



GRACE CHURCH

Work and Blessing

Psalms 127, 128

Grace Church | 7.9.23

We had a great sabbatical. The saddest part of Sabbatical was missing you on Sundays. We did have the blessing of worshiping with several partner churches, including Grace Hewitt and Wellspring, but there is nothing like seeing Christ in the songs and faces of your people. God is good—and I am immensely grateful for you, church. My family and I have benefited greatly from your generosity. But allow me to share with you a curious lesson I learned from sabbatical.

After our trip to England, Allie and I were feeling very refreshed and ready to settle into some new rhythms for a few weeks. We had plans for rest, plans to rest well, to be “good” at sabbatical. But life happened. Right when we got back I ended up fracturing my elbow during a basketball game. Not how I planned things going. A few other random things happened—a huge tree limb fell onto our deck, we had a flea infestation in our house, our cat had six kittens—some normal stressors, others abnormal. And so for a good part of my sabbatical I realized that I was fighting the desire to control my circumstances in a way that suited my vision of sabbath. When I felt like I was losing the fight, I became frustrated, sad, or more tired than before. All of this revealed that my view of the relationship between work and rest was skewed.

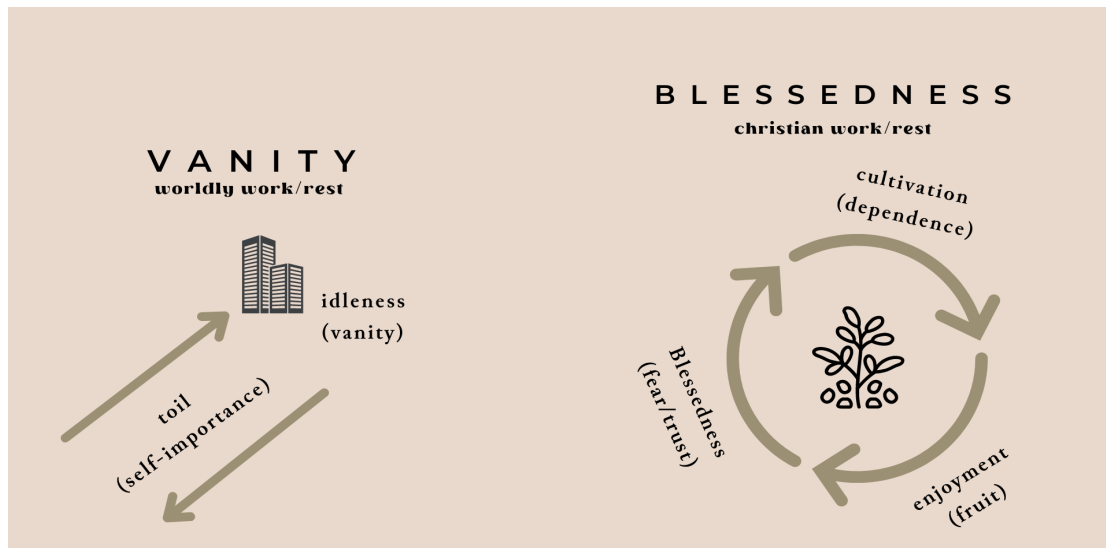
But what I learned is that rest, Sabbath, is more about letting go than gripping tighter. Sabbath is the opposite of conquest. You can’t really work for it, at least not in the way we think about work. You can’t toil for it, it’s not something to be built or a thing to be attained. In my imagination, I would build for the six weeks of my sabbatical an impenetrable castle of rest, unassailable by the stress of work. Maybe you can imagine a similar feeling when you step away for a vacation, or you turn off your phone for a long weekend. It’s the same feeling that causes some people to spend thousands of dollars building a man-cave or she-shed or something like that—a place where they can escape, like their version of Superman’s fortress of solitude.

Smaller picture, it’s the attitude that says we are all just “working for the weekend”—wearing ourselves down in order to have the resources to indulge ourselves when the work stops. Or the idea that the hard work of parenting is worth it for the day when your kids leave the house and you inherit your freedom once again. Bigger picture, it’s actually built into our whole system of work. We work for seventy or so years, and then we get to retire. The purpose of our work is to build a great house, a great career, a great bank account, a great portfolio, so that finally when we are often too worn out to enjoy it, we can retreat to our man-made mansions and escape into our well-earned selfishness. But what I found is that this idea of work and rest is entirely unbiblical.



