

"Unless the Lord Builds the House" - Part 1

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Scriptural Foundation: Psalm 127, ESV

A song of ascents. Of Solomon.

¹ 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.

I thank God for allowing me to grow up in a home which was healthy. My mom and dad loved God and they loved each other. They lived their faith day by day in the home. What I learned in church was practiced by my parents and I did not see any inconsistency there. Instead, integrity, love, discipline were norms for me.

I think fondly of my dad lacing on his "Oscar Robertson" sneakers after a long day at work to play basketball with us in the driveway. His patented skyhook was something beautiful to behold. Mom baked cookies and played board games and taught us how to read. Both tucked us into bed at night, often with Scripture and prayer, and always with kisses. My dad's rough whiskers chafed against my tender skin, but I did not care.

Our family meals would be filled with energetic conversations. I did not realize how treasured these daily conversations were until my friends remarked how much they loved coming to my house for meals because they loved talking with my parents.

Sin abounded in our home. To be sure, all of us exhibited much of the flesh, especially the male Boerckels. But, grace abounded more. Jesus and His cross are the center of making broken parts whole.

My dad's experience as a boy was much different from my own. He recounted his home was filled with conflict. His dad drank booze and fought with his wife. His dad eventually divorced his wife and left his family. My dad's mom did her best to keep her children fed, but it was hard as a single mom. Despondent and despairing, my dad, as a teen, felt alienated from God. He wondered whether God cared for him at all. My dad was not angry at God for His seeming lack of concern, but he was extremely sad God would not, perhaps could not, come near him, but then God did.

My dad heard the Gospel through reading the New Testament when he was sick for almost an entire year. He heard the Gospel when he turned on a radio and he listened to a young evangelist by the name of Billy Graham. He heard the Gospel when he met my mom, whose family was Christ-centered. He heard the Gospel and he received it when he recognized God did care about him and God did draw near to him as he placed his faith in Jesus, and he was changed.

He told me when he married my mom he had one goal in his life he really cared about: He simply wanted to honor God and specifically honor God by having a happy, healthy family, a family which loved God together and loved one another. He did not have great ambition in business. He did not have any intense interest in hobbies. He did not have any social goals to gain positions of influence in church or community. He simply wanted to honor God by having a healthy, happy home, and he and mom prayed for that. From everything I can see, his four children, their spouses, and each of his twelve grandchildren love God and love one another.

I relate this to you not to boast of my family, for we have nothing to boast about. My dad knew, and my mom knows, they did not manufacture a healthy home. That was not in their power; God alone builds healthy homes. They gave thanks to God for His work of grace. I relate this story to you to share with you a godly vision for your life and you family and a godly possibility it is within reach, because God is near to each one of us.

God gave the driving vision regarding family to my dad before my dad had a family. My dad's priority and desire rubbed on me and I hope it rubs off on you, also. I relate this story to you to share with you a godly vision for your life and you family and a godly possibility it is within reach, because God is near to each one of us.

God gave the driving vision regarding family to my dad before my dad had a family. My dad's priority and desire rubbed on me and I hope it rubs off on you, also. When I got married, I set as my purpose to honor God through a healthy family. I believe, on the basis of Scripture, if God was going to use me for His praise, He would use me first as an instrument of grace in my family. Everything else, my relationship to ministry, to money, and to other people would become fruitful or unfruitful on the basis of honoring God to the health of my family. To the end of a healthy family, I began to pray. Ultimately, I evaluate the effectiveness of my life, not on the basis of the size of the church I pastor, not on the basis of the number of baptisms, weddings, or missionaries sent out, but I evaluate the effectiveness of the spiritual health of my family. I know that is God's work and not mine. That is why I need Him and that is why I depend upon Him.

For a long time I have asked the question, "God, how would you use me as Your instrument to build a healthy home?" Thankfully, God is not silent regarding this question. He gives us part of the answer in Psalm 127 and this psalm is so important for us as a starting place and as a foundation. We study this psalm to seek the Lord's grace. There are four actions for the successful building of your home. We will consider the first two in this study and the last two in the next study.

Notice, as we consider Psalm 127, the title reads, "A Psalm of Ascents of Solomon." Once again, this is one of the psalms of pilgrims, as they faithfully journey up toward Jerusalem, toward the Temple to worship God during one of three times during the year,¹ would sing together. It is chosen as one of the fifteen songs of ascent. Jerusalem was up on a mountain and they had to travel up the mountain. That is why it is called "a song of ascents". They would sing and think about life, and they would think about God and give praise to Him.

