

Unless the Lord Builds the House - Tripp Martin

Please take up your Bibles and turn in them to Psalm 127. Psalm 127. And we're going to look at this Psalm this morning. Hear the word of God.

“Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it. Unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.

It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows. For so he gives his beloved sleep.

Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord. The fruit of the womb is a reward.

Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth.

Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them.

They shall not be ashamed, but shall speak with their enemies in the gate.”

Let's pray. Father, please be with me as I proclaim your word this morning. That I would be accurate and faithful. That you would guard me from misspeaking. And that those that hear, Lord, you might bless through the consideration of this Psalm. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Now, if you look at your Bibles, before verse one.

You remember that I'm the guy that tells you all the time when I'm doing Sunday school that the verses are not inspired. The chapters are not inspired. The headings are not inspired.

So, we do know that Psalms are broken down. So, we can tell Psalm 127 is a pericope. It's an entity.

But there are two attributions given which should be in your Bible. One, it should say a “song of ascents”. A-S-C-E-N-T-S.

And it should say “of Solomon”. Now, we don't read that when we read the scriptures. We don't consider these to necessarily be inspired, but they're instructive.

So, this Psalm is attributed to Solomon. And it's called this a song of ascents. Now, we all know what it means to ascend, right? You're starting lower and you go up. That's what it means. You ascend a staircase. You can ascend a hill.

Approaching Worship

Why is this Psalm classified as a song or Psalm of ascents? Well, not only is that a good question, but if you look around it, if you start looking at the Psalms in front of 127 and after 127, you're going to find that it's not the only Psalm that has this attribution, a song of ascents, at the heading. In fact, there are 15 Psalms that are classed as, that are titled with Psalm of ascents. They each begin with that before verse 1. And they are Psalms 120 to 134.

And they form, if you will, a psalter within a psalter. So, clearly when the Psalms were compiled, this group was put together and the question would then be, well, why? Now, let

me see if I can start with this. First of all, how many of you have any of you been to the Middle East and been to Jerusalem? No, okay.

Jerusalem's on a hill. In order to get to Jerusalem, if you're coming to Jerusalem, you ascend. Also, Jerusalem, because it's the house of God, is often viewed as being higher.

So, wherever you are in Israel, Judah, if you're going to Jerusalem, you often go 'up' to Jerusalem because it's where God dwelt. And it's believed by most commentators that this group of Psalms from 120 to 134 were sung by caravans of pilgrims who went up. Who went up why? Well, they went up to keep three yearly feasts at Jerusalem.

We can, if you read the Psalms, there are some that are clearly after the Babylonian captivity. So, that tells us that the psalter, as we see it here, was put together after the return from Babylon. Not all are, though.

And they tend, with the exception of Psalm 132, they're very short psalms. And they tend to focus on a single thought or a feeling, a sigh, a hope, a joy. They're also known as pilgrim psalms because the three festivals, which we're going to look at in a minute, every able-bodied male in Israel, I'll say Israel rather than Israel and Judah.

When I say Israel, I don't mean the northern kingdom, I just mean the whole land. They were to come to Jerusalem for these three festivals. So, turn in your Bibles, if you will, to Exodus chapter 23, and let's look at verses 14 to 17.

For those of you that take notes, we're in part one of the outline, Approaching Worship. Exodus 23, 14 to 17 reads, Three times you shall keep a feast to me in the year. You shall keep the feast of unleavened bread.

You shall eat unleavened bread seven days as I commanded you at the time appointed in the month of Abib. For in it you came out of Egypt. None of shall appear before me empty.

And the feast of harvest. The first fruits of your labors which you have sown in the field. And the feast of ingathering.

At the end of the year, when you have gathered in the fruit of your labors from the field, three times in the year, all your males shall appear before the Lord God. So, when it's talking about all your males, you're looking at Bar Mitzvah. So, you're looking at teenagers up to old men.

We can't find a lot of evidence that this was ever kept as God commanded very often. But it is the command of God in Exodus. Now, let's look at the three feasts because you actually know more about them than you think.

