

## Sacred practice of effortless work

Psalm 127

By pastor Ken Keyte

Date: 18th Dec 2016

1

### Psalm 127

<sup>1</sup> Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain.

<sup>2</sup> In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for he grants sleep to those he loves.

<sup>3</sup> Children are a heritage from the LORD, offspring a reward from him.

<sup>4</sup> Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one's youth.

<sup>5</sup> 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

*A song of ascents. Of Solomon.*

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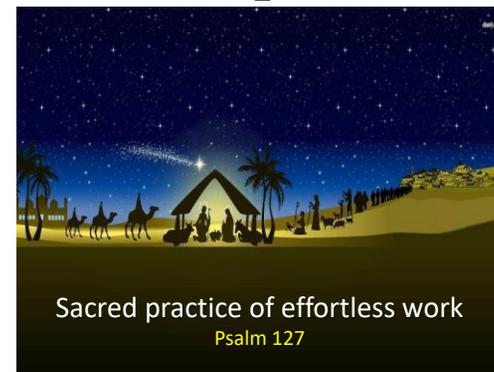
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2



This is *another* of the *15 psalms of ascent* that were sung by the Hebrew pilgrims as they travelled the long dusty, *uphill journey to Jerusalem* for the annual religious festivals of- *Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles.*

So the *first people* to sing this psalm would've *expended much effort* getting to Jerusalem.

Many came *great distances* from where they lived *beyond the borders* of Israel, they would've had to *overcome formidable obstacles* - mountain passes to climb, rivers to cross, bandits and wild animals to ward off, hot days, cold nights - *just to get there!*

It was a *dangerous and difficult journey* on paths that were *nothing like* the *new footpaths* being laid in Te Puke!

*Naturally*, after arriving at their destination, there would've been a *tendency to congratulate themselves* and *each other* on getting there safely.

They would've had a *sense of pride* in their accomplishment. They probably *swapped stories* about their adventures along the way.

They would've *compared notes* about *how long it had taken*, the *short cuts they took*, *how far* they'd come, *how many* family members and neighbours they'd brought with them, *how many times* they'd made the journey.

*We do* much the same today!

## **Babel Builders**

*Pastors make comparisons between church statistics, growers compare their harvest results, dairy farmers compare production figures, school teachers compare class NCEA results, truck drivers compare the size and power of their trucks, factory workers compare pay rates and working conditions, tradesmen compare jobs, Mums compare stories about their kids achievements, whatever our profession or trade, we like measuring our performance and making comparisons today.*

But through the *noisy crowd* of arrivals in Jerusalem proudly *boasting about how they'd gotten there*, someone would *strike up the tune-*

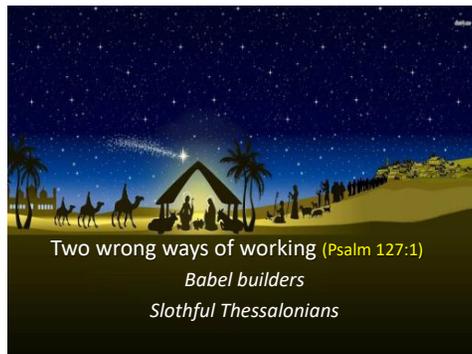
**2a**

*"If God doesn't build the house the builders labour in vain, If God doesn't guard the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain!"*

*Effortless work sounds like an oxymoron, but... Psalm 127 warns of a **wrong way** and presents a **right way** of working- working **without** God requires **worthless effort** whereas working **with** the help of Lord is **effortless and worth it in the end!***

### **Two wrong ways of working**

3



*Genesis 11* tells us about a *tower* that was built by this *wrong way of working*. As the *world population grew* and people began *spreading out* from the East, they *arrived at a plain* in the land of *Shinar*. *Ignoring God's command to fill the earth and take care of it*, they *settled their* and decided to *make a name for themselves* by *building a city with a tower to the heavens*.

