

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate the study of Psalm 127 as a supplement to the sermon. It is based on my (Michael's) study and meditation on the psalm. This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

PSALM 127:1-5 ESV

1 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. 2 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. 3 Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. 4 Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. 5 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.

STRUCTURE

- I. The vain life: laboring without God (1)
 - a. The vanity of building a house without God (1a)
 - b. The vanity of guarding a city without God (1b)
- II. Center: the vain life vs. the fruitful life (2)
- III. The fruitful life: laboring with God (3-5)
 - a. God builds our house through His gift of children (3-5a)
 - b. God guards our city through His gift of children (5b)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

Psalm 127 feels like two different songs, pasted together. The first half contrasts vain and fruitful labor (1-2), but the second half emphasizes the blessing of children (3-6). Upon closer inspection, however, the first and second half share multiple common threads. Thematically, the "house" of verse 1 correlates to the "children" of verses 3-5, and the "city" of verse 1 parallels the "gate" of verse 5. On that note, the LORD "watches over the city" to protect it from potential enemies (1), and those "enemies" manifest at the end of the song (5).

Far from copy-and-pasting two disparate songs, by certain words and themes, the Psalmist links them closely. The second half spotlights God's solution to vain labor in the first half: children. The "fruit of the womb" is God's solution to a vain and fruitless life.

One reason we initially miss this is that we think of the "house" of verse 1 as a construction project. This is not wrong, for "those who build it" (Heb. *bonim*) implies such. As noted in the commentary below, however, the Psalmist employs wordplay with the word "children" (Heb. *banim*) in verse 3. Why? Because "those who build" the house ARE children. This introduces another wordplay: "house." The word can speak of a physical residence; it can also symbolize legacy (the same double-meaning exists in English). The author intends both. Without God, our "construction projects"—the work of our hands—amounts to nothing. More importantly, our efforts to build a legacy fall flat without God. God builds our legacy through children. In Old Testament times, this was essentially limited to one's biological offspring, but by the work of Christ, it applies to spiritual offspring, too (see comments below). In short, it's not *what* we leave behind but *whom* we leave behind that makes our lives count.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

1 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.

—"A Song of Ascents":

- Psalms 120-134 are songs of ascent. Most of them are short, perhaps because they were memorized by pilgrims who sang them on the way to Jerusalem/the temple.
- Ross: "The word is from the verb 'to go up' and so means 'goings up' or 'ascents'... Perhaps 'an ode to the steps.'"—perhaps the steps that ascended the temple.

- Some have said that these were the songs sung by Diaspora Jews (making pilgrimages back to Jerusalem), but some of these songs were written before the Jews were ever exiled. This song, for instance, was penned long before exile by Solomon.
- Nevertheless, these have historically been labeled “pilgrim psalms.” Even before the exile, Jews made pilgrimages to Jerusalem multiple times a year for worship. The Jews sang these on the journey to Jerusalem or as they ascended the temple steps.
- We can derive an application from these pilgrim songs: worship doesn’t wait till we arrive. Even in the process, we praise. I love how Eugene Peterson referred to our faith journey: *“Every step is an arrival.”*
- We were made to worship. Even as we journey, we can fulfill our purpose. We don’t need a destination to fulfill our destiny.
- In what ways have you withheld praise during the process? What are you waiting for? Is every step an arrival for you, or must you “arrive” at a tidy destination before you sigh with relief and give God thanks? The Songs of Ascent whisper: worship as you go.

—“Of Solomon”: Solomon wrote two biblical Psalms—72 and 127. His life fits the theme of this one, which is about God building a house since Solomon built the house of God.

—“Unless... vain”:

- The song’s theme is stated in the negative, namely that our efforts are fruitless without God. The contrast is expressed later: with God, our efforts are fruitful.
- “vain” labor could mean that the house never gets finished or the city gets invaded. It could also mean the house gets built—but it dishonors God. This, too, constitutes vanity. The tower of Babel comes to mind.
- Vanity, then, could reflect both a failure to achieve one’s objective (build the house and guard the city) AND a failure to accomplish God’s objective (build the house and guard the city – *for God’s honor and by God’s grace*).
- Solomon knew something about building a house in vain. His father David was not allowed to build the house of the LORD because he was a man of bloodshed. God did not want His house of worship associated with such (1 Chrn. 28:3). If David had tried to build anyway, his effort would have been “vain,” even if he was outwardly successful.
- It’s scary to imagine God letting you be “successful” by building something “great”—a Babel of your own making—only to find out that He disapproved of the project. I’d rather “fail” in the world’s eyes and have God’s approval than “succeed” in the world’s eyes and earn His frown.

