

Psalm 127:1-2

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] What is the point? Seriously, just what is the point? You work hard, or reasonably hard, to pass a few exams. You get a job. You work long hours and weekends, just to get bedded in, of course, when you're in a new job. You do okay. You climb up the ladder a rung or two, or maybe four or five. You make some money. You buy a car and a flat. You get married. You have 2.2 kids. You buy a bigger house and a nicer car, certainly a bigger car, just to protect what you have earned, the comfort that you enjoy. You continue working long hours and weekends.

Before you know it, you're no longer 20-something or 30-something or even 40-something, or maybe even 50-something. And just what is the point?

Psalm 127 broaches this big question, just what is the point? And it does so by examining the human preoccupation with constructing and accumulating and conserving what we have constructed and accumulated. It talks about building houses and households, about protecting what we have built and secured. It talks about working long hours and securing our hard-earned cash. It talks about families and children and growing up. In a few short verses, this wisdom poem for That Is What It Is does a pretty good job of describing the lives of men and women as individuals or as parts of families, but also the activities and preoccupations of the societies that we form a part of.

Well, what do we discover in this psalm that we'll be thinking about this morning? I'm suggesting that there are four things that we discover in this psalm, perhaps many more, but four that I want to highlight. The first that we'll be looking at is that in the psalm we have a sobering portrayal of the futility of life under the sun. And I use that expression that is found in the wisdom literature to speak of life without reference to God, of godless life, where godless is being used in a literal sense, where God is out of the picture, the futility of life under the sun.

The psalm provides a sobering portrayal of such a life. But the psalm also provides for us a welcome reminder of who life really is all about. And we'll be noticing that as well. The psalm in the third place provides for us a necessary call to focus on the good gifts of God, very special in the matter of family and children. And that's something we'll just notice this morning, and then this evening we'll take that particular point and develop it much more fully, really verses 3 to 5, the second half of the psalm. But then fourthly, the psalm also provides for us a solemn warning to be heard and heeded.

[3 : 39] So, a sobering portrayal of the futility of life, a welcome reminder of who life really is all about, a call to focus on the good gifts of God, and a warning, a solemn warning for us to hear and to heed.

Let's begin then by noticing this sobering portrayal of the futility of life under the sun. And I want to consider this first element or this first point under three subheadings, and this will be where we spend most of our time. So, don't be concerned if, you know, we've been going for 20 minutes and I'm still on the first point, and you're thinking, ah, there's four points, we're going to be here forever, because point number one is where we're going to spend most of our time. And this sobering portrayal, we're going to think about it under three subheadings. So, if you can mentally visualize the structure, that might, I hope, help you. The first subheading that I want to notice is that in verse 1 of the psalm, we have a description of activities that represent all human activity at an individual or family level and at the level of a community or society. Notice what we read there in verse 1 of Psalm 127, unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain. The building of houses, the construction of edifices, the keeping safe of that which we have built and constructed, do these activities not really represent all of human activity as individuals, but also as societies. House building, or if we broad that, as I think we can legitimately do to the idea of household building, so not only the physical structure, but the building of a home, of a family, this occupies, does it not, a huge chunk of our time and effort as men and women.

Much of our planning and effort and income is directed to this end, to build or buy our own house. It's one thing to build a house or indeed a city. The next big task is to conserve or protect what we have constructed. And of course, the psalm also makes reference to that. The city has been built, good.

Well, now you have to protect it. You have to conserve it from those who would destroy it. And of course, these activities that the psalmist refers to in representation, really, of all human activity, these activities can be applied to the personal level of an individual, a father, a parents, but also to the level of societies, be that a community or a city or a nation.

So, the psalm is about life and how we live it. It's about time and how we spend it. It's about asking of these activities that so occupy and preoccupy us, what's the point? You know, what's the point of all this building? What's the point of this house that I've constructed? What's the point of this protection that I've secured for myself as I look into the future by means of the income that I earn and the insurance policies that I've signed up to? What's the point? So, we have then this description, first of all, that represents all human activity in verse 1. But we also have recognized in verse 1 that such activity is vain unless the Lord is central to such activity. Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.

[7 : 54] Now, before we think about what is being said here, it is important to recognize what the psalmist is not saying. The psalmist is not implying that a godless perspective, and again, I'm using that phrase literally, where God is out of the picture, a godless perspective leads to inevitable failure in the activities or ventures of life.

