

## **Futility: Living self-sufficient lives**

When asked if they faithfully depend on God for everything in their lives I would say that, much of the time, Christians would say that they do. It's relatively easy to convince ourselves that we're fully depending on God when things in our lives are going pretty well. And yet, the minute something unexpected and negative happens we can tell pretty quickly if we're really trusting God or not, based on how anxious and fearful we get. The Old Testament book of 1 Samuel records an interesting story in the life of King Saul which illustrates Saul's failure to trust in God when his life was in danger. In the narrative, the Philistines, bitter enemies of Israel, sought to defeat God's people. The text tells us that the Philistine army had, "...thirty thousand chariots and six thousand horsemen and troops like the sand of the sea in multitude." When the armies of Israel saw how massive the armies of the Philistines were, some of them deserted, which greatly depleted Saul's army. What was Saul to do?

It was customary to seek the LORD's guidance before going into battle. This often took place by inquiring of a prophet as to what was to be done. At this time, Saul was in a place called Gilgal where he was told to wait for Samuel seven days in order that Samuel could offer a sacrifice of worship to God and inquire of the LORD. When Samuel had not arrived at the designated time, Saul became fearful. Rather than wait for Samuel, he decided to offer the sacrifice himself, which was forbidden by God for Saul to do. Immediately after offering the sacrifice Saul sees Samuel coming and goes out to meet him. Samuel says to Saul, "What have you done?" Saul tries to justify his disobedience, but no excuses will suffice. For his disobedience to God, Saul would eventually be replaced as Israel's king. When life became uncertain and he became anxious and fearful, Saul determined that his way—rather than God's way—was sufficient to meet his immediate needs.

In this short series of articles from Psalm 127, I want to look at the importance of living our lives in total dependence on God. This Psalm is grouped with several other Psalms (120-134) called the Psalms of Ascent. The Psalms have been called the "hymnbook of the Old Testament" and this grouping of Psalms, especially, were sung by God's people as they went up to the Temple in Jerusalem for the annual feasts, as well as other times of worship. I want to begin our look at this Psalm under the heading:

—Futility: Living Self-Sufficient Lives

Verse 1 is given in two conditional clauses, i.e., the outcome of our life is conditioned by certain choices that we make. The first conditional clause reads: "Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." The Hebrew word translated "vain" appears no less than three times in the first two verses of this Psalm. Solomon, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is placing a special emphasis on "vanity," a word that carries the meaning of futility, emptiness, worthlessness, nothingness, and even fraud or lying.

The word translated "house" can mean a building as in the house that we live in. Houses provide stability, comfort, and even protection. Because this Psalm is written by Solomon some

scholars have suggested that he may be referring to the Temple in Jerusalem—the “house of God.” This would certainly speak of the presence and protection of God. “House” can also speak of the descendants of a family as in, “the house of Saul” or “the house of David” (2 Sam. 3:1). This being true, the language of “building the house” can refer metaphorically to our growing, nurturing and generally caring for our household, i.e., the people that make up our family, as well as all that we do to accomplish that lifelong task. In verse 1 we see, potentially, a sad picture of futility, i.e., a life lived without any real thought of or concern for God. The “house” that’s not built on the Word of God is a house filled, ultimately, with frustration and sorrow. No one can do this perfectly and yet, unless we depend upon and rest in Jesus Christ, we’re seeking to build our “house” on self-sufficiency.

In summary, no one will ever choose God’s way apart from his grace and yet our choices matter. Whether speaking of caring for our families, or anything that we seek to accomplish, our lives will be empty should we choose self-sufficiency rather than depending on God.

“Unless the LORD builds the house,” futility is sure to follow.

Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton, Illinois.