

The Meaning in Life

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[0 : 00] I'm going to invite one of our members, Douglas, up. He's going to read God's word to us! Douglas is going to read Psalm 127. A Song of Ascents of Solomon.

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.

Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord. The fruit of the womb is 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 the word of the Lord.

[0 : 58] When we eat lunch together after the service today, two of the questions, two of the most common questions that we'll probably ask each other are going to be, how's work going? How's the family?

And I'm not trying to make you feel paranoid. These are good questions to ask one another. But it's not just in church that we ask these questions. These are the questions that we ask each other at work, at school, as we're studying, whatever we may be.

If you want to be a social media influencer, if you want to get a big following on Instagram, look at the trials of work, or hustle culture, how to build, or the challenges of raising a family, and you're bound to get a big, healthy following.

And when we read the words of Psalm 127, we see that those are the things that the psalmist is talking about too. He's talking about building a life, security for life, raising a family. But Psalm 127 isn't just asking us how we're getting on with that.

It's forcing us to ask ourselves, what are these things really for? What kind of life are you building? What is it you're trying to protect?

[2 : 05] How are you raising a family? Does anyone know the motto for Edinburgh's coat of arms? It's Nisi Dominus Frustra.

And I know that you guys all know what that means, but I don't speak Latin. But the English means, without the Lord, in vain. So, without the Lord, everything is in vain.

The motto of this amazing city is Psalm 127. And what it tells us, I think it's pretty shocking when you look at it. Because it's that, without God, our work, our life building, our protection, even our family, is meaningless.

And when you think about the society that we live in today, we're kind of a dichotomy. So, there's never been a time, really, I don't think, where we've had so much freedom around work, and yet we voluntarily almost imprison ourselves to our careers.

Have we ever had a society that enjoys so much security and safety in one sense, but then seems to live in such fear and anxiety on the other?

[3 : 23] Have we ever had a society where children are the very epicenter of people's lives, like their whole lives revolve around what their children want, what they want to do? And yet, for other people, children, family, just seem disposable.

Well, through this Psalm, we're going to learn that the anecdote for our workaholicism, for our anxiety, the solution to the imbalanced way that we think about family life, is in this Psalm.

I've got three points. And the first point is, what are you building on? If we look together at verse one of the Psalm, it says, So, we're not just talking about construction here.

We're not all builders. But the idea of building can apply to anything that you are building in your life. So, whether you're an entrepreneur, a fireman, a software engineer, an artist, someone who's

building a home, these things apply to you.

These are all really important forms of building in life, and they require us to work hard. The word labor that the Psalm uses here is hard work, toil, struggle.

[4 : 49] Whether you enjoy what you do for a living or you don't, you've got to admit that sometimes work is pretty frustrating. We find it hard to get through the things that we need to do, let alone to the point where we feel like we're getting ahead.

And sometimes that makes us feel overwhelmed in life, makes us feel like we're struggling to keep up while everyone else is running away ahead. But what is the thing that we feel that we're struggling to keep up with?

Well, often we're drowning because we feel pressured by the material world that's around us and the material measures that people use to define success.

More money, bigger house, nicer car, flashier clothes. These are the things that all around us, in our workplace, in our neighborhoods, people put such emphasis on, they look at this as a sign of what building success is.

The thing about constantly pursuing more material things, though, is that it is a bottomless pit. It never ends. No matter how much you make or accumulate, we only seem to want more.

[6 : 03] We need the next thing, the extension onto our big house, or the faster car than the one that came out last year, or the new iPhone that comes out, probably in a few months' time, it's going to cost a thousand pounds and make your one old.

The beast of consumption is never satisfied, no matter how much you feed it. And then all the while, as we're trying to feed this beast, work is toil.

It's hard. Even if you really love what you do, you've got to admit that there's times where you face frustration. A report in 2024 found that poor mental health in work, just in the UK, costs employers, just costs employers, not the country.

51 billion pounds a year. That's a number that's so big we can't visualize it. There's too many zeros to fit it into our mind's eye. So work is hard, and our relationship to work is broken.

But why? How? Well, as Christians, we know why. It goes right back to the very beginning of the world, when everything was very good, and Adam and Eve lived in a beautiful garden city, and they were given everything that they could imagine, and they were given a practical purpose as well, to work the land.

[7 : 29] They weren't put there to lie on sun loungers, they were to work the land, to build it, to grow it, to expand this garden across the world. But Adam and Eve thought that they could climb the ladder, and by themselves.

Achieve more without God. And they were convinced that they should do the one thing that God told them not to do. And then because they disobeyed God, in Genesis 3, 17, we're told God said, cursed is the ground because of you.

