

A REWARD OF GOD

Psalm 127

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As it is Mother's Day, I thought we would touch upon a passage of Scripture with applications to parenting. It applies, however, to every adult in this room, whether male or female or with or without children. The focus of our study will be **Psalm 127**.

This is a wonderful psalm, but it is often misunderstood by readers as well as several well-intentioned scholars who do not have an understanding of its proper historical context or an up-to-dated awareness of the Hebrew language itself.

So to begin, let's take a close look at when and why this psalm was written and its originally intended purpose. To do that, we need to recognize the psalm's historical and literary context. Allow me a moment to explain.

Psalm 127 is one of fifteen psalms, **Psalms 120-134**, which are a group entitled by the Jews "Songs of Ascent." They are called thus because the pilgrim Israelites sang them as they traveled from their homes all over the land of Israel to Jerusalem, ascending to the Temple. These pilgrims made the trek to the Temple four times a year to celebrate four annual feasts mandated by God. Of these fifteen psalms, David is clearly identified as having written at least four of them. As you will soon hear, I believe that David authored **Psalm 127** as well.

Psalm 127, like other ascent psalms, was probably not originally composed for the specific use of pilgrims singing their way up to Jerusalem. They were probably written for other purposes, which I will explain in a moment. These Ascent Psalms were packaged together as worship songs after Solomon's temple was destroyed by the Babylonians, and during the era of the second Temple, built by Zerubbabel following the Jews' return from the Babylonian exile.

I'm not sure if **Psalm 127** was meant to be sung along the way as a historical victory song or to be sung by the people as they stood before the Temple to

worship and remember Who is the One behind all of life, the One whose glory filled the Temple.

In a moment, we are going to read the RWB version or translation of this psalm. In case you haven't heard of that translation before, it's because it is my unpublished translation, based on the most recent accurate Hebrew works on this psalm.

One of the more recent conclusions drawn by our modern Hebrew scholars, according to the most recent and highly regarded Orthodox Jewish translation of the Old Testament known as the Tanach (The Stone Edition), correctly points out that this psalm was not written by Solomon, as most of our English translations suggest, but to or for Solomon. The point is that this psalm was written by someone else for Solomon. Most likely David wrote this psalm for his young son, soon to be King Solomon and general contractor over the building of the Temple. This psalm was to be read and kept in mind, as Solomon was left with the responsibility of building the first great Temple of Israel. It is an instructional psalm, a psalm filled with words of encouragement as to how to reign successfully as king over Israel.

For us today, the major theme of this psalm is the key to living our lives successfully. This theme is that all human enterprises (whether building a Temple, safeguarding a city against enemies, raising a family, or becoming a successful business person) only succeed as we humbly acknowledge and worship the One who rules over all of the earth.

The structure of the psalm is simple. It falls into two parts: verses 1-2, God's home on earth (the temple and land of Israel); and verses 3-5, our home on earth.

With that, I invite you to follow along in your Bible as I read my translation of this psalm, and see what a significant difference the improvements to our understanding of ancient Hebrew has made in enabling us to properly understand this psalm.

A Song of Ascent to Solomon
RWBV

1. Unless the Lord builds the house,
in vain do its builders labor on it;
Unless the Lord guards the city,
in vain is the watchman vigilant.
2. It is vain for you to rise up early,
to retire late,
to eat the bread of painful labors;
For He gives to His beloved sleep.
3. Behold! A gift of the Lord is sons;
A reward is the fruit of the womb.
4. Like arrows in the hand of the warrior,
so are the sons of one's youth.
5. Praiseworthy is the man who fills his quiver with them;
they shall not be shamed when they speak with their enemies in the gate.

Note our outline of this psalm. It follows after three progressive attributes of God.

I. God builds/produces	Verse 1a
II. God guards/protects	Verse 1b
III. God gifts/provides	Verse 2-5
A. Sleep	Verse 2
B. Sons (children)	Verses 3-5

Note the progression of this psalm. It begins with the house or home of God, the Temple, then moves to the general populace of the city, and then to the individual home. To the Jew, all of life was to be theocentric, meaning God-centered. All of life was to find its meaning in relationship to God. Worship and life were not separated. Life began with and was forever entwined with one's worship of God.