But God had *other ideas* about their *tower-building name-making work*. He put a *stop to it* by *confusing their language* causing them to *re-scatter out over the face of the earth* as he'd always intended. The *never completed tower of Babel* is a *symbol of a wrong way of working!*

One of the early Christian church leaders in the fourth Century and a defender of the Christian faith from false teachings, Hilary Poitiers, described this wrong way of working (in Latin) as *irriligiosa sollicitudo pro Deo-* a *blasphemous anxiety to do God's work for him!*

In other words it's *making an idol out of our work!*

*Western culture* takes up where *Babel left off* by *deifying human effort*. The *machine* is the *modern symbol* of this way of working with which we attempt to control and manage *everyone and everything*. *Technological advancement* is seen as the *solution to all the world's problems* but the promise is *never fulfilled*.

Empires, corporations, organisations, and brands become *more important* than the *people* who work for them. Until eventually, *just like Babel*, their *vanity* becomes *obvious* to everyone and *work on the tower building project* (whatever it is) eventually *comes to an end* as the people *disperse* and start looking for *something else to build!*

A *terrible example* of what this kind of work looks like at its worst is in the events *surrounding the birth of Jesus*. The *murderous actions* of King Herod defending his position as a *King of the Jews* by *slaughtering* all the baby boys born in *Bethlehem* was motivated by his *name-making temple building* ambitions.

Broken marriages, dysfunctional families, absent fathers and mothers, and the *ever growing number* of *social support services* for the *broken* men, women and children, is the *toll* this kind of work takes on *our society today!*

### **Slothful Thessalonians**

**3a**

Yet *some people* who've read what *Psalms 127* says about "*the Lord building the house*", and "*guarding the city*" have *paraphrased* it to read, "*You don't have to work hard to be a Christian because God does everything for you.*"

The *Apostle Paul* had to deal with some of these people in the *church of Thessalonica*. They thought that *since God has done everything in Christ* there's *nothing more to do* except *quit work and wait for the Lord's return!*

And so they *sat doing nothing*, while living off their "*less spiritual*" friends. Unfriendly critics might have called them "*sloths*" or "*freeloaders*". In 2nd Thessalonians 3:11-13 Paul told them bluntly to *get to work and start earning their keep!*

*Reminding them* of how *he* and his *co-workers* *weren't idle* when they were in *Thessalonica*, how they *hadn't* eaten anyone's food *without paying for it*, and had *worked hard night and day* so as *not to burden* to anyone!

And that they'd done so to *set an example* for them to *imitate* in *how Christians work*.

Perhaps the *Priest Zechariah* had *slipped into this way of existing?* After the *angel* had told him about the *parenting work* he'd have to do *raising a child* who'd *grow up* to become a *prophet* to *make ready a people for the Lord*, Zechariah told the *angel* that he *doubted he and his wife* were *up to it*, because they were *too old for it!*

Consequently the *angel muted Zechariah's voice* until their son *John the Baptist* (as he was later known) was born. And so Zechariah was *jolted out of his slothful ways!*

*Babel builders* or *slothful Thessalonians?* These two *polar opposite work ethics* are just as *prevalent* among *Christians* and *non-Christians today!*

Which of these *work ethics* would *best typify you?*  
Are you a *Babel builder* or a *slothful Thessalonian?*

If I'm honest I know I have *Babel building tendencies* in me!

An example of this happened on Wednesday. It was our *final BOP Baptist pastors' cluster meeting* for the year. After a coffee and some yummy Christmas treats, *David McChesney* who was hosting it asked us to each *share a 3 minute highlight* of *something we were grateful for* from the *year gone by*.

