

# Psalm 127 • The futility of human effort

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Chapter 127 is a Psalm that is written by Solomon and it's one which highlights the futility of human effort apart from God. How many of you have learned that human effort apart from God is a futile thing?

And this Psalm begins in verse 1 by saying, check this out,

*"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." (ESV)*

Now, in the first verse here of this particular Psalm, we see two areas of human effort that are deemed as vain. And remember the word vain means empty. If somebody says, hey, don't use the LORD's name in vain..., that means don't use the LORD's name for no reason, or for an empty reason. You're just saying it to say it. You're not addressing Him. You're not talking about Him. You're just using His name, perhaps as an obscenity or something like that. It's an empty sort of a thing.

Well, this Psalm says, that unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it, or those who labor in the building of it, do so for emptiness or for empty reasons. And of course, building a house could be metaphoric here of all kinds of efforts that we engage in. Because we build a lot of things in this life. And if the Lord isn't in them, we're going to end up laboring in vain.

Because whatever is attempted in life, whatever you're trying to do: whether you're trying to have a relationship with someone, whether you're trying to build your home, whether you're trying to build your business, whether you're trying to even be a better person, there's always two ways to go about things. And to approach whatever effort or thing that we're trying to do.

And the first, of course, is to charge ahead: with our own plan, our own method, our own agenda, our own timetable, our own resources. And just go, boom! And of course, that's the way we've all lived. We've all done it that way at some time in our lives. Hopefully, the older we get in the Lord, the more we're realizing, I'm just banging my head against a wall when I do it that way. Because I'm using my own effort, my own resources, my own power. And I'm very, very, very limited. My knowledge, my insight is very, very limited.

If I'm going to depend on myself and myself alone, yeah, sure, I might be able to sing that song, I did it My Way. Big deal. Some of these young guys are like, Huh? But ultimately it's going to be, it's going to be just all human effort and it's going to peter out.

Of course, the other way to look at what I'm doing in life, is to wait on the Lord is to spend time in prayer and to rely on His resources, His timing, His guidance, His direction, His wisdom, to do it His way. And what a better song to sing. Right? I did it His Way.

And yet you have to understand, and you have to admit, honestly that it's unnatural for us to do things that way. That was one of the best things for me to come to terms with at some point in my life. Is that following the Lord, and relying on God, is unnatural for me.

And what I mean is, the natural man, meaning, Paul the fleshly man is directed towards self at all times. And that means, if there's something that I see that needs to be done, Paul is the one who naturally just steps forth and starts to do it. And I do things in my own strength and that's comes very naturally.

It is a supernatural thing to rely on the Lord. Okay. To trust God, to go with His timing instead of mine. To go with His wisdom instead of mine. To go with His agenda instead of mine. That's a supernatural thing. And it's something we have to be very conscious of.

There's a statement in the Proverbs that goes along with this theme that we're looking at. Let me put this on the screen for you from Proverbs chapter 10.

It says,

**Proverbs 10:22 (NIV84)**

*The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it.*

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And I've always loved this verse because it... The world is chasing after wealth all the time, almost everybody, and even Christians. Don't say you've never been tempted by a lottery sign telling you how many millions you can get if you just waste your money on a lottery ticket. And of course, the whole idea behind it is that so many people are going to waste their money that there's going to be

money for somebody to win. But of course you have a better chance of being struck by lightning.

But anyway, the point is the Proverb says, God gives wealth and He adds no trouble to it. Right? What that means is, when the Lord is behind the process, there's a blessing that goes along with it that is not accompanied by trouble. So many times when we try to make our own way, and do our own thing, and go our own direction, in our own wisdom, "my, my, my everything," I just make trouble for myself. And it just ends up just falling flat.

I think about Abraham and Sarah, of course, every time this idea comes into my mind. Because here's Abraham and Sarah, they're being promised by God that they're going to have a child. But they're getting old. Sarah is upwards of 90 years old by this time. And Abraham's about a 100.