The feast of unleavened bread. You all know what Passover is. It's the night when you celebrate, when the Jews celebrate the passing over of the angel of death because of the blood on the lintels in the doorposts.

And so, he passed over those who were covered by blood and did not take the firstborn. The feast of unleavened bread, which today is called Passover. Passover is no longer at night.

It begins the day after Passover. And takes place in March or April. Seven days.

And the purpose of unleavened bread is to remind them that when God brought them out of Egypt, they didn't have time to let the bread become leavened and rise. So, they ate unleavened bread. What today you know is matzah.

So, the first feast where the men were to come is Passover. The second feast is the feast of harvest. Also known as the feast of weeks.

It starts 50 days, which is seven full days after the feast of first fruits. And it has a name that you will be familiar with from the New Testament. Pentecost.

Pentecost means 50. It takes place in the last part of May, the beginning of June. And it's because this was a feast when everyone was one of the three feasts when people came to Jerusalem.

That on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit fell upon the apostles, Peter preached a sermon. Why were there so many people there? It was the feast of Pentecost. The feast of harvest.

The feast of weeks. The third feast is the feast of a gathering here in Exodus. Better known probably to most of you is the feast of tabernacles or the feast of booths.

It's late September to mid-October. It takes place five days after the day of atonement, Yom Kippur. And it celebrates God's provision to his people with the current harvest.

And also his provision, the Jews are to be reminded that God took care of them for 40 years in the wilderness. While they wandered, he made provision for them. So what we have happening here with these songs of ascent is as these pilgrims are either gathering, coming from across the land and or coming up the hill to Jerusalem, they sang Psalm 120 to 134, including Psalm 127.

So we have encouragement if we go through those psalms. And I encourage you to go study them. Take a look at Psalms 120 through 134.

I said that one of the thoughts that these psalms expressed was a sigh. Well, that's Psalm 120. It's talking to prayer about the lying tongues of treacherous neighbors, probably after the first people had come back from the Babylonian captivity. And there was so much treachery around them.

Psalm 121, very familiar psalm. It's talking about how God will keep us.

122, rejoicing in going to Jerusalem where God dwells.

Psalm 123, calling for God's mercy in trouble.

124, praise for God's deliverance.

Psalm 125, trust in God in days of trouble.

Psalm 126, another one that's clearly after the Babylonian captivity. God has sent back a few. And now they pray that God would send back the rest of his people to the land.

I won't continue to give you little headline titles for the rest of the psalms. But they are part of coming to worship.

Who is Building?

But we want to look specifically here at Psalm 127. And it breaks down into two parts. Verses 1 and 2 and 3 to 5. I could also, again, the verses are not inspired.

Where somebody put the number, I could argue that happy is the man who has his quiver full of them. And verse 5 is the end of a section starting with verse 3. And at the last, they shall not be ashamed but speak with their enemies in the gate. It's a third section, but that's not how it's presented in your Bible.

So we'll do it the way it's before you. So we come to the second part of the sermon as we look into Psalm 127. And that's who is building? Verses 1 and 2. Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.

Unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It's vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows, for so he gives his beloved sleep. This is a favorite verse of Christians.

I can't count how many times I've met with believers. We're getting ready to do something. We're praying that the Lord would bless our efforts.

And this Psalm, this verse is quoted. "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it." Lord, don't let us labor in vain.

We need you to bless the efforts we're making. They're for you. My wife reminded me, and interestingly enough, this is one of the reasons God gives us wives.

I'm so into the exegesis. And the exegesis is like this thick on this Psalm. You're not going to hear almost any of that, which is a great blessing for you.

But I miss the fact that, hey, we're in the middle of a church revitalization effort. We need to be praying that God's going to grow providence. We don't want to be doing the things we're doing, taking out social media ads, holding conferences, holding an evangelistic endeavor in September or October in our own strength.

