

Sermon for Sunday, May 8, 2011
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A Home That Lasts
Psalm 127

1. People seek home and family, security, and peaceful prosperity

One day, a well-known man decided to build a sturdy house, a house that met his needs, which were substantial. He had enough money and built in a fair city, near a military center, for he fancied himself a military man and it made him feel safe. He built a wall around his house and he felt safe. But he was not safe, for he was a great criminal. He fancied himself a powerful man, with strong allies, but the Lord did not build his house. And one day he learned that he had built it in vain.

As you have guessed, I'm describing the late Osama Bin Laden. We never, never rejoice in death in itself, yet the way people die, can illustrate spiritual truth. Bin Laden's failed plans for his safety certainly illustrate Psalm 127's first truth: "Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain."

Bin Laden's case is an extreme example, to be sure. Yet we know that there are many fine houses, in every city, raised by skilled builders, but not by the Lord. Therefore no matter how splendid the house itself may be, the builders labored in vain. For no one wants a beautiful but empty home, much less a house filled with tension, grief or loneliness.

By contrast, there are humble, ordinary homes where the LORD watches and blesses the men, women and children living there. When we build a house, we hope to create space for a home, filled with family, love and security.

In this world, no home is perfect. We must say this clearly, even forcefully. On Mother's Day, let's remember and praise women who long to become mothers. But as life unfolds, they never marry or never bear children. Others do have children, but somehow the family shreds. We wonder, "How did we get here?" Psalms 127-128 describe the blessed home, but let's notice that Solomon begins soberly, with the broken home.

Broken houses can be rebuilt. The Lord can bless our second effort, right? And while our psalms say much about blessed children, a home can be happy even if babies never laugh there. And a home can be happy when the last child goes to college, or finishes college and moves to Saskatchewan. There are many ways for God to bless a house to make it a home.

2. The futility of building godlessly

Psalm 127 answers a vital question: What does it take to succeed in life, to build a house, earn a living, and create a home? Human effort is important! The Bible says that anyone who does not work will not eat. But God's presence in our work, in our homes, brings real success.

In Psalm 127, Solomon mentions the things people seek: a house, security and prosperity, and family. People also seek love, power, significance, peak experiences, a name, but these may be most common: home, security-prosperity, family love. But all these things can elude us. We never find what we're looking for, as Bono says. Solomon's key word as Psalm 127 begins is "vain:"

- Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor **in vain**.
- Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard **in vain**.
- Lest we miss it because he put it last, Solomon next puts it first: "**In vain** you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat."

In English "vain" and "vanity" have a poetic or artistic air. "All is vanity" sounds like something Shakespeare might say. The Hebrew word isn't elevated – "Shav-awv-wh/" sounds like shove and is no more noble than "shove." It's an ugly word that means useless, pointless, a waste. "You're wasting your time. This is pointless, useless. No good will ever come of it." That's what vanity means.

- People can build **houses**, but without God there is neither home nor **family**.
- People can post **guards**, but unless God protects, they'll never have **security**.
- People can **work hard**, but without God, there is no peaceful **prosperity**.

We want to pour their life energy into things that matter. It's frustrating, even maddening, to perform work that's foolish, to work at problems that never get better. So, how does God build one house but not another?

In what sense is work useless without God's blessing? Surely atheists can enjoy business success. Doubtfuls build homes, schools and clubs without asking God to bless them. Secular people certainly seem outwardly successful. What then is Solomon saying? The heading of the psalm is literally "of Solomon." Traditionally, that's understood to mean "By Solomon" – he wrote it. But "of Solomon" can also mean "about Solomon." That idea opens new vistas.¹

Psalm 127:1 says Solomon built houses and for a time God blessed them. He built the temple, the house of the Lord. He also built a house, a royal palace, for himself. It seemed a bit too grand, since it cost more than God's temple. He also built houses for his many wives.

The houses he built for his many wives were vain. He barely knew many of them; most of them were pagans, who drew his heart from God. The temple was a place of blessed worship for many years. Centuries later, wicked kings brought worship of idols, of sun and stars, of fertility gods right into the temple. Priests and people agreed to it, tragically. Therefore, Ezekiel says, God's presence glory and blessing left the temple. It became nothing but a gilded building.

Sadly, this truth holds today. Many church buildings are no longer houses of worship. The gospel is not heard, few Christians are present. The building is a religious and ethical club. God is not there, but danger is, for religion without Jesus and his grace kills. Solomon knew: A house without God is not blessed.

Solomon also knew that godless labor isn't blessed. Psalm 127:2 says God gives to his beloved sleep, or it may be translated, "in his sleep." This also seems to be a comment Solomon made about himself. His first given name was Jedidiah – beloved of the Lord – and God gave him a gift while he slept.

¹ Allen 178

One night, God came to him in a dream and offered him a gift, whatever he asked. Solomon asked for wisdom to rule well. This pleased God, who granted that request and promised what he did not ask: riches and success against his enemies, if he remained faithful: "If you walk in my ways and obey my statutes and commands I will give you a long life" (1 Kgs. 3:14).

