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Psalm 127

Pat Harrison

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## LIVING ASSETS

Before we came to Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino a year ago, I was “baptized” into the business world. For seven years, I poured myself into a small but promising retail gasoline and grocery business in Denver, Colorado. Five of those years I was sole owner. I was an entrepreneur. I thought that had a nice ring to it. God brought my wife to me in the middle of this time. Work involved long hours, but I had a going interest—a strong, loyal customer base; I was paying off the business at a rapid pace; and I had the three keys in business going for me: location, location, location. I knew the risks, but they were good, and calculated, according to several successful business minds. My situation was at times nerve-wracking, at times exhilarating. I paid myself a subsistence salary and was careful not to snatch even a Twinkie. At a conservative estimate, I would have the business paid off in five years and have a quarter million dollar-asset built up to provide for a family or whatever came along.

Spiritually, I felt in touch and growing with God. I had handed over the success or failure of the business to the Lord. I was involved in teaching and in fellowship with a local church body. I was excited to be God’s man in the market place, which was where I was sure he had placed me after three years of preparation here at PBC and two in full time ministry at a church in Santa Barbara.

Several years into my business venture, however, the unthinkable happened. The rules of the game changed. Decisions made in corporate board rooms in Chicago and Houston, and in government offices in Washington and Denver, took my control and my profit margins away. I still had location, location, location, but big oil companies were taking business from me with prices at the pump I could not compete with. Then the state highway on which my business sat was designated to be widened, taking out my store. Over a period of years, I saw my business, which I had put my blood and sweat into, dwindle to a shell of its former self. To make ends meet I had to let workers go, work excessive hours myself, and take no salary. The bottom line became blurry. Complicated negotiations to compensate me for my loss went sour and I came away with no assets from this venture, only a lot of “what ifs” and “whys.” So much for my life as an entrepreneur.

A columnist recently wrote in an article that there are three unchangeable facts about planning for retirement:

- You own stuff.
- You die.
- Someone will get that stuff.
- I would add a fourth:
- Stuff doesn’t satisfy.

That’s not original. King David’s son, Solomon, in his diary of an unsatisfied life—the book of Ecclesiastes—said the pursuit of stuff will leave us feeling hollow inside. He should know! He embarked on the experiment of a lifetime. If he could do it all, have it all and know it all, would that give meaning to life? God had given him

money, power, intelligence and friends, yet Solomon gives an honest assessment of the value and fulfillment these assets brought him:

**I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; I made gardens and parks for myself, and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees; I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves, and I had homeborn slaves. Also I possesses flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem...**

**Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me. And all that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all of my labor and this was my reward for all my labor. Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun...**

**So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me, because everything is futility and striving after wind. Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity. Therefore I completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun. (Eccl 2:4-7, 9-11, 17-20 NASB)**

Good retirement planning, a paid-off mortgage, college degrees, earthquake insurance, and recognized accomplishments are not a guarantee that we’ve learned anything eternally lasting, or that we can avoid a life of gnawing frustration.

So how can we attain fulfillment that transcends simply being a hard worker, a good manager of material things, a good plate-spinner? How can we find meaning in what we pour our time and energies into so our lives don’t end in profound emptiness?

In Psalm 127, our text today, Solomon sheds light beyond his diary of futility:

**Unless the LORD builds the house,  
They labor in vain who build it;  
Unless the LORD guards the city,  
The watchmen keep awake in vain.  
It is vain for you to rise up early,  
To retire late,  
To eat the bread of painful labors;  
For He gives to His beloved even in his sleep.  
Behold, children are a gift of the LORD;  
The fruit of the womb is a reward.  
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior,**

**So are the children of one's youth.  
How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them;  
They shall not be ashamed,  
When they speak with their enemies in the gate.**

Solomon picks up on his theme of vanity or emptiness again, but this time he includes a hopeful note: unless the Lord builds the house or guards the city.

The activities of building and protecting, providing and preserving, owning and insuring certainly are pursuits common to us. They seem to take most of our time and money, don't they? When I bought my wife a wedding ring, we insured it from theft or loss. And I bought earthquake insurance here in California! If you buy a bike, you must a bike lock, too; a nice car demands a car alarm. Society has trained us as consumers to buy and protect our investments, even to the extent that, as my friend Ron Ritchie would say, "we spend money we don't have, for things we don't need, to impress people we don't know!"

It is natural for us to operate this way. God created us with a capacity to work, to cultivate the ground from which we get a degree of satisfaction. We must be diligent in this to create rewarding and interesting careers and comfortable homes, and then to be wise to protect our investments as best we can.

Our tendency to do things independently from God (sin) makes us compulsive and preoccupied with our work, however. We relegate God to the role of an innocent bystander, or rubber-stamper of our efforts. Eugene Peterson in his commentary on this psalm says: "relentless, compulsive work habits, which our society rewards and admires, are seen by the psalmist as a sign of weak faith and assertive pride, as if God could not be trusted to accomplish his will, as if we could rearrange the universe by our own effort."

