

## Summer in the Psalms, Part 4: Wisdom -- Psalm 127

### 1. What we Desire

Last week I began with a weird question: What are People For?

This week I've got another. I stole this from poet Christian Wiman:  
What do we want when we can't stop wanting?

Those of you who've studied psychology will probably think of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow said that we want to satisfy our needs. And we satisfy our most basic needs first. You're not going to try to cure cancer or break the 2-hour Marathon barrier unless you've got a roof over your head and a meal in your stomach.

The Psalms are honest about human desires and needs. And Psalm 127 has its own "hierarchy of needs." Solomon---at least as smart and wise as Maslow---addresses three levels of human need. Let's start at the bottom of his three-level pyramid.

Verse 2: Bottom level: We've got to eat. And one reason we get out of bed in the morning is to go find something to eat. (You people who skip breakfast--I don't know if you're really human.)

Verse 2: Middle level: We've got to have some sense of security. You can rest at night if it's safe. The 1. August holiday made me think of the Swiss police and military who stay up so that I can go to sleep.

Verse 1: Finally, top level: if we're secure, and we have enough calories and sleep, we start dreaming about the future---even the future after we are dead.

The Lord has made us. These desires and needs were his idea. Working to fulfil them is good and right. *Work* is good.

It's good to think about how we're going to put food on the table. Paul challenges the lazy people in Thessalonica. He says (2 Thess 3) that, even in a Christian community marked by grace, where all was shared—you've got to work. If you don't, you don't get to eat.

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Vacation is fine. Days off are wonderful. But they're meant to help us recover and rest so that we can be energized to work.

It's also (verse 1b) normal to desire security. It's normal for those of us who have come from less peaceful places, less economically stable places, to appreciate a place like Switzerland, and even to work hard for an opportunity to remain in a place like this. And it's good and right for families around the world to try and relocate to more peaceful and stable places.

And, once we have our basic needs met, it's (verse 1a) good and right for us to begin to work for a better future for our children and grandchildren. My grandmother, who just died in Christ in June, worked a simple job alongside my grandfather, who worked an even simpler job. They paid their bills, they saved their money, and then my grandmother figured out a way to turn their savings into an education for my dad, for me, and for my brother. Without this, I probably wouldn't be here with you today.

Before going deeper into verses 1-2, we've got to be clear: God has made you with needs, and you were made to labor, while the Lord himself meets your needs.

### 2. What We Do

If the problem is not in our needs, or the work we need to do to meet those needs, then where is the problem?

The problem is that we try to meet these needs---for necessities, for security, and for a legacy---in our own energy. They consume us. And once we begin living simply to meet these needs, we never have a moment of true, deep rest.

If all you do is climb Maslow's hierarchy of needs ...; if all you do is move from food, to security, to providing for your children and grandchildren; ... even if you continue to climb that hierarchy of needs, all the way to the top, what's the point?

This is actually really interesting. Early in his career, Maslow said that the highest need is "self-actualization." That's a fancy word for "becoming the best version of yourself possible." And along with developing our abilities and talents, guess what: just like

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Psalm 127, he's got parenting at the top of his pyramid! One way to be your truest self is to make more and better selves in your own children.

But then, later in his career, Maslow realized something: our highest need is not self-actualization. A person's highest need is *transcendence*---to find something *beyond* yourself and to live for that purpose. The biggest need of the human heart is not to pursue something "in here" but something "out there."

David Brooks has a great new book called *The Second Mountain*. He realized that you can develop yourself all you want (his earlier book was also great---it was called *The Road to Character*). But if you are just trying to make a better version of yourself, you're still stuck on the "first mountain."

The second mountain is where you leave yourself behind and you pursue something outside yourself. Brooks says that if all you do is climb the first mountain---going after good things!---your life is still full of anxiety, fear, moments of happiness, but a constant feeling that "it's not enough." But if you go to the second mountain, and leave behind your "self" in search of something beyond yourself, your life can be full of joy---even if you still haven't found what you're looking for.

What does Solomon have to say about this in Psalm 127? Solomon had all his needs met. He had military security and wealth. And he had the leisure time to pursue "self-actualization." He was on a journey on the second mountain, too. And his conclusion is this: it is vanity to simply get food and shelter and clothing (2). It's pointless if you stop at security (2). It's even pathetic if your greatest goal is to build a lasting legacy ("a house") for yourself through your children and grandchildren (1).

Without God, these are pointless. Now, some people do something at this point. They *add* God. They think: Oh--what I'm missing is God's *blessing* on my work. That's what it will take for my work to prosper. So they say their prayers in order to get God to make them successful.

