

The Ride of Your Life: Why Surrender is so Vital to Your Voyage (Ps. 127)

Chris Altrock – May 30, 2010

Do you remember your first crush? Do you remember how old you were? Raise your hand if your first crush happened when you were in elementary school. How about middle school? The first girl I had a crush on was Sara Mills. Well, let me correct that. The first *woman* I had a crush on was my fifth grade teacher, Ms. Lloyd. Ms. Lloyd had moved to Cloudcroft, NM from Texas. She was gorgeous. But I was a fifth grader, and she was my teacher. It just didn't seem like it would work out. So my crush on Ms. Lloyd didn't last long. The first girl I had a crush on was Sara Mills. We were in sixth grade. I still remember Valentine's Day in sixth grade. Because on that day, I gave Sara Mills a necklace. Everyone in class saw me give the necklace to her. It was my public declaration of love for Sara. There was only one problem—Sara didn't feel the same. But I didn't let that bother me. So for the next three years I pursued her and she rejected me. I kept giving her gifts. But to no avail. I wrote her notes. But to no avail. I'd point out to her how poorly her current boyfriend was treating her. But to no avail. I'd ask friends to put in a good word for me with her. But to no avail. No matter what I did to win Sara Mills, it was useless.

On Sunday mornings we've been listening to the travelling songs of Ps. 120-134, songs sung by ancient Jews as they travelled to Jerusalem for religious festivals. One of those travel songs, Ps. 127, focuses on things in life that are to no avail, efforts in life that prove to be useless: *1Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. 2It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep. 3Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. 4Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. 5Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate. (Ps. 127:1-5 ESV)*

This song focuses on several scenes. They are scenes of the kind of work that would take place in the day-to-day life of someone living in that time. I like to imagine that these are scenes the singer sees as he/ she travels to Jerusalem for the religious festival.

- *The first scene is of a crew building a house.* For us, building a house is not a part of our everyday life. But in the ancient world, this would have been a normal part of life. You didn't have the kind of realtors then as you do now and you didn't have a buyer's market then as you do now, with home after home already built and available for purchase. If you wanted a home back then, you often had to build it. Perhaps as this singer travels to Jerusalem, she passes a village where a crew has gathered to build a home.
- *The second scene is of guards watching a city.* In the ancient world, if you lived in a city, you were constantly focused on the reality that there were hostile tribes which could, at any moment, attack and plunder your city. For this reason most cities had a protective wall surrounding them and that wall was manned by guards. Perhaps as the singer passes cities on the way to Jerusalem, he sees guards, watchmen, posted high on the walls of the cities, vigilantly watching for danger and ready to defend the city against threats.

- *The third scene is of people laboring long hours.* In this scene a person rises early in the morning and works until late in the evening, tired but sleepless from all the work. In the days of the singer, such long hours may have been required. Life in the ancient world could be brutal and it could take tremendous effort and long hours of work just to make enough money to survive. Perhaps the singer, on the way to Jerusalem, is now passing a group of laborers tilling fields from sun up to sun down. And she reflects on their hard work.
- *The fourth scene is of people securing their future.* At first, the final scene in this psalm appears to focus on family planning. The singer hums a line about a couple having children, a full quiver of them. Perhaps that line is inspired by the singer passing through a village and seeing village children playing nearby. But as the song goes on, we realize that this scene is about more than family planning. It's ultimately about a family securing their future. The song states that having many children makes it possible for a father to not be *put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate*. The word "gate" refers to the city gates. The city gates were the place in the ancient world where legal disputes would be resolved.¹ If someone wanted to sue you, they would do so at the city gates. It was the ancient equivalent of the court house. And if some charlatan made false accusations and tried to take you to court to gain your property or your possessions, having many children could be beneficial. The large family could provide a great deal of testimony to refute the false accusations.² In addition, if that charlatan won the case through bribery and you had to surrender your property and possessions, having a large family could provide security. Your children could take care of you. They would provide for your future needs. Thus, the final scene in the song is about a family trying to secure their future. By having many children, the future of the father or mother would be far more secure. Perhaps as this singer travels to Jerusalem, he overhears one of these court cases taking place at the gates of the city he travels through.