We need God to be blessing that effort. We need God to be building the house. Now, the image here of your house, the concept is it's not a metaphor for something.

The concept is a home, an actual house, a building. You decide you need to build a house. Back then, the real estate wasn't like it is now where somebody sells and you go buy something.

Occasionally in cities that would happen, but often you had to go build your own house. Your parents own a bunch of property. They've got a house on it.

Now their sons grow up. They get married. They build other homes on the property.

That's the concept here. It's our labor. It's our project.

We're the builders. But as Solomon says here, if we're doing this in our own strength, it's in vain. If we're not actively following Yahweh, then the project just is something that drives us away from him.

It's not something where he blesses us. Likewise, the watch in the verse one, unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. Poor translation.

Don't blame it on the NKJV. It started with the King James Version. The way it actually reads in the Hebrew is unless the Lord keeps the city, the keeper stays awake in vain.

And that concept of keep, if you've been going through these psalms in the Psalms of Ascent, would remind you immediately of Psalm 121 where we read regarding God that he will not allow your foot to be moved. He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.

We miss the close allusion there because of our translation. So you've got it. You've built your house.

You've built a city. How are you going to protect it? Well, go back to Ezekiel. You set a watchman on the wall.

What's the watchman doing? Well, he looks out to see if there's any danger coming. This is the Middle East. You don't have to worry about a herd of a million buffaloes that are just going to trample down your building.

You're looking for armed warriors, armies that are coming against you. And then he turns the other way and he looks across the city. And what's he looking for? Well, what do you think he'd be looking for? If you start seeing smoke or flames, he needs to sound an alarm.

You're asleep. Somebody's house is burning. The whole city could catch fire.

So you're going to have policemen. You're going to have firemen. You're going to have somebody who watches, whose job is to help keep the city.

And the point here, of course, just as in Psalm 21, where our help comes from the Lord, from Yahweh, the covenant God, it's he who will keep and preserve us. It's he who neither sleeps nor slumbers. I, by the way, was a security guard and ran a security company at one point.

It's really great when you're the boss because somebody can't make it. So you get a call at 10 o'clock because it's a 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. shift that nobody showed up, Tripp. What do I do? So you try and call Harry, who's supposed to be there.

Harry forgot. Harry doesn't answer his phone. Harry's sick, didn't bother to tell anybody.

So you hop in your car and you drive down and you take over. You say, stay there until I get there. And then you get to, without planning it, you get to stay up until 6 a.m. so that you can be the watchman in that situation.

But unless God is watching over your city, you can watch all you want. But it's in vain. It's the Lord who keeps.

True peace and protection comes from him because He doesn't not show up. He doesn't fall asleep. He doesn't slumber.

He keeps Israel in covenant faithfulness. So, yes, you should have a watchman. You should have smoke alarms.

You should have security systems. These are prudent things to do depending on where you live. But true peace and protection come from he who neither slumbers nor sleeps.

The third part of the first two verses is in verse 2. It's vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows, for so he gives his beloved sleep. Now, I want you to notice something here. If you look at verse 1, it's in the third person.

If you look at verses 3 through 5, they're in the third person. Verse 2 is in the second person. For those of you that don't do well with grammar, that means it's you.

It's not talking about somebody who's outside of it talking about something. It's saying you. So it's vain for you to rise up early.

The third person gives us principles that we can apply. When the Bible starts talking in the second person, it's challenging you directly with what's been said. So when you've got projects, my wife can tell lots of stories about this through my work life before I retired.

And she would argue even after I retired. And you get stressed. You get overwhelmed.

Do you worry? Do you lose sleep? Boy, I know I sure did. Occasionally, I still do. When schedules are tight and you need to get something done, what do you do? Well, you get up early.

You stay up late. You know, the phrase in America in the West is burning the candle at both ends and occasionally in the middle as well. Where you read here to eat the bread of sorrows, another translation for that would be the bread of wearisome efforts.

