

"Unless the Lord Builds the House" - Part 2

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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.

Like many of you, I am thanking God for giving me the special gift of my mom. I could have been born into any family, or I could have not been born at all. But, Scripture teaches God has a plan for each and every one of us, from eternity past. Part of His eternal plan for me was to grow in my mother's womb and then grow me under my mom's loving care, under her instruction, and under her help. What a privilege! Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Lord.

I know God elects many to grow up in far more difficult circumstances than I did. Some grow without a mom at all. Others are with a mom who have such severe problems in her life, and it is very hard on little ones. If you are one of those, know God loves you the same as He loves those who are given godly moms. His ways are not always discernable by our minds, but we need not doubt Him or His kind purposes because the cloud of mystery shrouds our sight from His glory.

He settled the question of the magnitude of His loving kindness for us when He sent His only Son Jesus. Do not doubt God's loving kindness. Jesus died upon the cross as a substitute for our sins so we can know Him and we can connect with the Living God in a living, real way; so we need never fear during God's wrath and God's condemnation, but we can enjoy God and commune with Him in fellowship forever and ever. In sovereign love God ordains many different paths to communion with Himself. If you are a Christian I urge you to not grumble over the means God employs in leading you to Himself and to His glory, but rather rejoice that God, in His mercy and in His grace, would elect us and He intends to use us in this life for His eternal purposes.

With that said, again I affirm my gratitude to God for giving me my mom. She is a godly mom. She and dad helped me to understand this vital truth. Out text validates a mom and dad's focus upon their home as the central place of investment in their life. God places great value upon the family and this psalm reveals that and He calls us to make the building of our home a major aspect of our life's time, energy, and resources.

My mom modeled this biblical priority. She labored tirelessly to build our home. She grew up as a hard working, thrifty farm girl where she learned how to stretch a dollar and labor to make a home. She cleaned, maintained, and straightened the house and property, but more importantly, she cleaned, maintained, and straightened her sons and daughter. She easily invested over eighty hours each week, directly, in working to build a home when we were little. She did not commit herself to many other outside distractions. Other than her service to the Lord in the local church, the home was where she invested her energy and time. My mom understood any fruit from her considerable efforts depended solely upon the Lord.

When we consider the first two verses, this is what they teach us,

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.

In our previous study, we observed this great psalm is applicable to many aspects of life. It is applicable to a church, to a county or a community, or to an individual life. Anything vital which we are at work to build, if we do not build it upon the basis of the Lord being the Master Builder, we are laboring in vain and everything is vanity and emptiness. But, I believe God gives special application to this truth in applying it to the home.

Old Testament pilgrims would sing this song on their way up to Jerusalem to celebrate one of three national feasts.¹ Every year they set aside some time in their life to think about the home of which they were a part, and which was growing and being built. They wanted to recognize all of their labor depended upon the Lord laboring first.

We began with four actions which I believe this psalm outlines for us as to how we might build our home. The first action we observed is, by way of review, we must embrace the Lord as the Builder of our home; unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. God alone build the home. God offers Himself to us, is that not exciting, to be the Master Builder of our home. As we embrace God as the Master Builder of our home, we discussed three primary instructions, which are not necessarily comprehensive, for embracing God as our Master Builder.

First, we need to read and heed God's instructions; we need to set the example. We must draw spiritual truth and spiritual light from God through His Word. Second, we pray and petition God to actively work for us. We call out upon Him in our great need. Finally, we keep Christ and His Gospel central. How are you doing on these three essentials? How is your prayer in petitioning God on behalf of your home? Is Christ central in your home, or is He often in the periphery?

The second action we observed is: we must reject our independent efforts to build our home. God does not call us to passivity, but He calls us to hard work and to labor in reference to our home. But, this is hard work in dependence upon God. It is in vain we rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil. The idea is we work so hard to build a home, but in the evening we take bites of the meal and it does not taste satisfying. We earn this food, yet the food we earn is not enjoyable, enriching, or satisfying. Something is missing and something is bitter about life. Does that describe your life? You seem to be working and working so hard, yet when you eat the fruit of that labor, it is not satisfying. That is a symptom of a person who is laboring hard, but not laboring in dependence upon the Lord. Home building is in vain when we engage it without God and when we do it for our glory rather than His. I, also, gave you symptoms of independent efforts to build our home.

