

Solomon's simple one liner, serves as both admonition and promise, warning and blessing, and should echo through the minds and hearts of everyone in the household of faith. "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain." Explicit in the opening line of Psalm 127 is the emptiness of human achievement independent from the Lord. It was one of the psalms the Hebrew pilgrims prayed as they ascended to Jerusalem to celebrate the special days of worship, such as Passover and Pentecost. They reminded themselves in song of God's sovereign care over every sphere of life. They were dependent upon the Living God who was their source of security and significance. They traveled to Jerusalem to worship their God, unencumbered by the myth of human self-sufficiency. These Jerusalem-bound sojourners dedicated their efforts and their relationships to God.

If Yahweh doesn't build the house,
 the builders only build shacks.
 If Yahweh doesn't guard the city,
 the night watchman might as well nap.
 It's useless to rise early and go to bed late,
 and work your worried fingers to the bone.
 Don't you know he enjoys
 giving rest to those he loves?
 Don't you see that children are Yahweh's best gift?
 The fruit of the womb his generous legacy?
 Like a warrior's fistful of arrows
 are the children of a vigorous youth.
 Oh, how blessed are you parents,
 with your quivers full of children!
 Your enemies don't stand a chance against you;
 you'll sweep them right off your doorstep.
 Psalm 127, The Message

The psalmist poetically paints a picture of wisdom that centers all of life in the Lord from city planning to having children, everything is done in him, "for from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be glory forever! Amen" (Rom 11:36).

Holy Vocation

*Unless the Lord builds the house,
 the builders labor in vain.
 Unless the Lord watches over the city,
 the guards stand watch in vain.
 In vain you rise early
 and stay up late,
 toiling for food to eat –
 for he grants sleep to those he loves.
 Psalm 127:1-2*

When we pray this psalm today, we acknowledge from beginning to end that God's mission is our mission – God's work is our work. We can only claim it as our own to the extent that we follow God's lead. This means that in our work and effort we draw our wisdom and energy from God. What holds true for our salvation is also true for our lives as a church. "For we are God's handiwork (poetry), created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2:9). Apart from God we can do nothing and the model for this dependency is Jesus who said, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working....I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does" (John 5:19-20). Calvin put it this way: "It is not the will of the Lord that we should be like blocks of wood, or that we should keep our arms folded without doing anything; but that we should apply to use all the talents and advantages which he has conferred upon us."¹

The psalmist proposes a new scale of meaning that runs counter to the technological tower of Babel and the spirituality of Eastern religions. Babel and Buddha are poor alternatives for life philosophies that work, because they end up sacrificing the person on the altar of human perfection. Steve Jobs is an iconic figure in the pantheon of today's techno-Tower of Babel. As a teenager Jobs was drawn to Zen Buddhism and its quest for individual enlightenment, intuition, and minimalism. Later, he would marry Eastern spirituality with Western materialism, with the result that innovative products become the essence of salvation. He believed that our tools define us and shape our identity. They make us who we are. Ingenious devices save us from being "scattered over the face of the earth" (Gen 11:4).

The psalmist offers alternative spiritual direction. He pictures spiritual health, physical well-being and relational strength coming from communion with God. The divine defense against the emptiness of soul-draining self-effort, competitive insecurity, and restless hyperactivity is to seek first Christ's kingdom and his righteousness and everything we need will be given to us (Matthew 6:33). The psalmist centers home and city, work and family in God and celebrates the blessing of God's presence and provision.

The three-fold warning against vain and empty labor resonates with Solomon's message in Ecclesiastes. He delves into the emptiness of life strictly considered from a secular point-of-view and his verdict is unequivocal: "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless" (Ecc 1:2). What others could only fantasize about, Solomon accomplished on a grand scale, "I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards...I bought male and female slaves...I owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasures of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well—the delights of the heart of man" (Ecc 2:4-8). However, Solomon's success as an architect, engineer, environmentalist, agriculturalist, rancher, financier and patron of the arts brought no satisfaction. He lamented, "Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun" (2:11).

¹ Calvin, Psalms, 104.

Solomon goes on to contrast the ego-driven, self-exalted, power broker with an ordinary person who enjoys the simple pleasures of life as a gift from God. “A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?” (Ecc 2:24-25). The tension in Ecclesiastes lies in the contrast between a meaningless self-centered existence and a meaningful God-centered life. Solomon makes the case that the only reality that separates us from futility and meaninglessness is the fear-of-the-Lord. This is the fear that is not afraid of God, but seeks to please God. This is the fear that is best translated as faith, trust, and love. Ecclesiastes is wisdom’s critique of all ego-centric attempts to redefine the meaning of life apart from God. Solomon in all his glory did not compare to the God-fearing individuals who found satisfaction in their labor because of God. Ecclesiastes challenges our strategies for success and causes us to re-evaluate our goals and priorities. There is a striking affinity between those who are described in Ecclesiastes as able to enjoy life because of the blessing of God and the early Christian believers who made it their ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind their own business, and work with their hands, so that they would win the respect of outsiders (1 Thess 4:11-12). The desire to shun the rat race and “live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” is a lesson right out of Psalm 127 and Ecclesiastes (1 Tim 2:2).