And because we were *all pastors* who *struggle to say anything in less than 3 minutes*, there was an *incentive* of a *chocolate* for keeping it *under 3 minutes!*

As the *one by one* the *stories* were shared of *great accomplishments*, *amazing conversions*, *difficult challenges overcome* from each of the *pastors* in the room, I began wondering *what I would say?*

So when it was my turn I shared about the *latest highlight in our church-* how a young man had just been baptised Sunday night at our church who'd shared his amazing *prodigal son-like testimony* of how he'd *been lost and far away from God*, but then at his *lowest point* had *miraculously encountered God*, his life was *transformed* and now he'd come *home to faith in Jesus Christ!*

For which I am *very, very grateful to God for!*

But if I'm *really honest*, my *motive* for choosing *that particular story* to share with the other pastors is *more about me wanting to show off that God is just as active in Te Puke Baptist Church as he is in any of theirs!*

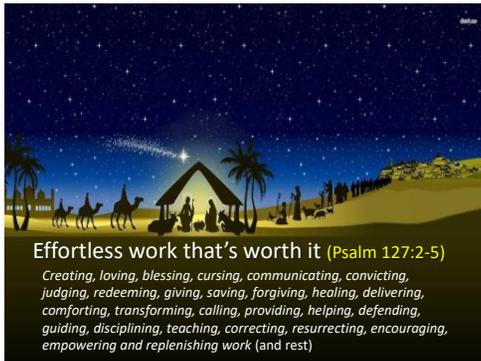
Which is what *Babel builders do!* We're motivated by trying to make a name for ourselves, by impressing people that we're *better than the rest!*

But Psalm 127 warns of this **wrong way** and presents a **right way** of working- working **without** God requires **worthless effort**, whereas working **with** the Lord is **effortless and worth it in the end!**

So *what then* is this *effortless way of working* with the Lord, that's *worth it in the end?*

### Effortless work that's worth it!

4



In the beginning *God worked*, the very first words of the Bible say that "*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*" Creation *is work!* Genesis 1 describes the *week of creation* as 6 days (whether literal or symbolic) of *God work*.

- God *separated light from darkness* on day 1,
- God *separated the sky above from the sea below* on day 2,
- God *separated the earth from the sea and covered the earth with vegetation* on day 3,

- God *separated the night from the day by putting lights in the sky* to illuminate the earth and to *make seasons and days and years* on day 4,
- God *filled the waters with fish and filled the sky with birds* on day 5, God *made animals of every kind* for the earth, and *made humans in his image* to fill the earth and look after it on day 6.

After *each day of work*, God looked at what he'd made and said "*it was good*"- *it was worth it!*

Then on the *seventh day* it says *God rested* from *all the work* he'd done.

So according to Genesis 1 *God works* and *God rests!* And he continues *working in the world!*

The Bible is *full of stories* describing how *God is at work*, not only *creating*, but also:

4a

*loving, blessing, communicating, convicting, covenant making, covenant keeping, redeeming, giving, saving, forgiving, healing, delivering, comforting, nurturing, transforming, calling, providing, helping, defending, guiding, disciplining, growing, teaching, correcting, resurrecting, encouraging, empowering and replenishing work (and rest).*

All through the Bible God is revealed as *working and resting* in all these ways *and more!*

God *works and rests*, we were *made in God's image*, therefore we were *made to work and rest* in these many different ways *too!*

But Psalm 127 also tells us how the *worthless effort of Babel building* or even *Thessalonian slothfulness* **doesn't result in rest!**

The Message paraphrase puts it like this:

*It's useless rising early and going to bed late, working your fingers to the bone. Don't you know God enjoys giving rest to those he loves?*

In every letter the Apostle Paul wrote, he demonstrated that a Christian's work is a *natural, inevitable and faithful development* out of God's work.

It's *not a coincidence* that each of his letters *concludes* with instructions *guiding us into the kind of work that participates in God's work.*

However, the *curse* of some people's lives is *not* work as such, but *senseless work, worthless work*, the kind of work that psalm 127 describes as "*labouring in vain*" because God *isn't involved in it!*

You see our work goes *wrong* when we *lose touch with God* and *start working like Babel builders* or *stop working like the slothful Thessalonians!*

But Psalm 127 not only *posts a warning* about the *futility of working without God*, it also *presents an example* of the *effortlessness of working with God.*

In contrast to the *anxious labour* of *building a city and guarding the people*, the Psalm praises the *effortless work of making children.*

