

Don't Eat the Bread of Anxious Toil

by John Piper

Don't eat the bread of anxious toil by trusting God to work while you sleep and relying on his sovereignty for success.

Duration: 25:34

Scripture: Psalm 127:1

Topics: "Faith And Trust", "Gods Providence"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on Psalm 127, specifically verses 1 and 2. The main point of the text is that unless the Lord is involved in our endeavors, our labor is in vain. The speaker emphasizes the importance of not engaging in anxious toil and instead trusting in God's provision. He shares a personal illustration of a time when he struggled with sleeplessness and found comfort in imagining Jesus calming the storm and assuring him of his care. The sermon concludes by highlighting the potential futility of our efforts if they are not aligned with God's plans.

Transcript

People whose hearts are not fretful or anxious or in a kind of resentful frenzy, but instead are full of tranquility and peace, and are taken up as much with the affairs of others as with their own little world, the world sits up and notices such people. And rightly so, because in all likelihood, where there are such people, something out of this world is at work. The world is full of anxious people.

I'm most aware of students at this point, having spent six years with students, anxious about what other students are going to think of their new pair of shoes. Anxious about an oral book report and having to stand up in front of a group. Anxious about whether they can make the grade that will get them the GPA to get out of here.

And on and on the anxiety goes. And there are anxious adults. It is not something that only students have.

I made a list here of things. Anxiety about pleasing the boss, not losing a client, finishing a report on time, it's due tomorrow morning. Getting out of this foolish investment I got into before it breaks me.

This strange pain in the chest that keeps coming back. From time to time there settles over every one of us what Roland was talking about, I think. That dark, gray, heavy blanket of depressing anxiety.

Sometimes you can't even put your finger on what it is that's making you just feel crummy and afraid about tomorrow. The experience is so common that when there are a few people around who live in the joy and the peace and the freedom of Christ, they stand out like stars in the night. The few people who have learned how to obey Jesus' command, be anxious for nothing.

They're the salt of the earth and the light of the world. You know, for most of us, when that blanket settles down, life becomes tasteless and dark. And we need the savor and the light of some people who have learned not to be anxious for anything.

Now, in the past year, say from January on, the last semester I taught at Bethel, one text has functioned repeatedly more than any other text to blow away more fog of anxiety than any other. I can remember time after time, a big pile of books under my office, opening the door, and as I go out, saying to myself, Father, unless you teach the class, those who teach it labor in vain. And comforting my heart that in the final analysis, whether anything of value happens in this class is not owing to me, but owing to God.

And sometimes that truth would come home to me so strong that I would feel as light as a butterfly walking into class. The text is Psalm 127, verses one and two. Unless 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. It is vain for you to rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil, because he gives to his beloved in his sleep. The main point of this text, I think, is don't eat the bread of anxious toil, or like Jesus put it, don't be anxious for what you shall eat.

When we grow up, we all have to work for our bread. You cannot escape work unless you just want to be a moocher off other people. But you can work in two different ways.

You can work anxiously, worrying about how people are going to think of your work and worrying what's going to happen if you don't do it just right. Or you can work with serenity in your heart as serving Christ and not men and eat the bread of peace and not anxious toil. God's will for his children is that they do the latter, that they not work and eat the bread of anxious toil, but that they eat the bread of peace.

God doesn't lay down, does he, specific rules in the Bible for how early you should get up and how late you should knock off from your work. But he does lay down this principle. Don't let the motive for your rising early and your knocking off late be anxiety.

If for the joy of fruitful labor you feel like working twelve hours a day, so be it. But watch out lest you deceive yourself and really be driven by anxiety or by its twin sister, selfish ambition. Christians will work hard.

Nobody's going to go away tonight, I hope, saying, the pastor thinks God does all the work and we just loaf around. Christians work hard. We are an industrious people.

We always have been, ever since the New Testament got a hold of people. We've been an industrious people. But we work hard for the joy of all the good that can come to others through our work, not out of fear at what people might think if we fail.

Those are two different ways of working hard. Be diligent as God may lead and eat the bread you earn. Fret not over what you need and let not worry burn.

That's the main point, I think, of Psalm 127, 1 and 2. God's beloved, that's us, I think, who are in Christ. God's beloved ought not to undertake his labors fretfully from day to day. Now, as I analyze verses 1 and 2, it seems to me that there are two reasons given here for why we ought not to eat the bread of anxious toil.

The first one is verse 1. Unless the Lord build the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. Now, before I ask the question, how is it that that verse is an incentive not to be anxious? Let me ask another question, namely, what would it mean if we were to leave God out of account and go about building a house and that be in vain? What would this vanity look like? I think there are four possible ways that we might labor in vain building a house.

