

RUF Bible Study – Songs of Ascents
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Psalm 127 – Work

*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.
2 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.
3 Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord,
the fruit of the womb a reward.
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.*

ESV

*If God doesn't build the house, the builders only build shacks.
If God 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 God'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.*

The Message

Is there anything more useless than steps that lead to the ceiling?

Sarah Winchester was born in 1837 and she married William Winchester in 1862. Winchester was the son of the man who invented the repeating rifle that bears his name, and the heir to a fortune. But tragedy struck this young family. Their daughter died when she was only six months old. Sarah and William lived a normal life together until William died in 1881. Upon her husband's death, Sarah inherited \$20 million and one half of the family's company, which brought in an additional \$1000 a day.

Of course, the money was no consolation for her grief. A friend told her she should consider consulting with a medium, which she did. The medium told her that these deaths were a part of a curse, and that spirits haunting here were a result of the people her family's rifles had killed. She reported that Sarah herself would also die – whenever she stopped construction on her house. Sarah then did the only “reasonable” thing; she bought a house in San Jose in 1884, and started using her fortune making various additions twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, for the next 38 years.

The House contained 160 rooms. These included 40 bedrooms, 13 bathrooms, many of which have glass doors, and 6 kitchens. There are also 47 fireplaces many of which have flues that go nowhere, as Sarah believed the spirits after her could enter and leave a house through the chimneys.

There are two ballrooms, and forty staircases, and more than 450 doorways. Of the forty staircases, many lead nowhere, and one ends at the ceiling (below). All the stairs have thirteen steps except one which consists of 42 steps, but each step is only two inches high.

There are also 2,000 doors in the house, and 10,000 windows. Most of the windows have thirteen panes, whereas some rooms have thirteen panels, and other rooms have thirteen windows. There is one room that has a window in the floor; others have closets that open to blank walls; there are many rooms within rooms; and one door that opens to an eight-foot drop overlooking a garden outside. Another door opens to an eight-foot drop that overlooks a kitchen sink.

Can you imagine what the workers must have thought when Sarah would look from the floor to the ceiling and say, “I want a staircase there”?



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Uselessness troubles us. Extreme uselessness, like the Winchester Mystery House, may fascinate us. But it's still disturbing nonetheless.

This next psalm in the songs of ascents is attributed to Solomon², someone who might have been able to relate to Sarah Winchester. Scholars debate Solomon's authorship, but there's no real reason to dispute it. It has been added in the collects of these songs the Israelites would have sung on their way to Jerusalem to worship because of its thematic content, not its author.

There are two indications that Solomon is the author. The first is his use of the word, "vain," which connects us to Ecclesiastes: *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.* (1:2) The second is the term, "beloved," one of the favorites of Solomon. Not only is this a favorite, but it is also a special name of Solomon's - *Then David comforted his wife, Bathsheba, and went in to her and lay with her, and she bore a son, and he called his name Solomon. And the Lord loved him and sent a message by Nathan the prophet. So he called his name Jedidiah, because of the Lord.* (2 Samuel 12:25). Jedidiah means "beloved of the Lord."

We have then the beloved's psalm of the vanities. Solomon comes to our mind – his life, faith and legacy. This psalm speaks of some of the things that most occupy our energies – building, security and family.

Building and Security

The first stanzas of this song speak of building and security. *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;*

Or as Eugene Peterson translates it: *If God doesn't build the house, the builders only build shacks. If God 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.*

My first thought when I read about building is vain is that of my personal building projects. I cannot seem to wrap my mind around the way things should be done. I cannot conceptualize beforehand the difficulties I will encounter. I've shared before my large disastrous projects. But there are so many more.

Two come to mind. The first is a box I made in order to make a file cabinet fit into a closet. The space was big enough as long as we raised it a few inches above the wall molding and the shelf. So I set to work and built a beautiful square out of two by fours. It wasn't hard at all, but I was proud of myself since it involved power tools and measuring things. I set it in there, emptied the cabinet, put it up and over so it would fit in the spot and stood back to admire my work. Just as I had planned. Except that the closet opening now came just enough around the file cabinet so – the doors wouldn't open. Now I have a useless square.

The other one is making raisers for Ruth's bed. We wanted to get it off the ground a few inches, and I couldn't find these anywhere so I thought I'd make them. It was hard work since I didn't have a power saw this time. I hand-sawed sixteen blocks of wood and then nailed them together and painted them white. We set her bed on them – and the bed would fall off after about a day or so. I found the product at the store, bought them for \$10 or so, and they work great. Mine are available if anyone wants them.

Solomon says that all of our work, activities and building is like that – useless. Meaningless. We're making squares and bed raisers. We're wasting time and energy, but feeling like we're making progress. It doesn't get much more useless than a sleeping night watchman.

Another place we might think of is the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. It was an amazing achievement of technological and architectural ingenuity and working together. They worked hard on it. Babel is the Western mindset. "Western culture takes up where Babel left off and defies human effort as such. The machine is the symbol of this way of life which attempts to control and manage. Technology promises to give us control over the earth and over other people."³ But... machines, structures, governments, possessions can destroy too, and they do so in larger and larger numbers than ever before.

