

The Vanity of Unblessed Labor

Well we are in a new series on the Psalms and each week we will take a look at one of these preserved ancient hymns of Israel. And I've already got a lot of positive feedback and excitement about this series. I think a lot of people like the Psalms? This is evidenced in a lot of ways but you can actually see it in physical form in how those little Gideon Bibles are packaged. You have the NT Psalms and Proverbs. The Psalms are loved. Why do you think that is? I think one of the main reasons is because the authors of the Psalms help to put words to those things you are thinking and feeling but don't quite know how to express. David and others put expression to what's often times going on inside of us but we lack articulation. Have you ever had that experience of feeling super pent and irritable but you can't put your finger on it. And someone says, "What's wrong. And you say, 'I don't know. If I knew, I'd tell you.'" It's common to feel a certain way but not understand why you feel that way and not be able to really identify it. But then someone comes along and says, "Well maybe your frustrated because you don't really feel understood." And that sentence is like a bolt of illumination. That's exactly how I feel! This is what the Psalms does for many of us. It puts words to our feelings as we relate to God.

If you were to add a subtitle to this series I think you could title it, "Feeling in the Presence of God." I took some time this week and mapped out the entire series. All in all when we have completed this study we will have studies 20 different Psalms. And I think the 20 Psalms that were chosen cover almost the entire emotional spectrum. We have fear, anxiety, anger, bitterness, jealousy, joy, happiness, gladness, sorrow, impatience, depression, elation. It's really a great study on the composition of human emotion. I think even for those of you who think you are emotionless beings you will

find that you are far more emotional than you think. To be human is to feel.

Well turn in your Bible's to Psalm 127 and here you are going to see a Psalm where David is going to address the feeling of needing to make our work matter, the feeling of wanting our labor to count for something, to make something of our life, to do more than just exist.

How do we make our life count? This is a song about what makes life ultimately meaningful. It's both about what to work for and how to work for it.

Psalm 127 Introduction

**A SONG OF ASCENTS. OF
SOLOMON.**

Psalm 127

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 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.

Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth.

Blessed 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.

In English we have a word for working really hard for the wrong things. It's the word vanity. We normally think of vanity as relating to beauty. The nickname for the mirror is a vanity. There's even a magazine called Vanity Fair. But in the original usage of that word, when you called a person vain, you weren't necessarily calling

attention to their pride, you were calling attention to the fact that it's foolish to put a lot of work and effort into external appearance that will certainly and absolutely fade. That's misplaced and wasted work. It doesn't produce anything.

Vanity by definition is work without purpose or meaning. If I ask you to dig a hole and then fill it in. And I ask you to do that over and over again for your whole life, that would be vanity in the extreme. So much work and for what? For nothing. Nothing was accomplished. There was no meaning in it all. There was nothing that fulfilled that giant empty space in my soul that is crying out for my life to matter, to count for something, to make a difference in some way.

Now in this passage the word vanity is used three times in just a few short verses. Solomon is pointing out the fact that just because you work hard doesn't mean it's meaningful. And we all want our work to be meaningful, don't we?

We all want our lives to mean something. We all want our toil and labor and sweat and effort to accomplish something. We want our lives to count in some way. We all have this insatiable thirst for our lives to be about more than just survival or even pleasure or entertainment.

It's easy to be entertained in our day and age. You can pull up an app with more movies than you could ever watch in your lifetime. You can play a new game on your device every day for the rest of your life and never play the same game twice. You can watch a new sporting event every day and never exhaust the limits of what the sporting world has to offer.

But isn't this just digging holes and filling them in. What's the point of

it all?

It's not enough to be fed and clothed and entertained. We want purpose. We want meaning. What's it all for? What's it all about? What's the thing that will satisfying that craving in my soul to make my life about something bigger than myself? How can I live my life such that when I am on my death bed I don't say, "Vanity, vanity all was vanity?"

Well this Psalm is attributed to Solomon. It's only one of two Psalms in the entire collection attributed to him. The entire book of Ecclesiastes is written to address this topic of work and toil and vanity. Here's a man who knows a thing or two about vanity and he opens his Psalm saying everything you do in life will be PURE VANITY UNLESS you do this one thing.

