

GOD'S WORDS FOR WORKAHOLICS

PSALM 127

Case Study:

When Philip said, "I am a teacher," he was making a true statement of his identity. If they allowed the same person to win "Teacher of the Year" multiple times, his would be the only name on the hallway plaque. Reading, preparing lectures, designing classroom projects, giving feedback on student papers, and meeting with students were all a joy to Philip. "Changing the future one student at a time," was a motto and a drug for Philip.

Philip's wife, however, wanted some of the attention and passion directed towards students for her. Admittedly, she had grown angry (with a strong dose of jealousy), then bitter, then distant, and now disinterested in their 30 years of marriage. Marriage was now only a convenient way to have more time and money to pursue her other interests.

When she used to try to talk to Philip about balance in his life, he would only complain that she didn't support him and she should be proud to have a husband who works that hard. Now Philip is the one on the bitter-distant cycle as he feels like his wife only uses him for money. But when that thought gets him down, Philip pours himself back into teaching in order to "stay positive."

What hurts Philip most is how disinterested his boys are in him or education. The boys also began to resent school when they could see it was stealing their father and becoming the definition of "being a good son." While they wanted to be a real person worth knowing, they felt reduced to their mind and their future when talking with Dad. Dad's connections were helpful to get into nicer schools, but they vowed not to take their education too seriously because they feared becoming "like Dad."

Philip is wrestling with mid-life issues. He has worked for three decades on "his dreams" but it not sure what to do with them now. His relationships with his wife, boys, and grandkids are functional at best. Making a will is almost depressing. He wanted to leave something to his boys to help them pursue their dreams. But the boys seem allergic to pursuing a dream (intentionally so).

As Philip struggled with depression, he tried returning to his faith. His teacher-side likes poetry so he began reading through the Psalms. When he came to Psalm 127 he read it many times over. For him it was "he Psalm less traveled." He saw in it a warning against his life-dominating error. He prayed through it many times and eventually rewrote it in his words to use as part of his repentance to his wife and boys.

Pre-Questions:

This case study is meant to challenge you to think biblically about the real struggles of life. These questions will not be answered completely in the sections below. But they do represent the kind of struggles that are being wrestled with in Psalm 127. Use the question to both stir application and to give you new insight into the psalm.

- What are the warning signs that a job is becoming an identity?
- What kind of relationships should Philip have established to serve a warning system?
- How did an over-emphasis on work become both the cause and "cure" of Philip's family problems?
- How did Philip's dream become both the standard and methodology of his parenting?

Read Psalm 127 in your preferred Bible translation. The “rewrite” of Psalm 127 below is an attempt to capture the words that God would give Philip to pray (Romans 8:26-27). This would be something Philip would need to pray many times as he struggled to surrender his work-based identity to the Lord.

A re-write of Psalm 127

1. I thought I could build my own dream life. I labored hard and excelled (in every tangible way I knew to measure or pursue “success”), but I am starting to wonder if it was worth it. I built a career, but I can’t live in it and it’s lonely. I gave my wife and boys every “thing” and “opportunity” I knew existed, but that has not made us a family.

2. I was the first one in the office and stayed up late researching or grading. My labor has not provided what was most important. I would work through lunch and be distracted during “family dinners,” but I think God (and I) would have been much happier if I had learned to rest and enjoy life. I see now that God wanted to give me rest, not because I was weak, but because He loved me and my family.

3. I thought my career was my gift from God and that with it I could reward my children. I realize now that my boys were my primary gift from God and that they were given to me to be enjoyed and loved more than rewarded and advanced. I have always seemed to miss relationships in the name of progress.

4. I thought my lectures, my writings, or my students would be my legacy. Now that they are all I have, I see I was wrong. My children are where I could have had the biggest impact on the world. My boys were God’s designed weapon with which I should have focused on advancing God’s kingdom and changing the world.

5. Fortunate is the father who pours himself into his children first; whose satisfaction is in his children more than his career or reputation. Everything I once did for my own glory now brings me shame as I see the damage it did to my family. When I speak with those I used to “compete with” for glory, I am only reminded of how they distracted me from what was most important.

Passages for Further Study:

I Corinthians 6:12; Ephesians 4:15-17, notice that Ephesians 6:1-4 (parenting) comes before 6:5-9 (work); 2 Thessalonians 2:6-16

Post Questions: Now that you have read Psalm 127, examined how Philip might rewrite it for his situation, and studied several other passages, consider the following questions:

- How should Philip deal with the sense of regret and guilt he feels for the damage his focus on work did to his family?
- How should Philip respond to the anger or indifference his wife and boys may have when he comes to them in repentance?
- How would your answers to the “pre-questions” have changed as a result of reflecting on Psalm 127?
- For what instances of work or performance-based identity do you need to re-write your own version of Psalm 127?