Now let's examine this psalm closely. In **verse 1**, notice the emphatic repetition of the three words, "**Unless the Lord.**" These words appear first in each sentence so as to wave a flag, telling us that this is important. That

which should come first in our lives is the Lord. He is the key. **“Unless”** presupposes the condition that God does work: He builds, He guards, He gifts!

The main difference between followers of Christ and others is that we take God seriously while others do not. We really do:

Believe the Jesus is the central reality of all existence.

Pay attention to what He is and to what He does.

Order our lives in response to this reality.

For wise is the person who understands that without our keeping in mind **“unless the Lord”** in all we do, blessing will not come our way in this fallen world.

In this first half of **verse 1**, the **“house”** refers to the temple, the **“house of God,”** not one’s personal home. Likewise, the **“city”** in the second half of the verse refers to Jerusalem, the capital city of Israel. The mentioning of the **“city”** is used here to represent the entire nation of Israel. In short, this city is where the king reigned and fulfilled his responsibility to make sure that all of the citizens of Israel were protected.

In addition, from the human leadership perspective, the king was responsible for the spiritual direction and protection of all of Israel.

To enforce God’s perspective, David uses these two illustrations of building and guarding to teach us that there is only One who is ultimately responsible for building and guarding our life. That is God. Therefore we need to keep our eyes on God, to acknowledge and seek Him out in all things. To not do that will make all of our attempts at success in life **“vain.”**

Note too, that the term **“vain”** is repeated twice in this verse and a third time in the next verse. In both cases in **verse 1**, the Hebrew sentence structure puts the word **“vain”** at the beginning of the sentence, emphasizing the emptiness and futility behind all human efforts apart from recognizing and submitting to God at the center of it.

The strength of a political party is not its leader’s ability to powerbroker plans; the security of a home is not its locks and fire alarms; and the strength

of a country is not ultimately in its sophisticated weaponry. Our strength and potential for success is founded upon whether or not we depend upon the Lord and allow God to lead. If we don't, David says, **"In vain they labor who build it . . . in vain the watchman keeps awake."**

David couldn't stress any stronger than he has right here the futility and foolishness of leaving God out of our lives. He will continue to stress this point as he works through this psalm, but let's take a moment to reflect.

Is Christ at the center of your home?

Does your family search out God's directions for decisions it makes in how you spend your time together and how you spend the money He grants you?

When friction mounts between family members, do you follow God's principles of how to confront one another, or do you simply avoid each other or give someone the silent treatment?

When crises come, do you follow His counsel or do your own thing?

If you don't seek Him out and make Him the center of your home, this psalm, God's Word, solemnly warns you that you are laboring in vain, and time will show you so in the end.

David adds some further wisdom in **verse 2** when he says, **"It is vain for you to rise up early, to retire late, to eat the bread of painful labors."**

To be a workaholic, thinking, "If it is going to be, it is up to me," is pure foolishness. If our view of life is that self-centered rather than God centered, David says that we will eat "the bread of painful labors." And that word "painful" refers to the grief and sorrow that comes because you have created an oppressive atmosphere for yourself and for those around you at home. Rather than finding fulfillment in your tasks, you

find yourself obsessed, driven, frantic, relentless, and compulsive in your work habits. [Discovery Publishing, Brian Morgan, #3905, Psalm 127]

Since it is Mother's Day, allow me a woman's one liner that illustrates the frustration of "**painful labors.**" One woman was complaining to the other, "There must be something to reincarnation. It's hard to believe that I could get this far behind in one lifetime!" That is the feeling that David had in mind when he used the word for "**painful labors.**"

But on the other hand, don't misunderstand David's intention. He is not encouraging us to sit back and be lazy. He is not saying that it is spiritual to show your trust in God by doing nothing. No, historically, Solomon had to do the work of overseeing the building of the Temple. David's point to Solomon and God's point to us is do all you can do, but don't fix your trust in yourself nor glory in your own accomplishments, as though God were not involved.

Somehow, there has crept into some Christians' theology that hard work is not good. But that's wrong. Hard work is good, and our God illustrated that for us when He created the world and then rested. If God works hard, then hard work has dignity. There is nothing degrading about hard work.