And the Psalms point points out that for many wearisome efforts, you may be taking your eyes off of he who really keeps you and protects you. You're so focused on what you need to do that you've lost sight of a broader picture. Solomon here isn't arguing that you aren't going to have problems.

You know, that evangelical strain of Christianity says, well, it's all joy. It's all great. Christianity is a great life.

No, we'll have struggles. We'll have issues. We'll have sorrows.

We'll have effort. But it challenges us as to how we handle them. Now, I was speaking with a Christian brother earlier this week, last week, I guess.

And he got results back from a test. I shared a little bit about this at the prayer time. And he called me, one other person, to talk about what the results were and whether they were serious or not.

And so after a few hours of talking and I said, well, you ought to call your. If it were me, I'd call my PCP, my primary care physician and say, what does this mean? Well, before he could get around to doing that, he started getting calls from doctors saying he needed to go in and get. They wanted to get to see him the next day as quickly as possible.

So, of course, not giving you any details, which just makes you very calm. Right. And I. So I'm trying to encourage him and he said, well, don't worry about it.

I know who's in control. God is in control. I'm not going to get nervous.

I'm not going to worry. I'll just go, you know, to find out what the situation really is. I was seeking to encourage him and he encouraged me because he knew who his keeper was.

So versus one and two, building the house, staying awake as a watchman, getting so caught up in wearisome efforts. If you rest in God, if the Lord is your keeper, if you recognize that your efforts need to be overseen by him and you keep that bigger picture, then those are the ones who are able to rest in the Lord and are given sleep. Yes, we're to work and we get to work hard, but we're always to trust that the Lord will take care of us.

Are Children a Blessing?

Now, the next three verses, I would argue two verses and the first part of verse five, I've entitled our children a blessing. Just think for a minute. This is such a Western 20th century question.

The rest of the world, there's no question our children are a blessing. What do you hear about in America since I was born in 1950 and since the 70s? I don't know if I want to have kids. I don't know if I want to bring them into this world.

Or, well, things are getting really bad now and I'm not going to have any more children because I don't want to bring them into this world. Things are too dangerous. This is actually a question today for many.

Should I have children? It's been a question since the 70s for some. The world's not going the way I think it should go. So the best thing I can do is to not bring children into it.

Let's look at the text. First of all, verse three starts with behold. Now, nobody's probably ever told you this, but you've been told many times that when you see the word therefore in the Bible, you need to ask yourself, what is it there for? It's referring to something that came ahead of it.

Behold is a similar word. Behold is what those of us in grammar, if you love grammar, you're going to love this point. Otherwise, just forget it.

Behold is what's known as a particle. It has no inherent meaning. It's emphatic.

In this case, it's emphatic that what comes next is a truth that's not open to question. And that truth is that children are a heritage from the Lord. The fruit of the womb is a reward.

They're a blessing from God. What do you do? You seek after blessings from God. You rejoice when they come.

Our society not only has questions about should I have children, but they slaughter children. The U.N. and whoever it is that does the global numbers estimated estimates that there are 73 million abortions each year. Of that 73 million, over 500,000, probably over 600 to 700,000 are in the USA each year.

Clearly, a society globally or in America that slaughters babies does not see children as a blessing from God. Everywhere else before the 20th century and certainly in the Middle Eastern culture, children were such an incredible heritage and blessing. Especially sons.

I'm not going to get into the male, female thing, but especially sons. And we're in a non-agrarian society. Most of the world has been an agrarian society until the last hundred years or less.

In our society, what do you seek to get security? You seek possessions. You seek money. What's your family? Your family is that 1950s concept of a nuclear family.

Your family is just me and Mary and our two children. That's our family. Nowhere else in the rest of the world has that ever been a family.

The family was not only siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, great-grandchildren. And typically in the Middle East, you all lived close together, probably in the same village, often on the same plot of land. You'd build another dwelling there.

Your security is found in those that are part of your family, that are around you and love you. Who, when you are in need, they will come and help you. When they're in need, you stop what you're doing and you go and help them.