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. (Psa 127:1 ESV)

That is a condition. That is prerequisite.

- Unless you get a passport, all your preparation for your overseas trip are in vain.
- Unless the CEO of the company is supportive of your groups project, all your work will be in vain.
- And Solomon says, Unless the Lord builds the house, all your labor will be in vain.

Now the house talked about here is clearly not a physical house but rather the sum total effort of a man's life.

- It certainly could include a house.

- It could be a man's business.
- It could be a person's artwork.
- It could be a person's family.
- It's everything.

We are all in the process of building our kingdom, what we are known for, our house. Financially you have a net worth. Relationally you are constantly investing and there is a certain value to that. Academically, musically, artistically, we are constantly working, building. By the very fact you are living, by the very fact you are breathing, you are building a house of some sort.

And Solomon says, build all you want. Go to the best schools. Get the best mentoring and coaching. Eat the best foods. Get a personal trainer to help you with your body. Earn a ton of money. Build awesome houses. Get some vacation homes. Get a Leer Jet. It doesn't matter what you do.

"Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain."

That's a pretty strong stop sign in our life, isn't it? Is the Lord building your house?

Now we understand the logic of that but honestly, what does that really mean? What does it mean to let God build the house. Say a token prayer? After all, I'm the one who gets up and does the actual work. I'm the one who initiates and puts in the time and sacrifices. Perhaps you are a Martha type and you are doer. Regardless of how much you try, you just can't let it go. You always got to be doing something. You've got to have a hammer and nails and you can't be content unless your pounding on something. How do you let God build the house? Well there are three thoughts here that I think we

can pull out of the text.

1. Acknowledge God's sovereignty.

Acknowledging God's sovereignty is an admission of your limitations and smallness. You can't build the house because you're not big enough. It's a confession that despite all your effort, despite your perfect execution, despite your rigorous discipline, you can't control the outcome. Control is a massive illusion. You are not in control of ten thousand details that might thwart your plan.

This is what I like to call the principle of cotter pin. A cotter pin is a small little piece of wire that slides through a hole at the very end of a bolt and its job is to ensure that the nut that screws onto that bolt doesn't come off. Well imagine you are a Nascar Driver. And you've trained for years. You are the best. Your pit crew is the best. And you're killing it in the Daytona 500. And it's the final lap and you're in turn two and without you knowing that little cotter pin had fallen out during the race and the nut that secures an important part of your steering works its way loose and falls off and you slam into the wall and lose the race.

No matter how good you are, you don't control everything. You can try to build your house but you're not big enough to ensure its success.

In the text the assumption is that our attention to detail, our effort will produce results. We don't want to get crushed by our enemies or caught unawares so we will do the responsible thing and set a watchman. We'll set ten watchmen.

I don't want to be caught naked and poverty stricken at the end of

my life so I'm going to build a house. I'm going to invest. I'm going to do everything I can to make wealth.

But this kind of thinking hasn't factored in the free radicals. How can you control the outcome of any situation unless you have complete control of every atom in every corner of the galaxy? You can't. But you can consult with the one who actually does control every atom in the galaxy. How do you know that tomorrow the principle of the cotter pin does not apply to you?

- A car accident
- A lawsuit
- An on the job injury or accident
- An economic recession
- Identity theft
- A superior competitor with better assets and more resources.

I was recently on the According to the CDC's website and they say that there are approximately 30,000 human diseases known to medicine. Just guessing but probably half of those you cannot prevent and could take you down and ruin your plans.

All over the Bible God is trying to remind us of the fact that we are not in control of our lives. Control is an illusion. And so part of letting God build the house is a confession that you are not in control.

2. Acknowledge God's Plan

A second part of letting God build the house is an acknowledgment that you are not the architect. It's one thing to say, I can't control the outcome of my plan. It's another thing to say, I am planning something that is directly in opposition to God's plan.

Yes, you lack control of random lightning strikes and rocks falling on your car and freak events in life. But that's a pretty minor problem compared to your lack of control of God himself.

Sure you might be the unfortunate recipient of a meteor, but you also might be the unfortunate recipient of the direct hand of God halting you in your tracks if you choose to go a direction God has determined you will not go.