The believer’s work ethic is unique, because it is modeled and motivated by God. Many of us have learned how to work from our parents. Years of observation, imitation and practice instill within us a work ethic. These positive work habits are usually derived from the example and the intentional teaching of others. But believers don’t want to stop with the model of their parents and teachers. We want to take it further and learn from the Lord how to work well. “The work of God is defined and described in the pages of Scripture,” writes Eugene Peterson. “We have models of creation, acts of redemption, examples of help and compassion, paradigms of comfort and salvation. This is why we read Scripture repeatedly and carefully to find out just how God works in Jesus Christ so that we can work in the name of Jesus Christ.”² Calvin encouraged believers, “Let us then so occupy ourselves, each according to the measure of his ability and the nature of his office, as that at the same time the praise of the success attending our exertions may remain exclusively with God.”³

The psalmist revels in the ordinary. Fulfillment is expressed in one of our most fundamental needs: “For he grants sleep to those he loves” (Ps 127:2). There is nothing like a good night’s rest to start the day. As the company of pilgrims ascended to Jerusalem they sang this psalm and put life into perspective. Their temptation was to see all of life as toilsome labor under the sun. We can identify with this obsession. It is easy for us to become overworked and easily stressed and to see everything in terms of our effort. This may be why God built into Israel’s routines these seasonal pilgrimages to Jerusalem, when they could not help but be reminded that the Lord’s work inspired and empowered their work. The rhythms of grace cause the faithful to examine their lives and renew their priorities. All too often we live as if everything depended upon us. One night I had a dream from which I awoke in a cold sweat with my heart pumping. I had dreamed that our church was performing Handel’s Messiah in a Sunday evening service. The whole church was excited. The musicians had rehearsed and the director was ready. When the day came the congregation turned out along with hundreds of visitors. In my dream it was

² Peterson, Long Obedience, 104.

³ Calvin, Psalms, 106.

standing room only and the anticipation of the gathered crowd was great. The only problem was that there were no musicians, no soloists, no director. No one, but me! But in my dream, the congregation expected me to carry on as usual and perform the Messiah. You can imagine my relief when I woke up from that nightmare!

Children

Children are a heritage from the Lord,
offspring a reward from him.
Like arrows in the hands of a warrior
are children born in one's youth.
Blessed is the man
whose quiver is full of them.
They will not be put to shame
when they contend with their opponents in court.
Psalm 127:3-5

This poetic picture of blessing finds its culmination and fulfillment in relationships. The pilgrimage was a family experience. This was a faith journey of families. They were not family centered, but God centered. They worshiped and served the Lord as the family of God. The metaphors paint a beautiful picture of balance, wholeness, health and happiness. We lay aside our pride and no longer boast of what we have built or done for God. Instead, we humbly declare what God has done for us, in us and through us. It is a work of grace, thanksgiving and praise. "The character of our work is shaped not by accomplishments or possessions but in the birth of relationships."⁴

Health and holiness are meant to come together in the household of faith. At the end of this beautiful picture of blessing and holy ambition, the psalmist offers a quick sketch of familial protection and support in the public arena. In place of human self-sufficiency the psalmist bears elegant testimony of God's blessing in the family and among friends. The birth of a child causes us to marvel at the creative power and handiwork of God. Even the act of love and a difficult pregnancy does not lessen the strong feeling that we are participating in a work far beyond ourselves. The sinister deception of the new reproductive technologies is that we would somehow believe that we manufacture, control and engineer life when all we are doing is discovering in greater detail the work of God.

In keeping with the poetic metaphor of the psalmist, children are the best protection against enemies and a sure defense against shame. The psalmist compares children to arrows shot by an archer. The vivid simile projects the positive influence of children on the defense and influence of parents. Children extend the testimony and ministry of their parents in a beautiful way. Like an arrow shot from a distance, the child represents the parent in various places and through time.

God provides a new generation as a sign of his blessing, who are called to defend and protect the previous generation and carry on the Faith. This interdependence is both divine and human, *communion* with God and *community* with one another. The practical implications of this short

⁴ Peterson, A Long Obedience, 106.

psalm are enormous. They encourage us to reexamine the clear goals of our life together as the people of God and turn to the biblical basics. We know “that he who began a good work in [us] will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” We “continue to work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Phil. 1:3-6; 2:12-13).