As they traveled up the mountain toward Jerusalem to give sacrifice and celebrate the Lord, this psalm and the next, Psalm 128, tell us one of the themes they considered and meditated upon was a husband's work in building his family, important matters of life, and important matters of worship. This goal of a healthy family is clearly encouraged in this psalm and it is resting upon the minds of these Old Testament men, in particular, as they sing about their hopes and responsibilities in relationship to their family.

As we consider they would sing this three times a year, ask the question: How often do I take the time to meditate upon my hopes and my responsibilities in relationship to my family? I believe this important not just for married people who have children, but it is important for every one of us because we are all a part of some family; we are a brother or sister, or a son or a daughter.

The first action step we see is: Embrace the Lord as the Builder of your home. Submit to His leadership in your home. Right out of the box this is what the psalmist is singing,

¹ 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.

¹ The Feast of the Passover, The Feast of Unleavened Bread, and The Feast of First Fruits

The first principle of these faithful people of the Old Testament established in their minds, as they thought about their family and their relationship to it, related to the absolute dependence upon the Lord they needed to have in order to find any positive results whatsoever. Everything is in vain unless the Lord is the very center, unless He is the builder, unless He is the founder. This principle, by the way, applies not just families, but it also applies to nations, communities, schools, companies, workplaces, and churches. Unless the Lord builds the church, the individual life, or this nation, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over us, the military and the politicians stay awake in vain seeking to protect our country. Unless the Lord watches over us, the pastors, the elders, and the leaders in the church, we labor in vain to build the church.

One the basis of Verses 3 through 5, however, I believe applying this directly and specifically to the family is appropriate. Unless the Lord is active in building a healthy family, all human efforts are in vain.

There are two words pictures presented for us in the first verse. There is, first, the picture of a builder of a house. The second is the picture of a watchman in the city. Hebrew poetry is such, parallel statements always relate to one another; a statement is made and another is like it, but just a bit different. Sometimes it adds to the thought, but it is always connected to the same thought. There are not two different set side-by-side, but they always correspond to one another.

Implied in this first verse is the Lord offers Himself to labor on our behalf, to watch over as a guard on our behalf. The two ideas presented in these two word pictures is the picture of building, growing, and protecting against threats. That is what the Lord does for us. He builds us up and He protects us. Is this not our desire, as a parent, in relationship to our children? We desire to work, to build them up, and to grow them into healthy adults and protect them and guard them against all things physically, emotionally, and spiritually which might come against them to damage them. This is what the Lord does and what He commits Himself to on our behalf. The principle we learn is: God alone builds homes. He is the Master Builder.

Building a house is complex business. I would not attempt to build a house on my own. I know my limitations. When we built a room onto our house ten years ago, we hired a builder. It would have been foolish for me to try to learn as I built. Some of you possess expertise which is necessary to build a house, and you could do it. Others, perhaps, think they have the expertise to build a house and they attempt it only to end up in ruin and huge problems. A man has got to know his limitations.²

No human is capable of building a healthy home and we are foolish to attempt it. If we want to build a home, not a physical house, but a home for a family, we must go the One who knows how to build and who is willing to be our builder. The fact God joyfully works to build healthy homes is such a great encouragement to me. This tells us God, first, places a huge priority upon building homes. God is not going to waste any energy or focus upon that which is not vital or treasured. What the psalmist discusses, this implied idea of Him building the home for us, is because homes are important to the Lord. Then, in our feebleness, we are not left to ourselves and our own designs, but God Himself works on our behalf.

When we give ourselves to building a healthy home, we give ourselves to a worthwhile matter, but it is vital we rest specifically in God's power and God's work on our behalf. How do we embrace God as the builder of our home? There are three essentials for embracing God as the builder of our home. You may say, "Okay, I get it. I should not build my home on my own, for unless the Lord builds the house I will labor in vain and it will all be empty. How do I rest and depend upon God to build my home?"

