "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."*

(CSB) *"Absolute futility," says the Teacher. "Absolute futility. Everything is futile."*

Verse 2 of Psalm 127 enhances this message, *"In vain you get up early and stay up late."*

- Do you ever feel this way? Why?
- How would it feel to know that all that you work for is "in vain," "meaningless," and "futile."
- So, if all we do is in vain, then what is the point? Is that the message the psalm is trying to convey?

Read this excerpt from *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

Some people have read these verses and paraphrased them to read like this: "You don't have to work hard to be a Christian. You don't have to put yourself out at all. Go to sleep. God is doing everything that needs to be done." St. Paul had to deal with some of these people in the church at Thessalonica. They were saying that since God had done everything in Christ there was nothing more for them to do. If all effort ends up in godless confusion or in hypocritical self-righteousness, the obvious Christian solution is to quit work and wait for the Lord to come. With a magnificent redeemer like our Lord Jesus Christ and a majestic God like our Father in heaven, what is there left to do? And so they sat around, doing nothing. Meanwhile they lived "by faith" off their less spiritual friends. Unfriendly critics might have called them freeloaders. Paul became angry and told them to get to work: "We're getting reports that a bunch of lazy good-for-nothings are taking advantage of you. This must not be tolerated. We command them to get to work immediately-no excuses, no arguments-and earn their own keep. Friends, don't slack off in doing your duty" (2 Thess 3 :11-13). How did they dare to reinterpret the gospel into a rationalization for sloth when he, Paul, from whom they had learned the gospel, worked his fingers "to the bone, up half the night, moonlighting so you wouldn't have the burden of supporting us while we proclaimed God's Message" (1 Thess 2:9).

- Have you ever known someone with the perspective to "quit work and wait for the Lord to come?" What does that look like?
- Why was Paul angry with people "slacking off" in their Christian responsibilities?

- How would that perspective produce a vain, meaningless, futile faith?
- So, what do you think is the right perspective of work, so that it is not “in vain?”

Unless the Lord builds a house... unless the Lord watches over a city—yes, he gives sleep to the one he loves. (Psalm 127:1-2)

Read this excerpt from *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

Our work goes wrong when we lose touch with the God who works "his salvation in the midst of the earth." It goes wrong both when we work anxiously and when we don't work at all, when we become frantic and compulsive in our work and when we become indolent and lethargic in our work. The foundational truth is that work is good. If God does it, it must be all right. Work has dignity: there can be nothing degrading about work if God works. Work has purpose: there can be nothing futile about work if God works.

- How might work be different than a job?
- How has work (not necessarily your job) provided meaning and purpose instead of futility?
- How can you find meaning and purpose in work, even when it feels futile at times?
- Peterson declares. "Work is good, if God does it." What does it mean that God works?
- Share an experience of how joining with God in work has been good for you and others?

Trigger Warning: Verses 3-5 might be upsetting to those who have chosen not to have children, were unable to have children, or have chosen not to have a “quiver full” of them. Be cautious when discussing these verses. Thankfully Peterson helps us understand that the “children” mentioned in these verses does not have to be biological, but relational.

Read this excerpt from *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

By joining Jesus and the psalm we learn a way of work that does not acquire things or amass possessions but responds to God and develops relationships. People are at the center of Christian work. The character of our work is shaped not by accomplishments or possessions but in the birth of relationships. We invest our energy in people. Among those around us we develop sons and daughters, sisters and brothers even as our Lord did with us...

Work is a way of being in creative relationship with another. Such work can be done within the structure of any job, career or profession. As Christians do the jobs and tasks assigned to them in what the world calls work, we learn to pay attention to and practice what God is doing in love and justice, in helping and healing, in liberating and cheering.

Peterson suggests that the work of God is found in relationships.

- Why are relationships essential to the work of God?
- How have you seen that work in your life? How have people investing their energy in your provided you with Godly meaning and purpose?
- How have you invested in others, seeing them discover their Christian meaning?
- How can the small group be an act of work and an d inspiration for it's members to be about God's work this week?

Optional Musical Interlude: Listen to Psalm 127 by Poor Bishop Hooper, reflecting on the words and music, allowing God to speak through this psalm into your heart.www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWXPhcWlrao

Final Thoughts: From Timothy Keller's *The Songs of Jesus* (pg. 333).

Prosperity and security are not ultimately your accomplishments, but God's gifts. So overwork, worry, and strain are foolish and wrong. So too thriving, happy children (relationships) are God's doing. Helicopter parenting and over involvement in our 'children's' lives, cannot insure their health and happiness. Unless the Lord enters their lives, all our watching is in vain. Giving our 'children' to God is the only way we can get to keep them. If you know that the one who loves you unfailingly is in complete charge of history, you will be able to sleep well. If you are overworked and overstressed, you are forgetting who God is. Jesus said it most bluntly: 'Apart from me, you can do nothing.' (John 15:5).

Application: Work this week. Invest in a relationship, sharing the love of Christ and provide meaning for you and those you spend time with.

Discuss:

- What is something you discovered today during our study of Psalm 127?
- How will this psalm help you through life's journey this week and beyond?
- How can you apply this psalm to your life this week?
- How can you support the people in your group as they journey through Psalm 127?

Closing Prayer: Invite the group to share any prayer requests for the week ahead. Then have one person close in prayer or invite the group to pray for each other.