

Psalm 127, “The Good Life??”

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

A Song of Ascents. Of Solomon.

*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.*

Introduction: The American Dream

What is your picture of the good life? What does it look like in your mind to be successful? When I was the Head of School at New Covenant Christian School, I used to interview all of the incoming parents. I would ask them a number of questions, including, “What are your goals for your children?” I got a variety of answers, but the most common answer was, “I really just want my children to be happy and successful at whatever they choose to do.” So, I discern here three key ideas: happiness, success and personal choice.

Tennessee Congresswoman Marsha Blackburn defines the American dream this way: “*The American Dream is independence and being able to create that dream for yourself.*” Notice the key words: “independence” and “for yourself.” Senator Tammy Duckworth from Illinois says, “*The American Dream I believe in is one that provides anyone willing to work hard enough with the opportunity to succeed.*” Here the key is that “anyone willing” can have “the opportunity to succeed.”

By the way, in preparing this sermon, I looked at dozens of quotes about the American dream, made mostly by politicians, ranging from Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio to Bernie Sanders, Michelle Obama and Robert Reich. Some think the American Dream is dead, while others are convinced it is alive and well. All seem to agree that it’s a good thing. Do you know what almost none of the quotes about the American Dream included? God. It’s about success, independence, happiness, self-determination. No mention of God, really.

Here’s a rare one that does mention God: “*We believe that what matters most is not narrow appeals masquerading as values, but the shared values that show the true face of America; not narrow values that divide us, but the shared values that unite us: family, faith, hard work, opportunity and responsibility for all, so that every child, every adult, every parent, every worker in America has an equal shot at living up to their God-given potential. That is the American dream and the American value.*” – Senator John Kerry
What does God give? Potential. What we do with our potential is completely up to us.

I've noticed this pattern in contemporary American public discourse: We determine our own success or failure, unless the system is stacked against us, and then we're a victim. So, success is something we'll take credit for, and failure is something we'll blame others for. God is sometimes acknowledged in passing platitudes, but is rarely taken very seriously at all.

I. Unless the Lord . . . Vanity! (vv. 1-2)

How different is the contemporary American dream from the resounding truth proclaimed in 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;*

Think about what most people would say are the key ingredients for a good life and a good society: solid building of a good infrastructure, good security, and hard work. Three times in these opening two verses, we have the repetition of this blunt phrase – “in vain.” Without the Lord, the labor of building is “in vain.” Without the Lord, the watchfulness of security is “in vain.” Without the Lord, the most incredible work ethic is “in vain.”

The most famous use of “vanity” in the Bible is in the book of Ecclesiastes, which begins: “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” But the type of vanity here in Psalm 127 is different from the vanity of Ecclesiastes. It's worse. In Ecclesiastes, life under the sun is vanity, or meaningless, because it is temporary, a vapor, a breath. It doesn't last long. But the word used here in Psalm 127 is different, and it means completely empty and even false, or a lie. Without the Lord, our best efforts to build, protect and provide are all completely empty, devoid of meaning, a lie.

a. Vain Building

Remember when President Obama stirred up controversy with his “you didn't build that” speech? I'm not trying to get political, but President Obama was referring to the infrastructure of American life – highways, public utilities, etc. – and the essential role they play in economic success. Also, remember when President Trump was elected, his supporters praised him for his track record as a builder, and they spoke of how good this background would be for American infrastructure and the growth of our economy, because President Trump understands the value of building.

But what does Psalm 127 say? “*Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.*” All the infrastructure, all the architecture, all the construction in the world is empty and meaningless without the LORD's blessing. But is that the primary meaning of this verse?

“*Unless the LORD builds the house*” – What house is Psalm 127 talking about? Well, Psalm 127 is the only Song of Ascents titled as “Of Solomon,” which could also be “For Solomon.” So, either Solomon wrote Psalm 127 or it was written for him, possibly by his father, David, or by one of the musicians of Solomon's day. What famous house did Solomon build? What famous house was the goal of the pilgrims singing the Songs of Ascents? Psalm 127 is the central song of the Songs

of Ascents, and in a Hebrew arrangement, the center is always very important. I agree with those Bible scholars who think the house being built in Psalm 127 is the Temple in Jerusalem.

David had invested heavily in providing for the construction of the Temple before his death. The closing chapters of I Chronicles detail the preparations David made for the Temple in his final years. Personally, I think David wrote Psalm 127 as fatherly advice to his son, the future king, who would be the one to actually build the Temple. He told Solomon that without the Lord's blessing, all of his preparations and all of Solomon's future labors would be in vain. They would actually be a lie because Solomon would be constructing an empty house, a house devoid of its true meaning.

