

Unless the Lord Builds a House

Psalm 127:1 A Song of Ascents. Of Solomon. Unless the LORD builds the house, They labor in vain who build it; Unless the LORD guards the city, The watchman stays awake in vain. 2 It is vain for you to rise up early, To sit up late, To eat the bread of sorrows; For so He gives His beloved sleep.3 Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, The fruit of the womb is a reward. 4 Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, So are the children of one's youth. 5 Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them; They shall not be ashamed, But shall speak with their enemies in the gate.

The great English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge was once having a conversation with a man about family and child-rearing. The man said he did not believe in giving children any religious instruction whatsoever. He told Coleridge that a child's mind should not be prejudiced in any direction, but when the child was old enough, he should choose his religion for himself. Anything else would infringe on the child's liberties and rights.

Coleridge listened without saying anything, and after a while asked the visitor if he would like to see his garden. The man said he would. So Coleridge took him out into the garden. There the man saw the horrid site of nothing but weeds growing wildly. "Why, this is not a garden! There are only weeds here!" the man said in surprise. Coleridge answered, "Well, you see, I did not want to infringe upon the liberties of the garden in any way. I wanted the garden to be free to express itself, and to choose its own production."

Many people today are like Coleridge's visitor, who see the family as nothing more than the place where we feed and shelter and talk to our children, in hopes that they will become nice people with jobs and houses of their own. Families are mostly feeding troughs and emotional massage clinics. But as to ultimate purpose, as to values, as to truth, that apparently the child must discover for himself with no prejudicial input from the parents.

You couldn't have a more counter-biblical idea than that of parental neutrality when it comes to faith. In the Bible, the family is the incubator for faith. The family is the greenhouse in which love for God is to be sown, grown and cultivated. The family is where the Gospel is preached, where disciples are formed, where Christlikeness is nourished.

And the stark contrast between the family that keeps God out, and the family that puts God in the centre is taught here in Psalm 127. The author is Solomon, this is only one of two psalms we know he wrote, the other is Psalm 72.

In Proverbs, Solomon's approach is so often to show us the two ways: two opposite ways of life, one of which leads to life and blessing, the other which leads to destruction and pain. The way of the sluggard and the way of the diligent, the way of the liar, and the way of the true witness, the way of the fool and the way of the wise man. Solomon always puts these two side by side to show us their contrasting ways, and their contrasting results. That's what he does here in Psalm 127. He aims to show us two approaches to family – the godless family, and the godly family, the family built with indifference to God, and the family built in dependence upon God. Solomon is going to show us the way and the fruit of building your family upon God, and the way and the fruit of building your family apart from God.

I. The Futility of the Godless Family

Psalm 127:1 A Song of Ascents. Of Solomon. Unless the LORD builds the house, They labor in vain who build it; Unless the LORD guards the city, The watchman stays awake in vain. 2 It is vain for you to rise up early, To sit up late, To eat the bread of sorrows; For so He gives His beloved sleep.

Solomon begins with two pictures: construction and protection. He imagines a building being constructed, the workers putting brick upon brick, walls going up, windows, roof.

He also then imagines soldiers and guards at night patrolling on top of those walls, looking out for enemies, walking through the streets in the dark, patrolling, looking for questionable characters or suspicious activity within the walls of the city.

Solomon takes these two images and says without God, both of these projects are doomed. The word *vain* used in verse 1 and 2 – vain to build without God, vain to guard without God, vain to rise up early, sit up late, and eat the bread of sorrows, means futile. It means to do something without a result, to work and labour and have it come to nothing. To build only to see it collapse, to reinforce and see it pushed over.

