



Firwood Church

These are the notes of a sermon preached at Firwood Church by Phill Marsh on the morning of the 22 March 2009; these notes are, therefore, intended to be read in conjunction with the sermon. To download sermons and other free resources, visit www.firwoodchurch.com or subscribe through iTunes.

SONGS OF ASCENT - PART 8, THE LORD MY FATHER

Psalm 127

A Song of Ascents. Of Solomon

**¹Unless 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.**

**²It 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.**

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

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

**⁵Blessed 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.**

1. INTRODUCTION

The Songs of Ascent are a series of fifteen Psalms (120 through to 134) that were sung by pilgrims as they went up to the temple in Jerusalem to observe the major festivals and to worship the living God.

In the Psalms encountered so far in this series, we have seen psalms of praise and of lament. In Psalm 127 (and also Psalm 128) we arrive at a new type of psalm, a 'Wisdom Psalm'. Other examples of this type of psalm can be found in Psalm 1 and 37. They present a slightly different style than has been encountered in the Songs of Ascent up to this point, and take themes from the Wisdom Books of the Bible (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Songs of Solomon).

This change in style can at first make Psalms 127 and 128 feel out of place in this series of Songs of Ascent, perhaps even in the Psalms – one could be forgiven for thinking that maybe Psalm 127 would be better placed in the book of Proverbs. Examining the purpose of wisdom literature however shows these two Psalms to be quite fitting in this series. Wisdom literature aimed to both explain something of the character and nature of God *and* highlight the way of 'right living'.

Psalm 127's place then in this series of songs gives those moving to worship God time to consider who He is (specifically, His sovereignty), the blessings He pours out, and the right response to those blessings. Psalm 127 should be seen as a psalm of 'practical praise' for Israel.

2. THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

The Psalmists begins with a declaration of the sovereignty of God,

Psalm 127

**¹Unless 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.
²It 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.**

'Nothing happens unless God makes it happen' is the cry of the Psalmist. This is true, but there is a danger (as with most things) in misunderstanding this truth. One could take away the idea that God will do what needs to be done and we can sit back and let it happen.

This kind of thinking can have disastrous effects on the Church. It may express itself as laziness within the band that leads worship, for example. The band could be of the mistaken impression that they may simply turn up to lead worship as the service starts, with no time spent practicing beforehand, under the banner of 'Whatever is God's Will will happen' - If the band sound terrible, it must be God's will that they sound terrible – well done band for following God's will!

Perhaps this misunderstanding of God's sovereignty could express itself in the outreach (or lack thereof) in the Church. 'God will bring in who He wants to bring in' would be the lazy call. Laziness is the key word here. Misunderstanding God's sovereignty in this way leads to laziness in all areas of work.

This is clearly not what the Psalmist is getting at. This becomes clear as we examine his background and the mindset that it ultimately formed in him, because the Psalmist is Solomon.

a) Author's Background

Solomon was the Son of King David and reigned after him from 971 until 931 BC. In 1 Kings 3, we see that Solomon, presented with an open invitation to ask for anything from God, asked for wisdom

Psalm 127

⁵At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, "Ask what I shall give you." ⁶And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant David my father, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you. And you have kept for him this great and steadfast love and have given him a son to sit on his throne this day. ⁷And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in. ⁸And your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen, a great people, too many to be numbered or counted for multitude. ⁹Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?"

¹⁰It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. ¹¹And God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, ¹²behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you. ¹³I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honour, so that no other king shall compare with you, all your days. ¹⁴And if you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your days."

It is for this reason that much of the Wisdom Literature of the Bible is accredited to Solomon (Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, Song of Solomon).

In studying the writings of Solomon, his opinion regarding 'work' becomes very clear. Verses such as,

Proverbs 6

**⁶Go to the ant, O sluggard;
consider her ways, and be wise.
⁷Without having any chief,
officer, or ruler,
⁸she prepares her bread in summer
and gathers her food in harvest.
⁹How long will you lie there, O sluggard?
When will you arise from your sleep?
¹⁰A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest,
¹¹and poverty will come upon you like a robber,
and want like an armed man.**

And again,

Proverbs 14

**²³In all toil there is profit,
but mere talk tends only to poverty.**

All this shows the high premium that Solomon places upon hard work, and his lack of sympathy (to put it mildly) for the lazy person (sluggard). Over and over again, Solomon attacks the sluggard and praises the hard worker.