And the same thing could be applied, I think, to guarding a city. Number one, if God isn't with us in the building, building himself, we may not finish. The Tower of Babel that I talked about this morning is a beautiful example.

They were building and they had great goals, but God was not building and they could not finish. And the tower was left undone as the people were dispersed. That's number one.

Number two. The vanity of building without God might be that the building gets built. But the foundation is so poor that it collapses.

The foolish man built his house upon the sand and the rain fell and the floods came and the winds blew and beat against that house and it fell. And great was the fall of it. God might sustain an unbeliever and give him strength to build a house.

And before he can go in the house, it gets washed away in the flood. Right there, just when he's ready to go in and his buttons are bursting and his nose is in the air at his great accomplishment, his feet get washed out from under him. That's the second way that our labor may be in vain if God isn't building.

Third, we might labor on a project. And here, generalize, because many of you are not engaged in building houses, but you're engaged in other sorts of achieving, building a business, building a family, etc. You might work hard and God prosper you by his common grace to succeed and get the building built and even have the building on a good foundation, solid, long lasting, beautiful.

And on the day you come to enter it, you fall dead of a heart because God wasn't in the building. Now, somebody might say or argue like this. The psalm says that our labor is in vain only if the Lord isn't in our labor.

But people die for whom the Lord is working. They were depending on the Lord in all they're doing and they die. Can it be then that they too have labored in vain? Are they in that same category? No.

And the reason is that death does not mark the end of the life of God's people. When they die, to be sure, they don't take the house, they don't take the business, and they don't take the family with them. But they take all the labor done in reliance upon God with them.

And that labor testifies before the judgment seat of God to their faith. And God approves and says, well done, good and faithful servant. You remember Revelation 14, 13.

Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth. Blessed indeed, says the spirit, that they may rest from their labors for their deeds follow them. Deeds done in reliance upon the Lord will follow us into glory and testify before God of our faith.

And you remember, of course, Paul wrote in view of the resurrection. First Corinthians 15, 58, be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your work is not in vain, even if you die before you move in the house. Fourth, and lastly on this count, you might be given the grace to finish the house.

It might be a beautiful house with a firm foundation, and he might allow you to enter the house and live there. But the house might become a house of tragedy. The marriage crumbles.

The children grow up and rebel. Emptiness, futility and vanity, and all around an abundance of knickknacks on marble shelves. Meaningless, empty, futility, because God did not build the house.

So it seems to me that the point of verse one is this. No matter how hard you work to achieve anything, the achievement of it and the joyful, fulfilling use of it is ultimately dependent on God and whether he grants that to us. If we don't trust him, but instead rely on our own insight, then we might build a monument.

But it's going to be a monument to futility if God doesn't build it with us. Now, I said back at the beginning of verse one is that this is, I think, a great incentive not to be anxious. Here's the way it worked for me.

I walk out of my office on the way to class. You'd think that after six years of teaching, you don't have any anxiety on the way to class. Baloney! You don't have any anxiety.

I've got anxiety. And I say to myself, walking out of class now, Lord, if it's true that if you don't teach this class, all my labor's been in vain, then the ultimate success of this next 60 minutes is your responsibility, not mine. And the effect that had was to lift off my back a weight I was never designed as a creature to bear.

Namely, the final and ultimate responsibility for the success or failure of any venture. Ultimately, it lies in God's hands, and that was a relief. That's when I felt like a butterfly on my way to class and could smile and walk in.

Because the weight otherwise was just too heavy. I can't bear the weight, Lord, of whether these kids like me today. I can't bear the weight of whether they're open to receiving the teaching about the sovereignty of God today.

I cannot bear the weight, Lord, of whether they ask me questions I can't answer today. They're all too heavy. They're yours.

I can't take them. And I've discovered that he is not just willing, he is eager to take those things on to himself. And that makes him more glorious, to show that he can bear them for me.

That's the great reason from verse 1, why the beloved ought not to eat the bread of anxious toil. The second reason comes in verse 2. Don't eat the bread of anxious toil because God gives to his beloved in his sleep. Now, your translation probably says God gives to his beloved sleep.

And I can't find one that says in his sleep, except a bunch of commentaries that I've read. But here's why I think that's what it means. First of all, the Hebrew, I think, will allow both meanings.

And if you want to check this out, you've got to go ask John Sailhammer sitting over there in the corner who teaches Hebrew over at the seminary. John, I think this is an adverbial accusative. But you can decide this point because all you need to accept is that the Hebrew is open to both possibilities and then ask which one fits the context better.

Listen to this. The first half of verse 2 says, it's vain to rise early and go late to rest. But how would the simple statement, God gives sleep to his beloved, help a person not do that? I don't care about sleep.