So, while Psalm 127:1 is true of all construction, I think it has powerful particular application for the church. The church is the household of God, the family of faith, the earthly manifestation of the kingdom of God. Impressive church buildings have been built and impressive church programs have been developed over the centuries. But without the Lord's blessing and presence, the most impressive church activity is empty, vain, useless, a lie. We can't expect the world to hear Psalm 127:1 about its building activity until the church first hears it about her building activity!

b. Vain Security

From its opening line about construction, verse 1 then turns to the topic of security:

*Unless the LORD watches over the city,
the watchman stays awake in vain.*

Again, we can see a general application to all of life, which is true: Real security comes only from God. In the aftermath of 9/11, we saw redoubled efforts to increase security to prevent another catastrophic terrorist attack. Yet we also saw a few incidents that made it clear it was not our human efforts to provide security that were keeping us safe – the shoe bomber, the underwear bomber, the NYC van bomb and others all failed to detonate and succeed not because of human efforts at security but because of “other circumstances” that we should have seen as divine protection. And while we saw a brief outpouring of religious sentiment in the days and weeks after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, it was not a biblical seeking of God in repentance and faith, and it quickly faded, as our culture's march toward militant secularization has continued.

How different was the founding of our country! If you look at a dollar bill, you'll see the reverse side of the Great Seal of the United States is a pyramid with the eye of providence overseeing its construction and the Latin phrase “Annuit Coeptis” – “He has overseen our undertaking.” It's an explicit recognition of the dependence on divine providence for the success of the new nation, ushering in a “new order for the world” – that is a republic, a Constitutional nation, ruled by law and not by a hierarchy of men.

Yet I do think the specific application we need to hear as a church is for the security of God's church and kingdom work. The LORD must guard and protect His kingdom, His people, His Jerusalem. Just as David was advising Solomon to look to the LORD to protect His people, His holy nation, so we are His people, His holy nation, in the church. We need His protection – not only physically, but more importantly spiritually. God must guard His church from the poison of false teaching or from being torn apart by divisions driven by human agendas and not a concern for the truth or for God's kingdom priorities.

c. Vain Work Ethic

The third ingredient for the good life, which is also vain without the LORD's blessing, is hard work:

*It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;*

Some people are naturally early risers, morning people. They get up early and work hard while many of us are still in bed. Other people are night owls, more naturally prone to stay up late, burning the midnight oil. Here's a picture of someone who is burning the candle at both ends, getting up early and staying up late. We might call this person a workaholic, but they're also driven by anxiety.

God is not opposed to hard work. Work is a gift of God, and Proverbs praises the virtue of diligence and perseverance in hard work. Yet we can work ourselves to death and accomplish nothing of eternal value without the blessing of the LORD.

When I consider the application of verse 2 to the church, I am convicted. As a church, we should work hard to serve the LORD and reach our community, but our hard work is no substitute for the blessing of the LORD. I tend to work a lot, keeping busy. Sometimes I resemble the portrait of verse 2. But as a church, we must pray and seek the LORD's blessing on our labors. We're all about to work really hard together on the Community Festival. We need to pray for the LORD to bless our labors for His glory! All that we do must be in and through and for Him, or it is in vain!

2. With the LORD . . . Blessing! (vv. 3-5)

How different is life with the blessing of the LORD! In Psalm 127, the blessing of the LORD is specifically described in terms of 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.*

We can see a physical and a spiritual application here, too. God's blessing comes in physical children – which can be biologically born to us or adopted by us. All children - biological and adopted - are a heritage from the LORD! But we can also see this in terms of the growth of the family of God by the addition of more people to God's family as people are brought to Christ and to His church. I think it's proper application to see these verses as applying to both families, both households.

a. A Heritage from the LORD

Children are a heritage from the LORD. The LORD is the One who gives us children. They are His blessing. It is not a coincidence that, as our culture has become increasingly secularized, we've begun to view children as a burden more

than a blessing. We are the wealthiest culture in the history of the world, and yet we talk more about whether or not we can afford to have children and how much children cost, more so than how much our lives are enriched by children.

Even more tragically, since *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, we have legally murdered over 60 million children before they were able to take their first breath in this world. Make no mistake, abortion is nothing but murder. We have come to see unplanned children as an unwelcome burden to be gotten rid of so we can live life as we have planned and as we please. After all, the American Dream is about independence and self-reliance and we won't reach the American Dream if an unplanned child comes along and gets in the way of our pathway to happiness and success. Approximately 25%, or 1-in-4, American women have an abortion by the age of 45. The 60 million missing Americans are the real reason why both Social Security and Medicare are collapsing. We have murdered the children we thought would be a burden, and now we don't have the blessing they would bring us in every area of life.

If you're here and you've had an abortion or you've participated in encouraging someone to get an abortion, you should know that God forgives the sin of abortion as surely as He forgives all other sin. Abortion is not an unforgivable sin. God also heals the pain of having had an abortion, as He loves women who have had abortions as much as He loves all other sinners. But abortion is a sin, and it needs to be forgiven, and abortion causes real pain, which needs to be healed.

Children are not a burden. They are a blessing. This is not an idealized picture that ignores the difficulty and challenges of raising children. It is the truth. The LORD gives us children as a gift, for our good and for His glory.

b. A Reward

"The fruit of the womb is a reward" – This could be greatly misunderstood. Psalm 127 is not saying that children are a reward we earn by being righteous, nor is it saying that God gives children to righteous people, people He likes, and He withholds children from unrighteous people, people He doesn't like. That's not true.