These essentials are so very practical and simple, but they are so vital for us never to move away from these fundamentals. First, we read and heed God's instructions regarding the home. Have you ever built something which did not turn out right? My brother, Scott, purchased a new set of bookshelves and they were not put together. They arrived in a box. He has an engineering so he opened the box and he saw the booklet of instructions. He said to himself, "I am an engineer and I know how to put things together," so he set it aside. He began to assemble the bookshelf, and after it was completed, it was build crooked; it was leaning to the

² "Magnum Force", Harry Callahan (Clint Eastwood), 1973.

right. He said to himself, "What did I do wrong?" He decided to pick up the book of instructions, and on the first page it said, "If your bookshelf looks like this," showing a picture of exactly how his bookshelf looked, "you did not read the instructions. You need to take everything apart, read the instructions, and start over."

God leaves us with a huge Book of Instructions. Some people say, when a baby is born, the baby did not come with an instruction manual. This is not true. It does come with an instruction manual. Your baby came with a huge instruction manual and it is God's Word. God gives to us instructions so we would submit to them, read them, heed them, learn them, and live them. Let me give to you a few instructions from Scripture.

Matthew 19:4 He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? ⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." ⁸ He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. ⁹ And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."

Deuteronomy 6:4 "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

Ephesians 5:22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior... ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word...

¹ Peter 3:1 Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, ² when they see your respectful and pure conduct... ⁴ let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious... ⁷ Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

Ephesians 6:1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ² "Honor your father and mother"... ³ "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land..." ⁴ Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

I am not commenting on any of these Scriptures; I have only read them, but even in the reading of Scripture some wince. These words cut across our culture and the self-sufficient, self-directed nature of our own thinking and lives. Who is building the house? If a person bristles at the bare reading of God's Word, clearly God is not building the life or the home. If we desire the Lord to build our homes, we must be eagerly read God's instructions, soak it in, receive it, and then be zealous to heed God's instructions. If we do not all of our efforts to build a healthy, happy home will be useless, vain, and empty. We will end up with tilted bookshelves which fail to accomplish their design and purpose.

Jesus told a story, at the end of His Sermon on the Mount, and He said, in Matthew 7,

²⁴ "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that

house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.²⁷ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

The second action step is to pray and petition God to actively work for us, to call out upon Him in absolute dependence. It is interesting Benjamin Franklin applied this psalm to our county's future blessing. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were two founders of this country who were the most distant from biblical Christianity. They were not Christians, but they were deists,³ yet even they, in their pagan, unbelieving way of thinking, understood and believed the message of this psalm in relationship to the country. The Constitutional Convention had been meeting for five weeks and they hit a deadlock. Large states were insisting congressional representation be based upon population. Smaller states wanted one-state, one-vote rule. It created a division which jeopardized the Union holding together. Eighty-one year old Benjamin Franklin stood up to address the group, and said, "In this situation of this assembly, groping in the dark to find political truth, and scarce able to distinguish it when presented to us, how is it happened, sir, we have not hitherto once thought of humbling applying to the Father of Life to illuminate our understanding?" Franklin is nonplused by this, yet he is an unbeliever. "How is it we have not stopped to pray? In the beginning of the contest with Great Britain, when we were sensible of danger, we had daily prayer in this room for Divine protection. Our prayers, sir, were heard and they were graciously answered. All of us who are engaged in this struggle must have observed frequent instances of a super-intending providence in our favor. To that kind providence we own this happy opportunity of consulting in peace on the means of establishing our future national felicity. Have we now forgotten that powerful friend or do we imagine we no longer need His assistance? I have lived, sir, a long time and the longer I live the more convincing proofs I see of this truth: God governs the affairs of men. If a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable an empire can rise without His aid? We have been assured, sir, the Sacred writings, 'except the Lord build the house, they labored in vain that built it.' I firmly believe this and I, also, believe without His concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel."

Even deist Franklin recognized the need for daily petition to God, for His working to bless a house. Could it be regenerate believers need a gently rebuke from an unbeliever regarding the need for prayer?

When God gave us sons, He convicted me of my need to pray over my sons each night. I put my hands on their heads, a physical symbol of spiritual work, and I pray the blessing, "May the Lord bless you and keep. May the Lord cause His face to shine upon you, be gracious to you and give you peace." When my son, Alexander, was about one year old, he was just starting to talk. In the evening he would reach out to me and say, "Peace, daddy. Peace." He loved the time of having his hands placed upon his head and say, "and give you peace." By God's grace I realized early it was not my mentorship, my discipline, my instruction which would change the heart of my boys, but it would be God hearing the prayers of a desperate man to bring His grace.