This is a principle found throughout Scripture. It is undoubtedly so that the Church should love, care for, and give to the needy. The Church should never be without Charity. However, Paul also makes it clear that he agrees with Solomon; the sluggard should not be given a free ride,

2 Thessalonians 3

¹⁰For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. ¹¹For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. ¹²Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

And so we see that the Church should definitely love and support those in need, but alongside this is the call to everyone: *If you can work, you should.*

Viewed from this perspective, Solomon's point in the Psalm is protected from the misunderstanding that leads to laziness. Solomon is not telling his hearers to stop work, instead he declares that work is good, but work outside of God is pointless, vanity.

b)Solomon on Sovereignty

Solomon's understanding that God rules over all, that nothing that happens does so outside of His command, is the grounding for what is to follow in the Psalm. Jesus spoke of this reality of God in Matthew 10, where he said,

Matthew 10

²⁹Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.

Here Jesus points to the insignificant (sparrow - small birds of little value, and pennies – the smallest monetary denomination) and declares God's sovereign rules even over their existence. Benjamin Franklin expanded on this point in a speech given in 1787 addressing the necessity of God's involvement in the building of the State when he said,

“...if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?”¹

Israel were fully aware of this fact that the rise and fall of nations, military success, national safety, etc. all depend on God alone. In hearing the terrifying reports of the spies sent into the Promised Land, which spoke of strong people and large, fortified cities, Israel was at first ready to give up. Moses and Aaron had to remind the congregation that God was with them, that the protection had been removed from their enemies, and that victory was theirs,

Numbers 14:5-9

⁵Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the people of Israel. ⁶And Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes ⁷and said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, "The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. ⁸If the LORD delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. ⁹Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them."

Israel also saw the other side of this truth. In Lamentations, we see Jeremiah's response to the sacking of Jerusalem,

Lamentations 1

**¹⁵The Lord rejected
all my mighty men in my midst;
he summoned an assembly against me
to crush my young men;
the Lord has trodden as in a winepress
the virgin daughter of Judah.**

In this case, after a succession of kings that did evil in the Lord's sight, God decides to 'cast them out from His presence',

2 Kings 24

¹⁸Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Hamutal the daughter of Jeremiah of Libnah. ¹⁹And he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, according to all that Jehoiakim had done. ²⁰For because of the anger of the LORD it came to the point in Jerusalem and Judah that he cast them out from his presence.

The result is the sacking of Jerusalem

2 Kings 25

¹And in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came with all his army against Jerusalem and laid siege to it. And they built siegeworks all around it. ²So the city was besieged till the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. ³On the ninth day of the fourth month the famine was so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land. ⁴Then a breach was made in the city, and all the men of war fled by night by the way of the gate between the two walls, by the king's garden, though the Chaldeans were around the city. And they went in the direction of the Arabah. ⁵But the army of the Chaldeans pursued the king and overtook him in the plains of Jericho, and all his army was scattered from him. ⁶Then they captured the king and brought him up to the king of Babylon at Riblah, and they passed sentence on him. ⁷They slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, and put out the eyes of Zedekiah and bound him in chains and took him to Babylon.

⁸In the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month—that was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon—Nebuzaradan, the captain of the bodyguard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. ⁹And he burned the house of the LORD

and the king's house and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned down. ¹⁰And all the army of the Chaldeans, who were with the captain of the guard, broke down the walls around Jerusalem. ¹¹ And the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had deserted to the king of Babylon, together with the rest of the multitude, Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried into exile. ¹²But the captain of the guard left some of the poorest of the land to be vinedressers and plowmen.

The wisest of Israel's kings in their wisest moments the Lord for the next move that they should make, not daring to trust in their own strength. Solomon understood this. His understanding was grounded in his father's words to him as he lay dying,

1 Kings 2

¹When David's time to die drew near, he commanded Solomon his son, saying, ²"I am about to go the way of all the earth. Be strong, and show yourself a man, ³and keep the charge of the LORD your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his rules, and his testimonies, as it is written in the Law of Moses, that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn, ⁴that the LORD may establish his word that he spoke concerning me, saying, 'If your sons pay close attention to their way, to walk before me in faithfulness with all their heart and with all their soul, you shall not lack a man on the throne of Israel.'

David tells his son to:

- Be a man.
- Work hard
- Do it God's way

Solomon knew that to step outside of the will of God was to move in vain. In the first two verses of the Psalm, he announces a form of 'futility curse' found a number of times in the Old Testament. The essence of these curses is 'you will work, but someone else will benefit'.

Another example of this kind of curse can be found in Amos 5,

Amos 5

¹¹Therefore because you trample on the poor and you exact taxes of grain from him, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not dwell in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine.

The idea that another nation could come and take their homes and crops was a very real threat to Israel. Solomon's words to them are not 'toughen up' or 'train well'. They are simply to trust God and to work according to his Will. He points out that extra builders and watchmen and longer working hours will all prove fruitless without God.