In classic Hebrew parallelism, the two lines of verse 3 are really both saying the same thing: Children are given to us by the LORD. They are a blessing. In God's common grace, He gives children to both the righteous and the unrighteous. In His wisdom, He sometimes withholds the blessing of children from His own dearly loved children, for His own purposes, which we often cannot see. Sometimes He does so because He wants us to adopt, so other children He loves can have a home and a forever family.

As parents, we need to make sure we thank the LORD for our children and see them as a blessing and a reward, a gift of God! We are blessed! If the LORD has not blessed you with your own biological children, seek Him in prayer and trust Him.

Spiritually speaking, sharing the Gospel with someone and seeing them come to faith in Christ is like having spiritual children. It's a great blessing! But it's also something God gives in His sovereignty!

c. Arrows

The third thing Psalm 127 says about children is that they are like arrows –

*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.

Much of the language of verses 4-5 comes from the cultural context of the ancient world of the Bible, where sons would protect and defend their fathers and their father's honor in public dealings in the city gate. The gift of children does provide a measure of security and protection in life. As we get older, we come to rely on our children, just as our children relied on us in their youth.

In the church, it's also the rising generation of believers who will be the future strength of the church. In both family life and church life, we should remember that a good arrow is one that flies straight. It goes where it's intended to go. *"Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is grown, he will not depart from it."* – Proverbs 22:6.

As an aside, I don't think *"Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them!"* is a line intended to guilt-trip believers into having as many children as we can possibly have. I think debates about how many children make a full quiver are missing the point of Psalm 127 entirely. I don't believe God is opposed to responsible, prayerful, life-affirming family planning, as long as we keep the perspective that children are a blessing from the LORD.

Conclusion: Nightmare or Blessing?

So, Psalm 127 paints a picture of life as either an empty, meaningless lie – in vain – or as a blessing. What makes the difference? The LORD makes all the difference, of course! His blessing makes life a blessing, and the lack of His blessing makes life a nightmare.

Where we see this most clearly stated in Psalm 127 is right in the middle of the psalm. I mentioned earlier that Psalm 127 is the middle psalm in the Songs of Ascents. This is Psalm #8 of 15, so there are 7 psalms on either side of it. The middle of anything in Hebrew is really important. And the middle of the middle in Psalm 127 is the central line, which is the final line of verse 2: *"for he gives to his beloved sleep."*

This centrally important line is the reason why I think this psalm was written by David for Solomon. 2 Samuel 12 tells of the birth of Solomon to David. We read in verses 24-25

24 Then David comforted his wife, Bathsheba, and went in to her and lay with her, and she bore a son, and he called his name Solomon. And the LORD loved him 25 and sent a message by Nathan the prophet. So he called his name Jedidiah, because of the LORD.

Solomon's little-known nickname was Jedidiah. I know my boys are both really upset that I didn't name them Jedidiah. But Jedidiah means beloved by the LORD, beloved by YaHWeH. In Hebrew, it Yedid-Yah – Beloved (Yedid) of YahWeh (Yah).

"He gives to His beloved sleep" – Do you know the Hebrew word for "He gives" – Nathan! David named one of his later sons by Bathsheba, a younger brother of Solomon, Nathan, after the great prophet who had been so instrumental in David's life. In Hebrews, this line is just three words – a form of Nathan, a form of Yedid, and then the word sleep. He gives His beloved sleep.

The line becomes even more loaded with significance if we look at the charge David gave Solomon concerning the building of the Temple in I Chronicles 22:6-9 –

6 Then he called for Solomon his son and charged him to build a house for the LORD, the God of Israel. 7 David said to Solomon, "My son, I had it in my heart to build a house to the name of the LORD my God. 8 But the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 'You have shed much blood and have waged great wars. You shall not build a house to my name, because you have shed so much blood before me on the earth. 9 Behold, a son shall be born to you who shall be a man of rest. I will give him rest from all his surrounding enemies. For his name shall be Solomon, and I will give peace and quiet to Israel in his days.'"

Solomon's name means peace, and David named him "peace" because he knew he would be the one to build the Temple. His name is peace. His nickname is "Beloved of the LORD." All the pieces comes together in the final line of verse 2 of Psalm 127, convincing me that David wrote this for Solomon.

But getting beyond the Bible trivia background, the final line of verse 2 is the central message of Psalm 127 and probably the central message of the Songs of Ascents. What were the pilgrims seeking when they came to Jerusalem and the Temple? The presence of the LORD and specifically the blessing of the LORD. And what is the climax of the blessing of the LORD, the most-repeated theme in the Songs of Ascents? Peace!

In the end, this is what the American Dream cannot promise, cannot deliver- peace! YaHWeH gives His beloved sleep! What kind of sleep? The sleep of utter exhaustion? No. The sleep of rest, the rest of peace. We toss and turn and can't sleep at night because we're trying to run our own lives, trying to manage our own crises. He gives His beloved sleep! He gives His beloved peace, a peace of mind and life that shows itself in sleep.

What's the difference between a good life and an empty, meaningless life? The peace of God! The peace of God that lets us really sleep at night, knowing we are loved by the LORD and knowing that He is the One who is building our house, guarding our city, providing our bread, guiding our children, and blessing our lives.