Jerry is going to be going to help her sister. That's a family thing to do. Less and less common in America.

And certainly with the fact that in my case, I have one child on the East Coast and one child on the West Coast. And I'm here in Denver, sort of in the middle. It's hard to get together and to take care of each other the way we used to be able to do.

And in the Middle East, particularly sons were important because the son would stay where you lived. He would marry and the woman, his bride, would come in and the children would be part of your line. If you have a daughter, I have a daughter, she would go out and get married to someone else and become part of their family line.

So children were seen as a positive, very positive thing. And it was up to God to give you children. It wasn't your decision.

We didn't have, I don't want to abort a fact. I know what that is. We don't have contraceptives to stop contraception.

Occasionally, if somebody doesn't have children, we give them some drugs so that they'll promote contraception. This was God's work. The Bible is full of stories that you'll remember about how God closed a womb for a period of time.

Sarah, Rachel, Hannah, Elizabeth in the New Testament. Isaiah 66 9 reads, Shall I bring to the time of birth and not cause delivery? Says the Lord. Shall I who cause delivery shut up the womb? Says your God.

Having children was a sign of God's blessing on a family. Children are precious. They're a gift from God and a reward from him.

It's something biblically that you seek after. And particularly, you'll see the reference there to the children of one's youth, which in the Hebrew is sons of one youth, one's youth. Because those that are born early in the marriage grow up and they're older.

So that when you start to become infirm, as Mary and I are reaching that point, your children are right there to take care of you. If we had a baby now, that baby wouldn't be around to take care of us in our time of need. We'd probably be away from this world and with the Lord before that baby reached an age of decision.

So you can understand why the psalmist says in the first part of verse 5, Happy is the man who has a quiver full of them. This is where security was found. This is where you lived in a group of people who would take care of you and whom you would take care of.

So you would be happy if you have a quiver full of children. In fact, something that our church has been promoting since I got here in 2011, 2009 when I first visited, one of the ways the church is to grow is evangelism. Yes.

Another way the church is to grow is covenant children. Christian parents should, they should, Christians should get married and they should have children. We've got an example of that in the back there with two young children.

This is God's way to grow, one of God's ways to grow the church. And as covenant children, they're taught right from wrong. They're taught good and bad.

They're taught who the Lord is. Now, I would warn parents that there are new responsibilities they have that before 1970, 50 for sure, weren't an issue. Our session now encourages parents not to send children to public school.

Public school has ceased being about education. It's about indoctrination and just about everything that is anti-Christian and wicked. It's getting worse and worse.

Likewise, I encourage, our session will encourage parents, if you're looking at Christian school, to be very careful. Because many Christian schools have become too worldly and too focused on what the world sees as proper, as what's right and wrong. Our sessions talked at times about the need to come up with a different model of Christian education, which may be going back to a model over 200 years ago when a church would educate its youth.

The pastor would hold classes and educate the youth. Again, small town. Everybody could walk.

Not here. I mean, I live 40 minutes away from where we worship on a Sunday. On the wrong day, it's an hour and 15 minutes to get here.

So there are responsibilities. What homeschooling is more and more an option. So children are a blessing from the Lord.

They're our heritage. But with that now, especially in today's era, comes a responsibility of being how we raise them. When I was growing up, everybody pretty much went to church.

May or may not have been a believer, but they all knew the gospel. The whole of America in 1950 was a lot like the Bible Belt today in America. Now, people don't have a Bible in their home.

You used to be able to say when you preached that I know every family in America has a Bible in their home. Not true anymore. There are so many Americans that have never been across the threshold of a church building.

When God gives us children, we rejoice and we seek to raise them and be responsible in raising them. You'll remember that when we baptize an infant, we talk about how the church, all of us, are part of that nurture and admonition. The raising in which they need to grow.

OK. The last two parts, Part B and C of Chapter 5. They'll not be ashamed, but shall speak with their enemies in the gate. OK.