So Solomon enjoyed God's favor. God built his house, watched his city, gave to him in his sleep. Sadly, none of these blessings lasted. Late in life, Solomon stopped walking in God's ways. He tried to protect his own borders, through "clever" alliances. He lost his peace as enemies rose against him (1 Kgs. 10-11). Worse yet, his heart turned from God. He forgot the lessons of his own psalm.

Hear the lesson of Solomon: godless toil is vain. It is vain to construct buildings and post guards, while forgetting God. It's vain to trust in our plans for home, family, career, finance. We plan, consult and dream and ask ourselves what we want, but ultimately it's vanity if God is not in it. Now that's the kind of statement that's just broad and vague enough to be an empty, frustrating slogan. What does it mean? Three things:

First, let me say that both secular people and disciples can toil godlessly. People who say they follow Jesus can lay plans without thinking of God or praying. Anyone can work frantically and accomplish nothing.

Second, the Bible doesn't say that godless toil is absolutely useless; rather there is an ultimate vanity to it, even if some good comes of it. A godless comedian can make people laugh, a godless scientist can discover helpful therapies, a godless writer can inform and move people.

Elsewhere, Scripture says that God is involved in all human activity in a way. Paul quoted a Greek poet who said, "In Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). God grants life to every human and He directs us: "He works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:11). Proverbs says, God "works out everything for His own ends — even the wicked for a day of disaster" (Prov. 16:4).

So then, godless human efforts have results. They are vain in the sense that they don't produce what people most want. People build houses and guard them because they want peace. They want restful sleep, without waking or crying out at night. Peace is a theme of Psalms 120-128; 120:6-7, 122:6-8, 125:5, 128:6. But do the godless have peace? British poet Philip Larkin answers the question this way:

"Aubade"

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.
 Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.
 Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
 Making all thought impossible, but how
 And where and when I shall myself die.
 Arid interrogation: yet the dread... Of dying, and being dead,
 Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.
 The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse -
 The good not done, the love not given, time torn off unused.
 An only life can take so long to climb
 Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;
 But at the total emptiness for ever,
 The sure extinction that we travel to... And shall be lost in always.

Not to be here, Not to be anywhere,
 And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.
 This is a special way of being afraid – No trick dispels.
 That this is what we fear - no sight, no sound...
 The anesthetic from which none come round.

Larkin had real success and fame in his lifetime. He worked, he built a house, but he is crushed, in advance, by the rolling train of death.

Fear is hardly the only thing that ruins our labors. A splendid house can be cold, loveless, fraught with conflict. So spacious that the residents tumble through space like asteroids, connected to nothing. When people seek peace without God, by their principles, against God's, it can't last.

"Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain" (127:1). No one can "watch" and prevent every disaster. Some people do everything right and die at fifty-four. Cars crash, tornadoes tear, wars blow. We find peace when we know that God numbers our days. Yet the Bible never questions hard work! Indeed, there is lasting fruit when we work for God and He works for us.

3. There is lasting fruit when God builds our homes, blesses our labor

God hates laziness and idleness. He says, "Six days you shall labor." Again, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men. You will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving" (Col. 3:23-24). There is lasting fruit when we work for God and He works for us.

It's good to work, but we must know our limits. Psalm 127:2 says, "In vain you rise early and stay up late, *toiling* for food to eat — for he grants sleep to those he loves."

Translators debate the precise sense of Psalm 127:2: Is it "God grants sleep to those he loves?" (New International Version) or "He gives to his beloved even in his sleep" (New American Standard Bible)? Both are possible in Hebrew, yet the final meaning of each is the same: We can sleep at night because God does not. We can slumber because God never slumbers. God cares for us when we sleep, when we cannot care for ourselves. The point: Since the sovereign Lord can either nullify or multiply our work, we should work hard, then rest in him.

How do people sleep when a hurricane bears down on them? A weather reporter points at his screen and make two points: 1) There is no need to panic. 2) We could all be killed. We can sleep with an approaching hurricane if we know God never sleeps, if we know that some things are greater than all possessions.

A Christian man started a retail business around 1995. It got hot, fast. It was the place to go – for two years. Suddenly, there were was *another* place to go; customers disappeared steadily. The business was in trouble. The owner became anxious, sleepless. One night he got up and started to read his Bible - Habakkuk. The people of God were facing invasion and the loss of everything. The prophet says, "I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones... [Nevertheless] Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior" (Hab. 3:16-18).

Then he went back to sleep and rested, from that day onward, even though the business did not change. So God blesses us in different ways. Sometimes he changes our situation; *sometimes he changes us, so we can sleep.*

Blessed sleep is a result of knowledge that God protects us. Solomon said, "When you lie down, you will not be afraid; your sleep will be sweet" (Prov. 3:24). To sleep is to act in faith. "I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me." "I sleep in peace, for you alone O LORD make me dwell in safety" (Ps. 3:5, 4:8). Why? Because, "he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep" (121:3-4).

