

Unless the Lord builds the house

Littlebourne - 4th September 2022 - Psalm 127

A Song of Ascents. Of Solomon.

So it's another of the Songs of Ascent, Psalms thought to be those that pilgrims on their way to the Temple would have sung together. This time, the Psalm's author is Solomon.

Two Psalms are attributed to Solomon, David's son, King of Israel. Solomon of course also wrote the majority of Proverbs, as well as Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs.

If you're familiar with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, you'll immediately see the similarities in style and content - this reads like it could be from the book of Proverbs. This isn't a Psalm directed to God with emotion like some of the others we've seen - it's not either lamenting or rejoicing, it's sort of matter of fact. The mention of vanity makes us think of the message of Ecclesiastes - that without God, all is in vain. Ecclesiastes starts with two chapters about how everything is in vain, but concludes like this (12 v 13-14):

13 The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. 14 For God will bring every deed into judgement, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

The Psalm here reflects this - that without God, all is in vain.

v1-2

*Unless the Lord builds the house,
those who build it labour 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.*

First, the Psalm makes clear that the Lord builds, the Lord watches: "Unless the Lord builds the house", "Unless the Lord watches over the city".

This is a God saturated view of life - that in building, in creation, God is working, that in watching over, defending, in preservation, that God is working. These two things sort of encompass everything, all work - creation and preservation. God is in all of life.

Second, the Psalm makes clear that we build and watch, we create and preserve - but if we do so without God doing His part, we do so in vain. In all parts of life, we can work, but if God is not working too, it will ultimately be in vain.

Now verse 2 gives us a third set of things that we do and God does - we get up early, go to bed late, work hard and God grants his beloved sleep.

This third part isn't the same as the first two - this is like the first two, it's an expansion of the first two, it's describing how to or not to build and watch.

The word toil (NIV) or anxious toil (ESV) here has the sense of hardship, of pain - it's used 6 times in the Old Testament, four of which are in proverbs where it's translated in different contexts as 'labours', 'sorrow', 'toil' and 'harsh'. In genesis 3, this word is used for the pain of childbearing. It's not referring to just work, but hard, laborious, painful work.

I think we have to be careful here. This Psalm is not saying that hard work is bad, that we shouldn't work hard. Solomon uses that same word in Proverbs 14:23:

*In all toil there is profit,
but mere talk tends only to poverty.*

Hard work and effort is no bad thing. It's often very good to rise early and go to bed late, but if our work is nothing but pain, if it's full of anxiousness, then it's not quite right. God blesses hard work, but he blesses hard work that trusts in Him.

Verse 2 tells us that we should create, sustain, as in verse 1, but do so with the knowledge that God creates and sustains. We don't need to be burdened with our work - we don't need to be of the opinion that we are holding up everything ourselves, it's God that holds up all things.

The last phrase, "for He gives to His beloved sleep", I think says that we're given rest by God from the toil, from the anxiety of things, when we recognise that He is working too. I think it also mirrors the staying awake and watching of verse 1. There's a sense here that God sustains things and allows us to rest, to sleep, he defends things for us, he sits watch for us, giving us rest. Psalm 121 (verse 4) tells us:

*Behold, he who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.*

The Lord stays awake for us, He upholds and defends us when we need to rest.

So the point here is that firstly God works - we don't uphold the world, but rather God does.

Secondly, we embrace being loved by God - he gives rest and protection.

Thirdly, we trust that the decisive effects of building, protecting, are God's. We do what we can, but the decisive effort is God's.

Finally, we build, we create, we watch, we preserve, but restfully. We shouldn't carry the weight of the world on our shoulders, but we should find rest in Him. Jesus said that He is gentle and lowly, His yoke is easy and His burden light - we should take hold of this.