And God has had told them some thirty, twenty-five, thirty years earlier, yes, you're going to have a child. And finally, Sarah says, well listen, this isn't going to happen this way. Because there's just no natural way that this is going to take place. Let's make an arrangement. Here's my slave girl, Hagar. You go ahead and just marry her and she'll have a baby. And we'll call it the promise of the Lord.

And what they ended up doing is they ended up working the whole thing out in their own strength, and power, and wisdom. And they ended up having a child. Yeah! And his name was Ishmael, and he was a problem child, and he continues to be a problem child to this day to the Israelites.

And, how many Ishmaels have we created?...", I think to myself. I've given birth to several. Several little babies called Ishmael. And basically it's just my own effort. It's those things that I stepped out to do in my own effort. And it just went, it just fell flat because the Lord wasn't in it. And sometimes we even do things we... that look like the Lord is in it.

I've told you guys before. Some of you that have been around here back when we were living in Washington. Sue and I decided to start a ministry. And because we live near Puget Sound, we called it, Sound Teaching Ministries. Catchy name, right? Everybody knows if you're going to have a successful ministry, you got to have a catchy name.

We came up with a catchy name. And we even had a logo. I can't remember what it looked like, but it was cool. And I put together all these Bible studies that I'd been teaching because I was on staff at a church as a teaching pastor.

And I was in charge of all their small groups. And I started putting these together and I started thinking, "You know what? I could market these. Yeah, that's what I'll do!"

I came up with a catchy name, a catchy logo. And I started sending out letters to churches all around the Seattle, Tacoma area. And it...The silence was deafening. It literally, I mean, it went nowhere. I mean, it went zero. It just fell flat on its face.

And at one particular point in my discouragement, the Lord spoke to my heart. And He said, did you think I gave you that gift for you to market it? Hmm, Okay. Yep. Sorry about that. I guess I ran off in my own strength, huh?

Yeah. We've all done it. Right? You could get up right now and tell some stories of your own. Some Ishmaels' that you've given birth to in your life. Well, hey, unless the Lord builds the house, they that labor, labor in vain.

The second part of verse 1 says, *"Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain."* And of course, this statement reminds us that our ultimate security is in the hands of the Lord. Because watching over a city is something they would do to try to get a leg up on an approaching enemy. You had people who are lookouts. Right? Literally, gatekeepers. And they were watching out. They're making sure that things remain secure. Because they want to see if an enemy is on the way.

Well, here it says, unless the LORD watches over that city, they that stay awake through the watches of the night to make sure there's no enemy approaching, do so in vain. And it means, that unless you and I are truly depending on God, anything that we do in the way of taking precautions or preparing for a rainy day, like we like to do, is never going to be enough. Because it's not going to truly keep us safe. Or provide for us in a time of difficulty if we're not depending on the Lord.

We're so good at coming up with things for insurance. And I'm not suggesting you shouldn't have insurance. I'm not saying that at all. I'm simply saying that if that's where your, if that's where your hope is, if that's where your confidence is, then you might be in for a rude awakening. Because those things can be gone in just the snap of a finger.

The Lord is the one who gives us a real sense of security. And that's the point. The point is that the person who trusts in the Lord, is the one who's ultimately

going to find rest and peace. And be able to go forth in life and say, "You know what? It's in God's hands. It's in God's hands.

And this can be a real life changing sort of a realization when we come to terms with the idea that the Lord is protecting my life. And I need to just stop worrying all the time, or stop trying to make it secure in my own strength. You know what I mean?

Have you ever seen one of those yard signs people like to put...This property is insured by Smith and Wesson, or something like that. It's like... Yeah! You know what the problem with that is, somebody has always got a bigger weapon. Somebody has always got a bigger gun. You got your Smith and Wesson, that guy has a cannon!

And the point is - nobody is bigger than God! And that's what we have to remember when we're looking for protection. And when we're looking at life and just saying, am I safe? Am I secure? If my safety and my security is in myself, then I got a problem. Right? Then it's a vain thing. But my safety and my security needs to be in the Lord.