This third action Scripture presents to us is the action of treasuring our children as God's precious gifts,

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

Children are a heritage, a gift from the Lord. Children are not the fruit, or gift, of healthy bodies or of chance; "Perhaps we will be pregnant, or perhaps we will not." God is actively at work in the conception of each and every child. Today, many view children as liabilities, as something to "endure" rather than to "enjoy". God says each one is a gift intended to bring joy a home.

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

As an aside, allow me to discuss the painful problem of barrenness because of us, in reading these verses, feel and express pain at the inability to bear children. You have been trying to receive this gift from the Lord, but the Lord has not given that gift. Notice, this text does not say, "Not having children is a sign of God's judgment." That is not what Scripture is teaching. It is simply teaching when we have children, this is a gift from the Lord.

As we think of the pain of barrenness, I encourage you to allow your thoughts to drift back to Hannah in the Old Testament. Hannah experienced that same grief and she was deeply troubled. God validated her grief, yet she recognized she was moving away from grief and toward the sphere of bitterness. She went to the Temple and she began to pray. She poured out her heart to the Lord in prayer over this matter. Pouring out our hearts before the Lord in all matters, particularly in matters which touch the very heart of God, such as His gifts, is the right thing to do. God took away her bitterness before Hannah conceived a child. It was not the result of God's gift she was free of bitterness, but it was the result of God's communion with her, God meeting her in prayer, she was able to be at peace even as she remained a barren woman.²

I urge you, please be careful of becoming angry with God if God, in His sovereign mercy, withholds this gift. Such anger will lead you into deeper darkness and despair and away from the light of His joy. We need to recall God delights to meet us with His sufficient grace whenever we call upon Him, even as He met Hannah in her need. Is it not within the rights and freedom of the Giver to give gifts and to withhold gifts? Is that not God's sovereign right? Is God bound by an obligation to give us gifts we desire?

In our study of 1 Peter, we learn God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.³ Peter said, "Humble yourself, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so at the proper time He might exalt you. Cast all your cares upon Him because He cares for you."⁴ We learned the phrase, "The mighty hand of God" refers to God's sovereign working over the affairs of men, a sovereign working which often includes deep pain and hardship for His own people. Peter was writing to a group of individuals who were suffering, experiencing persecution as a result of their faith, and server hardship. The pain and suffering was not as a result of the emperor Nero's purposes, but it was a result of God's mighty hand.

We are reminded to humble ourselves under God's might hand, especially when that hand seems to bring pain and difficulty into our lives. At the proper time He will exalt us and that is where our faith connects with the Living God, and we will see, in the end, on that future day, what God has ordained for us is exactly what we would have chosen for ourselves had we known what God knows now. We humble ourselves under Him recognizing, "God, you are God and it is painful, this circumstance you have placed me in, but you are God and I can trust you. You are wiser than I am. You are mightier than I am. You love me. I am going to humble myself and ask You to consider my grief and hear my cry, knowing at the proper time, when you see fit, you will exalt me." God gives sufficient grace to those who humble themselves before Him.

Children are gifts from the Lord to this world, to the church, and specifically to parents. This simple biblical idea carries huge significance in so many matters. Much of modern society rejects this biblical principle with devastating consequences. We are told over-population threatens the planet. We are told each child costs \$300,000 to raise. As we hear these things we begin to wilt. The rejection of the idea children are gifts is so pervasive society's ability to thrive is in jeopardy.

We are experiencing, in culture abroad, throughout the world a "birth dearth", particularly among people in developed countries. We have pounded into young couples' minds children are liabilities and not gifts with such force parents are not having enough children to sustain either scientific advancement or economic growth. Today women in more than sixty countries do not bear enough children to keep the population growing. There is a huge issue of a population dive occurring over the next three or four decades. Why is this a problem. Is it not better to have fewer people on the planet?