Faced what God thought of Babel, there is another extreme we can go to. Paul dealt with it in Thessalonica – that of doing nothing. You don't have to work hard to be a Christian. You don't have to do much of anything at all. God is doing everything that needs to be done. Quit work and wait for the Lord to come. (2 Thess 3:11-13) We often see this in the work ethic of eastern religions. "Eastern culture... manifests a deep-rooted pessimism regarding human effort. Since all work is tainted with selfishness and pride, the solution is to withdraw from all activity into pure being. The symbol of such an attitude is the Buddha – an enormous fat person sitting cross-legged, looking at his own navel. Motionless, inert, quiet. All trouble comes from doing too much; therefore do nothing. Step out of the rat race. The world of motion is evil, so quit doing everything."⁴

There is another option between Babel and Buddha – Psalm 127. "It doesn't glorify work as such, and it doesn't condemn work as such." Not workaholics or dropouts. It's "useless unless." Useless unless God is the one doing it really. Useless unless God builds. Useless unless God watches.

We must see that this *if* is essential. This *unless* means everything for us. We see that God works. We note that in Genesis 1 and 2 and fill it with meaning for our own lives. God works, therefore work itself cannot be inherently evil or bad. "The foundational principle 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."⁵

² The only other psalm attributed to him is Psalm 72.

³ Peterson, 107

⁴ Peterson, 107

⁵ Peterson, 109

Indeed, God makes our work meaningful. “The curse of some people’s lives is not work, as such, but senseless work, vain work, futile work, work that takes place apart from God, work that ignores the *if*.”⁶

We also see that God rewards our work for him. He cares. He watches. He sees. And he smiles at our work on his behalf. I’m not only talking about “vocational ministry,” but anything we do that is making the world a better place for his glory.

When did Solomon write this psalm? We don’t know, for he certainly forget the *unless* part. He became reckless in his projects. 1 Kings recounts his excesses; 1 Kings 9:19 says, “*and all the store cities that Solomon had, and the cities for his chariots, and the cities for his horsemen, and whatever Solomon desired to build in Jerusalem, in Lebanon, and in all the land of his dominion.*” Solomon kept building and building. Yes, he did build the temple, but he didn’t stop there. He built cities for his chariots. His building became an obsession for him, Sarah Winchester –esque in its folly. Solomon’s assets, his security also became a ruin – read 1 Kings 11:1 and following to trace his destruction, led out of a lack of faithfulness and a unbridled pursuit of all his desires. (700 wives staggers the mind).

Are you raising early and working late, toiling to the bone to make food and bread? Can you rest? Many of us don’t know how to rest. We don’t know how to take a vacation, to leave our cell phones and laptops behind. Or even to put them away at night and sit and read and – rest. We’re a workaholic culture. Even if you aren’t one personally, you are in one. We’re advancing our careers. We’re building our resumes. We’re making sure our kids are perfectly well-rounded, putting them in every activity we can think of. We’re a busy people.

We should work hard to build things. To make our spaces beautiful. To learn in school. To invent helpful product and serve people. My bizarro person is Joe Keck. He is able to build anything, to make project work. He has transformed our office into something peaceful and beautiful. With hard work. Anna once said to me, “Mr. Keck can do anything.” It seems so. Let’s work hard without becoming consumed with the work itself. He gives sleep to those he loves. Rest in Christ alone.

Family

The psalm makes an abrupt transition from work to family. 3 *Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. 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.*

Peterson writes, “*Don't you see that children are God's best gift?*”

It’s an abrupt transition for us, but not for the Israelite. “Most of us think of work and our families in nearly separate categories. We live highly compartmentalized lives. But the Jew would ask, Why is the house being built if not for the family? and why are the watchmen protecting the city if not for the families that live in it?”⁷

We live in a time where children are rather unwanted. The last fifty years has been an incredible time of selfishness for parents, and our western culture has made possible abortion, a very easy contraception and along with those a general mindset of children as a furthering of *our* adult lives on *our* timetables. Children in our culture have everything they want – own rooms, high education, a car, an iPod (I’ve seen nine-year-olds with iPods), a college degree. But they don’t really get a relationship because the parents are out making money for all those things. This is an oversimplification of course, but generally true. Much of the time parents spend with their children is shuttling them to and from various activities. I am not immune from this, and hate it and want to stop. What happened to playing games together? How many families eat dinner together every meal? Are we listening, relating to our kids? “*Don't you see that children are God's best gift?*”

Contrast the advancement of our careers with the “work” of making children. “The entire miracle of procreation and reproduction requires our participation, but hardly in the form of what we would call work. We did not make these marvelous creatures that walk and talk and grow among us. We participate in an act of love that was provided for us in the structure of God’s creation.”⁸

Sometimes Julie and I would look at each other and say, “We made cute kids.” But when we said that, we knew it was mostly wrong since we didn’t do much of anything at all. God made our kids, cute as they were/are. He did almost *everything*. When Julie was pregnant with Ruth, we would read and reread books about what was going on each month. Okay, the child is as big as a strawberry and has a heart beating already. Now he or she the size of an orange and this and that is developing. I hadn’t really paid any attention in eighth grade health class and was too cool for school in high school biology, so I was learning about what Julie’s body was making inside of her. But she wasn’t doing anything – except eating. It was all just happening. I wouldn’t exactly call that work.

