

BETWEEN THE DREAMING AND THE COMING TRUE

Building Babel?

The human race has always been building. Some of the things that have been built are, quite simply, extraordinary. Some of them are so extraordinary we've given them a name: we call them wonders. We have chosen to call a group of them The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. I believe it was Greek travellers who first decided what made it into this group of wonders. But, nevertheless, there are, apparently, Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Only one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World still stands today: the Great Pyramid of Giza, which was built more than 4000 years ago. The other Six Ancient Wonders are: The Hanging Gardens of Babylon; the Statue of Zeus in Olympia; the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus; the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus; the Colossus of Rhodes; the Pharos (Lighthouse) of Alexandria.

In 2000, a new set of Seven Wonders was created by people voting! The only survivor from the original list was the Great Pyramid of Giza. The Seven new Wonders of the World are: The Great Wall of China; Petra; the Colosseum; Chichen Itza; Machu Picchu; the Taj Mahal and Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro. All extraordinary creations built by humans with great skill.

Genesis records a building project that was a disaster: the building of the Tower of Babel in Genesis chapter 11. No matter how much skill and effort went into it, it was a failure. The result of efforts to build a tower to the heavens was a shattered community and confused communication that still exists today.

The truth of the story of the Tower of Babel presents us with is, that effort, hard work and especially religious effort, do not, in themselves, justify anything.

Work is something that is a major part of all of our lives in one way or another. Work is a gift of God and it is unavoidable. Because of the Fall, work, like everything, became tainted. The nature of sin is to take good things and twist them, and that can happen with our work. As we follow God, he invites us to use work in the way he intended it, and to be wise to the way that sin often tries to twist it.

The Seven Wonders of the World, ancient or modern, speak of the glory and achievement of man. The Tower of Babel is the symbol of human pride set against God's great love. Psalm 127 is given to help us live and work well in the light and truth of God's great love.

Psalm 127

A song of ascents. Of Solomon.

¹ Unless the LORD builds the house,
the builders labour in vain.

Unless the LORD watches over the city,
the guards stand watch in vain.

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

³ Children are a heritage from the LORD,
offspring a reward from him.

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

⁵ 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.

The first part of Psalm 127 is a warning about work. Just before we explore this a little further, a word about how it might be helpful to understand work. Often, and understandably, we understand work to mean paid employment. There's nothing wrong with that... but here, we are speaking about a broader application of work. This Psalm isn't just speaking to those of us in some kind of paid employment that we call work. It is, rather, speaking of any activity that reflects the truth that God is at work and that as we 'work' we are joining with God, or participating with God as he works! The point is, we are all involved in work as Psalm 127 understands and applies it.

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These verses are a warning to help us not fall into one of two extremes, as we go about our work. One extreme maybe the way of Babel. The people building Babel wanted to do something great, they wanted to make a name for themselves. They wanted to protect what they had and not be scattered throughout the earth. The people building the Tower of Babel were ready to work hard to plan and build. The people building the Tower of Babel want to control and manage the world in which they live.

Perhaps in some ways we are tempted to do the same. Our culture certainly seems to encourage us to do so. We are encouraged to work hard, to progress, to be successful, to plan, to dedicate ourselves to our work.

Perhaps one of the challenges we have in our culture is that we take ourselves too seriously and our work becomes a burden it was never meant to be. The truth is that I do that more often than I mostly care to admit. The truth is that I have found writing this talk really difficult. It's one of those Psalms we know quite well and want to quote to each other from time to time.

I don't want to write a talk that simply tells you what you already know. So, I can work really, really hard at researching for this talk and writing some deep insights. And, I can do that on my own! But the point of Psalm 127 wants to make to me is that the best way to do this, is not on my own. When the Psalm says that builders labour in vain, it is not saying that no human work can flourish without God's conspicuous, or dramatic intervention. What it is saying is that work done without God's participation will ultimately be empty – it will be in vain.

I could write the best, cleverest, challenging talk ever, but if God is not in it with me, it will be in vain! And, here's the thing, I'm not meant to do it on my own, and God doesn't want me to do it on my own. God's best is that we participate in the work of writing a talk together. I can work as hard as I like, in as many ways as I like, to write a great talk, but the best way is for me and God to participate together. The same is true for you – in whatever you are doing.