—“builds the house... watches over the city”:

- Kidner refers to these as life’s “enterprises and its conflicts, the work of creating and conserving.”
- To build the house—that is our “enterprise.” Almost all of us engage in some business, some work of creation, whether we’re paid for it or not.
- To watch over the city, he calls “conserving.” In ancient times, “watchmen” stood guard, ready to alert the townsfolk of invasion and the men to take arms. While we don’t operate precisely that way, we perform many daily acts to conserve and protect. We lock doors, wear seatbelts, install anti-virus software, screen our devices, shield our babies, educate our employees, and fund our military.
- Without God’s help, our homes, devices, babies, organizations, and even our state will not be safe, nor will anything we care about be built up. Even if our efforts to create and conserve “succeed” for a time—they won’t for all time. Whatever we do without God, even if it lives for a moment, will die in eternity. Whatever we do with God, even if it fails at the moment, will live in eternity.
- This reminds me of 1 Corinthians 15:58: *“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”*
 - 1 Corinthians 15 is about resurrection. Paul is saying that God will not just resurrect our dying bodies, but in mysterious fashion, our righteous deeds.
 - I love this quote from NT Wright: *“You are not oiling the wheels of a machine that’s about to roll over a cliff. You are not restoring a great painting that’s shortly going to be thrown on the fire. You are not planting roses in a garden that’s about to be dug up for a building site. You are... accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God’s new world. Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of His creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or to walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one’s fellow human beings and for that matter one’s fellow nonhuman creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up*

the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world—all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make."

- The verse seems to build on itself—from a house to a city. Cities comprise many homes. On an individual and corporate level, God alone gives success.
- The song will employ a typical biblical pun for "house." David offered to build God's "house"—His temple—but God counter-offered to build David's "house"—his legacy (2 Sam. 7). Like in English, "house" can refer literally to a dwelling or metaphorically to family, to legacy. God builds both kinds of houses: our dwelling and our legacy.
- While Solomon mostly ignored his own wisdom, his life proves that God alone builds the house—the legacy—for through Solomon came Christ.

—"builders": Kidner notes the wordplay between "builders" (Heb. *bonim*) in verse 1 and "children" (Heb. *banim*) in verse 3, which strengthens the bond between "house" as dwelling (built by "builders") and "house" as legacy (built by "children").

—The "house" of verse 1 parallels the "children" of verses 3-4, for God builds the house through children. The "city" of verse 1 parallels the "gate" of verse 5, for God preserves the family legacy through children.

—The last half of the Psalm contrasts with the first because children provide the antidote to a vain life. Nothing contradicts vain labor more than fruitful multiplication.

—In the New Covenant era, "multiplication" extends beyond childrearing into disciple-making. Jesus was single, yet Isaiah prophesied, "He shall see his offspring"—in the resurrection—"[when] He shall prolong his days" (Isa. 53:10). Because of Christ, we who bear no fruit in the womb can yet bear fruit of our Savior's tomb.

—Verse 1 assumes that God works, and we work also. God watches the city, and we watch also. God does not replace the worker; He makes his labor fruitful.

—Kidner: for each activity, "this verse sees only two possibilities: either it will be the Lord's doing or it will be pointless; there is no third option."

2 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.

—Verse 2 continues the thought of vain labor but states it positively. Instead of, "Unless the Lord... [your labor is] vain," he says, "in vain" you labor—without the LORD.

—This verse could apply to either building a house or watching a city. Builders usually rise early, and watchmen stay up late. Verse 2 is meant to generalize the labor.

—It is crucial that we interpret this in the context of verse 1. One might think this verse censures hard work, but *Proverbs* extols diligence and condemns negligence. Many other biblical passages could also be named. See 1 Cor. 15:10 ("I worked harder than any of them...")