Remember Balaam. Remember Jonah. Remember the Apostle Paul. Remember Nebuchadnezzar. All of these men were running one direction and God intervened and slammed a giant steel curtain in front of them and said, "Enough. You shall not pass." And guess what? They didn't. Do not pass go. Do not collect \$200. Your going straight where I tell you to.

We are not the architects of history are we? That's another part of what it means to let God build the house.

God is actively directing all history according to his purposes and you can't win. One of my favorite verses to illustrate this is Proverbs 21

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.

Proverbs 21:1

The picture here is of a stream of water that has a will of its own.

- Water does exactly what it pleases.
- Water pleases to run downhill.
- It never wants to go uphill.
- So you will always see water getting its way, it just runs downhill perfectly happy.

And Solomon uses that image to say, that's exactly how God runs the world. Man does exactly what he pleases all the time. Man is pleased to please himself. That's what men do. And so if God wants to move you, if he wants to direct the course of history what does he do? He simply moves a little dirt around. He sticks a little mountain in your way so that instead of doing what you were going to do, you make a different decision. You thought you were in control. You thought you were doing what made sense to you. But God manipulated you so easily.

- You're in the business of following gravity.

- God is in the business of erecting mountains.

God just shapes and molds the landscape of the world and everyone things they are making great savvy decisions, everyone thinks they are so smart, everyone thinks they are directing their future and God is enthroned above the circle of the earth and he laughs. The whole earth is putty, the hearts of men are like a trickle of water coming out of a hose that you play with in the sandbox. How simple we are. How deluded we are.

Imagine if I could control what web pages that were served up on your search engine. And you are searching for best investments for 2016. And all I serve you up is pages about Micron Stock. Well what you conclude? That Micron stock is what you should buy.

You'd feel so cheated if I said, actually I withheld from you the webpages that talked about these 12 other stocks that would certainly outperform Micron in 2017. You'd feel totally setup. You'd be so angry with me.

Can't we accuse God here of the same thing? Isn't our life like looking at a rigged webpage? Isn't everything in life is a setup. Every day you are getting served up a sliver of the grand total of reality? God it's not fair!

Now before you go accusing God of manipulating things, don't forget he's already told you about 10 billion times that you have a broken search engine. Don't trust what you see with your eyes. Don't trust what the world tells you. It's a broken, manipulated search engine. And yet back we go, over and over again, making decisions based on the ridiculous results this life serves up. Doesn't it make sense to listen to the guy who can see it all? Doesn't it make sense to go to

the top? He's telling you it's a setup. He's telling you that it's not what it seems. Appearance vs. reality.

So listen to him. Unless the Lord builds the house, it's all vanity. Unless the Lord watches over the city the watchman watches in vain?

America will rise when God wants it to rise and it will crumble when God wants it crumble. We can't put our hope in presidents or military might or reformation plans. It's all an illusion.

Remember Hezekiah when the Assyrians came. All odds were against them and they won? Why? Because they set a watchman? The watchman reported. Sir their is a sea of Assyrians that outnumber us 100/1. The watchman didn't save them. They were saved because God was watching over them.

Conversely, remember the city of Jericho? There was no chance. How could Israel possibly win? But they did? Put one watchman in charge a hundred in charge? Ten thousand in charge. It doesn't matter. All they would be doing is watching God slaughter them.

Listen, God is in charge. God is the builder. He's the architect. He gets his way in the end. I think the image of a construction worker would be appropriate here.

Let's say you decide to build a house. You hire an architect and you pay money and you design a plan you like and then the workers get out there and start doing the actual work.

And let's say one of those workers says, "You know, I don't like that room. I think I'm going to frame up the wall a little differently." He

could spend three days working on it. Get it all wired up, framed up sheetrock on. He could be very proud of his work but that is a perfect example of work that is done in vain - pure vanity. The true builder, the master builder will come in and say "What are you doing? You didn't follow the plan." Tear it down at your expense and redo it according to the plan at your expense. Unless the builder follows the plans, his work is in vain.

Whose house are you building? Are you trying to follow a blueprint that makes sense to you or are you doing what God tells you to do. You can be very proud of your work, you can find your work very satisfying. That's not the issue. Because the guy whose in charge at the end of the day decides whether or not your work is legitimate. It will be ripped out and destroyed if it's not work in the direction of his plan.