So what is the relationship between work and rest? Actually, our text in **128:2** gives a picture. A time when “you shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands, you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you.” That is the Biblical picture of rest, of blessedness. But we think of it as some distant future, whether tonight or this weekend or next vacation or retirement, when the text says “you shall”, a perfect tense, meaning ongoing. And notice it says nothing about idleness—it’s not sitting on a beach being waited on. It’s actually eating the fruit of *your* labor, not someone else’s labor. It’s not about refraining from meaningful work, it’s about a soul that can say “it is well”.

And I think all of us resonate with that vision of rest. It’s less the feeling of vegging out with movie marathons after an exhausting week and more the feeling of stepping back after putting the finishing touches on a great meal, an oil painting, a woodworking project, and enjoying the product of our sub-creation. It’s not building a great fortress to retire to where no one can bother us and no one asks anything of us—it’s instead cultivating a peaceful garden where we continue to work with value and meaning. The purpose of work, then, is not to build up enough capital to slip into idleness, as if work was some evil to be conquered (linear). Rather, the purpose of work is to learn how to always be producing and cultivating a garden full of fruit to be enjoyed—which is why there was work in the garden of Eden and while there will be work in Heaven. Work and rest are cyclical—we cultivate, we enjoy—rather than linear—we work, work, work, then stop.



Much more can be said on this, but while I have lots of thoughts on Sabbath from my Sabbatical, the point of Psalms 127 and 128 is not to give us a definition of work and rest. The point is to show us *how* to get the blessedness of **128:2**, where “all is well with you”. And these two Psalms show us two clear ways. Look at **127:1** for the first way. There is a way to build, to work, that will never lead to blessed rest. Simply put, it’s building your own house, or working on your own. And it’s useless. We will call it the “Tyrannical Emptiness of Self-Importance”.



The Tyrannical Emptiness of Self-Importance

Or, what happens when you try to build your own house

The operative word in the first two verses here is “vain”, which occurs three times to describe three kinds of work: building a “house” without God, keeping watch to protect a city without God, and working hard, losing sleep, without God. All three are vain. The word “vain” is different than what is commonly translated as “vanity” in Ecclesiastes. See how this Psalm is attributed to Solomon—but we need to be careful to not conflate this too closely with the vanity of Ecclesiastes, where “vanity” is the word “havel”, which means breath or wind. According to Ecclesiastes, life is “vanity” in the sense that it is elusive and hard to pin down—but not in the sense that it is purposeless or meaningless.

The best example of true vanity is Sisyphus, the man punished by the gods to spend eternity rolling a large rock up a hill, only to watch it roll back down every time. That is the vanity being presented in this Psalm. The word is “shav”, meaning deceit or falsehood. Ultimately vanity is a trick, a deceit. We think we are working hard to accomplish some good end, but the truth is that our work is useless in the end, it gets us nowhere. The image of the “bread of anxious toil” is instructive—it shows us that while vain work won’t always *fail*, and sometimes it will produce bread, the bread will be “anxious toil”. Anxious toil is the work of vanity—go back to our image—we are anxious because we never have true security in our work. When we work without God, there is no end to our work, no true rest.

There will always be bigger barns to build, bigger houses to have, bigger savings. It’s not inherently wrong to build a bigger house, and often very wise to save: the point is that it is never ending. You can always build more, there will always be temptation to comparison, to value your work based on size. Only God builds a house that is ever “big enough”. Not only that, but without God’s protection, we will always be anxious about losing the rewards of our work. But as we see in **verse 1**, bigger walls and more alert watchmen are pointless. It’s supreme foolishness to think that bigger walls and better security blankets can keep God’s sovereign hand out.

When we can’t escape the anxiety of hoarding and always growing, never having enough, then it makes sense to label our work as “toil”. “Human labor under the sun becomes toil when God’s blessing is absent”.¹ Toil is the result of the fall. Solomon’s language of “anxious toil” is a direct echo from the garden — where Eve is said to bring children in “painful labor (same root word as anxious)” and Adam is told he will “eat in pain” (Gen 3:16-19). Toil is work that has been corrupted. Instead of working alongside God to cultivate the garden of the world he has made, we fight against thorns and brambles, against sin, and death and Satan. The world fights back.

We are masters at downplaying the toil of our labor. Ultimately, that is what most of our technology is for: to make life “easier”. But all the automated smart home devices and bread slicers and pesticides in the world can’t eliminate the reality that without God’s intervention, all of work is

¹ Psalms Expositor Commentary



vanity. This is why I've chosen to call it "tyrannical emptiness". A tyrant is a cruel and oppressive ruler—and that is what work without God's blessing is. We are ruled, mastered, by our toil, promised a full, blessed life and in the end all we get is emptiness.