He is not saying that. The builders may well build the house, and they may well do so with great skill and industry. They may give no thought to God and still achieve the goal of building the house or the mansion or the palace or whatever it is they're building. The psalmist is not saying that if you keep God out of the picture, you won't be able to build houses. No. You may well achieve a great deal. You may build many houses and do so very successfully. And the watchmen also. The watchmen may successfully watch over the city and ensure its protection and preservation with no reference to God. And that's true of our societies.

We may have great defense policies and armies and armaments that defend our country, and we may be able to do so successfully giving no thought to God. It's possible to do that.

As observation confirms that that is so. But really the question that the psalmist asks is, well, for what purpose? So the psalmist is not saying that if we keep God out of the picture, we will be abject failures in all that we do. That is not the case.

Nor is the psalmist decrying diligence in the fulfilling of our labors, be that constructing or conserving or both. The builder should work diligently, and the watchman ought to watch conscientiously. That is the task that they have been assigned, and they should perform their duties with care and with diligence. What then is the psalmist saying? Well, what the psalmist is saying, and what he is doing, is recognizing the ultimate futility of all such activity, of all such endeavor, however diligent and however successful, if God is removed from the picture or relegated to the sidelines. And this truth can be applied both to societies or communities and also to individuals and families. If we begin with societies, or if we take the example of a city, Edinburgh's motto, our capital city, Edinburgh's motto, found on its coat of arms and dating to the middle of the 17th century, is *Nisi Dominus Frustra*, which is Latin and translated means, *Accept the Lord in vain*. And it comes from this psalm. It is taking the message of this psalm and using it as a motto for the city.

[11 : 06] And what is revealing is how the city fathers, influenced by Reformation thought and principles, saw and understood that the civic life of the city, and as a capital city in a sense representing the nation, ought to be centered on God, and that if it were not to be centered on God, then it would be vain.

Now, I'm not sure how this might apply to the current trams fiasco in Edinburgh, unless the Lord builds the tram lines, its builders labor in vain. I'm not sure if there's an application there.

But more seriously, the point of the psalmist, picked up by the city fathers of our capital city way back in the 17th century, is that all the activity and industry and culture and progress of the city of a city or a society is ultimately futile unless the Lord, unless the Lord is recognized and granted the place of preeminence and honor that He merits. And how fitting and how applicable this principle to Scotland today. As we embark on a constitutional debate that will climax in a referendum in November of 2014. And I imagine that here this morning we have represented different points of view. Some of you will vote yes, and some of you will vote no. Some of you haven't yet decided. But what I would say is this, that whatever our own personal preferences concerning the constitutional debate surrounding our nation's future, whether you are of a mind to conserve the union or whether you are of a mind to go down the route of independence, the key principle in both scenarios is *nisi dominus frustra*, unless the Lord in vain, unless the Lord in vain.

And what of our city? We boast of our status as the oil capital of Europe. We're soon to embark on the construction of the much-awaited bypass, where hundreds of millions of pounds will be invested.

We continue to debate the alternative visions for the revitalization of our city center. But is it not the case that the key truth absent from the agenda at council meetings, seldom recognized by our captains of industry, never on the lips of our MPs and MSPs, is *nisi dominus frustra*, unless the Lord in vain.

[13 : 57] Unless the Lord in vain. What's the point of all our prosperity? What's the point of all the bypasses you could wish for? What's the point of city gardens or any other vision of the city center?

If we have relegated God to the sidelines, if God has no place in our thinking and in our plans as a city or as a nation. But then there is the application of this principle of unless the Lord to our lives as individuals.

You see, you can build a mansion. You can reach the very top of the ladder in your chosen profession. You can look forward to a retirement of leisure and ease. But here, too, this principle holds true, *nisi dominus frustra*, unless the Lord is in vain. Unless the Lord is in vain.

And we can consider this further as we note our third subheading under this first point. And I'll just remind you to help you keep in mind what it is that we're trying to present here. We're thinking, at the moment still, of the psalmist's sobering portrayal of the futility of life under the sun.

We've noticed that in the first verse we have a description of activities that represent all human activity, be that of individuals or of societies. We've also noticed that the psalm recognizes that all such activity is vain unless the Lord is central to such activity. And what we're going to do now, we're still thinking of this sobering portrayal of the futility of life, but we're going to think of it now under this third subheading relating to verse 2 of the psalm, where we have a movement in the poem, we have a movement from the general to the personal with a concrete example of work as a tiresome bind and burden. Notice there in verse 2, in vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat, for He grants sleep to those He loves. The first words of this verse has the sense almost of a curse.