The Apostle Paul had to correct those at Thessalonica concerning some of the Christians' belief that one could just sit back and trust God to provide, that there was no necessity to plan and work hard to fulfill that plan. So Paul wrote these words of exhortation to those who would tend toward laziness rather than building a disciplined work ethic. We read in **II Thessalonians 3:10, 13**, "**If anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. . . . But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good.**"

The point is that work done independently of God will be futile. But a person who trusts in the Lord will find rest. Without the Lord, all domestic work is in vain.

Notice what the last part of **verse 2c** says. It is a promise directed at a specific group of people. David states "**For He [God] gave to His beloved [those**

who worship and submit their lives to God’s leadership--those who have an intimate relationship with Him] **sleep.**”

That phrase found in our English translations, “**even in His**” is omitted in the original Hebrew text. Most translators add this phrase because they think it more clearly explains the intent of David’s writing. I don’t and neither do most modern Hebrew translators. Why should we add something that is not necessary to complete the thought? If you add the phrase “even in his,” it changes the meaning to state that while you are asleep, God is working on your behalf. That is true. God never sleeps, but we do, and He does work on behalf of His saints while they sleep. But in this passage, I don’t take that to be the intent of David’s words. I take his statement to be that God gives you the gift of sleep. Hence the literal, word-for-word Hebrew states, “**For He gives to His beloved sleep.**”

Our God is not just a builder and a protector; He is a provider/giver who gives sleep as a gift to those who work hard while trusting in Him. The gift of rest, whether it is a good night’s sleep or a Sabbath rest of stopping your work for twenty-four hours, is something that should be made a part of our plans. Getting eight hours of sleep is showing worshipful trust that God is in control of the outcomes of our work. We can accept His gift of sleep without fear of failure. There may be exceptional times of emergency when we have to pull an all-nighter, but that is the exception, not the rule.

Sleep/rest is a gift from God, something for us to enjoy, because it allows our bodies to be restored on a daily basis. Sleep is also a picture of being free from the fret and fume of life--freedom from care. We can rest in the Lord and relax.

Remember how Christ was fast asleep in the back of a boat during a violent storm at sea, while the rest of the disciples were frantically bailing water? Jesus’ spirit was quiet, and He slept, because He entrusted his life to His heavenly Father. Sleep like that is a gift.

Candidly, I have not lived my life this way until recently. As a pastor for years, I have lived life as a driven man. My drivenness was supported by what I see now as much faulty theology, fear of failure, and fear of rejection, rather than living under the approval and acceptance of the Lord, fully trusting

in Him and His outcomes with legitimate, God-centered work. I have to learn a whole new way of life: trusting God to do His work through me at His pace and in His time. Furthermore, I have had to learn that it is not the product of all my work that is so important, it is the process. Am I now welcoming and inviting His presence and principles to be a part of my work?

Then, in the next three verses, David goes on to apply this principle to the gift of a happy home. In **verses 3-4**, David makes an announcement. Then in **verse 5**, he makes a pronouncement. Let's look at **verses 3-4** again. David states, "**Behold.**" This is his way of saying, "Hey you who are reading this, wake up! Pay attention! Listen up, because I am about to make an important announcement." And what is that announcement? He says, "**A gift of the Lord is sons; a reward is the fruit of the womb. Like arrows in the hand of the warrior, so are the sons of one's youth.**"

Please note that the proper translation here is not children, but "**sons.**" In **verse 3**, the word in Hebrew is plural for sons. It can either be translated as children or sons, depending on the context. Contextually, this word does not refer to male and female children because "**warriors**" as is referenced in **verse 4** typically in those days were not females but only males. In addition, when business was taken care of "**in the gate,**" as is referenced in **verse 5**, it was adult men who took care of these things, not women.

Further, David states that should Solomon take seriously the raising of godly sons, they would be like "**arrows**" for Solomon when they grew. Arrows were used to protect people from their enemies and to provide food for the household. But a good arrow required work on the part of the hunter/warrior. It had to be crafted from wood to be straight, so that when it was released from the bow, it would fly true toward its target. David's point in using this illustration of the arrow is that raising godly sons requires due diligence and intentionality. For when you get old, those sons can be there to protect and provide for you.