Have you ever felt this vanity in your own work, whether in the office or in the home? Why do you think the image of American labor has been so often compared to a rat race, a rat caught in a tyrannical wheel, always running but going nowhere? We all understand this. Think with me for a second: what is the "house" of your life? What work are you building, what legacy (maybe parenting, vocation, education)? Now think about what you do to "protect" it? What securities do you take, what walls do you build? Now lastly, think about how hard you have worked to attain it. All the hours and hours you'll put in before you call it quits. How do you make sure it is not all vanity?

It starts by recognizing that the path to vanity is paved by self-importance. Pride, for short. Self-importance is when you think of yourself as the center of your life, when you view your accomplishments as the things that really matter. Self-importance is when you live your life to achieve your ends, to build your house. Self-Importance is conquest for the sake of self-security. It's playing God: bigger barns, bigger buildings. It's Babel: building just for the sake of building, to inflate our ego. But self-Importance is the ultimate form of self-deceit. You feel you are progressing, growing, building, but in the end you are being tricked into an empty life. Self-importance is cosmic foolishness: expecting to play the part of God and being shocked when we can't live up to our expectations.

If I can confess for a moment, this is what I tried to do with sabbatical. The most important part of sabbatical, obviously, was me. So if I really want to rest, I needed to play God. I need to control everything around me to fit my agenda of Sabbath. But there is no rest in that, there is no satisfaction. Because you'll never be satisfied until you release your desire to build your own kingdom. Look at **verse 2**, *he gives to his beloved sleep*. Rest is not a reward, rest is a gift.

The image is only pressed further in **verses 3-6**. What do children have to do with houses? Well obviously, it's the people that fill buildings that give them value. In the cultural context, a "house" is not a fortress of solitude but simply a place to fill with children. But the image of children is used here as well because like sleep, it is ultimately not in our control. Some of us know the pain of this reality, and some of us the joy—God is the one who opens and closes wombs. Children are a gift from him—the miracle of life not something we can re-create.

Those with children are blessed, **verse 4**, because they are like arrows. Your children go out from you and protect you and keep you in your old age, they are your heritage, they are your house. The "gate" in **verse 5** is the place in ancient culture where disputes were decided. So that when you are too old to defend yourself, to stick up for your rights, your children go to the city gate and plead your cause.



The idea here is very simple: nothing of any value comes from our independence. If you want a heritage, if you want to build something that lasts your life, you cannot do it without God. Just as you can't open your own womb to have children, neither can you expect true spiritual blessing apart from God. Businessmen cannot expect to provide quality products without God's help. Doctors cannot expect to help hurting people without God's help. Teachers cannot expect to speak truth and value to their students without God's help. Mothers and Fathers cannot expect to raise children in the Lord without God's help. Spouses cannot expect a long and happy marriage without God's help. When Jesus says: "apart from me, you can do nothing", he does not secretly mean "apart from me you cannot do some things". Unless the Lord, in his good pleasure, builds the house of your life, all is vanity. As Paul says, if Jesus Christ is still dead, "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die".

Now, it is tempting to respond to this with despair or idleness. But none of this means that we *don't* work. There is real, God given value in work. To cease working all together is to act less human. The difference is not *whether* we work, but *how* we work.

Again, there are only two ways to work. One is the way of self-important toil, leading to vanity. The other leads to blessedness—and it is the way of dependence.

The Fruitful Blessedness of Dependence

Or, what it is like to be welcomed into God's House

The Christian way to work first starts with recognizing again that the goal of work is not "idleness" but "enjoyment of fruit". You don't work in order to stop working, you work in order to cultivate God's world, to make it fruitful. Notice the language of fruit in these verses. In **127:3**, children are the "fruit" of the womb. In **128:2**, we eat the "fruit" of labor. In **128:3**, the wife of the blessed man is like a fruitful vine. This does not just mean she bears children, but that she is beautiful—full of life—that everywhere she goes her work is to be a conduit to life, like water and nutrients flow from a vine and make fruit. The children of the blessed family are like olive shoots—rich, full.