Sure. The Lord has to build your family, watch over you, and make the earth fruitful. But that's not what we're after here. The formula is not work + prayers = success.

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Why? Because you can have all the stuff that a loving God gives, and still be lacking the loving God who gives all that stuff!

Even if you're off the first mountain and on the second mountain, looking for something outside yourself. You're trying to cure cancer, to colonize Mars, to translate the Bible for a remote people group, to help your discouraged neighbor find hope. And even if you succeed, will that be enough? Have you truly climbed the hierarchy of needs and lived a full life?

St Augustine, who was climbing for a long time, famously said that our hearts---the very center of our being---are full of restlessness until they find their rest in the Lord God. Why are you toiling, the psalmist asks, anxiously (2), day in and day out, for something that you'll never have enough of? Don't you know, he says, that there's someone who wants you to rest in him?

Jesus says "don't be anxious. (Matt 6) You have a Father in heaven who knows your needs, who made you with those needs. And Jesus says, don't just seek "something beyond yourself." Seek something specific: the kingdom of heaven. Pursue the heart of everything. Pursue the very heart of your Maker. That's where you'll find rest, even while you continue to do the good work you were meant to do.

Everyone must work. And: There's only two kinds of work. Anxious work, and restful work. And the only way to experience peace and joy and rest even in the midst of your work is to come to the heart of the one who made you and loves you, and trade your anxious labor for his joy and peace.

### 3. Jesus sings Psalm 127

Now, do you want to feel what this kind of rest is like---rest in the one who truly loves you? Then you've got to hear how Jesus sings Psalm 127 with his life.

Jesus begins his ministry with a 40-day -- no food (Matt 4). It's his way of saying "I need you, Father, more than bread. If the next years of my mission and life are going to matter, it's *you* I need."

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Jesus frequently rose early from sleep. And he would wander off. To do what? To make strategic plans for the day? To struggle over his priorities? No. To be with his Father in prayer. It was more restful for him to get up early and rest in his Father's love than to get an extra hour of sleep, or to get up and run his 5K or study for his big test. For Jesus, those things are good, but without resting in his Father's love, those things are pathetic, foolish, anxious strivings. Rest in his Father was wisdom.

Jesus goes into Jerusalem, the holy city, and confronts the evil religious leaders and their wicked practices and teachings. If he simply wanted security in Israel's capital, this is the last thing he would do! When he's being arrested, one of his disciples tries to become his bodyguard---his watchman. Jesus says, no. I don't want your sword. I'm trusting in my Father to watch over this city, and to watch over me as I go into this city one last time.

Instead of Jerusalem's watchmen, he gets Roman soldiers trained in torture and execution. He literally experiences everything that Jerusalem most feared: being overrun by a foreign military.

And how are those soldiers doing the following Sunday morning? A couple of them are standing guard over Jesus' tomb, making it secure. Jesus rises from the dead, and these guards shake and "become like dead men" (Matt 28). These guards watch in vain when the Lord watches over his beloved Son.

And finally, who builds up the house of the Lord? Ancient Israelites had as many children as they could. Even Father Abraham had many sons. But Jesus remains single, and fathers no children.

And yet he is the one who builds up the house of Israel. Jesus is (verse 3) the one Son who is the great heritage of the Lord; the Father's great reward. To have a son like Jesus (verse 4) was to have one perfect arrow to defeat all the Lord's enemies: sin, and death, and hell.

And to have a son like Jesus means that God the Father will, as a father, never be ashamed. Whenever his son says or does something, he'll say, with great joy, "that's my boy!"

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And now Jesus comes to his Father and says, “here are all your children (Heb 2:3). You’ve loved them. Now I’ve made them your own. They are here to serve you in the rest and peace and joy of your love, right alongside me. Your quiver is full of arrows, Father!”

Jesus sings Psalm 127 with his life, for his Father, for you, for me.

4. What we must be and do.

You and I will work. We’ll put food on the table, we’ll aim for security and wealth. We’ll try to leave a lasting legacy. We’ll even try to go beyond ourselves and serve some greater cause. That’s part of being human.

But now, I hope, you can see that you can do all this and be anxious, vain, miserable.

Or you can do all these things *while* you’re resting in the one who does all things well, and who makes all things new.

Your purpose in life is not to “succeed.” You weren’t created to work, overwhelmed by anxieties. You were created to work, overwhelmed by the love of the one who created you.

You can experience this only if you rest all that Jesus has been and done for you, and make your life into a smile of joy---the smile that comes from resting in the love of your God.

Are you smiling? Smiling in the midst of your work? Have you rested in the smile of your Creator and Savior?