Notice the text is not saying "do not build." Nowhere here or in scripture does it advocate passive idleness. But it does say without the Lord in it, there is no meaning and rest. At some point, you and emptiness will become acquainted.

I'm sure Solomon reflected on his father David in saying this. David, of course, zealously desired to build a permanent home for the ark of the covenant, the presence of God, in his holy city, Jerusalem. But even David's godly desire and unequalled power to do it was not the reason it would be done. God had a greater plan and purpose that were beyond David's work ethic and godly desire. The Lord told David it was the other way around: He would build a house for David. His offspring (Solomon) would build it. And furthermore, an eternal throne would be established through his seed which was Jesus! Solomon had learned that good intentions, focused efforts and spiritual integrity would ultimately be a waste of time and unsatisfying if the Lord wasn't in it.

Anne and I have begun looking for a house. It is a daunting task, to say the least. We're factoring in things like neighborhood, design features, schools, affordability, basketball hoop, etc. At times we get excited at the thought of moving from temporary renters' status into a permanent home. Frankly, at times we feel it is an exercise in futility. We feel we should go back to our apartment, hunker down on the kitchen floor and eat cold cereal! But God gently reminds us that his direction, not the house, is the main thing. He has a plan and he is working too. "Unless the Lord builds the house..."

In case we don't get the picture, verse 2 intensifies the theme of meaningless work without God, and reveals a secret about God:

**It is vain for you to rise up early,  
To retire late,  
To eat the bread of painful labors;  
For He gives to His beloved even in his sleep.**

Our response when our pursuits leave us empty inside is often to work harder and at a feverish pace. The last 13 months of my business, I was rising at 4 o'clock in the morning and returning home at 6 or 7 in the evening, six days a week. My candles were not only burning at both ends, they were on fire in the middle! My once satisfying work had become "anxious toil."

Working at a frenetic pace or being compulsive will at some point topple us like a house of cards. But the key here is that this too is empty, a waste of time in the scheme of things.

How does God's respond to man's activity and performance? God loves to give! What a contrasting picture! We increase our work, yet God stands ready to give. This is the nature of God.

And he gives not in relationship to our working, but because he is working. We so easily discount or don't really believe God works on our behalf. We think he worked at creation and it was marvelous, but then he rested and is still resting. Jesus said: "My Father is working until now, and I too am working." God the Father and now Jesus through his Holy Spirit are at work providing needs, healing hurt and loneliness, restoring broken relationships, repairing meaningless situations in our lives, revealing truth about life to us and creating life out of death. God's silence for a season does not mean he isn't working.

I expected the text here to say that God supplies what our anxious toil could not produce—houses, tax shelters, financial security, bread on the table, and meaningful relationships. But it says "in our sleep." Actually, the phrase "even in his" is not in the original manuscript; it has been added for clarity. But it takes away from the stark contrast the author intended. It is designed to grab our attention and ask, "Why the word 'sleep'?"

Solomon uses a descriptive term instead of a material object to focus our attention on the nature of God as a Giver. Indeed God gives to us when we're in the most effortless posture we could imagine: sleep! God loves to do great works in our lives when we can take absolutely no credit! The height of his creation was woman, whom he formed while the man was asleep!

This truth became real in my experience the summer before my business closed down. Then, the elders at PBC initiated the process with Anne and me whether God might bring us out to pastor here. We prayed about it and gave it serious consideration, but I must admit I was skeptical that God could ever move in such a way to free us up from the slavery to my store and the lack of a timetable from the state of Colorado. I almost laughed when the elders said that if the Lord was behind it, everything would fall in place with his timing. At my weakest point, when it seemed I had the least control, God stepped in and resolved it. In 60 days he brought us out here. Though I was "sleeping" and out of energy and ideas, God was working and brought about his plan.

**Behold, children are a gift of the LORD;  
The fruit of the womb is a reward.  
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior,  
So are the children of one's youth.  
How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them;  
They shall not be ashamed,**

**When they speak with their enemies in the gate. (127:3-5)**

“Behold, children...” What a well-chosen example of the hidden and miraculous gift of God that cannot be brought about solely by human effort!

We are told three ways children affect us when we see them as God’s gift. First, our view of their value is increased. Solomon desires us to awaken (behold!) to the fact that children are a treasure. The word translated “gift” here is actually “inheritance,” a stronger, fuller concept. Children are God’s inheritance to us, not based on hereditary right, but on the free will of the giver. They are a treasure for his glory and honor whom we have the privilege to nourish, teach, dedicate, and prepare to be salt and light in the world.