Construction is doomed unless the Lord builds. Every building project depends upon the weather, upon the laws of gravity and physics and mathematics remaining constant. A building project needs the stability of the Earth's crust, absence of hurricanes. Besides that, humanly speaking, unless God allows the human builders to make progress, it's not going up. Just ask the builders of the tower of Babel. The Lord Himself must be the builder, and the workers must work in dependence upon Him, Protection is doomed unless the Lord protects. No human guard can be in all places at all times, have eyes to see every threat, have ears to hear the most silent invader. Unless God, who sees all and knows all, directs the guard to the problem, alerts him, allows the intruders to expose themselves, the guard has no chance of protecting the city. The Lord Himself must be the Protector, and all the guards work in dependence upon Him.

And verse 2 tells us that it doesn't matter how early you rise, how late you go to bed, how hard you work, it still won't make the impossible happen.

Now these two pictures are meant to picture the family. A family is a construction project. A husband and a wife come together, and if God blesses them with children, they begin to build. You build a home. You build relationships of trust, honour, love. You build character. You build knowledge and skill. You build abilities. You build shared traditions. You build memories. A family is also a protection project. You protect from physical harm. You protect from evil influences. You protect from emotional trauma. You protect from abusive individuals. You protect because you want to conserve what you are building.

Apart from God at the centre of this project, it is empty. Unless God is building the family, the project will fail. Unless God is securing and protecting the family, it will be invaded and defeated.

The temptation is to do what verse 2 says it is futile to do. We might think that that's a nice, otherworldly spiritual idea, but in the end it is up to us. We will build and protect our families by the sheer intensity of our effort. We will work harder, get up earlier, go to bed later, and make it happen. We treat this like accounting – time equals money, put in more time, get more money, and use that money to build the family and protect the family.

Solomon says – that's vain. You can lose sleep, get up earlier, go to bed later, eat the bread of sorrows, bread by the sweat of your brow and through the tensions and pains and sorrows of work in this world, but it won't rescue the situation.

Solomon isn't ridiculing honest labour. He is saying that feverish, fretting, fanatical work, the attitude of the self-sufficient workaholic is not going change this.

Psa 33:16- No king is saved by the multitude of an army; A mighty man is not delivered by great strength.

Pro 21:31 The horse is prepared for the day of battle, But deliverance is of the LORD.

Someone says, Solomon, I disagree. I know plenty of people with happy families, who are by no means believers, by no means God-centred. They lived fairly happy lives, they bought a house, sent their kids to decent schools, went on decent holidays, the children had some issues, but ended up getting jobs and settling down. Millions of people have fairly stable families, they see the value of family, but they have no leanings towards God. All of us know nice people with nice families who spend their weekends miles away from church. Their homes have not collapsed, the people haven't been destroyed. And as much as that is true in our day, it was true in Solomon's day.

So when Solomon says godless family life is vain, his definition of vain must mean something other than money, health, education. He must mean that you can have enough money, educate your children, grow up and old together, and still be empty as far as God judges family life.

What is empty about a godless family?

- 1) If knowing and loving God is not the purpose of the family, it has no purpose except survival. If we don't live to know and love the beauty of God, our purpose is to simply pass our days with the trivialities of life – eat, work, sleep, have a few hobbies, friends, entertainments. We see a whole generation coming up in the world's most affluent countries, whose problems are at root – depression. They are chronically bored with life, frustrated, in despair over the futility of everything, trying to fill the gap with entertainment, drugs, cheap sex. You find these young people to be angry, and yet they are the richest, best-fed, best clothed, generation in human history. They are made in God's image, they sense the vacuum in their hearts, and they grow angrier each day as their families and schoolteachers give them hollow answers. Without God at the centre of a family, there are no deeper realities than the daily grind. In fact, the Bible tells us that the family is actually a picture, a role-play of the greatest realities of all. Husband and wife picture the love God has for His people. Father and mother are to show the care God has for His children. Brothers and sisters are to display the love between believers. Without that understanding, you are trying to build a 5000 piece puzzle without the picture on the box. You can't relate the pieces to the whole, because you don't know what the whole is, what the big picture is, what the main idea is. The family might be physically healthy, but it is futile.
- 2) If God is not the God in your family, then your family itself becomes a god. You see the parents who live for their children, they live for children that excel, or a for a luxurious home, or for plenty of photo albums and home movies of happy times. You see the man in love with his own surname, and determined to have his family make a mark, or leave a legacy. Every false god will do three things to you. It will disappoint, it will depart, it will divide. The god of family disappoints. That marriage made in Heaven seems very earthly after a few years. Those children you poured everything into become spiteful and rebellious. The marriage sours, the children don't excel, tragedy or disease strikes the home. False gods also depart. Cling to it as you might, family changes. You cannot pickle family love and open it up at any time. And the man or woman who has made a god out of family feels wounded and even betrayed when the children grow up and leave the house, when disease strikes, when old age breaks the silver cord. False gods divide. Find a home torn apart by jealousy, bitterness, strife, and I will show you a home where those people began expecting father, mother, son, daughter, brother sister, husband, wife to be something that only God can be. And out of those idolatrous desires comes anger, demands, punishment and pain. Without God, the disappointment and division of family comes to ruin what it is supposed to cultivate.