—The Psalmist is censuring *a certain kind of* hard work, namely, the kind that ignores God. We have a saying for this in our culture: "There's no point in climbing a ladder if it's leaning against the wrong wall." The problem was not the effort, per se, but where it was directed. If I am not laboring for God's honor and by God's grace, my anxious toil gets me nowhere. I am climbing up a ladder that's leaning against the wrong wall. I am sacrificing sleep to build another Babel.

—"bread of anxious toil":

- Literally, "bread of sorrows." The point is not that the bread makes them sad but that the labor it requires is excessive and brutal.
- It's not as though the labor results in five-course meals. The vain laborer of this Psalm expends everything just for daily bread.
- Our Father promises daily bread (Matt. 6:11). He wants us to focus the bulk of our energy not on money but on His kingdom and righteousness (Matt. 6:33). If we center our lives on King Jesus, we'll never worry for food or clothes (Matt. 6:25-34; 1 Tim. 6:8).
- Kidner: "Anxious toil is a Hebrew word which, with a synonym from the same root, was prominent in the sentence of 'pain' and 'toil' on Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:16ff).
- Ross: "This is the same word used in Genesis in the 'curse' oracles; the pain for the woman would be in childbirth, but the pain for the man under the curse would be toiling by the sweat of the brow. The psalm, then, is referring to the drudgery of life under the curse."

—"for he gives to his beloved sleep":

- This could be translated as "he gives to his beloved [in] sleep." This would mean God provides for us even while we are sleeping. Only the 1995 NASB and NET (among major translations) favor this rendering. Everyone else translates it similarly to the ESV.

- “for”:
 - You don’t have to rob yourself of sleep to “make it happen”—whether “it” is the building of a dwelling, the establishment of a legacy, the protection of a city, or anything else.
 - But what about Jesus staying up all night to pray about His choice of disciples (Luk. 6:12-13) or to pray on His way to the cross? What about Paul often having “many a sleepless night” (2 Cor. 11:27; cf. 6:5)?
 - Again, we must read this in the context of verse 1—laboring without God. Jesus and Paul did not labor “without God.” Sometimes laboring for God will wear us out and drain us of sleep. Jackie Pullinger slept every night in street clothes and only at odd hours because she was serving drug addicts who lived in her home, leading them to Christ. I am reminded of the quote by Charles Spurgeon:
 - *“The best and the wisest thing in the world is to work as if it all depended upon you, and then trust in God, knowing that it all depends upon him. He will not fail us, but we are not therefore to fold our arms and sit still. He will not forsake us; we are not, therefore, to go upstairs to bed and expect that our daily bread will drop into our mouths.... Oh no, no, no, no, God does not pander to our laziness... Throw your whole soul into the service of God, and then you will get God’s blessing if you are resting upon him.”*
 - The Psalmist is saying: you’re depriving yourself of sleep to earn bread because you don’t trust God to provide you with either.
- Sleep can be a sign of our faith in God. See Matt. 8:24, where Jesus sleeps through the storm. Insomnia can be a mere physical condition, but it is sometimes spiritually rooted. Restless hearts and minds rarely produce restful bodies.
- “his beloved”:
 - What a wonderful name for God’s people! “his beloved”!! Could anything be more extraordinary?! What use are mansions and well-guarded cities if we don’t have the love of God? If we have God’s love, what need have we of mansions?
 - David named his son Solomon, which he usually went by, but God assigned him the name “Jedidiah,” which means “beloved by the Lord.”
 - 2 Samuel 12:24-25: *“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 and sent a message by Nathan the prophet. So he called his name Jedidiah, because of the LORD.”*
 - After the death of their first child (resulting from adultery), God blessed them with Solomon, aka Jedidiah. David would suffer hell-on-earth for his sin, but this child was a sign of divine favor, not only on Solomon but on David and his marriage to Bathsheba. It would have been easy for David to conclude that the union would never be blessed since he started terribly. But God showed mercy.
 - Solomon extends this “beloved” label to all God’s people. God has visited all His people with grace, despite our sins. As with Solomon, grace found us before we ever found—or sought after—God.
 - I am feeling very impressed by the label “his beloved.” Why is this so touching my heart right now?
 - I think it is because—I know this but always need reminding—my value is not in what I do but in who I am before God. I am one of his “beloved children” (Eph. 5:1). Even if I “work harder than all of them” (1 Cor. 15:10), it is not as a slave but as a beloved child.
 - I labor FROM love, not FOR love.
 - I think it’s hitting me extra that this was Solomon’s name before he ever built God’s house, before he ever reigned as king, before he ever wrote a proverb, before he ever did anything—he was “beloved.”
 - Something about this makes me sigh deeply with rest and relief. Again, these are not biblical truths of which I was unaware. But this verse is feeding my soul afresh. Oh, to be beloved by God!
 - This makes me think of John, who had a resume that made everyone else’s look like garbage: he was one of the twelve apostles; he saw Jesus perform more miracles than could be recorded in a book; he was the only one present at the crucifixion; he