The psalm is a good news/ bad news kind of psalm. The good news is this: *God wishes to work through our everyday work.* Listen once more to the Psalm: *1Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. 2It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep. 3Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. 4Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. 5Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.* (Ps. 127:1-5 ESV) Let's go back through these four scenes. First, the psalmist believes that God has a purpose in mind for that house which is being built. God wants to be in charge of that home construction. Second, God has a will to accomplish regarding that city that is being protected. God wishes to preside over the watching of that city. Third, God has a plan in mind for that person and that work which is demanding so much of that person's time. God wishes to determine the schedule of that person so that person can get some sleep. And fourth, God has a will to accomplish when it comes to that father's future which the father is trying so hard to secure. God wants to be in charge of how many children that couple has. Any children conceived will be a heritage from God.

The psalm is saying that each of these everyday scenes witnessed by the travelling pilgrim is part of the larger work of God. The psalm assumes that God wants to work in and through each of these everyday scenes. God wants to build the house—he has a plan for it. God wants to watch the city—he has a plan for it. God wants to provide sleep to worker—he has a will for that worker. God wants to preside over the heritage of children and the security they bring. The good news of the psalm is that God wants to work through our everyday work. The everyday stuff of your life is the very stuff God wants to work in and through. That’s the good news.

But here’s the bad news: *If we do not pursue that wish, our everyday work is worthless.* Attached to each of these four scenes is the word “vain” or at least the idea contained in the word “vain”: *1Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in **vain**. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in **vain**. 2It is in **vain** that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep. 3Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. 4Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one’s youth. 5Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate. (Ps. 127:1-5 ESV)*

The word “vain” is directly attached to the scenes of building a house, watching a city, and working long hours. It is implicitly attached to the scene of a family securing their future. The word “vain” means “worthless.”³ We might use the word “useless.” As the traveler passes that crew building a home, she realizes that their labor will be worthless and useless if God is not part of that project. As the traveler peers up at the guards watching the nearby city, he realizes that their protective efforts are worthless and useless if God is not part of their effort. As the traveler looks out at the field and watches a tired man sweating after long hours of labor, she is convicted that his labor is worthless and useless if God’s not involved in it. And as the traveler overhears a court case and a father passionately defending himself against some charlatan, he realizes that if God’s not participating in that court case, the defense doesn’t have a chance.

Let’s see if we can get this a little closer to home. Here’s the good news. You may not build a lot of homes today. But you probably have some very important project in your life. You probably have a venture you are “building” just like that crew had a house they were “building.” You probably have something that gets you up early and keeps you up late, just like that laborer in the song. It may be graduating from school. It may be pursuing a new degree. It may be earning a promotion. It may be losing a significant amount of weight. It may be starting a new business. It may be finding a spouse. It may be raising your children. It may be writing and publishing a book. It may be recording a CD. It may be getting a part in a play. It may be your career. It may be adopting a child. Many of us have something that we are building right now. This psalm assumes that God is interested in that project and that God wishes to work in and through that everyday project. God wants to be in charge of that project, he wants to supervise that work, because there is something good and meaningful he can do in the midst of it.

God desires to be in charge of and work through the kind of stuff that makes up your everyday life. He's going to work through the routine and sometimes monotonous projects that makes up 90% of your life.

But here's the bad news: Unless you pursue God's will in that work, all that effort will be worthless and useless. Unless you approach that project seeking God's will, you are just spinning your wheels. In the end, if you accomplish your project, but you've not invited God to be in charge of it, you've built nothing.