² 1 Samuel 1:2-18

³ Proverbs 3:34

⁴ 1 Peter 5:6-7

This is a huge problem because healthy, productive human beings are society's richest assets. They are net producer, not net consumers. A decrease in population translates into an economic crisis and this crisis will be particularly hard for the aging population, as there are more and more getting older and fewer and fewer who are younger to care and help them. Steven Malanga, a Senior Fellow at the Manhattan Institute, as he cites several other economists in an article, writes, "Julian Simon calls people 'the ultimate resource. Human beings discover how to convert oil, coal, and uranium, which sat worthless in the earth for eons, into energy. The most important economic effect of population size is the contribution of additional people to our stock of useful knowledge. A growing population streams young workers into the labor market and they are usually the most daring and knowledgeable and inventive people.' Harvard economist, Greg Mankiw, says, 'Those who fear over-population share a simple insight: people use resources so they are net liabilities. The rebuttal to this argument is as equally simple: people create resources.'"

I bring this about because it is important to understand a Christian-world view radically changes the way we think about problems in this world. The world needs more children to avoid economic catastrophe, but more importantly, we consider the spiritual ramifications when Christian families succumb to the world's ideology. The Christian home is God's primary instrument, along with the church, for making disciples of Jesus. When Christians view children negatively, they make decisions which negatively impact the spiritual witness of the church. Fewer children in Christian homes will mean fewer pastors, fewer missionaries, fewer evangelists, fewer disciple makers, fewer Sunday school teachers. The fewer the Christian workers in the field the less impact the church will have upon society and the more influence the kingdom of darkness possesses. The church's greatest earthly asset is not her buildings or her bank accounts, but it is her people.

Young adults, I encourage you, before you decide how many children you should have, please ask yourself these questions: Do I consider children as gifts from the Lord to bring joy, through whom God intends to bring glory to Himself? Do I consider children gifts from the Lord, or as financial liabilities which potentially rob me of a certain standard of living? Do not think of the question of how many children you should have until you get those issues clear in your minds. How we think about children, and Scripture instructs us on how to think about children, will greatly impact our decisions regarding our home.

There are five necessary ways to treasure our children as God's good gifts. How do we treasure them and treat them as gifts from the Lord? Children are given to us for such a short time. Children are given to us as a stewardship as opposed to an ownership. Our children are God's possessions first and foremost and they are given to us as a sacred trust.

First, we treasure our children through our time. Without a commitment to treasuring our children through our time, we will fail on any other effort to treasure our children. There is no other way we can treasure our children apart from investing our time. We must fight for quantity of time with our children. We will have insufficient quality time with our children if we do not give quantity time to our children. Be willing to sacrifice all kinds of things for the sake of investing quantity time with your children,

Second, we treasure our children through love and encouragement, affection, and inspiration. I know children can be frustrating at times and we do not need to hear an "Amen" for that, but we need God to fill us with patience. Children becomes the means God uses to help sanctify us and make us more like Jesus and be more patient so we avoid those harsh, killing words which discourage our children. We treasure them by the words we speak and the attitudes we hold; this soft, gentle, patient, loving, and encouraging responsiveness to our children.

I am thankful for my wife's example to me in this. I acknowledge I am tempted, particularly as my children grow older, to over-teach. I am a teacher, so when I see a problem in their life, I want to teach them. Often times I need to be patient and back away. Sometimes people need to get involved because they are passive by nature and they are under-teaching. There are times when I need to step back a bit and encourage them, not teach and correct. That is what they need at this time.

Third, we value our children by praying for them. When was the last time we got on our knees and plead before the Lord for our children's spiritual and emotional and physical blessing? Our children need God's grace and the greatest means we have to bring God's grace into their life is through His Word and through prayer. I believe it is important we pray for our children in private and away from them, but also in their presence. I believe our children need to hear us pleading to God for their souls, their salvation, their growth in Christ, their sanctification, for them to overcome specific sin, and for them to learn specific graces. They need to hear us, also, pray for their whole well-being, their physical and emotional health, their interaction in school and among friends, and the success of their endeavors. They need to hear us pray for them so they can say, "My mom and dad, they pray for me." That is one of the ways we reveal we treasure children as God's gifts.