saw Christ risen; he saw Christ in heaven; he wrote five books of the Bible; his name is inscribed on the foundation stones of the New Jerusalem. AND YET—he does not identify himself in these ways. In John's Gospel, his ID badge reads, "the disciple whom Jesus loved."

- What if that was how we thought about our identity? What if our resume felt irrelevant to us because the love of Jesus was everything to us? How differently would we live our lives?
- According to the Psalmist, at the very least, we would sleep better.

—Kidner: "while a contrast between fruitless toil and effortless enrichment is attractive, the opening verses are in fact contrasting two attitudes to God (dependence and independence) rather than two attitudes to work or, still less, the rival merits of toil and sleep."

3 Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward.

—Ross: "Some commentators conclude that Psalm 127 is composed of two different psalms that were joined together because the subject matter is so different in each half."

—But as the rest of this Study Guide shows, the two halves intimately relate!

—"Behold":

- Theological Wordbook of the OT: "An interjection demanding attention, 'look!' 'see!'"
- Why does the Psalmist say "Behold"? Because verse 3 shows how God builds our "house"—our legacy—through the womb.
- Again, in light of the New Covenant, He builds our legacy through physical *and spiritual* children—disciples.
- The point is that it's not *what* we leave behind but *whom* we leave behind that makes our lives count. Whom are you investing in for eternity?

—"children... the fruit of the womb":

- These are parallel. Children are the fruit of the womb. The word "fruit" ties back to the original command, "Be fruitful and multiply...." Implicitly, then, we are to raise our children to love God and make earth look more like heaven (cf. Gen. 1:28). Not just children, but godly children, contrast the vain life.
- Our culture thinks children are the cause of, not a solution for, the vain life. People think they can achieve more without the hindrance of mouths to feed. This is not God's view.
- The world views legacy as streets and monuments named after us. God views legacy as children who carry on our name—and more importantly—His.

—"heritage... reward":

- "heritage" can be translated as "inheritance." Just like an inheritance of wealth requires wise stewardship, children must be stewarded well. It's one thing to have a child but another to raise one.
- "heritage" can be translated as "gift." Parents in the trenches with toddlers (or teens!) do well to remember God's perspective. How often do we thank God for our kids?

—Kidner: "God's gifts are as unpretentious as they are miraculous. The two halves of the psalm are neatly illustrated by the first and last paragraphs of Genesis 11, where man builds for glory and security, to achieve only a fiasco, whereas God quietly gives to the obscure Terah a son whose blessings have proliferated ever since."

4 Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. 5 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.

—How are children like arrows in the hand of a warrior (or in a quiver)? The last part of the verse clarifies by mentioning "enemies." Arrows are for enemies. "enemies in the gate" are ones negotiating their terms of surrender. City gates are where parties negotiated deals. Since the fathers in this passage—the ones with arrows/children—"shall not be put to shame," the metaphor indicates that arrows/children ensure victory for fathers against their enemies.

—In light of verse 1, verses 4-5 show us how God builds the house and watches the city: through children. They are like arrows, forcing the surrender of our enemies at the city gate, enabling us to build and preserve our legacy.

—But how do children protect us from our enemies?