Think more about these images. Fruit is entirely different from structures. Fruit is alive, buildings aren't. Anytime we build bigger, better houses or businesses or bank accounts, the purpose should be to support the fruit, which is the work of our life that is alive: parenting, being a friend, joining a church, discipleship. Just like Phil said last week, this also applies to mission. Without God, we can't make disciples. We can't do it with bigger buildings and better programs. Why? Because discipleship is about producing fruit. Fruit requires cultivation, but is ultimately driven by spiritual forces outside of our control. Paul talks about this as his own work as an apostle. He isn't better than any other apostle or teacher, say Apollos. He tells the Corinthian church: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." We don't build, we just plant, water, prune. Even God himself is the master gardener, we are just "sub-gardeners"!



Notice too the contrast between **128:3**, “Eating around the table“, which brings to mind a lively and joyful family meal, instead of “eating the bread of anxious toil” in **127:2**, which reminds me of when I feel that I’m so busy I have to eat my breakfast in the car, or over the sink like an animal!

Remember the imagery in **127:1** activates God, saying he is the one to “build” the house and watch over it. What kind of house does God build? That is answered in **128**, it’s a living house—a people, a family. No mention of wealth, buildings, bank accounts or business dealings. It may feel small, insignificant, and trivial to you, but the picture of blessing is not a place of power or personal glory. It’s a family table.

What kind of walls does God build? It’s not the security of physical things. Instead, the security of the blessed life is found in a lineage. **Verse 5-6**, the blessing is secured through the prosperity of God’s city, Zion, and through *grandchildren*. What God is saying is that true security is not found in hoarding what you have, but passing it on to others. Blessedness is ultimately about building, through dependence on God, something that is *alive*, that multiplies.

I can’t help but think of the church. When God set out to build a house, he did it his way. He didn’t send a builder, he sent a son, to speak with his enemies in the gate. “His response to Satan’s rebellion was to promise... a baby.”² Our hope has always been in God’s provision of a Son, something we could never do ourselves. And the Son didn’t come to build a fortress or a castle, but a family to feast around a table. Through his death and resurrection, God’s Son (the arrow shot as a weapon against the serpent) builds God’s house for us, so that we can be welcomed into God’s house as God’s sons. God’s house, his new temple, is not made with human hands. The place he dwells is with his people, the church. If you are in Christ, you are full of the Holy Spirit, and *you* are God’s house. He has promised to keep you and surround you, not as walls go around a city, but as mountains surround a city—you are built *into* God’s very heart, welcomed into his house and his family.

Rest is not what happens when work is done—rest is what happens when the work is valuable. Which is why we must have an answer to the question: Is all our labor in vain? This is the gospel solution to our shame in work: the feeling we get when we compare ourselves to others and feel we don’t measure up or our work is not as meaningful in God’s sight. If our work was about building our own impressive lives to gain God’s favor, surely our shame would be appropriate! Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are loved and welcomed already, regardless of the quality of our work: given the place of honor at the table, not the place of shame.

In his book *The Life We’re Looking For: Reclaiming Relationship in a Technological World* notes the striking difference between the first century world and ours.

“When modern Americans meet someone for the first time, we quickly ask, “So what do you do?” But well-born Romans did not ask that question because in Roman society the question was not *what* but *who*—not your occupation but your relations.

² James Hamilton, *Psalms*



So when the early church gathered in homes for a weekly meal and began to call each other “brother” and “sister”, and many often left their own homes to live with one another, their contemporaries were shocked, especially of the wealthy who hosted in their homes. Why would they abandon their family name for a collective identity full of people unlike them and often inferior? Because they knew their worth, their blessedness, was not in what they independently built for themselves, but in who they were dependent on.

The empty promise of Satan in the garden was one of self-importance: “you shall be like gods”; the better promise of God is one of dependence: “you shall be blessed”. One requires us to take and eat in rebellion of God, the other to open up and receive in trust of God. But only through one way can all of this blessing, freedom to enjoy work and not be given over to the tyranny of vanity, can be ours. What it takes is the wisdom of **128:1**, “blessed is everyone who fears the Lord and walks in his ways.”

There is the secret: fear of the Lord is rightful awe and worship before him. It’s the opposite of self-importance. Instead of self-belonging, it’s God-belonging. Instead of thinking: “I am a god”, fear of the Lord is saying “The Lord is God.” Fear of the Lord, the path to blessedness, is doing things his way, walking in his paths. It’s trusting that when he is building your life not exactly how you planned—he knows what he is doing. It’s ceding control to him, working hard to cultivate, to water, to prune, but knowing he alone gives the growth, and so giving him the glory when any fruit comes. It’s living open handed, knowing that all things are a blessing from God. It’s trusting that if you are in Christ, you are not defined by what you do, but by whose you are—a member of the household of God. You have value before God, and so does your work: as God himself builds your life into a showcase of his glory.