Fourth, we treasure our children, which is like the third, by instruction in the Gospel of Jesus. Our children need to hear the Gospel over and over and over and over and over. We cannot share and tell the Gospel enough to our children, for our children are born with huge problems, the problem of sin, and they need to be rescued from sin and from self. Only Jesus, through His Gospel, possesses the power to do that. We cannot rescue our children from themselves or from their sin. The Gospel is so deep and so rich, no amount of telling it diminishes it. That is not true for any other message I know. When I hear any other message over and over again, I get bored with it, but that is not true of the Gospel. It expands and there is something new I learn about this precious, rich Gospel of grace. We want to continue to expand this Gospel in the teaching in our home. We will never get to the end of our understanding of God's glory in it. The Gospel alone can bring children to possess a vision for God which will drive them toward a God-centeredness of life and toward a God-saturated being.

Children are not blank slates; they are busy sinners and they need parents who give energy and wisdom in helping them to learn how to fight sin and selfishness through the Gospel. How do you apply the Gospel to specific problems in life? The Bible is our greatest resource to understand God's Gospel on the subject. That is why we saturate ourselves with Scripture because Scripture contains the Gospel, this good news of life. I love 3 John 4,

⁴ I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

That is true for me. I know the only way that will have happened in the past and will continue to happen in the future is the Gospel remains central.

Finally, we treasure our children through healthy marriages. These are not comprehensive. They are all necessary. Apart from any of them we cannot say we really treasure our children as God's precious gifts. One of the greatest gifts we can give our children is to love our children's mom and to love our children's dad. Many modern couples divorce and the home is broken. That is always sad. Often times they are tempted by this lie: The children will be better off with us divorced than with us fighting all of the time.

I acknowledge there is one instance in Scripture where divorce is permissible and that is ongoing, unrepentant adultery in a spouse. But, here is this lie: The children will be better off with us divorced than with us fighting all of the time. That is foolish nonsense, for those are not the only two options. Children are better off with parents who humble themselves before the Lord and who receive His grace and see the beauty of a miracle in the family as a result of the power of the Gospel. God's grace is sufficient for us to fight through all the heartache of sin and to provide new life in our souls so we might be free of the dark, difficult aspects of sin. No marriage is past the power of God's grace to restore. God is the One who raises dead people from the grave, so, if you are thinking of divorce, do not buy Satan's lie it will be better for the children. The message sent to children when Christian parents divorce is a devastating one.

Here is the message the divorce of Christian parents sends to their children: The Gospel does not work. The Gospel is not true. It is so difficult for children to overcome that message which comes through that action. Listen to Malachi 2, on this matter,

¹³ And this second thing you do. You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand.

The problem is, God has abandoned His people for their rebellion. They are going to church. They are praying. They are wrestling with God. They are calling out and weeping, yet, God does not hear them.

¹⁴ But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. ¹⁵ Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. ¹⁶ "For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless."

Through the Covenant He gave, they were to bring about godly offspring. The idea is to invest in your marriage and grow in love with your spouse.

As Christians, we know these five commitments listed are essential. These are parenting fundamentals, but let us consider them as we look at them. How are we doing in our relationship with our children? How is our time? How is our love and encouragement? How is our prayer and instruction in the Gospel in a healthy marriage? It is impossible for us to fulfill these things apart from God's grace. We are a feeble and weak people and we are sinful. We walk away from God and we fail Him, but if we plead with God for His grace and if we come to Him in faith, God delights to hear our prayer.

The fourth action is to shape and send your children for God's glory and purpose,

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

God gives children to parents so the more they grow to worship God and to serve Him, the more they experience His sovereign design. God's children are not an end in and of themselves, but they are like arrows. Is this not an interesting illustration God uses to help us understand His purposes for our children?