Verse 2 goes on to say,

*"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."*

And the next area of futility that is given to us here apart from God, is the area of work. Labor. And by the way, this can even be the ministry. And what he's talking about here is the fact that so many people live their lives laboring away. Working long hours ignoring or neglecting the things that are really important in life.

But working long hours, anxiously toiling away to build up their investment portfolio, or be able to buy that new car, or that new luxury condo, or whatever the place might be. I want to get that coveted vacation package. I'm working hard this year to be the top salesman, or whatever the thing might be.

And according to this Psalm, all they're doing is *"eating the bread of anxious toil;..."* Ewww, doesn't sound like a very good thing to eat, *"eating the bread of anxious..."* You know what we call that today in our culture? Stress. *"...eating the bread of anxious toil;"* is a simple poetic name for stress.

And in our culture, we are so stressed out. Have you ever noticed how people talk? Some of you who are older, you guys know that stress is an interesting term that has become much more popular in the last couple of decades. I don't remember it being talked about as much as we talk about it today. And now today is the day we have all these wonderful conveniences and this and that. We seem to be under more stress than ever.

And we're going through all these motions, as the psalm says here in verse 2. We rise early; we go to bed late; we eat the bread of anxious toil; and he says, it's vanity. It's vain. It's empty. It's empty.

Do you know that for some people, life is only: going to work, making money, buying things, and having... and being happy. That's all life is. And you know what? That's a very shallow life. And eventually it will prove itself to be so.

Now, as we get into these final verses in this short psalm, we see how the Lord goes on to bless a home. And this is interesting. And you'll find out it's through the giving of children.

Look at verse 3. It says,

*"Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward."*

Wow! Notice that children are declared here to be two things: a heritage and a reward from God. A heritage and a reward. Now, what you're reading here in this Psalm is God's perspective on children. You have to understand that. And the reason we know that is because sometimes we don't see it that way.

I remember there was an effort back in the 1990s, I think it was... And I think it was probably, born out of the right motives, but the wrong methodology. But do you guys remember, there were a lot of public service announcements playing on TV and stuff like that - that were trying to discourage young people from having unwanted pregnancies? But they were doing it by characterizing children as a burden and as an encumbrance. Do you guys remember that? I remember seeing a lot of those.

And it was basically, they wanted you to think that if you have a baby when you're too young, you're going to be miserable. That baby is going to make you miserable. Now, do you want to be miserable? And that was their effort of getting people to not have unwanted pregnancies.

And I remember thinking to myself, that's not what God thinks about children. And here we have to encourage people not to have babies by trying to tell them that this is just going to be a big fat ball and chain, you guys. And that's pretty much all it's going to be. So don't...

In fact, you know what? Do you remember they used to give these girls, and I don't, maybe they still do this. But in public school they used to give girls these baby dolls that looked like real babies. And you had to... They would just cry at any given time in the middle of the night or something like that. And you had to get up and tend to them. And it was a project these girls had to do for like a couple of weeks during school, to see what it was like having a real baby.

I'm sorry. That's not what it's like having a real baby. We had... We raised four of them in our home. And you know what? It's different when they look like you. It's different when you really, truly, love them. And they don't have Mattel stamped on their behind or something. Or you don't have to put in batteries. Or plug them in to charge them up, or something like that. It's a completely different thing when it's your own baby. But here they're trying to tell girls. This is what it's like being a mother.

And I remember one of... We were meeting over in the small sanctuary back then. And we were packed. And one of these girls brought one of these babies to church. And she was sitting on this inside row against the wall. And we were so packed in there, it was hard to get out. And her baby started crying. And it was one of those fake babies.

And I was in the middle of teaching. And this baby's doing this, WAAAN! WAA AN! WAN! And the thing won't shut up! And I don't think they could turn them off. Because that's the point. You've got to learn what it's really like to have a crying baby. You can't just go, NNN! (Pastor Paul simulates pushing a button) We all wish we could do that with our kids at some particular point. So, this girl's just sitting there with this baby looking panicked. And I tell you, I wanted to go rip the batteries out of that thing.