- 3) Without God at the centre, our children become fools. A fool is someone who does not see life from God's point of view. Solomon actually tells us that foolishness is native in a child.

Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; The rod of correction will drive it far from him. (Pro 22:15)

The rod and rebuke give wisdom, But a child left to himself brings shame to his mother. (Pro 29:15)

Later, Solomon describes the pain of having raised someone who does not see life from God's point of view.

A foolish son is a grief to his father, And bitterness to her who bore him. (Pro 17:25)

A foolish son is the ruin of his father... (Pro 19:13)

He who begets a scoffer does so to his sorrow, And the father of a fool has no joy. (Pro 17:21)

Pro 23:24 *The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice, And he who begets a wise child will delight in him.*

The point is not judging a family from man's point of view: did you have enough money, a decent house, cars, gadgets, holidays, education? It's looking at it from God's point of view: did your family pursue God? Did your family enjoy family life, not as a god, but unto God, because of God? Did your family shape one another to think God's thoughts after him? This is the measure of fulfillment, the measure of success from God's point of view.

To show us the richness of life like that, Solomon then turns his attention to the opposite way of doing family.

II. The Fruit of the Godly Family

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

As opposed to those who build without the Lord, and those who try to guard without the Lord, here we have something from the Lord. Children are a gift from the LORD. The word for heritage in the Hebrew means an inheritance, a possession received through inheritance. Children are a kind of wealth, a reward that comes to you. Here the focus is from straining and striving in your own strength, to submitting and receiving. Because children are the ultimate example of something which God gives. Conception and life is not something you can engineer. You can be a part of it, but God is the one who gives the life. Children should be the ultimate statement to the proud heart: you could not make this on your own.

The godly family is the opposite of self-sufficient, self-congratulatory, self-made. The godly family walks in humble dependence upon God. In fact, the very next Psalm describes it.

Blessed is every one who fears the LORD, Who walks in His ways. 2 When you eat the labor of your hands, You shall be happy, and it shall be well with you. 3 Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine In the very heart of your house, Your children like olive plants All around your table. 4 Behold, thus shall the man be blessed Who fears the LORD. (Psa 128:1-4)

The picture is one of blessing and enjoyment upon the head of the man who did not get this merely by hard work, but got it in a life of faith and trust in His God and Saviour. It's a life of rest as well:

For so He gives His beloved sleep.

It is a life where God is the man's most prominent reality, so it is built into his life. Look at 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, with all your soul, and with all your strength. 6 "And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. 7 "You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. 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. (Deu 6:4-9)

Notice the logic. Since God is unique, He deserves your ultimate love. No one should be loved like God, because there is only one God. And once you have internalised that, God says, saturate your home with this knowledge. Teach it to your children. Let the theme of loving God be present when you are eating, playing, reading, fixing, or resting. When you travel, let it be with you. In the rhythms of your life, God should be at the centre. God should be as prominent in your home as if you had written a note on your hand, or put something in the very centre of your vision, or stuck something on that part of your house that you pass all the time.

