

# Psalm 127

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 16 July 2023

Preacher: Jack Gamble-Smith

[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Okay, the Latin phrase, which is probably not the words you were hoping to hear from a PhD student in theology as the first couple words of this sermon, but the Latin phrase, Nisi Dominus Frustra, maybe you've seen it.

You've probably seen it engraved into many buildings and doorways throughout the United Kingdom. My wife and I saw it on a bus as we came here this morning. And as you probably know, that phrase is taken directly from Psalm 127, which is our text this morning.

And it simply means, without the Lord, vanity. And it's been adopted as the motto of apparently buses as of this morning, schools, military regimes, watchtowers, clergymen, wells, and even the city of Edinburgh in 1647.

And one of the reasons this psalm is so popular is because it describes daily life that we can all hear in this building resonate with.

It describes builders. It describes watchmen. And it describes parents. It describes children and parenting those children. And it acknowledges the pains of our lives, of rising up early in the morning and going to bed late after a long day of work, laboring and toiling and raising children, and after it, just trying to sleep to calm your mind after all the worries of all that you've done.

[ 1 : 2 7 ]     And if you look actually at Psalm 127, you're going to see it has kind of three main verbs that it used to describe our daily lives. If you look at verse 1, it describes our lives as building and watching.

And in verse 2, it describes it as sleeping. Building, watching, sleeping. Rising up early and returning to bed late in the evening. And building doesn't just describe if any of us in this room are construction workers.

That's not the only people it describes. It's the idea of creating something. Of creating something beautiful where there once was nothing. Of turning an empty lot into a school.

Or into a bowling club. Or a craggy hill into a castle. Or a few trees turning them into a house. Or a stranger turning them into a friend.

Or a broken relationship into one of trust and respect. And the idea of, if that's what building is, the idea of creating, then watching isn't just about those of us who work as security guards.

[ 2 : 3 0 ]     Or something along those lines. The idea of preserving and watching over what we've created. We all put locks on our doors. And we, those of us who have children, we childproof our houses when they start being able to run around.

And we spend all of our days building good reputations. And then trying to guard the reputation and the character that we've developed. And we watch and protect our marriages and the vows that we've made to our spouses.

All of our days, no matter what we all do here, each of us, spend our days creating with our hands and our minds. And then trying with everything we have to protect and preserve what we've created.

Whether you're an engineer, whether you're a student, whether you're retired, whether you're a mother or a father. This is what you do. You create and then you protect. And then you do this crazy thing that God has made us all need.

Which is to spend a third of our entire life in bed, asleep. And no matter who you are here today, what your life situation is, your life is a never-ending cadence and routine of creating, protecting, and then sleeping for a third of your life.

[ 3 : 41 ] And that's why this psalm is so relatable to everybody. But this psalm doesn't just describe what we all do with our lives. It describes how we feel, if you look at this psalm, as we crawl into bed after a long day.

And maybe how some of us feel even here this morning. You see that word that's repeated all throughout the passage. A good way to read your Bible is to always look for the repeated words.

Vain. In vain is the thing that's repeated. And the fear that probably haunts us as we wear ourselves thin each day with work is that all of this just actually might be in vain.

Vain is the idea of emptiness, of meaninglessness, of toil without end, of pain without any purpose. The word for vain that's used here in your Bible is used to describe storms and what they leave behind in their wake.

It's like the destroyed homes and the destroyed schools and buildings and parks and lives and everything they've built. And you look at it and it's torn and it's tattered.

[ 4 : 47 ] And it just, it leaves you saying, why? All of this for what? It just seems so meaningless all of a sudden. And the scary reality of this psalm, Psalm 127, is that it says your entire life can, this is what your entire life can become.

You can wake up early and you can create and you can protect and you can create and you can protect. And you fall asleep exhausted and worried about your creating and protecting. And the tragic thing is it can all be meaningless.

It can all be in vain. It'd be like spending years dreaming and planning to build a home for your family near the coast that maybe you would go on holidays to.

You live in a cheap flat and you go on, and you don't go on holidays and you save every penny that you have and you find the perfect plot of land after saving for all those years.

And you and your wife design this beautiful home and you spend years building it and bringing in people to build it. And when it's finally done and you finally are going to go, the next week a storm just comes in and washes your home out to sea.