Again, Jesus makes this very point about Himself,

John 15

5... apart from me you can do nothing.

How sincerely do we take this statement of Jesus'? Nothing. We can do nothing. Jesus doesn't say that we are weak without Him, that we are going to find things difficult without Him to help us. He says that without Him, nothing can happen. Absolutely nothing. This is an incredible statement, and merits much meditation.

Why does Solomon this sovereignty of God and our dependence and powerlessness as a good thing? His answer is in the second verse of the Psalm,

Psalm 127

**2It 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.**

He gives His beloved sleep. Here Solomon is not simply talking of having a nice nap. He contrasts the man working in God's Will, to the man outside of it, working all the hours he can, getting up early and going to bed late, producing only the driest results. Solomon posits that for the believer who understands that God is in control, peace comes. As Jesus says in Matthew 6, we are not to worry, for God orders all things and our worry had absolutely no effect upon our situation.

Matthew 6

25"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?

Solomon's call in light of God's sovereignty is this:

- Seek God's will

- Do that. Nothing more or less.
- Trust that God has it in hand.
- Rest.

This principle can be applied to all of a believer's life, but here in Psalm 127 he focuses it down to a specific application – our children.

3. CHILDREN

At first reading, the second half of this Psalm can seem quite disconnected from the first. It seems as if Solomon is discussing one subject and then suddenly changes focus and discusses another. What we see in Psalm 127 however is that Solomon is using the first half of the Psalm with its declarations of God's sovereignty as groundwork for the second half.

Solomon has a number of things to say regarding children.

a) Children are a Gift from God

Psalm 127

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

Here it is important to pause and ensure that we read what the verse says and what it does not say. Solomon very clearly declares children to be a reward and a gift from God. He does not say, however, that those who are unable to have children are being punished by God. If you are a couple struggling to conceive you should not take this verse as a sign of God's displeasure with you. We see in Scripture God's heart for those unable to have children,

Psalm 113

**⁹He gives the barren woman a home,
making her the joyous mother of children.
Praise the LORD!**

The truth is that many churches are full of, or at least surrounded by, young people who need parents. It may be that God, in His sovereignty, never grants you your own children. This does not mean that you may never be a parent.

In this Psalm, Solomon shows God's sovereignty His giving of children to people. This very fact highlights the gravity and responsibility involved in receiving and raising a child. They are God's gift, and we must be sure that we handle that gift correctly.

b) God's Gifts Continue to Bless

Psalm 127

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

**⁵Blessed 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.**

What is Solomon saying here? He is not suggesting that it is good to have a number of children so that in his old age he will have a sizeable family mob able to surround and protect him, threatening those that dare threaten their father. Here Solomon talks of the power of raising children of integrity.

It is at this point that we begin to see the 'house' that Solomon spoke of in verse one. Here he makes a call for parents to toil, not at simply raising their children, but at something bigger: to work at raising them in God's will. This leads to children of integrity, who silence the slanderous accusations of enemies against their parents by their good living.

It is in this way that all Christians are now known as Children of Abraham and in a similar sense, Children of the Disciples,

Galatians 3

⁶just as Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"?

⁷Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. ⁸And 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." ⁹So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

Indeed, our very faith speaks of the faith of those before us that made it possible to hear the Gospel. Our lives speak their defence at the gate, giving no cause for shame. This is what Solomon urges us to be a part of.

c) The Condition

The condition for this continued blessing of children of integrity that Solomon (and ultimately God) sets forth is this: The Lord builds.

The problems of lazy parents are clearly evident in society around us, but Solomon is not speaking to that issue here. Here he addresses those parents that toil outside of God. Those that work hard to provide for their children, but do so without concern for the will of God.

Solomon's warning is stark – unless it is done God's way, all that labour is in vain. Futile. Pointless.

4. Application

So how are we to ensure that we do not labour in vain? How do we work to raise our children and let God build the house? The answer comes in knowing that the one who gives children as a reward is Himself a father. Our Father.

Jesus said,

John 5

¹⁹So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.

In everything we work at, labour for, we are only to do what we see the Father doing. We must do away with our own ideas of what seems to be the right course of action, and seek only Him. As parents, we must get on board with what God is doing, align ourselves in His will, and follow the model of God, our Father. We must then model this for our children, allowing them to see us be honest, fair, kind, loving, just, hardworking, holy, and obedient, willing to lay our lives down for our sons and daughters.

In all this, we must trust God and rest in the knowledge that it is He that builds the house.

An obedient generation will now raise up a generation of young people that silence the enemies and mockers of the Church not by force or might, but with lives of integrity and love.