Our passage comforts us because it tells us about God. First, God works. He builds our houses. He watches cities. When we see how God works, we know how we should work in the world.²

God makes our work meaningful. He builds houses, watches cities. I talked to someone in construction who doubted the value of her work. The work of architects and designers, carpenters and electricians can certainly be frustrating, yet it is good work, work we can do with God to serve humanity by creating places where people thrive. When we forget that God works with us, it's easy to focus on work's many, many frustrations. With Him, we dedicate our labors to something, someone beyond ourselves. And He rewards our work for Him.

Maybe we're too eager to see results, instead of trusting the results to God and let him build. I feel the same thing. From time to time I get a note from someone who has been visiting Central. It starts "I sit in the back [or the balcony] and I never heard the gospel. I thought I was a Christian, but now I know that God loves me, I'm forgiven, saved by faith, not works and judgment." Sometimes they add, "I had to tell you because I'm moving away soon..." Sad, but is it really?

There is a lesson for students here. In 1880, Dostoevsky praised the young men in his society who were willing to give up their life for the just causes of that day. He continued: Yet they fail to realize that it can be easier to risk their lives. But "to sacrifice five or six years of their ebulliently youthful life to hard studies, to learning, in order to increase tenfold their strength to serve the very truth that they loved and the very deed that they sought to accomplish – such sacrifice is almost beyond the strength of many of them." Why is long study so hard? For the same reason that so many things are hard: we can't see the results. So let us trust that God watches our work, guards our city, while we sleep.³

3. The lasting fruit when God builds our homes and families

Solomon's mind is on home and family: "Sons are a heritage from the Lord; children a reward from him." Solomon mentions sons because they inherit the family name and lands. But "children" - daughters too – are also his reward.

While the work of building and toiling can be loud, God builds families quietly. We don't hear bones grow. In Genesis 11, Part One, humanity expended enormous effort to build a vast but half-baked tower that ended in disaster. In Genesis 11, Part Two, God first noticed Abraham and began to build his family: a man, a family, several families, a dozen families, then a nation. So God builds our homes, quietly day

² Boice 1118-9

³ Dostoevsky, Bros, 26, rephrased

by day, as children are born, learn to walk, talk, read, write, reason and love. They go to school and more and grow up.

Hear the tone of the psalm shift - from vanity, to fruitfulness in children, a heritage, a reward. Psalm 128:2-3 adds: "You will eat the fruit of your labor; blessings and prosperity will be yours. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine... your sons... like olive shoots around your table." The fruit of womb fills the quiver and the children are like arrows, defending the city against aggressors. They ensure safety in the present and for years to come (127:4)⁴

More, children help family mount a successful defense if disputes break out dispute with "enemies in the gate." That's the city gate, where residents took their legal problems. So parents fill their home with children and children defend the city from outside threats. They defend the family from inside threats too. The family finds peace, shalom, complete well-being.⁵

Children are central to God's work in the world. But God does more than grow the family. His blessing on the city begins with his blessing on the family. Is it old-fashioned? Psalms 127-8 are clear, the family **is** the basic unit of society. When families prosper, society grows strong. If families disintegrate, society decays.

Psalms 127-8 say it both ways. Psalm 127 begins with vanity in the city and moves to fruit and blessing in the home. Psalm 128 begins with God blessing the family, then says the city prospers. So when God blesses the city, the family thrives, and when families thrive, the city has peace.

This was true first in Israel. It is true in the church, and it applies through the world. Do you want to make your country a better place? Care for your children. Do you want to care for your children? Try to make your nation a better place. But it would be a terrible mistake to stop with a raw call to action...

Gospel

We cannot raise blessed families without God. We notice that Solomon failed to learn the lessons he taught others. Solomon's "wisdom" was lost on Solomon himself. His building became reckless, his kingdom a ruin, "his marriages a disastrous denial of God."⁶

He heaped up wealth so he could raise up buildings – using the forced labor of his own people. When he finished, he called it "vanity." His kingdom collapsed soon after he died. When Israel protested Solomon's high taxes, his son threatened more. Soon his domain split into two diminished nations. He built homes for hundreds of wives, women he hardly knew, from other nations, women who led him away from the Lord. We shake our heads, but are we do different?

Mothers and fathers sometimes dread "their day" because they are so aware of their failings. Yes. But remember, the church is not an ethical club. I don't refuse to offer parenting tips, but parenting tips will never be the essence of church. The essence is this: God becomes our Father and takes us into His family when we receive Him by faith. He is the just and merciful, loving and faithful God. Every good parent starts there – not in techniques, but in character.

⁴ Futato, p. 388

⁵ Futato, p. 389

⁶ Kidner, Ps. 440

If God is in your house, if He is in and with you, by faith, your parenting sins are forgiven, so stop feeling guilty. And you have the strongest motive to parent well – to lay down your irritation or anger or laziness: God is in your house, bidding you to be who you are, more and more like Him, in union with Him.

That is the main point: When we turn from self-sufficiency and replace it with faith in God and live by his principles, activities are fruitful, not useless. So stop toiling, rising early and staying up late, as if you could ever be self-sufficient. Find shalom because God is at work in your home, your family, offering the security, love and peace you seek.