I'm anxious. I don't want to sleep. I want to work all night to get ready for the class tomorrow.

What good to do to tell me God gives sleep? See, it just didn't make sense in the logic of the psalm to say, stop getting up early and going to bed late anxiously because God gives sleep. I don't care if he gives sleep. I got to work to get ready.

But if you translate it, don't rise up early and go to bed late, eating the bread of anxious toil because God gives to his beloved while he's asleep. Then it makes sense. Then you've got an incentive, a tremendous incentive, and the incentive is this.

God can perform more good for his beloved while they're asleep than they can perform for themselves while they're awake through anxious toil. So for goodness sakes, go to bed and rest in the Lord. Why should I sure need to hear that? You know, people who set their own schedules and are workaholics have an awful time knowing when to get to bed and when to get up in the morning.

And a word like this comes as a very good reminder to us. Have you ever asked yourself the question, why did God create man so that he needed sleep to spend one third of my life unconscious? Why? I mean, God could have invented and created a person who was always alert and rested. Does that ever bother you? I mean, I see my little Abraham.

He sleeps two thirds of the time. I wish he slept a little more these days. But when I say you sleep a third of your life, you might say, oh no, I get by on six.

You didn't before you were five and you won't later on either. You add it all together, you've slept a third of your life. Why? Well, the Bible doesn't tell us why, but I've got an idea.

I think God invented us with the need of sleep as a parable. A universal testimony to the human race that we are but children and we better own up to it or we'll kill ourselves. Every time you lay yourself down at night, you've got to own up to the fact that you are so frail that you have to become helpless and unconscious and blind every day or you can't live.

Isn't that humiliating and humbling? And rightly so. I don't think there's a time when we are more childlike and more weak than when we sleep in faith. And didn't Jesus say, my grace is made perfect or my power is made perfect in your weakness? And didn't he say, unless you turn and become like little children, you can't enter the kingdom.

And if God's power is made perfect in our weakness, then surely we can believe this psalm when it says that we ought not to rise early and knock off so late, eating the bread of anxious toil, because when we sleep in faith, God is at work with all his might all night on our behalf, changing people's attitudes, doing things that you can't imagine that he might do to make things go the way they should the next day. The great test of faith is, can we believe that when we lay our head down to sleep and look at the problem, how

in the world is the problem going to get solved the next day? Yet believe that God can bring, as it were, out of nothing a solution that we hadn't imagined or give us grace to profit tremendously from going through the trial. William Cooper wrote a hymn.

We sang it, I think, last Sunday that has helped me so much since I ran across it. Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace behind a frowning providence. He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour. The bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower. Blind unbelief is sure to err and trace his works in vain.

God is his own interpreter and he will make it plain. Let me close with a personal illustration. About, I can't remember how many years ago, three, four years ago, while I was teaching, I went through a period in which I could not get to sleep at night.

And I lay there reasoning with myself. You ought not be anxious. There is no reason to be anxious.

And all the reasonings keep you awake. You know how it goes. Counts sleep, the sheep keep you awake, and so on.

What finally worked was this. I put before my eyes a scene and recalled it night after night. And the scene was this.

I'm on a boat. And the sea is beginning to rise. And the crew is in a frenzied way trying to keep the bow into the wind and get the cargo fastened down.

And I go down into this small hole of the ship and there's Jesus asleep on the cot in the hole of this ship. Not a line of tension on his face at all. And I walk over to him and I pat him on the shoulder.

Jesus, I can't sleep. Would you help me? And he sits up, moves to the end of the cot and says, you lie down here. And I lay down and I put my head in his lap.

And he puts his hand on my shoulder and he says, now, I'll take care of you tonight. And don't worry, you'll be ready for the class tomorrow. I can't tell you how many times I went to sleep in that position.

And I still go back to that position sometimes when sleep won't come. And I commend it to you. Or if you have your own sweet position that helps.

He gives to his beloved sleep and he gives him sleep because he gives to him in his sleep. So in summary, don't eat the bread of anxious toil for two reasons. No matter how hard you work at your job, ultimately it's God who determines its success or failure.

So the weight is lifted off your back. Relax. And number two, he gives to his beloved in his sleep.

He can do more for you when you're asleep. If you trust him, then you can do for yourself through anxious toil. Words, words, words, father, unless you come in and make them powerful.

So that this very night, that person who is perplexed about tomorrow will be able to believe you that you give to your beloved in his sleep. So that we can rest and be a kind of people then who are not anxious or troubled or running about in a frenzied way. But tranquil with a kind of peaceful abandon and very much taken up, not just with our own affairs, but with the affairs of others.

And in that way, men will see our good deeds and give glory to you. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

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