[ 5 : 58 ] Meaningless. All those years and all that planning and all that labor, all that sacrifice. For what? And the writer of this psalm says that is what life can so easily become if we're not careful.

Decades of work and sleeplessness for nothing. And so the question we need to ask ourselves this morning is, is that us? Are we laboring in vain in each of our different fields?

Do we bear the burdens that we have in vain? So if I were to have just a few headings in this sermon, the first would be the negative, which is how to make sure you're living a life in vain.

How to live in vain. And the psalm, if you look at it, is very clear about the vain life. If you look at verse one, it's one where you build the house, but God isn't building the house with you.

Where you labor, but you're laboring alone without God laboring along with you. And my guess is that if someone were to ask, how do I not live in vain?

[ 7 : 02 ] How do I make sure that my life is meaningful? Probably early on in the conversation that person asked the question to, he would receive advice as to what he did. For example, if you want to make sure that you're living a meaningful life, be a missionary or a pastor or work for a church or give money to the poor.

Make sure you're doing meaningful things. And those things, of course, aren't wrong. They're all right. But that's not exactly how this psalm would give you advice. The psalmist tells you that if you look at it, that you can be a builder or you can be a watchman.

And the Lord can be with you. Your life can be meaningful. But you can also be a builder or you could be a watchman. And the Lord cannot be with you. Your life could be in vain.

So it's not primarily what you do that makes the difference. It's how you do it. It's how you do what you do that makes all the difference if your life is in vain or meaningful. And so, again, for this first point, negatively, how do we do it wrongly?

How do we make sure we live in vain? And if you look in the passage at verse 2, and you look at that phrase that says, eating the bread of anxious toil. Eating the bread of anxious toil.

[ 8 : 17 ] That's how you do it. And notice those two words, anxious toil. He says that the vain life is one where you wake up early, you go to bed late, you work diligently, and every moment of that is nothing but another bite of the stale bread of anxious toil.

All your days. Anxious toil is your daily bread. And those two words, anxious toil, it's just one word in the original language, and it's a really tricky word to translate.

And if you just even think about the idea of anxious toil, it's the idea of anxiety, inner pain, inner anguish, and toil, outer pain.

Anxiety, inner pain, toil, outer pressure. It's both physical and emotional sorrow. And the writer's trying to tell you there's a way to spend your whole life getting up early, going to bed late, creating and preserving an internal and external anguish.

And that feeling of internal and external pain is the indicator light that you might actually be living in vain. And the sad thing, I think we could probably all say that at some point in our life, we have known that feeling very well.

[ 9 : 30 ] You don't even really need me to describe it for you. And so the question we have to ask is, why is that feeling there? Why is that anguish there in our own lives? In the book of 1 Kings, this word is used to describe a father who neglected his son, and it resulted in his son feeling this anguish.

And in the book of Isaiah, the same word is used to describe when Israel's being described as a forgotten and forsaken wife. The picture is of a wife who should be paid attention to, a wife who should be loved and cared for, but isn't.

And the pain that creates in a wife who's created to be loved by her husband, and a son who's created to be loved and cared for by his father, but who both are forgotten and left unloved.

Internal and external pain. And you can't get this pain by stubbing your toe. It's a soul pain that you can only get. And here's the point. Just like the son in 1 Kings might work to be noticed again by his father, and a forgotten wife might work hard to be noticed by her husband, we can all work really, really hard to fill a deep void within ourselves, to calm the anxious feeling that we aren't truly loved or meaningful.

And maybe we all look for that. We all might try to satisfy that in different ways. Maybe by looking for the approval in our bosses or coworkers, or even in our own sense of self-accomplishment or goals.

[ 11 : 05 ] And so we can spend all of our waking moments trying to be loved, trying to be noticed. And this psalm would say to you, to all of us who've been there at one point or another, you were made to be loved, but you're going about it in all the wrong ways when you do that.

Because you can't get love. You can't get love that way. It's just not that way. That's the wrong way. And my guess is that somewhere deep down we know that. We know that's a vain pursuit.

So what do we do? If that's how we live in vain, how do we not live in vain? How do we make sure that we're living a meaningful life? And the psalmist tells us that as well.