Now I know there's *much hard labour* in giving birth to a baby (I'd be in big trouble with Raewyn if I implied there wasn't!)  
Nor is it easy *raising kids* (I know that as a Dad!)-  
but the *actual process of conception and human development* both *inside the womb* and *after the baby is born-*  
I *can't claim* I did *any of that!*

The *entire miracle of reproduction and human development* requires *our participation*, but hardly in the form of what *we'd call work!*

Raewyn and I *might like to think* that *we made our kids-*  
but *actually we didn't. God did!*

*All we did* was participate in an *act of love* between *husband and wife* provided for us in *God's creation.*

Though it was a *one-off miraculous conception, never to be repeated again*, the way Luke describes how *Mary became pregnant with Jesus by the supernatural*

*activity of the Holy Spirit- is a prime example of the effortless work of participating with God!*

In fact *I reckon* Psalm 127 *points to Jesus* because:

*Jesus is our heritage from the Lord,  
our gift from God.  
Like an arrow in the hand of a mighty warrior are the sons  
and daughters of God.  
Blessed is the person who belongs in God's quiver full of  
arrows.  
We will not be put to shame with Jesus at our side  
because the enemy doesn't stand a chance against us,  
not now nor on judgment day!*

*How then do we participate* in this *effortless work* that's *worth it in the end?*

*Well, as we do the jobs and tasks assigned to us* in what the world *calls work*, we learn to *pay attention to what God is doing in the world*, so we can *join in with God's work too.*

We catch glimpses of God's: *creating, loving, blessing, communicating, convicting, covenant making, covenant keeping, redeeming, giving, saving, forgiving, healing, delivering, comforting, nurturing, transforming, calling, providing, helping, defending, guiding, disciplining, growing, teaching, correcting, resurrecting, encouraging, empowering and replenishing work* (and rest) in people's lives.

I caught a *glimpse of this* on Wednesday afternoon. I got *back to the church* after the *Baptist pastors end of year cluster meeting*, a little bit *late* for the *Vincent House Christmas lunch* I'd been invited to (it's tough being a pastor this time of year!). In between the *main course* and the *desert* they had an *awards ceremony* for the *residents and staff* of Vincent House.

But there was *something quite different* about these awards.

I'm familiar with *High School academic awards* that are given out for *accomplishments in school subjects*.

I'm familiar with *sporting awards* that are given out for sporting accomplishments.

and I'm familiar with *service awards* that are given out for performing some kind of service to the organisation.

But the *Vincent House awards* weren't really about *accomplishments*, they were really about *how'd they'd accomplished things*.

As I *watched and applauded* as they got their awards, I caught glimpses of God's *creating, loving, blessing, redeeming, giving, saving, healing, delivering, comforting, nurturing, transforming, providing, helping, defending, guiding, teaching, growing resurrecting, encouraging, empowering, and replenishing work* (and rest)!

*May the Lord be the one who builds our house,  
our business and our church!*

*May the Lord be the one who watches over our city!*

*May the Lord be the one who grants us rest!*

*May we become like arrows in the hands of our mighty warrior!*

*Blessed because we belong in God's quiver full of arrows.*

*Never being put to shame,*

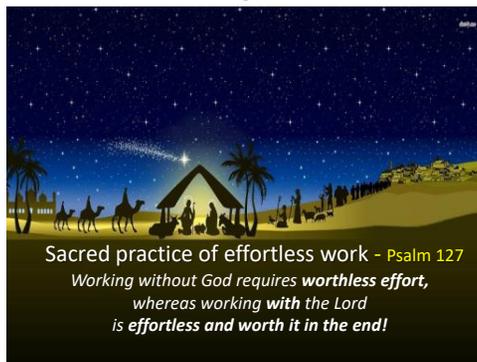
*because the enemy doesn't stand a chance when we work with Jesus!*

*not now nor on judgment day!*

I think it might *be a bit like that on judgment day!*

According to Psalm 127, God *isn't* impressed by the *size of the house*, or the *business*, or the *church* that we build, but he's *very interested* in how we *go about building it!*

5



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