We typically view inheritance as what we pass on to children materially, not that they themselves are our inheritance from God. The bumper sticker says “I’m spending my children’s inheritance,” but it should read “My children are my inheritance.” Politicians use attractive rhetoric to refer to the need to reduce the deficit and clean up our environment so our children can inherit a better world. This is a worthy goal. But shouldn’t our goal first be to value children and communicate to them by our language and actions that they have intrinsic value, that they are not an interruption in our hectic lifestyles, or a liability to our financial position, or inconvenient to care for? What good will it be to have a pristine environment, no nuclear threat, and have inflation under control if the next generation has no identity or moral teaching or conviction?

It is important to see here that we can receive this gift of children as God’s inheritance even if we have no children of our own. Jesus had no children of his own, but he made it clear that those related to him are in the family of God. When it was pointed out to him that his brothers and mother were in the crowd, he replied, pointing to his disciples, “Here are my mother and brothers.” The Lord has given us an opportunity to pour ourselves into the lives of spiritual sons and daughters just as he adopted us into his family.

People are the treasure to God, not secure possessions. Joel Werk, our high school pastor, shared with our staff recently that as he was cleaning out his garage and going through a box of old baseball trophies, he reminisced about the events surrounding those awards. Yet they now are mere hardware, collecting dust, he said. The real trophies are the relationships he built with children and families in this church.

Secondly, as we begin to view children as gifts from the hand of God, we recognize our stewardship of them.

**Like arrows in the hand of a warrior,  
So are the children of one’s youth. (127:4)**

I don’t know much about archery, but I imagine arrows must be carefully chosen as to their size, tip, weight, etc. But, who points, aims, and shoots them? The word here, “mighty man” or “warrior,” is used of a man of God going into battle against forces opposing the Lord. Parents are the strong man/warrior here who shape, direct, point and eventually let fly.

There are no formulas for effective parenting. But it is true that we need to help the child feel like a person who is loved, not a problem that needs to be solved.

I’m discovering effective guidance is mostly walking alongside, entering into the world of a child, rather than barking prescriptions from afar. Our son, Dylan, at only a few months old was afraid of bathtub water. As novice parents, we became frustrated before we

got creative. Finally, it was suggested to us that we get in the tub first and run the water so he can see how delightful the whole experience can be. It worked! He loves baths now. But it took entering into his world. We must enter into our children’s world of thoughts and feelings.

Effective parenting also involves letting them enter into our world, to be more open with them about our hopes fears and struggles. Well-chosen vulnerability by Christian parents allows young people to see how we work through issues and handle responsibilities. A few weeks ago, we had a Passover presentation in Junior High group by a “Jews for Jesus” representative. It was a wonderfully rich time. I was impressed that the man brought his ten-year-old daughter along to be with him and go out to dinner afterwards. He was shaping his arrow.

So if parents are the source of strength, why do I feel so weak and inadequate? Raising children can be awesome. Someone has said that parenting is the only job where you have no prior experience but you only have one shot at it. The Lord is our source of strength. But we need to approach it like David in his battle with Goliath. David rejected the instruments given him, trusting that God would come through, since it was his battle. This is the essence of the mighty man in scripture: he is mighty because he is trusting God to battle for and alongside him.

And finally, someday children grow up, leave home and lead their own lives.

**How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them;  
They shall not be ashamed,  
When they speak with their enemies in the gate. (127:5)**

Most translations make it sound as if there is blessing once your quiver is full. The goal is not the number in the quiver, however, but the quality choice of investing in children. The verse is better read “Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them.” It is people like this who will not be disappointed at the end of their life with how they spent their time. Their children will honor them with their protection and presence in their lives. Rather than desert you, your children will draw near to you and preserve your reputation, speaking well of you in the public domain, which was the “gate” in Solomon’s day. A lifetime of compulsive career-orientation and emphasis on building and protecting may have produced acquisition of property but may have alienated people. Here, the psalmist says that true security comes from your children, not from what you’ve built on your own.

Ray Stedman’s memorial service was a picture of his choice to invest in people as an inheritance from the Lord. The church could not hold the people he had touched, his countless spiritual sons and daughters. His whole family was there to honor him. I’ll never forget the sense of worth he transferred to me when he took me along to a pastor’s conference where he was speaking outside Washington D.C. some years ago. Everywhere we went and to everyone we met he introduced me first—as if I were the reason we were there!

As I now look back on the sequence of events that took my business from me, I can see the loving, shaping hand of my heavenly Father. Certainly there was pain, heartache, and tangible loss. Anne and I still carry scars, and we still have unanswered questions. But God has clearly demonstrated to us that he is alive, well, and working. He is able to bring profound and lasting meaning to our lives where once there was anxious toil and emptiness. He has more than replaced the business in our lives. He had a different and more awe-

some plan than my quarter million-dollar asset. I used to call the business “my little baby.” Behold, since that time he has given a son and sixty spiritual sons and daughters in the body of this church whom I can pour myself into.

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