And so this would be how to live meaningfully. If you just look actually at Psalm 127, look at those actual words in the first two verses of it. See words like building in houses, labor in vanity, watching in cities, rising up early, going to bed late, eating, anxious toil.

Those are all very relatable words. And then there's this little word, if you look at it, that doesn't seem like it belongs. Can you see the word that doesn't look like it belongs? Beloved. It's like a little rose poking up through cracks of concrete.

[ 12 : 27 ] In the midst of toil and work and sleeplessness, beloved just shows up. He gives his beloved rest, is what it says.

And so what's the difference between a vain and a meaningful life? It's the difference between a loved wife making dinner for her husband as he talks to her after a long day, and a servant girl making dinner for her tyrant master.

They're both making dinner. But that's the only point of comparison between those two. And this is where we begin to see the gospel intertwining with the way we live and labor and operate in our daily lives.

You see, the gospel is more than a list of points you need to believe or a thing you need to sign or a choice or decision that you make. The heartbeat of the gospel is a view of God himself.

It's an understanding of who God is and his disposition toward us. And so we have to ask the question, how does this psalm actually present the heart of God for us?

[ 13 : 35 ] Look at verse 1 again. God builds the house as we build the house. The Lord watches over the city all through the night right beside those who watch over the city.

And as we rise up early, while it's still dark in the morning, it says the Lord rises up alongside of us. He's with us in that. And as we yawn and stay up late to finish projects, the Lord sits beside us lovingly.

And it says, the Lord gives us sleep. He holds us as we fall asleep. Do you have a view of God that lets you say, as you fall asleep, the Lord is gifting me sleep right now.

He's giving me sleep as a gift. And do you see the picture? It's a God who says, I will never leave you. And we probably have heard those words before in church, but it's so tangible here.

God says, I won't leave you as you build relationships and homes and careers and marriages. And not only will I not leave you, but I'm building alongside of you and I'm actually building for you.

[ 14 : 45 ] And as you watch over what you've created, as you tidy your home and steward your finances and pray for your marriages and your children, I'm not only with you, I'm doing it for you and through you.

And I'm the God who says, at the end of the day, please sleep now. It's a gift that I'm just giving to you. You can rest because you know that even while you sleep, I, the Lord, will keep watch over your little ones and over your house and over your city and over the church and over your hearts.

I will keep watching even while you rest. And I'll be right there when you wake up. Why? Because that's a picture of him saying, you're my beloved. And I would never leave my beloved alone, unprotected, uncared for.

Beloved. And I just wonder, even as I'm preparing this, do I have a view of the world that lets me think about God like that? Do I have a view of God and myself that lets me think about God like that?

And I think if we're honest, I'd say we might not always have that. We might have a view of God that says something like, God doesn't want anything to do with me or, you know, God isn't actually that interested in my marriage or my friendships or God isn't that interested in my parenting or my sleeping or God doesn't want to be near me.

[ 16 : 08 ] And you would understand if you knew what I did or I think or the sin that I struggle with. And whenever you use that logic, whenever we use that logic in our life, we're just slicing off another piece of our daily bread of anxious toil.

You're just feeding yourself like eating bread, anxious toil, anxious toil. And here's what we need to understand. Here's what I need to understand.

If when we struggle, not if we have those thoughts, but when we have those thoughts, if you want to draw near to God, if you want him to be always with you and you want to be with him, God has already come in the person of Christ.

And if you trust on what Christ has done in his life, in his death, then if you were, if any of us were to stand before God right now, God would look at you and say, but I don't see any sin in you.

I only see the righteousness of my son. I only see his perfect life and his perfect death. And he would say, I love you and I want you to rest from this anxious toil that you labor with day after day after day because you're my beloved.

[ 17 : 25 ] And there's probably, if there's probably something in you because there's something in me when I hear that that says, I don't deserve that. I haven't earned that. That just feels so backward, but it's the truth.

And we probably don't have the gospel right if it doesn't feel backward to our own heart and mind. The work is already done. You are beloved.

You don't have to work for that. And I just wonder, do we actually live like that is what God says about us, that that's God's heart? Do we actually understand the gospel to be the heart of the Father for us like that?

In ancient Rome, when a general had victory after battle, he would ride into Rome in a chariot with his troops behind him, with the booty from the war, with the prisoners of war behind them.