The NT talks about this concept using the exact same metaphor in 1 Corinthians 3.

**For we are God's fellow workers.
You are God's field, God's building.**

1 Corinthians 3:9–15

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it.

For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—

each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.

If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward.

If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

"For we are God's fellow workers.

So God building the house doesn't mean you don't work. You work with him. You're a fellow-worker.

You are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it.

So letting God build the house doesn't mean you don't work. NO, YOU WORK. YOU PUT FORTH ALL KINDS OF EFFORT. Its not less than effort but it's way more than effort. There's a particular kind of effort God is interested. That's why he says, take care how you build upon it. You've got to build in alignment with his plan. Let each one take care HOW he builds.

For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Do you see how the foundation sets the parameters? The foundation of the house sets the perimeter and the shape of the walls and the size of the rooms. You could put a lot of different types of siding or fixtures or colors. But you can't make the walls into a different shape. The foundation sets the shape. And Paul is saying build your life on the foundation.

Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw-- each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire" (1 Corinthians 3:9-15).

But it's more than even the shape. There are material requirements.

The plan calls for gold, silver and precious stones and you can't substitute wood, hay and stubble because their easier. It's hard to build with gold. It's costly to build with gold. It's much easier to just kick some sticks up off the ground and use those. But that's not what the plan calls for. And if you use those things, if you go against those plans, that work will be destroyed. Your wasting your life.

So let me ask, are you building God's house? And you might be asking, can I ever do something for me? How could I ever justify doing anything for myself. How could I ever do something that doesn't have kingdom value? This is personal decision. Don't look for rules here. Assume no, and then thank the Lord for yes. Don't go into this looking for justification for your idols. All or nothing personalities.

- Ravi Zacharius.
- Pray about it.
- Actually ask God and involve him.
- Total human package.
- Say no to more.

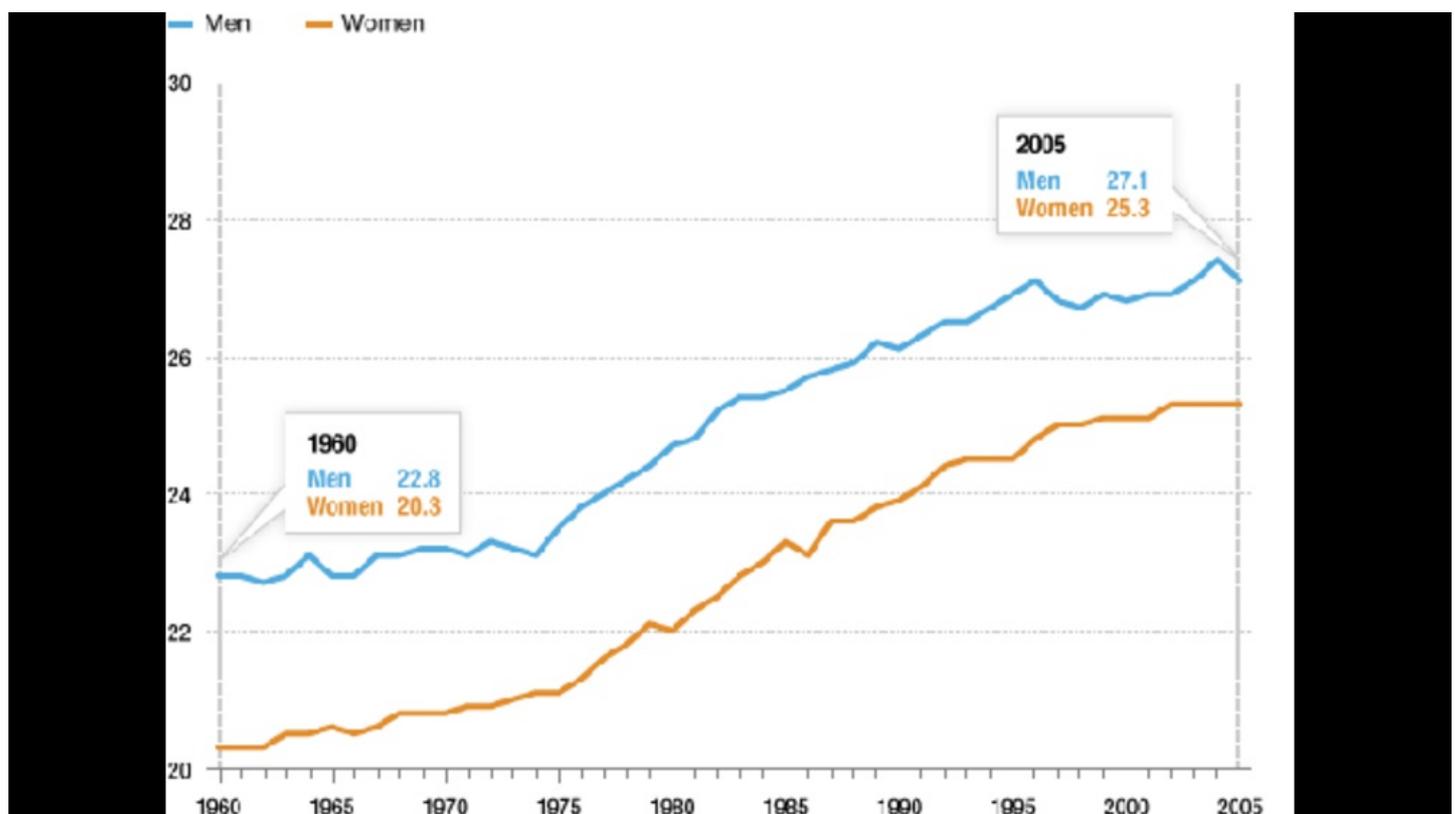
Now there is a particular part of God's blueprint that he's going to focus in here at the end. Part of building God's house is by raising a family. Essentially he's going to define a giant piece of what building with gold, silver and precious stones.