But, I love the fact that God says, from His perspective, children enhance our lives. They enhance our lives. Check out these last couple of verses.

Verse 4,

*"Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth.*

*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."*

Now here, the psalmist is using a metaphor where the father is pictured like a warrior, if you will. And he's... And his children are likened to arrows that he carries with him into battle, into the battle. It's an interesting picture, isn't it?

And, I've never been an archer. I've never used a bow and arrow in warfare. I can't say that I understand all the dynamics of that. But I have to believe going into war, if you have a bow and arrow as your primary weapon, that your arrows are indispensable, I would have to assume. Right? And I think that there's something related to that, that the children are to be seen in the same way.

And it's interesting, when you read these verses, we're really not given the full interpretation of this thing. It simply says that children are like arrows in the hand of a warrior. And we're left to think through what that means. What the implications of that are. And how an archer would actually use those and so forth. It'd probably be good to have somebody get up and - who's been an archer - to talk about that. And how they depend upon their arrows and so forth.

But you'll notice that this passage, in this psalm, doesn't really go into child raising. We don't get like child raising tips here, although it's implied. It's implied here. And I've read some commentaries on these verses where some commentators go into great detail about the making of an arrow. And how it has to be finally crafted in order to be useful in the quiver of the archer.

Those are interpretations. They're not right in the passage, you know what I mean? They're embellishments that we gain from those. And they're probably, great reminders. But I don't think we talk enough about the influence that parents can have upon their children, both positively and negatively.

And Sue and I have raised four kids. And they're all grown now and out of the home. And, you know what? I confessed something recently to when we were doing Art of Parenting two times ago. I confessed to the people that were here, that I wish I could get a do over in my own parenting. I really do. I wish I could. I wish I could do it again.

Sue and I were talking the other day about how we were... Actually, we were out eating. And we saw some young couples walking by with their kids. And we were remembering how stupid we were when we started raising babies. And I mean that, literally.



I mean, I was 25 and probably emotionally mature... maturity of about 17. And Sue was younger than me but more mature. And we didn't know a thing! Not thing one about raising kids. Except what we'd probably learned in our own homes. And many times that ended up just getting us in trouble. How I wish I could influence my kids today more than I do. You know that gets to the point where you parent your children on your knees.

There's that time in the home and it's wonderful. But when they leave you parent on your knees. Because the time of that direct "one-on-one" parenting, where you're actually telling them, now do this. That goes away. I mean, they don't accept it after a certain age.

And you're hoping, by that time, that you have infused them with a sufficient amount of wisdom that they're going to apply it in their lives. But sometimes they don't. And you can't go back. You can't go back and parent over again with an adult child so, you spend time on your knees crying out to God.

I found an interesting little statement. Woodrow Wilson, was actually, at one time, I don't know if you know this, was actually a one-time president of Princeton University. And he wrote this. Actually, I guess he spoke these words to a parents group. Check this out.

He said, I get many letters from parents about your children. You want to know why we people up here in Princeton, cannot make more of them and do more for them? Let me tell you the reason we cannot. It may shock you just a little. But I'm not trying to be rude. The reason is that they are your sons, reared in your home, blood of your blood, bone of your bone. They have absorbed the ideals of your home. They have... You have formed and fashioned them. They are your sons. In their multiple years of their lives, you have forever left your imprint upon them.

I don't think Woodrow Wilson was trying to be discouraging. I think he was trying to simply be realistic about the fact that, we only have so much time and we do our best. And many times those kids veer away from the things that we poured into them for those years when they were at home.

But we have to believe that at some point by faith, God is going to bring them back to the things they know. And the things they learned at first. And the things that we poured into their hearts when they were moldable. Meanwhile, we know that the Lord is doing a work on those arrows.