

## Psalm 127

### I. REVIEW: THE SONGS OF ASCENTS

- A. Throughout history, the people of God have always sought to understand their lives and their situations within a Biblical framework. Because of this, we have always sought to “find ourselves” in the stories of the Scripture and the movements of God’s redemptive purposes revealed within them.
- B. Christians have always sought to understand their lives and their situations within a Biblical framework and employing Biblical categories. Paul tells the Corinthian church to understand and apply the Scriptures of the Old Testament in this way — highlighting that these were given as *examples* for us.

<sup>1</sup>For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, <sup>2</sup>and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, <sup>3</sup>and all ate the same spiritual food, <sup>4</sup>and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. <sup>5</sup>Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. <sup>6</sup>Now these things took place as examples for us... (1 Cor 10.1-6)

- C. Because of this, there is a necessary and important element of the life of the church (particularly in seasonal moments) to seek to understand what God is doing in light of Scriptural patterns, Scriptural stories, and Scriptural practices.
- D. The Scriptures are intended to interpret, give shape to, and inform our lives. Engagement with the Scriptures is not simply about studying (to understand), memorization (to know/recall), or even about learning doctrine (what we are to believe). One essential aspect of engagement with the Scripture is seeking to let the Scriptures inform the way we *see the world* (God, ourselves, others, our situations, etc.) in order to shape our affections and desires, which in turn shapes our virtuous participation in God’s world.
- E. **Songs of Ascents:** These 15 Psalms (Pss 120-134) were designed as a “hymnbook” for God’s people on their pilgrimage toward the city of God. In the OT, God’s people were commanded to come up to Jerusalem three times a year (at the three major feasts) to offer worship to his name. These psalms were designed with a specific “narrative arc” that allowed the children of Israel to remember the journey of being called up to the place where his glory dwelt. Singing these songs fulfilled several functions in the life of God’s people:
  - 1. These songs reawakened a belief in God’s active provision and protection of his people.
  - 2. These songs rekindled a longing for God’s presence among God’s people.
  - 3. These songs reoriented one’s life around God’s purposes.
  - 4. These songs reactivated faithful participation around God’s calling for his people.

### II. THE CALL TO BUILD

- A. The heart of Psalm 127 is a portrait of **work** in the kingdom of God and under the reign of the Most High.
- B. Many believers have a difficult relationship toward work. This is because work throughout the Scripture is presented as a **paradox** of two realities that must be held in tension. Often times, believers struggle to hold these in tension together, and fall into distorted ways of viewing work in the economy of God.
- C. From the beginnings of the Biblical narrative, we see that mankind was created with a distinct mandate to work. God created the whole of the cosmos to be filled with his glory, and after himself working for six days to bring order and distinction in his creation he created man and woman in his image.

<sup>2</sup>And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done (Gen 2.2)

D. The creation account gives a portrait of *two distinct roles* that humanity is to fulfill in relationship to God.

<sup>26</sup>Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion... <sup>27</sup>So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. <sup>28</sup>And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion..." (Gen 1.26-28)

1. Man and woman are created to *live in relationship* with God and be conformed into his likeness. To be made in the image of God means that humans have the faculties necessary to participate in "like-kind" communion with the eternal and uncreated God.
2. Man and woman are created to *work in partnership with God* in expanding the boundaries of his Garden-Temple to the ends of the created order. To be created in the image of God also means that humans are invited into playing a meaningful and vital part in his realizing and accomplishing his purposes in the world.

<sup>15</sup>The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it (Gen 2.15)

E. However, sin has distorted and brought intrinsic difficulty and futility to the work that mankind is called to do. Because of their sin, the man and woman are cursed precisely in the places where they are called to operate in partnering with God's purposes to fill the earth with his glory.

<sup>17</sup>And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; <sup>18</sup>thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. <sup>19</sup>By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return." (Gen 3.17-19)

F. We now live in the times where we have a troubled and tenuous relationship with work because of the fall and the curse that has been placed upon the earth.