It was a whole procession. But they would put another person in the chariot with the general. They'd put a slave boy in with the general. And the slave boy had one job for the entire procession.

[ 18 : 29 ] He would repeat to the general over and over and over again as they rode through, Homo Es, which is, you are but a man.

You see, the general had won a battle. He had troops behind him. He had crowds cheering. And it would be so easy, even for a moment, for that general to think that he was a little bit more than a man.

He needed to be reminded every second, Homo Es, you are but a man. And my guess is that this morning, as we wake up tomorrow morning, we don't feel like a Roman general.

We need to be reminded that we're but a man. That's very apparent to us. We feel sinful, we feel tired, we feel weary, and probably somewhat unlovable and unworthy, even as we come here this morning and tomorrow morning and the next morning.

Which is why the Father sent another to ride in a chariot with us as we wake up on Monday morning. And that someone is the Spirit. And that Spirit will say to you, just like that slave boy said to the general repeatedly, over and over and over again, you are a son or a daughter of the King.

[ 19 : 44 ] You are beloved of the King. And the King loves you. That's what the Spirit will say to us over and over and over again. Because everything around you is going to tell you that that isn't true.

Our experience will tell us that's not true. But that is what the Word of God tells us. And if we don't listen to that voice, life will be both excruciating and meaningless.

And look what the Psalm tells you. It's a life that is not only meaningless, but it's a life that is lonely. It's a life where you are building a house without God.

You're staying up late watching a city without God. You're falling asleep without God. And I hope that there's something in all of us, in me, that says, I don't want to be without the Lord.

I've been alone too many nights, too many early mornings alone. And the crazy reality is, and this might sound kind of shocking, if that's you, if that's me, we've just uttered our side of what the Bible would call a covenant.

[ 20 : 55 ] And what do I mean by that? God's made a covenant with mankind for all of history. And you've read it if you've read probably almost any of your Bible. And it's when God says, I will be your God and you will be my people.

That's the beating heart of God in the Bible. And he says it over and over and over and over again all throughout Scripture. And if your heart says, I want to be his, I want to be one of his people, I want him to be with me and near me, then you can trust his word when he says, oh, I want to be your God.

I want to be, I want you to be my people. I want to give you peaceful rest. beloved, you're a son or a daughter of the king. And as we turn to these final three verses, if you look down, you're going to see a whole different section of the psalm.

It's probably going to look like we've almost started reading an entirely different psalm at this point. It's now about children and arrows and quivers and enemies and gates. What is this all about?

What happened? What is this second part of the psalm? And many have thought over the years that these are really two psalms that have been kind of sewn or stitched together to form one psalm.

[ 22 : 08 ] But I think if we actually understand the first two verses really well, and it's the idea that God is creating and he's preserving along with us and through us, actually the last three verses will make a whole lot of sense and it'll make sense that they're one psalm.

And just look at what's happening in these last three. It says, children are a heritage from the Lord. The fruit of the womb of reward. Just notice the phrases from the Lord and the words of reward.

The Lord gives us children. He gives us a reward through our children. And I think we all know that.

We've probably said those words before, but just think about that reality in this context. The Lord creates children. He's building families and homes and generations and lineages.

The Lord is creating little ones in our homes that will live after us. And verses 4 and 5 say, like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth.

[ 23 : 18 ] 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. Notice again, arrows, warriors, quiver, enemies, gates.

This is battle language. This is the language of someone who protects, who guards, who we might even say someone who stands on a gate and watches over a city type language.

And just remember verse 1. Remember we talked about. Do you see the themes emerging again of creating, of protecting? The Lord not only creates and builds our families and our homes and our generations, but then he protects us through our families and he protects our families.

He guards us through what he's created in us. Do you see, this is an example of the Lord creating and protecting us in the most mundane area of our lives, our home.

And the psalmist is saying, don't you see the Lord caring for you even in your little ones? mothers, fathers, do you want proof that I am still creating in your lives and caring for you?

[ 24 : 31 ] Well, look at your children. And how would a child actually know that the father loves her? All she has to do is look into the eyes of her mother who stays up with her when she can't sleep or at her father who builds little houses of blocks with her and who locks the door at night.

That is God's subtle, strong way of saying, I love you to that little girl. God is saying, I couldn't be more involved in the fabric of your home or your lives.