Our culture encourages us and applauds us for working hard and taking great care to do our work as well as we possibly can, but we can take ourselves too seriously and think that ultimately it's all about us – that the whole thing revolves around us. Perhaps, at its worst it invites us to become workaholics, because if we work harder, if we work longer, if we leave no stone unturned and nothing to chance, work will be satisfying and successful.

Psalm 127 invites us to think differently and to recognize that to invite God into our work and to participate with him is what gives work its value and satisfaction.

It is quite possible, and many scholars think, that Psalm 127 was written by Solomon. And Psalm 127 has echoes of Solomon's life experiment, where he methodically tried to find satisfaction, only to find, he was chasing the wind. Psalm 127 and Ecclesiastes come to the same conclusion: life lived in the truth about God and in participation with him is the best way to live.

Psalm 127 v 1-2 however, are not encouraging us to be lazy! It's not a case of because God is involved we need to do nothing. In Ecclesiastes 9 v 10 Solomon says: 'Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.' In the New Testament, Paul echoes these words: 'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord, not human masters.' (Colossians 3 v 23)

We give it our best! We use the gifts and skills and intellect God has blessed us with and we use them as well as we know how. And there's a beauty in this Psalm that we would do well not to miss. We give it our best, we work hard, we do what our hand finds to do with all our heart...but we can relax because we know we are not working on our own. We can relax, let go, because we are participating with God in what he is building. The weight of success and failure is lifted because we work with God in his grace.

The basis of Psalm 127 is that God is at work. It's the truth that runs through the whole of the Bible: God is at work. God is at work in creation and God is at work in the mess! God is at work loving and healing and helping and leading

and guiding and guarding those he created. God is at work drawing people, those he created, to himself. God is at work reconciling the world to himself (Colossians 1 v 20).

Psalm 127 v 2 tells us God grants sleep to those he loves. Perhaps, when we do it on our own, we find sleep hard, but Psalm 127 reminds us of the truth that even while we sleep, God is at work. Perhaps a good way to understand this is that precisely because God is at work, we can sleep. Friends, I know that I, for one, need to take heed of that truth: that precisely because God is at work, I can sleep! And maybe, you too need to hear that truth today: precisely because God is at work, you can sleep!

It is true that there are some things we can do (like turn on a light) certain things we cannot do (like control the weather) and some things we cannot control but can influence. This is true of work and sleep. If I prepare well and read widely, it can help write a better talk. If I don't stay up too late looking at my phone or tablet, I can prepare for sleep. So, we both work hard and rest, knowing there are some things we cannot control but some things we can influence or prepare for, and trust God is at work.

Psalm 127 3 v 3-5

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I think these verses are best understood as an example of the truth of verses 1 and 2. The Psalm is not saying that you are blessed if you have lots of children and therefore not blessed if you don't. The Psalm is saying that children are a gift, a miracle, that is given by God – the gift of life – and at the same time we have a part to play in creating children. The miracle of a new life, a baby, is never the result solely of our efforts. The miracle of new life is exactly that – a miracle.

Interestingly the first three generations of Israel were born by mothers who could not bear children: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and

Rachel. A strange way to fulfil his promise to Abraham of a great nation, but perhaps God's point was to remind Abraham and Israel, that it is God, and God alone, who brings life.

And maybe in Psalm 127 these verses serve to make a broader point.

Jesus himself did not have children of his own... but he came to make us all children of God. Perhaps it is better to understand these verses as a reminder that people are at the centre of our work and God's work. Perhaps it serves to remind us that the character of our work is shaped not by accomplishments or possessions, but by relationships.

We can all be involved in building relationships in whatever place we are. And in all our relationships, wherever they are, whether in a Christian context or a secular context, we can all demonstrate God's great and magnificent love. We can all show compassion, love, grace, mercy, patience and forgiveness. As followers of Christ who know we are loved by God, we can demonstrate that love to others. As God loves us without limit, we can show others that God loves them without limit too. And as we do that we participate with God who loves because he loves because he loves....

Psalm 127 reminds us that we can work hard and give it our best, but the best way to live is to live with God's great love at the centre of our lives.

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