G. Living in this state often leads us toward one of two wrong mind-sets related toward work:

1. **Apathy** — many Christians (unbelievers as well) take a false view of work based on either the difficulty of work or the misapplication of the concept of needing God's intervention. Misunderstanding both of these elements can lead toward a passive orientation in our work that is marked by lethargy and apathy.
2. **Control** —the second distortion related to work is one that takes the whole burden for the outcome of our labors (our provision, our safety, our well-being) into our own hands. This overemphasizes work and is bogged down with an anxious and toiling spirit.

H. Yet we see implicit within this Psalm is the call to work. From the opening verse we are put face to face with a tension. First, we see that God must intervene. However, we also see that we are called to work.

### III. THE NECESSITY OF GOD'S INTERVENTION (PS 127.1-2)

<sup>1</sup>Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stays awake in vain. (Ps 127.1)

- A. The Psalm immediately brings us into the heart of the paradox related to work. Solomon declares that if God does not ultimately intervene through his power and his presence, the labors of our hands are done in vain.
- B. Solomon uses two pictures to present the same idea. These two pictures are intended to strike us with the reality of our need for God to intervene in the natural courses of our lives.
- C. The first picture is of builders giving their strength to build and fashion a house. Within the overall structure of these Psalms, it is likely this idea of building a house has multiple meanings.

1. The idea of builders at work building a house in the time of Solomon would have naturally referred to the **construction of the Temple**. Solomon had been given the charge by his father David to build God's house. This task required an unprecedented expense of resources (financial, material, labor) and significant administration — taking seven years to complete. Solomon intimately understood all of the energy and effort that went into building the house of God. Yet, he also understood that unless God was at work in and through their labors, it would all be in vain.
  2. We also see within this Psalm (and elsewhere in the Scripture) God at work to build the house of individuals — namely, through constructing a **family legacy**. Later in the Psalm, Solomon highlights the heritage of children, leading us to see that there is a second idea of house building at work in this Psalm.
- D. The second picture is that of watchmen waiting through the night in order to protect the walls of a city. Solomon says that the most alert and able watchmen cannot in their own strength watch the walls of the city, unless God himself is providing a protective covering for them.
- E. In both of these pictures, Solomon demonstrates that there is an essential interplay between God's activity and our labors (e.g., farmer at work).
- F. Elsewhere in Scripture, we see that God meets his people *precisely* in the place where he calls them to actively set out to work in partnership with his purposes.

<sup>7</sup>Thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways. <sup>8</sup>Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the Lord. (Hag 1.7-8)

<sup>4</sup>Work, for I am with you, declares the Lord (Hag 2.4)

<sup>6</sup>Then he said to me, "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts. <sup>7</sup>Who are you O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain. And he shall bring forward the top stone amid shouts of 'Grace, grace to it!' (Zech 4.6-7)

- G. Solomon then goes on to demonstrate that it is not work that is the problem. Rather, it is anxiety induced work that cannot rest in the grace and sovereignty of God.

<sup>2</sup>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 (Ps 127.2)

- H. Jesus highlights that anxiety is a marker of distrust and orients our labors and efforts toward seeking the kingdom of God and his righteousness in our lives.

<sup>25</sup>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 it. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? <sup>26</sup>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? ...<sup>31</sup>Therefore do not be anxious... <sup>32</sup>For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. <sup>33</sup>But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (Matt 6.25-26, 31-33)

#### IV. THE GLORY OF A LEGACY (PS 127.3-5)

- A. Solomon turns from highlighting the necessity of God's intervening work to a portrait of a full life.

<sup>3</sup>Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. <sup>4</sup>Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. <sup>5</sup>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. (Ps 127.3-5)

- B. It may strike us as odd that in a discussion of the Lord's needed intervention in the work of his people that the closing of the Psalm is a portrait of fullness that surrounds the gift and heritage of children.