I am always, always creating and protecting my people. God wants to press into the place where as parents we might feel the most forgotten, where your work goes the most unnoticed, where you lose the most sleep and no one else will ever know.

You don't get a promotion for that. God, where we might feel the most alone and where you might even feel the most anxious over the little souls of your children. And the God who says, I see in secret says, I see you, mothers and fathers, and I'm there with you, in your homes, alongside of you.

Though you won't be given awards or promotions for parenting, I'm giving you a song to remember that your labor isn't in vain and it certainly isn't being done without the presence of God.

[ 25 : 49 ] because as parents you aren't just given buildings to build or cities to watch, you're given little eternal souls. And God lets you create habits in these little souls and teach them to sing and to read and to be a good friend, to pray and to eat.

And this passage promises you, parents, that he is involved in your work, that that work matters to him. that as you rock your screaming baby to sleep, God is right there with you singing this little soul to sleep.

And as your child sleeps, God says to you, mother or father, please rest. I will protect this little soul. And as you teach your little boy or girl to pray, God is right there sowing seeds of faith in this little soul, protecting their little hearts with his strong hands.

In conclusion, Nisi Dominus Frustra, without God, vanity. Another university in Edinburgh in 1964 wanted to use that line as well for their motto for their new institution.

But they changed the wording just slightly. Their motto was changed from Nisi Dominus Frustra to Nisi Sapientia Frustra.

[ 27 : 11 ] Without wisdom, vanity. And the ironic thing about that is that's the least wise change they ever could have made.

They've gone against everything Psalm 127 says. Psalm 127's cry is unless the Lord builds and protects and is with you, every single thing you do will be absolutely meaningless.

That's the unmistakable claim of Psalm 127. And the one word this institution has removed is the Lord. And in his place they put the word wisdom.

And by doing so they've condemned themselves to vanity and to meaninglessness. righteousness. And it's easy to see the folly of that decision.

But how often do we do the exact same thing in much more subtle ways in our own lives? How often do we say unless I have this one thing, then my day is meaningless.

[ 28 : 19 ] Unless I accomplish this one thing in my life, then my life is meaningless. Unless I am liked or respected or promoted or unless I have the family that I want, unless my kids turn out or do the business that I hope they'll do or unless I whatever, then life is meaningless.

And on and on and on we spend our entire lives inputting different words and different seasons of our lives without blank vanity. Just like the universities done.

I just wonder what would happen as a church, as Winsboro Church, as just us, what happened to our families, to our relationship to the Father, if we actually lived as if God's heartbeat toward us was one of love and care for us.

What would happen to our anxious toils and our marriages and our parenting if we believed that? In the Gospels, Jesus says, come to me, you all know this, come to me and I will give you rest.

My yoke is easy and my burden is light. And notice that Jesus says, I will give you rest. But then he uses the language of working, of labor and of toil, of a yoke and of a burden.

[ 29 : 41 ] See, with Jesus, the labors of life don't go away. But when you have Jesus, you can rest because you are his, you are beloved.

Think of the way John calls himself the disciple whom Jesus loved. He knew that Jesus loved him. And that so imprinted itself upon his entire life that he even removed his name from his Gospel and just called himself the one that Jesus loved.

And when we realize that life doesn't necessarily become easy, but it does become peaceful and meaningful. let me pray for us.

Father, thank you that you are so determined in your word and through your word that we understand that you love us and that you're a God who isn't far off, but you're a God who's so determined to imprint your love upon our families, on our parenting, on our homes, on churches, and I pray that each of us in this room would walk away leaving behind the daily bread of anxious toil, leaving behind the vain pursuits of making our life meaningful by filling in without blank and vanity, and I pray that we would go away here like John and say we're the person that Jesus loves, and that would be our identity, that would be what imprints itself upon our lives, and that would so shape the way we live and think that we would relate to each other as beloved, and that we wouldn't need to compete with each other, we wouldn't need to prove ourselves to each other, but that we would live out of love and not for love.

Lord, I pray that your spirit would apply this passage to our hearts and our minds all week, and that you would encourage us and that we wouldn't walk away browbeaten, but we would walk away just so thankful for your love, and so thank you, Father.

[ 31 : 56 ] We love you and praise in Christ's name. Amen.