It all parallels some of our reading from Acts - we are to work, to act, to do things, make decisions, etc. but do so joyfully and restfully, acknowledging that God is in control. In Acts 1, where they decided on the new twelfth apostle, the apostles made a decision, but trusted that God was working in their actions. In the actions of the apostles as they are faced with persecution - they rest in the knowledge that God is at work. In Acts 4 we saw that the believers prayed for boldness in their actions, prayed that they could continue to build and preserve, after thanking God for his sovereignty over all that was happening - they knew that God had to be in what they were doing.

v3-4

*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.*

At first glance, it doesn't appear that this has much to do with the first part - it's a bit like Proverbs again, in that it seems to jump to another topic. So what does this have to do with what we read in verse 1 and 2?

I think there's a parallel here - children are both something that come from ourselves, a work of our own, and something that really comes from God, his gift. Almost the most natural and obvious way in which we create as humans is through producing children, and in this matter too, God must be in it for it to succeed.

Solomon was part of the 'House of David', David's line, his descendants - likewise, we trust God to build the 'house' of our family. Just as the house in verse 1 needed to be built by the Lord as much as by the builders, families need to be built by the Lord, as much as by us.

Throughout the Old Testament, we see lots of big families - lots of people have large amounts of children. Last week we heard that it was just fourteen generations between Judah and David, and from this one man Judah had come the tens of thousands of men who were with David in his generation.

But we should be careful not to read this as just sheer volume of children being an automatic blessing - David wouldn't have been more blessed if he had more Absoloms. There's plenty of examples in scripture where children are their parents undoing. The blessing is in a quiver full of straight arrows, not crooked sticks. Just as we must do the work of building - families and whatever else - it is all in vain if God is not building with us.

Likewise, God preserves and protects by giving us children - all of us are the result of many generations of children. The Psalm describes these children as like arrows in the hands of a warrior, like a quiver full of them. God preserves His people through the generations - He promises faithfulness to a thousand generations that are faithful to Him (Deuteronomy 7:9).

Verse 5 gives us a picture of what this looks like. The NIV says the courts, but the more accurate translation is the gate (ESV, etc.). The gate of the city is where in those days, the decisions and conflicts were decided - where the leaders of the city would talk and content with each other. The judicial centre of things was the gate of the city.

The picture here is that this man is contending with his enemies by the gates, and his sons are there with him. His sons are there, on his father's side, backing him up. He's not ashamed of his children, doesn't have to make excuse for them.

So these verses are not so much about the pitter-patter of tiny feet, but rather about generations that trust in God. It's not about just having children, but children raised well and children in whom God works and builds - that's the real blessing.

Conclusion

Those making their way to the temple in Jerusalem, singing this Psalm, might have thought about God building His house, the temple, God watching over His city, Jerusalem. This Psalm would have reminded them that nothing built by the hand of man is anything, unless God is in it. That true protection doesn't come from the walls of the city, but from God.

They may have thought about the promise to Abraham that we find in Genesis 12 (verse 2-3):

2 And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

The promise to make Abraham's descendants a great and powerful nation, that would bless the world. The people then would be seeing one result of this - the nation of Israel - the many people that descended from Abraham and worshipped God.

But the ultimate focus of the Abrahamic promise of many descendants is on Jesus Christ. The whole world is blessed through Abraham's descendant Jesus, through whom all are invited into the blessing promised to Abraham.

Paul puts it like this in Galatians 3 (verses 7-9):

7 Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. 8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." 9 So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

Then later in verse 29:

29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

It's those who are in Christ that form Abraham's promised offspring - the blessing of children to Abraham is fulfilled in our being in Christ, we're adopted into the family of Christ through faith.

This promise of God to Abraham, made by God, Christ Jesus, fulfilled by Christ Jesus, reminds us that unless God is in us and our children, we work in vain - unless Christ is in us, we toil in vain.

We think that we make the difference, that our work is what does the trick, that we are in control - but we are totally dependent on God, for everything, especially salvation.

Unless Christ builds your house, unless Christ watches over your city, it is all in vain.