3. Love His children.

"Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Blessed 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" (Psalm 127).

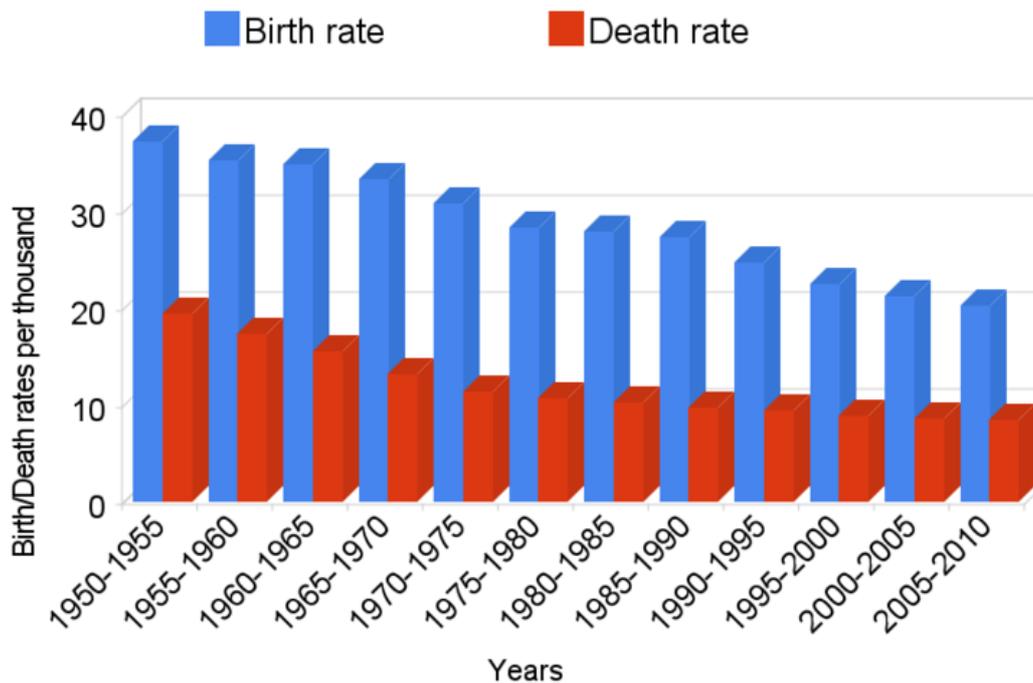
What does it mean to allow the Lord to build your house. If God has given you a family and children then invest in your family. Invest in your children. Invest in their lives. This is pretty counter to the culture in which we live. Our culture values marriage and children less and less every year.