[16:10] Now, that's very strong language, and perhaps it's too strong, but there is that sense to it. Really, what the psalmist is saying, or what the poem declares is, vain to you, vain to you, if you rise up early and stay up late. And we'll think about what that means in a moment. But he's saying, it's vanity to you. It serves you no purpose. You achieve nothing from what it is that you're doing.

And from the general truth that we have in verse 1, unless the Lord builds a house, unless the Lord watches over the city, and in verse 2, it gets personal, because the words are directed to the reader, to the listener. And what about you? What about you? Never mind now societies, never mind others. What about you? Vain to you, if you rise up early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat.

What about you? But what are we being warned of? Well, we're being warned of the folly of being consumed and blinded and shackled by godless work. And again, I stress, I use that term godless as in work where we work without any reference to God. The folly of being consumed by such work, by such endeavor, by such money-making. And how very contemporary is this verse not an accurate description of so many of the good citizens of Aberdeen? Might this verse be an accurate description of some of us here this morning?

In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat. Is hard work being decried? By no means. The issue here is not hard work, but what the psalmist describes as toil. And here the word is not just a synonym for work. Toil, even as the English word implies, speaks of that which is grinding and burdensome and wearisome. Indeed, the very word that is translated toil can also mean sorrow. So, it's work that has that characteristic. The man or woman who toils endlessly. But for what purpose?

Making money to eat and drink and play and build and buy. But soon, even the eating loses its pleasure and appeal. In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat. You eat because you have to eat, but it's lost its appeal and pleasure. So, we have in these verses a sobering portrayal of the futility of life under the sun. But we also have in these verses, and in these first two verses, we also have a welcome reminder of what or who life is really all about. You see, if we are saying, as we are, and as the psalmist is saying, if we are saying that life is not just about constructing and conserving, it's not just about working and accumulating, it's not just about making and spending money, then what is it all about?

[19:52] You see, it's relatively easy to diagnose the problem. And for the younger in the audience, I would say that even Jesse Jay can do that. It's not about the money, money, money. But what then is it all about?

Well, it's not about making the world dance or any other activity worthy as it might be. It's about the Lord. Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain. Who is it that grants sleep and rest and peace? It is the Lord. He grants sleep to those He loves. Life takes on meaning, and the activities of life take on meaning in the measure that the Lord occupies the place that He merits and demands. And we can put flesh on this by identifying three complementary ways in which this must happen in our lives. You know, if your response is, and I hope it is, well, I agree with that, and I want the Lord to have the place that He should have in my life. He doesn't currently, well, what do I need to do? Well, we can notice these three aspects that complement each other. First of all, we are to depend on the Lord in all that we do.

We are to be grateful to the Lord for all that we receive, do, and achieve. And we are to do all that we do for the Lord. Even just these three prepositions maybe can help us remind it. Depending on the Lord, being grateful to the Lord, and doing all that we do for the Lord. You see, we depend on God. Without God, we can do nothing. The man who rises early and stays up late to get that promotion, to get that overtime, to build that bigger house without any reference to God is a man who is not depending on God. He's depending on himself. And he thinks by his own wisdom and by his own hard work and by his own endeavor, he will achieve what he wants to achieve. Not depending on God. But we are also to be grateful to God for all that we receive, for all that we do, for all that He allows us to achieve. The houses and the cities we build, the success we enjoy, the wealth we accumulate, recognizing that the hand of God is the one that grants us these things. And as we do, so we will be delivered from pride and from a mindless pursuit of that which ultimately only God can give. So, we depend on God. We are grateful to God, but we are also to do all that we do for God. And so, in the building of our houses and in the constructing of a career, in the making of the money that we make, to do so seeking His glory, seeking to advance His kingdom, seeking to demonstrate in the manner in which we do these things His values and His priorities. And this is not only the right thing to do, it is also one that brings with it a happy consequence. As we read there in verse 2, "...for He grants sleep to those He loves."

Depending on God, being grateful to God, living for God is the recipe for sleep, for rest and tranquility delivered from the toil and stress of self-centered living. Yes, God created us to work, but He also created us to rest. And this very day that we are enjoying is ample evidence of that. One day set aside for us to rest. The advice of the psalmist contained in this poem has a New Testament parallel in the Sermon on the Mount. We read the words of Jesus in Matthew chapter 6 that really touches on this same theme, and we can read again some of these verses to see how, in the words of Jesus, we have an echo of the truths that we find in the psalm.

Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, than the body more important than clothes?