In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life. So the very ground, that's Adam's place of work, becomes cursed because of their disobedience to God.

So maybe you feel like your office is cursed, but if you want to know why work is so hard, it's because we live in a broken, fallen world.

Because Adam tried to build without God. The first part of this psalm, well, it reminds us that all of our work without God is ultimately meaningless, in vain.

[8 : 42] The word vain appears three times in just these two first verses. Without God, building is empty. Without God, protecting our stuff is worthless. Without God, getting up at the crack of dawn to get ahead is totally futile.

So what does that mean? Should we all just quit our jobs, set up a cute commune in the foot of the Pentlands? Well, no. The psalmist is not telling us that our work is worthless.

Work is not worthless. And he's not telling us that building life is meaningless. He's saying that these things are meaningless, that these things are worthless if they're not built on the right foundation.

When we build and work without acknowledging that it is for God and by God that we are working and building. You see, work isn't the punishment for Adam's disobedience.

Work is purpose. That's what he was put here in the garden to do. And so when we work with obedience to God, work becomes worship.

[9 : 51] So that means that no matter what you do for a living, no matter how you spend your days building, whatever it is you're building, we're building something when we're building with God that's not going to crumble.

It's not going to disintegrate into dust. Okay, second point. How do you sleep at night? So the psalmist, I think, seems to know about the UK's mental health at work crisis thousands of years ago.

In the second half of verse one, he says, unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It's in vain that you rise up early and go to bed and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil.

I mean, I wonder if you can relate to getting up early, staying up late, trying to get ahead and not feeling like you're making any progress. Or maybe you have.

Maybe you've got up early, you've gone to bed late and you have made progress. You've got the promotion, you've got the pay rise, you've built yourself a reputation as somebody who gets things done, but that's only resulted in you being given more to do.

[11 : 04] So you have to get up early, you have to go to bed late, you have to stay away from home longer, you have to go to bed later and later. Sometimes, maybe, for some of us, it feels like success in work itself.

Without God is a curse. The more you get ahead, the more you have to work, the less you get to rest. And I think the psalmist hits the nail on the head for our society when he writes the phrase, eating the bread of anxious toil.

So the bread of anxious toil is not an artisan loaf from 12 triangles. In Hebrew, the word bread can be used to refer to any form of food.

So this is the way that we keep ourselves alive. And he's saying, you're giving your life over to the grind and your reward is indigestion. Have you been so anxious?

Are you so anxious in life that you feel that you can't even swallow down food properly? Have you been so worried about what lies ahead, about what you might lose, that your favorite food doesn't bring you any pleasure?

[12 : 22] Have things, good things, like food and drink, almost become an anesthetic to help you cope with the pressure you feel from the people and the work that you have to do?

Well, this is another question. Is that because, functionally, you're living and even eating as an atheist? Do you go to work, come to the dinner table, even, don't even get to the table.

You sit on the sofa or you sit in the driver's seat of your car on your way to another meeting because you've got to keep going. And then you lie down in your bed exhausted, riddled with anxiety because you think, this is all down to me.

Well, the second half of verse one speaks about protection, about keeping the things that we're building, of how futile it is to stay up all night guarding our stuff as if we can protect it on our own. when we're scrambling to hold on to our material possessions without the Lord, without relying on God, without being confident that he is with us. It's like that dream people talk about where they've got coins and they just keep falling through your fingers.

[13 : 43] That's what our material stuff is like. We can't hold on to it. J.D. Rockefeller, when he died, he was, they said that he was the richest man in the world. probably the richest man that I'd ever been.

And somebody asked his accountant, how much did he leave? And his accountant said, he left all of it. The psalmist is saying, worrying, building, and protecting in life becomes meaningless.

But he's saying it's meaningless because we don't rely on God. So here it is, right at the end of verse 2, in the center of this psalm, here's the solution to our tendency to fall into workaholism on one hand, anxiety on the other.

The Lord gives his beloved sleep. C.S. Lewis, who wrote the Narnia series, was a Christian thinker as well. And he said this about work.

He said, if we thought we were building up a heaven on earth, if we looked for something that would turn the present world from a black pilgrimage into a permanent city satisfying the soul of man, we're disillusioned.

[14 : 56] But if we thought that for some souls, and at some times, the life of learning, humbly offered to God, was in its own small way one of the appointed approaches to the divine reality and the divine beauty to which we hope to enjoy hereafter, we can think so still.