I particularly cried out for my sons' salvation. I wanted them to hear me for my son's salvation, "Lord, save this man from his sins and from himself." I wanted them to know two things from their dad. First, they needed rescue from sin and darkness. Secondly, God through Jesus was the only One who could rescue them. I still hold onto my boys and I pray for their souls, "Lord, rescue my sons from sin and from self and give them vision."

As my boys grew, they would often have struggles with sin, emotion, and decision, and I know my greatest influence comes to them, not on behalf of my words of wisdom, but upon my petitions to God to build their

³ deist, *n*, a person claiming solely upon the evidence of reason, in the existence of God as the Creator of the universe who, after setting it in motion, abandoned it, assumed no control over life, exerted no influence on natural phenomena, and gave no supernatural revelation. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1976.

lives. While I am feeble and I have failed them often in many ways, I commit to praying for them. Would you make that commitment, also?

The third action is the action of keeping Christ and His Gospel central. The Gospel tells us what God demands of us, God provides for us in Christ. God demands absolute purity of us, spotlessness, and absolute righteousness and whatever God demands from us, and that to be sure He demands, He provides for us in Christ. That is the Gospel message. He provides it freely and simply. As we come to Him in faith, He offers that. Have you received from Christ what God demands of your life? If you have not, you are not ready to face Him. God provides for us what He demands of us. God does not build a home on the foundation of His Law because the Law cannot provide for us what God demands of us.

God builds homes on the basis and foundation of His Gospel, for without a transformed heart, without God's life inside of us, we are unable to understand and obey God's commands, and we are unable to have a right relationship with God or with one another. We need Christ to rescue us and save us from our own feeble attempts to live life rightly, healthily. We need Christ to strengthen us so we can overcome the spiritual forces which are at work to destroy us. No parent or child will read and heed God's instructions apart from Christ. No child or parent will pray to God in weakness, apart from the Gospel, making them new creatures in Christ. The old must pass away if the family is to be rescued.

Our minds, our hearts, and our wills must conform to Christ; our minds so we would think right thoughts about God and have right attitudes toward God, our hearts so we would have right affections toward God, and our will so we might have right actions toward God. It is not enough for just one of those to transform us, for our head to get around right doctrine, but for our hands and our hearts to be far from God. We need every aspect of us transformed and only God's Gospel does that. Christ is the only person or power who can liberate the family from the self-deception which hides the truth of God from us, from self-devotion which spurns the love of God, and from self-direction which resists the authority of God in our lives. We need Christ as the center and the Gospel brings Christ to us.

Is your home and is your life Law-centered or Gospel-centered? From the outside, a Law-centered home and a Gospel-centered home look very similar. Both have children who behave. Both have families which are respectable. Both are successful in the workplace, in school, and in other ways. Both go to church and they listen to good sermons. Both pray before meals. Both have a moral code they follow. Both improve all the externals of life, but only the Gospel affects the internals of life. Only the Gospel moves us past religious ritual, external praying, external beliefs and doctrines. The Gospel brings these beautiful rich thoughts about God to our minds so we rejoice in God Himself. The Gospel brings about a change of heart so we truly love God, that we are not manufacturing that love, but that love is there, and the Gospel brings about a willing submission and surrender to God even when no one is looking, even when no one notices, and even when we could get away with it. The Gospel brings about that kind of change and that is why we need Gospel-centered homes.

The second action is we must reject our independent efforts to build our home,

¹ 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.

This psalm condemn human effort or human labor. It is not commending to us a passive form of Christianity. God is not speaking to a people who neglect laboring to build their home. He is not speaking to deadbeat dads who do not spend time, energy, or money investing in the lives of their children. He is not speaking to workaholics who allow every business distraction to rob the family of time and love. Psalm 127 is God speaking to dads and moms who serve on the PTA, who drive their children to piano lessons and basketball practices, who encourage their children to complete their homework, who have family meals together, who read books on child-rearing, who attend seminars on parenting, who make an effort to come to church together on Sunday morning. He is talking about parents who are laboring. He is not condemning labor or

speaking to those who do not labor. He is speaking to those who do labor; he is speaking to church folk, in other words, and he is saying, "Listen, it is possible for all that labor to be empty and vain if you labor independently of God." It is not enough to give God a nod here and there. He must be in and through and under everything, because we do not have within our power the ability to manufacture a healthy home.

The principle is: Homebuilding is in vain when we engage it without God and it is not in vain when we do it for God's glory. When does God not build our house with us? It is when we have the wrong center, the wrong purpose, the wrong principles, the wrong priorities, the wrong motives, and the wrong methods.