[24 : 36] Look at the birds of the air. They do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

Why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin, yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow, is thrown into the fire, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, what shall we eat, or what shall we drink, or what shall we wear? For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. If you are to live the life that the psalmist is commending, if you are to grant to the Lord the place that He merits and demands, then in the language of Jesus, what you are to do is to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. And where does that begin, or on whom does this converge?

Well, it begins with and converges on Jesus, the promised and reigning King. And so this morning I ask you, is Jesus your King? Do you bow the knee to King Jesus? Do you bow the knee to King Jesus in the life that you live, in the houses that you build, in the work that you do, in the plans that you make?

Because if you do not, then you are making the big mistake that the psalmist speaks of in this psalm. What is the point? What's it all about? It's all about King Jesus. It's all about bowing the knee to Him, and living for Him, and independence upon Him. And so in this psalm, in this wisdom poem, we also have this welcome reminder of what life, or who life, is really all about. We notice also at the very beginning that we have in this psalm a necessary call to focus on the good gifts of God, very especially in the gift of children, as the poem goes on to develop in verses 3 to 5. The poem really has two distinct parts, and it's not altogether clear the connection between them or the flow from one to the other. It is certainly the case that children are a central and clear example of the principle of *nisi dominus frustra*, without God, vanity or vain. In the matter of children, this triad of dependence on God, and gratitude to God, and dedication for God applies. And so the poem broaches this happy subject of the fruit of the womb, and in so doing identifies the principles and lessons that we can grasp and apply. But we're going to do that not this morning, but this evening. So if you are particularly concerned, especially this would be important for parents, though the principles apply not only to parents, we will be thinking of that more carefully this evening. So that allows us to take, to step forward to the fourth element that we wanted to look at. And again, just to remind ourselves of what it is we've seen thus far. We thought, first of all, and spent more time doing this, considering this sobering portrayal of the futility of life under the sun. Then, much more briefly, though in some ways of much greater importance, because it provides the antidote, it provides the answer, we thought of this welcome reminder in the psalm of what or who life is really all about.

We've also, and just very fleetingly, because we're going to consider it this evening, we've noticed that in the psalm we have this necessary call to focus on the good gifts of God, and very especially the children that He grants us. But there is then finally, finally certainly this morning, we have a solemn warning to be heard and heeded. And what is the warning? Well, in a sense, the message of the psalm, the message of this poem is a solemn warning, unless the Lord. And so that word of warning comes to you this morning, unless the Lord occupies the place in your life that He merits and demands, then it's all pointless. It's all futile. So the message of the psalm itself is a warning. But when I speak here of a warning, a solemn warning, I have in mind, not in the first instance, the content of the poem, but the author of the poem. We haven't even read how the poem is introduced. Notice there at the introduction to the poem, we read a song of a sense of Solomon, of Solomon. Now that Solomon would be the author of Psalm 127 is not surprising. The psalm would almost fit better in the book of Proverbs.

[30 : 07] The content of the psalm, the wisdom lessons that we have in it would sit very easily in the book of Proverbs. It is, to coin a word, Solomon-esque in its content and flavor. So why is it that recognizing that Solomon is the author, why does that constitute a warning? I'm suggesting that it does. Well, the reason it constitutes a warning is that Solomon, as we know, was a man who very wisely asked for and was granted wisdom from God in great measure. It's also true that Solomon was a man loved by God.

And maybe as he penned these words and he spoke of God as the one who grants sleep to those he loves, he was thinking of himself. I am the one who has profited from the wisdom of God and is the object of the love of God. But, there's always a but, isn't there? But Solomon tragically failed to practice what he preached. You see, what he preaches in the psalm, it's all good stuff, but he didn't live it.

You see, the wisdom of his own poem was largely forgotten, certainly as the years passed. And in time, as 1st King records for us, his building projects became reckless, his kingdom a ruin, and his marriages and family life a disastrous denial of God. So the man who penned these wise words did not live by them. And that is why I say that this constitutes a solemn warning, because I ask you, what about you? Well, you haven't penned these words, but you are here this morning and you've read them and you've heard an explanation of them. What are you going to do with this wisdom?

That those who surround you at your workplace should live godless lives. And I'm not suggesting that is true of all those who surround you, but that there are those who surround you who live such lives, who rise up early and stay up late just to get the bigger house and the nicer car and the big promotion, that those who surround you should live lives of that kind is sad.

But that you should live such a life, that's beyond sad. That is folly of gargantuan proportions. It is to trample underfoot the very wisdom of God that he graciously places before you in his word.

[32 : 54] Nisi dominus frustra, unless the Lord is all vanity. Let us pray.