The growth of families is slow and unpretentious, *langsam aber sicher*, slowly but surely. The growth of the family is God’s work, and God’s blessing on the city begins with his blessing on the family. This truly is a focus on the family. But we don’t make an idol out of the family either. We don’t turn it in on itself, but allow the family to be used of God for his glory. This is something to be aware of, to be wary of.

We can read about God’s concern and love for the family and then make a dreadful mistake of idolizing this. We can give all our time and energy to the family. We can justify our expenses because our children are all that matters. But that entails a certain pretentiousness that is not found in the Bible at all. Though God’s best gifts, children are still messy and a great deal of trouble. Hurt and pain still come into their lives. Suffering is a part of growth. “God’s gifts are as unpretentious as they are miraculous.”⁹

⁶ Peterson, 109

⁷ Boice, 1120

⁸ Peterson, 110

⁹ Kidner, 441

“It is not untypical of God’s gifts that first they are liabilities, or at least responsibilities, before they become obvious assets. The greater their promise, the more likely that these sons will be a handful before they are a quiverful.”¹⁰

Think again of Genesis 11. After the Tower of Babel, what comes next, at the end of that chapter? I’ll bet you don’t know. I didn’t. We find a genealogical account of Shem and Terah’s descendants. We might yawn at this, but God put it in there for a reason. Because families matter. God is at work, and he cares about and uses families in the church.

That’s why we rejoice with our friends, Todd and Rebecca Wedel, who will adopt Anna Ruth next Wednesday. They will bring this little girl into their family, not with the slow and sure growth of pregnancy, but with the deliberate act of love of adoption. It will be a beautiful thing to have Anna Ruth in our midst, to baptize her into our community, to help love and parent her, and to teach her the faith of her parents.

Again, we don’t know when he wrote this because it is obvious Solomon’s family didn’t fare too well. They were a disaster and divided the kingdom. I’m not sure how many children Solomon must have sired, but he couldn’t have been a good father to them, considering the quantity of them and the quality of the ones we know about. Solomon forgot that children were the best gift from God.

I think this is a psalm that is difficult to apply. Okay, so we’re supposed to steer clear between the cliffs of overwork and underwork. Okay, so we’re supposed to love our children, but not over-love them. That is clearly vague.

Let’s say this then: The house being built is God’s *spiritual* temple – 1 Peter 2:5 says so. The city is not Jerusalem but the heavenly city – Hebr. 11:10 tells us this. The family is not our mere physical family, but our spiritual one – John 1:12-13 indicates this truth.

People are at the center of God’s work, of Christian work. Names, Friendships, Smiles, Handshakes, Greetings, Worship, Fellowship. Are we a church, a people, a fellowship that cares about people? Do you know what’s going on with the people you’re sitting next to?

If we build a building, will we use it for God’s glory? Buildings can be great, but they don’t love people. Buildings don’t redeem people. They can provide a context for it. But you have to open your life, your home as well. Do you use your stuff, your car, your computer, your time, your food to help and love people?

Will a building help us? Unless God builds it, no it won’t. But if God builds it, then yes it will.

“Christian worship gathers the energy and focuses the motivation that transforms us from consumers who use work to get things into people who are intimate and in whom work is a way of being in creative relationship with another.”

Will a building help us to get away from the city? If so, then I’m not interested. I don’t want a hide out. But if it will help us engage and minister to the city, then let’s do it. The best indication of whether that *will be* true is if it *is* true now, with the limited resources we have.

It’s interesting to consider Jesus’ work. No car, no house, no job, no food. Limited resources, I’d say. Vagabond friends. Riffraff, really. A strange way of teaching. No youth group. No church camps. No music ministry. No vestments.

And yet he was able to say to God—before his death even! – “I have accomplished the work you sent for me to do.” (John 17:4) I’d sure like to be able to say that. I’d like for Reformed University Fellowship at the University of Oklahoma to be able to say that. I’d like for Christ the King to be able to say that.

It seems to me that we’re going to have to cling hard to the gospel. To Jesus’ work – his life and death. That we would allow him to make meaning for us. Is everything meaningless? Yes, if we leave God out of it. *Nisi Dominus Frustra*, Without the Lord – Frustration.

Sarah Winchester built every second of every day to stave off death. She preoccupied herself with projects. She busied herself with many things. And Sarah Winchester died when she was 85 years old. Of course she did. She donated some of her money to a foundation to study tuberculosis. She didn’t leave any children. And she left her crazy house. You can visit it.

And us? Only one thing is needed, Jesus says. To sit at his feet. Now there are many other things to do. But what about our family? What about our faith? What about our God. Can we allow Jesus to build his house, and to use us as he sees fit?

Ephesians 2: 14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. 17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

¹⁰ Kidner, 442