It's no secret that people are getting married later than they used to. Here's a graph of what the trend looks like in the last 50 or so years:



This is not an accident. There is a fundamental shift in cultural values that has caused this. Getting into a serious relationship means commitment and a hampering of what I want to do in life. If I get married then it's more likely that I'll have kids. Now most people who get married do end up having kids but even then they are having fewer and fewer of them.

World Crude Birth and Death rates 1950 - 2010



You can see that over time there has been a definite decline in fertility:

I read a book a couple years ago entitled, "How Civilizations Die and Why Islam is Dying Too."

And the premise of the book is interesting. The whole world's population including the Islamic world is in serious decline. He says if you want to put a reason on it it's easy to do.

He says there are two factors that alone can determine a society's birth rate. Countries that are religious and lack of education will have high birth rates. Countries that are irreligious or atheist and have lots of education will have very few if any children.

So implied in that is that if you have a lot of kids what that means is that you are a religious person who is uneducated. If you are educated you will realize that having children is not really a good idea. That's kind of a slam. How does that sit with you?

The culture around us says that having children is not a blessing. Having children will cost you opportunity in your job, in your experience, in your happiness. People in the past did not have retirement plans. Their retirement plans were their children. Their children would take care of them in their old age. Well we don't need to do that anymore. We can stockpile all sorts of cash and let our money take care of us. We can purchase the finest treatments and the finest facilities and travel and get all there is to get out of life. Why do I need children?

That line of reasoning makes sense if you have as your highest aim, entertainment, pleasure, hedonism and simple self-interest. But it's a catch-22. Because the second you try to make it about self and achievement and money, you are not longer fulfilled.

I was sent a quote this week from John D. Rockefeller in 1909, Americas first billionaire that contained a hint as to this vanity. "The novelty of being able to purchase anything one wants soon passes because what people most seek cannot be bought with money."

You see, children are one of the best ways to get outside of yourself, aren't they? They force you to orient your interests and your resources to someone other than you. And turns out that is what God has said all along will bring you happiness.

We are in such an individualistic culture. It's the very air we breathe. But God wants us to think in terms of a society, to live for something beyond us, that's larger than us, something that we will never see in our lifetime.

He compares children to arrows in a man's quiver. An arrow is a

weapon that leaves you. It goes out from you. It's doing the work, not you. And the idea is when you have children you are pushing them out into a world you will never see, into a world you can't influence. And yet you are influencing it. You set the trajectory of that arrow. You gave it the force. The children of a man are weapons into the culture of the next generation.

Do you want to know what this boils down to. You have a chance, more than ever to influence the minds of your children.

Walt Disney said, "Our Greatest National Resource is the Minds of our Children"

This is true. You teach them what's worth loving. You teach them what's worth living for. You teach them the ways of the Lord. You teach them how to think and navigate and they become arrows.

What kind of arrows? Arrows that what you stand for and what you live for is true. The closing line of the Psalm says, He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

Why? Because standing around him are his own children who are filled with their father and mother's wisdom. Here they are in the gates of the city. This is the place where business was conducted. And perhaps there are people there who do not like this man for whatever reason. Maybe he loses a business transaction and maybe he wins a business transaction. The business doesn't matter. He won't be ashamed because he invested in his family and it was worth it.

A mother and father who gives of their resources and time to their children won't regret it. They won't wish they had done something

different. You can tell, can't you, people who invest in their families. You can tell people who sacrifice and sacrifice and give in the ways they can and their families show it. You are envious. You say, I wish I could have a family like that. I wish I had made the choices they made. I can't go back now. It's too late.

This man who let the Lord build the house won't be ashamed. Everyone eyes him with jealousy. That's perhaps why he has enemies. They are really envious. They want to be like him!

Listen, you will never regret investing in your children. You will never regret investing in your family. Lisa and I were talking about this yesterday. Do something that bonds you together. Sit down and say, "What would be fun to do as a family."

Impart your life to them.