- In ancient times, they populated armies and cities. A city without people cannot protect itself. Western nations are losing their culture because of a man-shortage. Caesar Augustus observed the same phenomenon in Rome and tried to stem the decline in population by conquering more peoples and passing laws favoring families. (See Carle Zimmerman: *Family and Civilization*.)

- Given the other symbolism in the song, however, I think the Psalmist intends something more than a literal fulfillment. Children are arrows because they protect the family legacy (like arrows protect a city). Children are arrows because they extend the reach of prior generations (like arrows soaring through the sky).
- As David's son, Solomon completed the work on his father's heart. He was one of those arrows in his father's quiver, extending beyond the reach of his father yet landing on the target he aimed for. God is a multi-generational God. He fulfills His purposes from one generation to the next. Without such a view, our efforts will be in vain, for it is through children and disciples that our arrows find their mark.

—"speak with his enemies in the gate":

- See comments above.
- This reminds us of God's promise in Gen. 22:17-18: *"I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And **your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies**, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."*
- On one hand, Psalm 127 pictures the warrior/father speaking with his enemies at the gate of his own city. Verse 5 technically does not specify that the meeting occurs in his own city, however, the parallel verse 1 suggests that the setting is his own city—not that of his enemy.
- On the other hand, Genesis 22 pictures Abraham's descendants as possessing the gates of their enemies—that is, offensively taking over their cities.
- Since this is poetry, I don't think we need to press for literalism. The echoes of "offspring... gate... enemies" are sufficient to link them. The point is: Abraham's descendants would defeat their enemies. The Psalmist builds on this imagery by putting it to song.
- God's people can trust Him for victory against our adversaries, whether human or demonic. Just as Jesus' victory over the devil is made visible through His disciples (see Gen. 3:15 vs. Rom. 16:20), so is ours. We should take the long view. We don't need short-term glory but long-term fruit. "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit"—in context, disciples—"and so prove to be My disciples" (John 15:8).

—"of one's youth": why is it better to have children while young?

- God blessed Abraham and Sarah as well as Zechariah and Elizabeth in their old age, and it seemed no less a blessing.
- This does not mean that children borne of older couples are less of a blessing.
- Instead, the Psalmist emphasizes the blessing of children in youth. Although he doesn't tell us why, I think his reasoning is simple. Having children in youth enables you to fill your quiver with them. Those who wait long to have kids typically have few kids.
- Pragmatically, most people I have spoken with who had children young are exceedingly glad they did. This passage motivated me (in part) to start my family earlier than most.

—"fills his quiver with them":

- Kidner: "The greater their promise, the more likely that these sons will be a handful before they are a quiverful."
- How should we respond to the "quiver full" movement that thinks we should continue bearing children for as long as we are physically capable? (i.e. the Duggar family)
 - First, there is a difference between "Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of" children and "Have as many children as humanly possible." We can infer that having more kids is a blessing, but we can't go further than that. For instance, "Blessed are the poor" (Luke 6) does not demand voluntary poverty. We can infer a warning against wealth, but we can't go further than that. (Notably, Paul tells Timothy to command wealthy folks to be generous and not put their hope in riches, but he never makes a blanket statement that they must surrender all wealth. See 1 Tim. 6.)
 - Second, "Be fruitful and multiply" does not specify how many kids married couples should have.
 - No command tells us to have as many kids as possible, and none limits the number of kids. We are being legalistic—adding to the Scripture—to put numerical demands on couples. "Be fruitful and multiply" should be allowed to stand on its own. The command still applies to married couples, but without specific numbers.
 - While we should avoid the legalism of the "quiver full" movement, perhaps a greater danger to most married couples in the West is not valuing what God values. Many passages

throughout Scripture indicate that God values children. If we don't want something God values, and it's fully in our capacity, we should ask ourselves (and the Holy Spirit) why.

- The final thing I'll say about having children is that the church fathers spoke with one voice about birth control, including the Protestant Reformers, who were against it. I am personally not against birth control, so long as it is not abortive (many of them are, so do your research). However, I think married couples of childbearing age should be generally less hesitant about having babies. If we value what God values, in most cases, we will favor more children.

—Summary of the Psalm by Ross: "The providence of God ensures the full success and safety of domestic activities for those whom the LORD loves."