The idea is, the godly home is God-centred, God-saturated. His Word is taught. His nature is caught by example. His Word is repetitively taught, it is visible, it is prominent, it is obvious.

The way to raise a hypocrite or an angry young person who rejects the faith, is to live all of the week with God as almost invisible, peripheral, weightless, and then suddenly on Sunday, go to a place and praise God and use God-vocabulary, and smile piously. That little mind will reason like this: God was invisible in our home for six days this week, suddenly you are acting like He is the most important thing in your life? Who are you kidding, Dad? Why are you acting like this, Mom? If God is really important to you, the first people who will know it are your children.

That's really why verses 3 to 5 are about children. Because children are in so many ways the product and result of our homes. Children are a reward, a precious gift that God gives. And the godly family sees them that way.

This doesn't mean only godly people have children. It doesn't mean when you have children, you have been God-centred, or that if you don't you have failed to be God-centred. It is simply stating that children are a reward and an inheritance from God that God graciously gives to the just and unjust. But the godly family sees children as a great gift.

What a sad place our brutal culture has come to where children are a distraction to my personal happiness. Children are an interruption to my plans to have a career, travel the world, do what I want. Children a nuisance and an annoyance. And so the culture has now come to the place of refusing to have children, or exterminating the ones God gives before they are born.

Yes, children may be unexpected. Yes, they may be unasked-for. Yes, they may be unplanned-for. Yes, but for the godly, they should never be unwelcome. For they are a gift, a windfall that God gives you.

And then the image changes from monetary to military.

4 Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, So are the children of one's youth. 5 Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them; They shall not be ashamed, But shall speak with their enemies in the gate.

Solomon pictures children as weapons. They are arrows to be shot by a warrior. What does a warrior do with arrows? He fires them at the enemy. They hit their mark, they bring down the enemy, they win victories.

The fruit of a godly family is children who are launched from the home, at the appropriate time, and

go into the world and do great things for God.

This is a really well-chosen image. The parent is the bow, and the children are arrows. Arrows are dependent on the bow, but also independent. Your children come from you, but then, as arrows, they leave you. Remember, you shoot arrows, not boomerangs. If your arrow comes back to you, it is not an arrow. Yes, God is very clear that a man is to leave father and mother, and cleave to his wife and they will be one flesh. I can tell you that the reason many marriages struggle is that one or both of the spouses have not left home, emotionally, financially, or sometimes even physically. You can't cleave unless you leave. And sometimes the fault is the parents who would like their children to cleave to another so long as they don't really leave the home. That is not the idea.

The goal of the godly family is to spend a lifetime carving and shaping them. You teach them the gospel, you fill their lives with love, with discipline, with Scripture. You walk with them through all their successes and failures. But then there comes a time when you shoot them out, you release them to fly on their own, maybe at the wedding altar, maybe when he gets his first self-sustaining job, maybe when she goes off to study. You string them to your bow, and if you have raised them in the Lord, they will fly clear and straight.

In archery you can quickly tell the difference between a good arrow and an inferior one. String two different quality arrows in exactly the same way, draw and release in exactly the same way, and those arrows will fly very differently.

How do you know they have flown straight? Verse 5 tells you. They shall not be ashamed – they shall speak with the enemy in the gate. The gate was the place where ancient cities held their court cases, settled disputes, did legal transactions. Children who embrace Christ, and follow Him will have no shame about their life or their faith. They can boldly face not only their friends, but their enemies – and defend the true, the good, the beautiful. They won't be mere parrots of other people, echo chambers for other voices. They will have owned the faith for themselves and be able to speak for themselves. And when they do that, be sure they will be passing it down to their children.

Scripture says happy is the man whose quiver is full of them.

When God brings two believers together, He does not intend for them to let those children grow up as self-directed weeds. He means for them to let their home centre on the Gospel, centre on knowing and loving God, and cultivate those plants to grow up straight into the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, shape those straight shoots into elegant arrows, and fire them into the very heart of the Enemy.