How are children like "arrows" in the hands of a warrior? There are three ways. First, a warrior shapes his arrows to be straight so they can fly right. God does not condemn hard work, rather He comes along side the hard work as we depend upon Him and He infuses it with fruitfulness and effectiveness. A warrior in Old Testament times took a long, meticulous time and purpose in shaping their arrows and forming the arrowheads so they are sharp and measured. The shaft and the feathers at the end of the shaft are all set so the arrow will be able to do its work.

In this passage we learn God is the One who actually brings about the right effects, but the warrior is still shaping and being used by God to produce this arrow which is fit for his service; children are like arrows in the hands of a warrior. The Bible calls the process of straightening arrows "discipleship". God gives the church to parents to help them spiritually disciple their children, shape them, and straighten them to help them become the people God intends for them to be.

Secondly, arrows in the hand of a warrior are instruments of war. The assumption set before us in this analogy is parents are involved in a war and they understand that. This world is not a friend of God or of God's grace. How are they going to win this war? One of the instruments in the hands of the warrior are the arrows. God tells us we are to fight against spiritual forces of darkness and sin and our weapons are not physical, but they are spiritual. They are the Gospel of Jesus Christ and His righteousness is found in this Gospel so when we

present this message of hope and life to the world, light might cause the darkness to flee and we might see change in people's lives as they become worshippers of Jesus. It is a war against the spiritual forces of this world.

So many times parents are tempted to bend their children in a way so their children fit into this world, as opposed to be ready to fight against the spiritual forces in this world. It is vital for us, as parents, to recognize the temptation we have to say, "How can I get my children to conform so they are not ridiculed for their faith?" The are arrows and they are meant to be sent into a world which has gone astray and which has rebelled against God and to be used to make a difference for God's glory.

Third, arrows are sent to a far away place the warrior cannot go. Parents sent their children to a place and to a time to which they will never arrive. I am forty-eight years old and, if the Lord is gracious to me, He may give me forty or so more years. That means, at the best, I will only be personally influencing this dark world to around 2052! But, God says to parents, we have the opportunity to reach beyond the time of our death through our children and sending them into places we can never arrive. And, as they learn to shape their arrows, they send other arrows into the future, all for the glory of God. Our faithfulness, in shaping, and in sending our arrows effects the future profoundly. God has given to us a God-centered vision regarding our children. That is the reason He says,

⁵ Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them!

This verse does not tell us how big the quiver is and I know there are some who over-apply this verse, but the Christian community rightly rejoices in large families. We ought not to be among that number who looks at a large family and says, "What in the world are they doing?" No, we rejoice in large families. Then he says,

⁵ He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

I believe he is talking about children helping us as we age. They come along side of us, care for us, protect us, and they bring certain provision. This is the future of a man who understands God's vision for the family, that he is blessed by the children God provides for him.

This psalm contains a principle regarding God's salvation for our soul. It is true, this has been applied to the family all along, but our application needs to go deeper and turn inward regarding our own souls. No matter how much we labor to earn God's righteousness and a soul which is healthy, we will never, ever be able to build a soul which has life, health, peace, and joy. It is outside of our power and our ability to have this righteousness which is required of us by God. If we are building our own soul, working hard to please God without depending upon what God has already done for us through Christ, we are laboring in vain.

This psalm is a call for us, whether we are applying it to our family, to our community, to our church, or to our own soul to fly to God in helplessness and say, "God, I need you to be at work in my life. I need you to rescue me from my sin. I cannot rescue myself from my sin. I need you to provide a righteousness you require in order for me to be acceptable to you. Lord, will you build my soul on the foundation of Jesus? I am now resting my life in Him and in what He has accomplished for me."

Are you depending upon God to give you a soul which is fit for Heaven? Unless the Lord builds that soul, that life, that house we are only laboring in vain. But, when the Lord builds the soul, what He provides for us in Christ, and what He promises to provide us, it is then we are blessed. We are provided, by God, with all we need for joy and peace. May God encourage us through His Gospel.