Unfortunately, David by this time had learned a very hard lesson from one bad arrow in his quiver--Absalom. As it concerned this son, David was a failure as a father. When Absalom became an adult, he did not provide or protect or honor his father. Instead, he sat at the gate and tried to undermine David and

steal his kingship. In the end, David grieved the murder of Absalom by a well-intended but wrongly-informed soldier of David.

Hence here, David is coaching his next son, Solomon, that if he wants to enjoy God's protection and provision for himself and the family that will follow after him, he had better look to his arrows, his sons to be. He had better come alongside mom with a disciplined and intentioned plan to create "straight-flying arrows."

However, having said all of this about the Hebrew term "**sons**" in today's historical and cultural context, we can also apply this term for "sons" to our children, both sons and daughters. Why? Because today in our culture, both sons and daughters do fight as warriors in the military, and both sons and daughters are CEOs of businesses, judges, physicians, and any profession in which we find a man.

So, understanding this current day application, let's look at the three different words David uses to describe not just sons, but all children.

The first one is that children are a gift. The term "**gift**" is a translation of a Hebrew word that refers to a possession or piece of property that is shared between two people. This particular verb form suggests the idea of giving an assignment to someone to take care of something or someone that belongs to another. The application is clear. Children are God's possession that He graciously assigns to and shares with parents. Thus, He expects parents and other adults in the community to take care of the children, to build into their lives and cultivate into them godly character qualities and a sense of awe for Who God is.

Hear this church! Whether you are presently childless or not, God lends us a gift, children, whether adopted, birthed, foster care, Sunday school, or however and wherever. They may come with or without birth defects. They maybe be expected or a surprise. All children are given to us adults with the assignment to nurture and build into their lives, either as parents or as fellow believers.

The second term David uses to describe kids is that they are a "reward." They are not simply the result of a mere biological process, a financial tax

deduction, just another chair at the dinner table, nor an interruption into your plans. They are a “**reward**.” This term conveys the idea of something being a pleasure, given as tangible proof of appreciation to those who serve God. God gives children, not as a penalty nor as a burden, but as a gift to be enjoyed.

As mentioned earlier, children are also called arrows. The inference is that these children will help meet the needs of parents in their older age and will protect them from being taken advantage of.

Parents are like archers who launch arrows. An arrow by itself cannot find its target. It needs to be launched and directed. And so a parent needs to carefully aim his or her child in the right direction, making adjustments to the prevailing winds of society, and then launch their child, no strings attached, to hit the target of bringing ultimate glory to God.

Finally, there is David’s pronouncement in **verse 5**. Praiseworthy is the man who fills his quiver with them; they shall not be shamed when they speak with their enemies in the gate.

When Dad’s enemies wanted to put him down, Solomon would shut up their comments by having finished the temple. When children are nurtured properly, they will not be ashamed to stand up for their parents or look after their parent’s best interest.

Please note again my translation. Literally the Hebrew reads: “**Praiseworthy is the man who fills his quiver with them.**” The Hebrew declares that the man who deliberately intends to have children is worthy of praise. Not many people, Christians included, think that way today. If someone has more than two children and, God forbid, has four or more, people today don’t consider that praiseworthy but overpopulation of the planet or some kind of foolhardy irresponsible choice.

Mind you, the parent of **Psalm 127** plans to have children and plans to prepare them for life, like a well-tuned arrow. This sort of parent is to be praised, and will be when it is all said and done.

David's point is this. When as parents you invest your lives in building up godly children, or as a church make it a priority to spiritually nurture the next generation of kids, then you and your community, your church, will be blessed.

But on the other hand, parents or the church that are too busy to build into their kids' lives, being preoccupied with their own plans, could end up like the priest Eli in the Old Testament. Not only did Eli's kids turn out to be an embarrassment to him, but they became an embarrassment to and a problem for all of Israel. Eli and his children became a stench to God. In addition, they became the cause of their negligent father's premature demise. If we don't teach our children to follow Christ, the world will teach them not to.

If you want your life in general to take on meaning and significance, and if you have a family and you want to build a solid home life for that family, then take it from David, who had to learn about how to parent properly the hard way, through a great deal of failure. Fear the Lord; respect and follow His lead. Make Him the leader and manager of your home. Commit to raising a generation of men and women who live with a clear picture of Who our God is. He is the ultimate builder/producer, the ultimate guard/protector over our lives, and the giver/provider for all we need.