Ultimately, here's what I think the psalm is calling for: *Surrender. When we surrender our everyday work to God's wishes, our everyday work becomes God's work.*

- The song is saying that the crew building that house needs to stop and pray: *"God, I know you have a plan for this house. You know best when it comes to this house. So I surrender it completely to you. Whatever you want with this house is best. Whatever you wish regarding this house, please do. I will accept whatever you do and however you do it, especially if it is not what I would do or how I would do it."*
- The song is saying that the king who sent the watchmen to the city walls needs to stop and pray: *"God, I know you have a plan for this city. You know best when it comes to this city. So I surrender it completely to you. Whatever you want with this city is best. Whatever you wish regarding this city, please do. I will accept whatever you do and however you do it, especially if it's not what I would do or how I would do it."*
- The song is saying that the worker getting up early and staying up late every day needs to stop and pray: *"God, I know you have a plan for this labor and for me. You know best when it comes to this work. So I surrender it completely to you. Whatever you want with this work is best. Whatever you wish regarding my schedule, please do. I will accept whatever you do and however you do it, especially if it's not what I would do or how I would do it."*
- And the song is saying that the family trying to have kids and that couple trying to protect their future need to stop and pray: *"God, I know you have a plan for this family. You know best when it comes to us having kids or whether we even have kids. So I surrender it completely to you. Whatever you want with our future and our family is best. Whatever you wish, please do. I will accept whatever you do and however you do it, especially if it's not what I would do or how I would do it."*

What is it that kept you up late at night or got you up early in the morning during the last week? What have you been working your tail off to accomplish recently? What "building project" is occupying the bulk of your time and energy right now? What family issues are concerning you right now? This psalm is urging you to pray: *"God, I know you have a plan for this. You know best when it comes to this. So I surrender it completely to you. Whatever you want with this is best. Whatever you wish regarding this, please do. I will accept whatever you do and however you do it, especially if it's not what I would do or how I would do it."*

Those of you thinking about the future, watching the stock market, paying attention to your 401k's and your investments, wondering about the saliency of Social Security, plugging away at a retirement saving's account, or now living off retirement, this psalm is urging you to pray:

“God, I know you have a plan for my future. You know best when it comes to my income. So I surrender it completely to you. Whatever you want with my future is best. Whatever you wish regarding this income, please do. I will accept whatever you do and however you do it, especially if it’s not what I would do or how I would do it.”

Ultimately, the psalm is a signpost pointing to the prayer Jesus taught us to pray: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, *your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. That prayer comes in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. And the Sermon on the Mount ends in the way this travelling psalm begins. The Sermon on the Mount ends with Jesus talking about a person who builds a house. This person builds according to his own plan, placing the house on sand. That house gets swept away by the rains. But Jesus says that a house built according to his plans, on the rock, will stand firm. Whatever it is you are building with your life, make God the foreman. Then, and only then, will it stand firm.

We’ve handed out this morning small white flags of surrender. This Memorial Day weekend we’ll hold and see many American flags. But this morning, I want you to see and hold a surrender flag. In just a moment we are going to sing a song about surrender, a song about entrusting all we have and all we are to God. But before we sing, I want you to take 30 seconds of silence to consider this question: What do I need to surrender to God? What project, what activity, what relationship, what worry, what slice of your life have you held on to, remained in charge of, but now need to surrender to God? I want you to write whatever it is on that flag. Take 30 seconds and write on your flag your answer to the question, What do I need to surrender to God? Then take that flag with you and later this week prayerfully surrender that thing to God. After about 30 seconds, we’ll stand and all surrender together.

¹Hughes, Robert B. ; Laney, J. Carl: Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary. Wheaton, Ill. : Tyndale House Publishers, 2001 (The Tyndale Reference Library), S. 225

²James E. Smith, The Wisdom Literature and Psalms. (College Press, 1996).

³Harris, R. Laird ; Harris, Robert Laird ; Archer, Gleason Leonard ; Waltke, Bruce K.: Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament. electronic ed. Chicago : Moody Press, 1999, c1980, S. 908