So Lewis is saying that whether you're an engineer, a joiner, a nursery teacher, we can rest safe in the knowledge that when we're working with God, we are working for God's kingdom. And as Lewis puts it, we can think so still. Or as Psalm 127 puts it, the Lord gives his beloved sleep. It's such a humbling humbling and beautiful reminder of the limits of humanity, the limits that we have ourselves, our own frailty, and also God's care for his people, that every night we have to lie down for about a third of our lives and be blind, defenseless, unconscious for hours at a time. There's a beautiful song by a Scottish singer-songwriter, he's called John Martin, and it's called May You Never, and the repeated refrain in that song is, may you never lay your head down without a hand to hold, may you never make your bed out in the cold. And this is what Psalm 127 is telling us about God and sleep. anxious about what you're building or about how you're going to hold on to the things that you have. [16:34] God's saying to everyone who trusts him, come and lay down, take my hand, and know that I'm watching over you. And God gives his beloved sleep.

This is a precious gift, in fact, sleep's two precious gifts in one. It refreshes us and it restrains us but it also reminds us that we're not in control and that God is.

And that means that our life doesn't come down to us. We sang Psalm 121 earlier on and that Psalm asks, when I look to the hills, fearing danger, where will my help come from?

And the answer is, the Lord keeps me. And that word keep, in Psalm 121, it's used six different times and it's the same route that we have in Psalm 127 for watchers over or watchmen.

So while Psalm 127 tells us that God gifts his people sleep, Psalm 121 reminds us that God never sleeps. And so we can lay down safe and secure in the fact that although we can't guard all the things of our lives, God can.

[17:59] Do you feel like you're in need of this secure, peace-filled, life-giving sleep? Because I do. Which is probably why Matthew, Matthew chapter 11, 28 to 30 is my favorite verses in the Bible.

Jesus says, come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I'm gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

And then it's interesting that straight after recounting these words, Matthew writes that Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, the God-ordained time of resting in him.

It's also a shadow of the wonderful forever rest that lies ahead of people who put their trust in Jesus. So if you want to rest from the anxiety of toil, the struggle of building and protecting life, accept Jesus and come to him.

Put on Jesus' yoke which is light and easy. But here's the thing, to put on this light and easy yoke, we have to take off the heavy, difficult yoke of whatever it is that's dragging us down.

[19:28] Is it living up to people's expectations? Is it protecting the things that you have because you think it all relies on you? Life doesn't become easy necessarily overnight when you put your trust in Jesus.

It's not what he's saying here. But it does become more peaceful because we rest not in what we've stored up for a rainy day, but because of what God has done through Jesus, his beloved, for his beloved.

And that takes us to our third, final point. Who is our eternal inheritance? Well, the psalmist has told us that one gift from God has been able to sleep even although we're traveling through a cursed world and working in a cursed workplace.

And that tells us of a second blessing that he gives to people and that's children. Verse 3 says, Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward.

He calls his children a heritage, an inheritance, and he calls them a reward or wages. So, first of all, I think maybe poignantly that it's Mother's Day today, I didn't plan this, but it gives incredible honor to those who are raising children.

[20:51] So, those precious souls, precious gifts from God. When I was in school, we would say, my mom just stays at home.

Just. C.S. Lewis would disagree with that just. To paraphrase something he wrote in a letter once about, it's a woman who was struggling being a mom, everything was difficult.

And he said, the homemaker has the ultimate career. All other careers exist for one purpose and that's to support the ultimate career. So, keeping those at home fed, warm, and safe is the most important job that there is, Lewis says.

But it's not a career where you get pay rises. You don't get promotions, you don't get an OBE for services to staying up for 72 hours straight while your kids are vomiting.

But the Lord knows. He knows that you read your Bible to your children when nobody else could possibly know. He knows that when you hold your baby crying and praying at 3am when you feel like everyone else in the world is asleep.

[22 : 06] He knows that you need him to be there with you. The psalmist is saying to you, carer, the Lord knows. And the Lord's not putting a tally mark onto your sheet saying, good job, well done.

It's a credit to your account. He's saying, my beloved, I'm right here with you singing with you to your little baby. As you teach them to pray, I'm with you.

I'm the one making those precious seeds grow. Trust me to care for you as you care for your children. And then in verses 4 and 5, the psalmist kind of suddenly changes tone because he chooses battle language to describe children.

He calls them arrows in the hands of a warrior. He calls the one who has them blessed. The one with many children will not be put to shame in front of his enemies. So in the ancient world, children, and particularly sons, because of the society they lived in, they were protection.

More men meant more power. And having sons was a sign of blessing because it literally meant you had more workforce, more soldiers, whatever you need those men to be.

[23 : 23] The references to being not to be shamed in the city gates because in those days they would gather at the gates of the city and make decisions, make judgments about how things were going to be handled.

So having somebody in the family capable of representing you well was super important. So I think we can think about children as arrows in terms of the church.