The gate was where legal, basically the courts of the ancient Middle Eastern city. So I see this as a new idea. It's probably got the notion of a legal proceeding where a man or the father is defending himself.

And the concept here is that the man is following God's rule, God's law. And he will be successful because he is doing what is right. And that's a blessing from God.

Now, I began pointing out that Psalm 127 is a song of ascent. It's used by God's people to prepare for worship as they came to one of the three festivals in Jerusalem. What about how we apply it today? Well, we come to worship not three times a year.

We come once or twice a Sunday, every week. The pilgrims coming to Jerusalem would sing these songs, which would help them focus on who God was. Look through Psalms 120 to 134.

In this one, particularly, that God is sovereign. He's in control and we need to be walking with him in those things that we do. So I want to ask a question.

How do we come to worship? Do we see it as a special time for which we prepare? Or is it, well, it's Sunday. So I know I've got Sunday school, prayer time at 9.30, Sunday school at 10, worship at 11 and 5.30. And it's, I mean, I'm a schedule oriented guy. As my wife has said, back in the days when I was working, if you didn't get, like, walk on the beach.

I mean, I had the week block for vacation, but if I didn't put walk on the beach at 10 o'clock, I'd just continue to do work at the house and relax while I did it, rather than focus on being on vacation. So I'm a schedule oriented guy. It's easy for me to fall in on coming to worship on Sunday as a, just it's a schedule thing.

It's something I do every Sunday. Don't let it become rote like that. And what's your attitude as you come to worship? The pilgrims coming up to Jerusalem to the temple for the festivals, this was something they looked forward to.

Now, how many of you, last hand raising thing, I know I'm going a little long, but how many of you grew up where there were Fourth of July parades or Memorial Day parades in your town? Very few of us. Four of us, maybe. Maybe four and a half.

I'm not sure what that meant. That was something you looked forward to. I mean, I grew up in a little town called Orland in Pennsylvania.

And we had a Fourth of July in sort of the town business center area. There was a field. We'd have, you know, rides come in.

We were probably too small to have anything but one or two fireworks. You know, something you remembered. Is worship something we look forward to? Is it something we remember? Is it something we want to tell others about? As the pilgrims would travel to Jerusalem for these three festivals, they focused on, as you go through the Psalms, their Lord who protected them, who kept them, who redeemed them, who brought them back to the land from captivity, who redeemed them out of Egypt.

And so they sang these songs rejoicing in who God was and what he had done for them. They knew that, and so they sang Psalm 127. If they had success, it was because of God's blessing upon them.

And recognizing who God was kept them humble as to who they were and what they did. It taught them humility, for they understood the greatness of the Lord. And that brought balance and proper meaning to their lives.

They sang of Yahweh. They sang of Yahweh who blessed them with children and families who protected them in the gate. It was he who they needed to focus on as they came to worship.

For it's he that they came to worship. And his mighty acts that they remembered. So do we remember that unless the Lord acts, we act in vain? Do we come to worship him, remember his mighty acts on our behalf, on our church's behalf? Let's pray we do so.

And let's pray that especially as we're seeking to grow our church, that God would bless those efforts. We don't want to build a house in vain. We want to walk where God wants us to walk and go as he wants us to go.

Let's pray. Father, indeed, unless you build the house, and I'll make it metaphorical, whereas the psalm is more concrete. But unless you're blessing our efforts, they're in vain.

They become wearisome. Protect us from that, Father. Help us to live each day of our lives as unto you.

When we work, we work as unto the Lord. When we vacation, we vacation keeping in mind who the Lord is and the blessing he's given us. Let us remember that children are not a nuisance or an inconvenience, but a heritage, a blessing from you.

Let us remember that you ask us to follow your law. As R.C. Sproul said in the video for Sunday School, it doesn't matter what even the Supreme Court says. It matters what you say in the Bible.

Help us to be those who are focused upon your word and what you tell us in it that we would live unto you. That we do not labor in vain for the labors you give us. And let us rejoice as we come to worship and praise you in Jesus' name.

Amen.