Our children must not become extensions of our own vanity. Parents are tempted to desire for their children to be popular, or athletic, or scholarly, or beautiful, or financially successful so we can feel good about ourselves. When we do that we labor in vain because it is not about us, but it is all about God and His glory. We unwittingly encourage them toward the transient things of this life when we have that view. But, less the flesh, less the eyes, and less the boastful pride of life, it is God whom we are all about.

The psalmist says,

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.

God is at work even when we are at rest. Without the Lord being at the center, we are going to be frustrated and we will eat the bread of painful labors; we will be painfully laboring and it will be frustrating to our soul.

Jesus taught us the same thing in John 15,

⁴ *Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.* ⁵ *I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.*"

We are not capable builders. Our independent efforts to build our own home are in vain. What symptoms reveal independent laboring and independent efforts?

First, there is the presence of hard work which is not bathed in prayer. Dependent efforts wrestle with God in prayer, knowing effort without God's blessing accomplishes nothing, so we struggle with God in prayer. When was the last time you spent even a single hour praying and pleading with God for our children's salvation, for their sanctification, and for their wholeness?

Second, there is a fleshly pride in our children and in their accomplishments. It is natural and good to rejoice in their accomplishments of our children, but it is fleshly to feel as though our children are superior because of them. This kind of pride reveals we are taking far too much credit for ourselves and giving far too much credit to them. It is God who is God who is the giver of every good gift. A spirit of competition which desires others to fail so our children will succeed is not produced by God's Spirit and it is a sign of deadly pride and independence.

Third, there is a forgetfulness of thanksgiving to God for the fruit which we enjoy. After we see God do good things, or after we see blessing which come to our children or our family's lives, a failure to give thanks for that is a symptom of a life which is living independently and taking credit for ourselves. A dependent heart cannot look at fruit without thanking God for His abundant grace.

Fourth, there is an earthly success which does not lead to the deep worship of God. All of life is about communing with God and we are exerting independent, vain efforts when that success, that fruit, that blessing, or whatever we call it does not lead us with a deeper walk with our Savior and Lord God Himself.

Fifth, there is a commitment to the physical family without a corresponding commitment to the spiritual family. God gives us two institutions in which He would bring glory to Himself in this broken world. He gives us the family and He gives us the church. If we are God-centered in our goals, and we say we are to be all about God and His glory, then we will recognize that because that is what the teaching of the Word is. There is a fleshly pride and an independence which says, "I can invest a lot in my family because it is about me," but if we have a commitment to that physical family without a commitment to the spiritual family it will reveal to us, as a symptom, we are not really about God, but we are about us and we are going to labor in vain.

Sixth, there is much instruction to our children about achievement with little instruction about affection toward others and toward God. We talk to our children and we give them much wisdom, the early bird which catches the word and other great proverbs, the necessity of discipline and diligence in their life, but consider what the Apostle Paul says to Timothy, in 1 Timothy 1:5, "The goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart." This is all worth pursuing. It is not about them, the people who are instructing the children or receiving some type of worldly acclaim or accomplishment, but it is about them becoming loving people; that they would love God first, with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their mind, and with all their strength,⁴ and then they would turn that and love other, even people who are hard to love.

Seventh, there is financial investment and time commitment to improving the body and the mind of our children without a corresponding financial investment and time commitment to improving their soul. We are willing to invest so much time and so much energy on their education, helping them learn things which will help them to become successful in life, but we do not have the same kind of intensity and willingness to invest our time and our money for things which would improve their soul. This indicates independent labor and that kind of labor will become vanity. We must refuse to build our home on our own.

This list is very abbreviated and it is not complete. Add to it your own symptoms of independent efforts. Think about this question: What would be a symptom of an independent heart and independent labor?

There is a warning in this text. The psalm was written by Solomon. It tells us he understood everything he wrote, but what happened to Solomon's home? Solomon drifted into the very kind of life he was warning others about in this psalm. He drifted toward independence and we see the shambles which ruined his life and his family and the result of it. Solomon ignored his own words and this teaches us the knowledge and affirmation of Scripture carries no value unless we apply Scripture and unless we take it home and do something about it.

My encouragement is: What will you do in laboring, dependent upon the Lord, to build your house? When we dependent upon the Lord, God works in amazing ways.

⁴ Deuteronomy 6:5