So the church passes from generation to generation and in itself is extraordinary when you think about that. And it's through covenant children that the church will continue right until the very end of the age.

These arrows are prepared and they're sent. That's also how God through the church pushes back into the darkness, pushing against the forces of darkness with a quiver full of shards of light.

We were in the garden a little while ago thinking about work and protection takes us back there as well I think because Adam was to work in the garden but he was also part of that job was to protect it and he failed.

[24 : 33] He failed twice as a protector. He failed to protect the garden but he also failed to protect his eve from the snake. And this just shows us how desperately we need a protector.

Someone who will come and protect us. We need a son who can place us in a garden and never let anyone come and harm us. The talk of children can sometimes feel awkward or problematic because we know that not everybody is going to be a parent and that's utterly heartbreaking for people and it feels as though speaking about children is something difficult to do.

but we know that the Lord can bring peace to even the most broken hearted. If that's you if you're in that position you're not any less beloved because God hasn't given you children.

So to help us understand the full significance I think of what this message about children really means we need to think about the psalm in the original context that it exists.

this is a psalm of ascent so this would have been likely sung by the children of Israel as they journeyed up to Jerusalem to worship God in the temple and to commemorate their great feasts.

[25 : 56] So there's 15 psalms of ascent and psalm 127 is the one right in the middle like the peak in the pyramid and this psalm is attributed to Solomon so Solomon was king of Israel I don't know if it was two by or for Solomon different people think different things maybe he commissioned the song because he was the one who built the temple and that's where God's priests served on behalf of the people or maybe it was written by Solomon we know that he wrote 1005 songs or maybe it's dedicated to Solomon because he's the one who's kind of the epitome of human success he's got all the wealth and all the knowledge the wisdom but he came to a disappointing end when he started to build without the Lord people used to say or some people say that this psalm is actually two proverbs kind of spliced together so you've got the first couple of verses that are about building and then you've got the next three verses that are about children but I don't think that's the case and one of the reasons

I think that that's not the case that this psalm is clearly one combined thought is a play on words in the story of 2 Samuel 7 so there David who's Solomon's dad David's king and he decides himself

that he's going to build a house to the Lord but God says to David you're going to build me a house no I'm going to build you a house when David said house like in verse 1 he meant a temple he's going to build a temple for the Lord but when God said house he meant a dynasty or a heritage like in verse 3 God was going to build David a kingly line of succession and Solomon inherited his father's throne but it's from this Davidic kingly line that the true the great king was going to come in Matthew we can read

Jesus' genealogy and it tells us the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David so Jesus it's Jesus who's the true fulfillment of the kingly house of David Solomon he built a physical temple a house where God would dwell God's presence would be with his people but Jesus is the temple God himself come to live with his people and Jesus is also the forever priest in the temple who makes sacrifices and stands before God on behalf of his people so Jesus is the temple and Jesus also said he was going to make his people his church to be a living temple in Genesis Jesus God didn't just curse the ground and leave it to rot he promised that the offspring of the woman the fruit of her womb would come and crush the enemy and that's Jesus Jesus has come and he's broken the curse and even although we're still living in a world that's fallen and broken and where work and security and even family so often feel difficult when we put our trust in Jesus we get to live in him work rest and praying because we're covered by his righteousness his goodness so that means that while work rest and play might still be hard

God is teaching us that he is with us but also that something better is waiting for us in John 14 2 Jesus says he's going to prepare a place for his people in his father's house the forever temple so Jesus is the one from the kingly line of David who wasn't welcomed as a king but who was mocked and slandered and rejected who wasn't defended in the gate in front of his enemies but he was put outside the city to die despite his divine power and strength he didn't pursue riches or wealth even his own comfort but he humbled himself and completed the work that God gave him to do even to the point of death God's beloved became cursed for us not so that we can make more money or get bigger houses or even as heartbreaking as it is for some people to have a family so that we can live in this new garden city that was designed and built by God where work will never be in vain but will be utterly satisfying where peace and tranquility will reign because God will live with his people at the end of the Bible it talks about

Jesus as a bridegroom coming for his bride and that's the church the bride of Christ is the church when instead of eating anxious toil the bread of anxious toil will feast with Jesus at a marriage supper Jesus finished the work that God his father gave him to do so that he could bring his people glorious blissful eternal rest let's pray Lord God we ask that you would bless us to this day we confess we so often attempt to build our lives on foundations that are not sure and certain we're often so tempted to build on our own strength or rely on other people put pressure on them to deliver for us Lord help us to be looking to you for everything that we need realizing that Jesus is our greatest treasure the true treasure the one thing needful and that we would be our whole lives would be oriented around pursuing him forgive us for our sins in Jesus name

[32 : 14] Amen