- C. It is important for us to recognize that in the wisdom literature of the Bible, the concept of  **blessing**  functions in a particular way. Although many of us are tempted to read it as a transactional promise — this concept in the wisdom literature of the OT (psalms, proverbs, etc.) is more like painting a picture of a full life in a manner that orients our desires and our labors toward aligning our hearts with God’s evaluations in order that we might live more in agreement with his ways.
- D. Toward this end, it is important to rightly assess what Solomon is saying as well as rightly understand what he is not saying.
1. He is declaring that  **children are a gift**  and therefore ought to be desired, received as a heritage, and should be treated as such.
  2. He is not saying that the ability/inability to have children is a sign of God’s favor/displeasure in the life of an individual. To interpret these verses in such a manner would be to misinterpret the purpose of these types of statements in the Bible. The Bible is filled with individuals who put their faith in God (demonstrated by walking in obedience to his ways) who did not experience in this life the fullness of what God promised for those who follow him (see Hebrews 11).
- E. It seems that Solomon uses this example of a full life for at least two reasons.
1. Raising children puts us face to face with the exact tension of work being laid out in verses 1-2.
  2. By painting a portrait of a full and satisfied life of a man with a quiver-full of children, Solomon is highlighting that the best (and most fulfilling) elements of work are those that are (a)  **outside of us**  (i.e., fighting selfishness and self-focused ambition) and (b)  **outlast us**  (seeds we plant that we may never see the fruition of).

## V. IMPLICATIONS

- A.  **The Lord has to work** : This Psalm brings us face to face with our own  **poverty of spirit** . As believers, we are called to give our time, energy, and efforts toward partnering with the grace of God in establishing and working with his kingdom in the world. The very things we are laboring to see we are unable to accomplish in our own strength. This is true  **personally**  (salvation, sanctification, etc.), in our  **families**  (see Ps. 128.3-4, flourishing of those around us, salvation, etc.), in our  **ministry**  (effectiveness, power), and in our  **vocations**  (God-oriented results — his kingdom come and will done).
- B.  **We have to work** : Christians are not exempt from work — even hard, exhausting, laborious work. We must reject the false implication that God has to show up and work that would lead us to passive engagement in the things before us. God has designed us to work, and to partner with him in accomplishing his purposes.

<sup>9</sup>Working together with him... (2 Cor 6.1)

<sup>10</sup>But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. (1 Cor 15.10)

- C.  **Anxious work and the reality of burn-out** : This passage invites us to reject all forms of working that are rooted in a self-reliant, anxious type of energy that puts ourselves in the place of holding what God alone can hold. There is an increase of people experiencing “burn-out” in our society — but we must understand that burn-out is not the result of working hard. Rather, it is the result of (1) doing the  **wrong things** ; or (2) doing the right things  **the wrong way** .
- D.  **Embracing the mundane, unseen, and small** : This Psalm also invites us to give our lives away in places that seem mundane, unseen, and small. The portrait of building a full and fruitful legacy invites us away from work that would “reward” us through accolades and praise from men — and give our lives away before the eyes of God to the things that matter for all eternity (cf. Matt 6).

## VI. BUILDING THE HOUSE: THIS FALL AT REDEEMER KANSAS CITY

- A. As the Lord has been at work in our church over the last season, I believe that he is calling us into a season of “*building the house*”. This is in line with the vision of what God has put in front of us to become and build a praying church that pursues his presence and his purposes for Kansas City.
- B. At the heart of every pursuit, allotment of resources, and ministry in the life of our church is the intentional and consistent commitment to pursue God’s presence as the *foundational reality* of our church’s life. This is not simply speaking of a theological reality, but of a desire to pursue the means that God has ordained to live in his glorious presence.
- C. For a season in the life of our church, I believe that pursuing our first value (*presence*), as well as the strategic elements necessary to building it, must take *primary place* of importance in what we talk about, how we train, what we “program” toward.
- D. To set out toward building this will require a clear framework (why are we doing this), a plan (what is expected), as well as a commitment to continue in the face of difficulty.
- E. This fall we are entering into a specific and focused season of putting our hands to the work that God has been inviting us toward. In this season, we will primarily be focusing our labors on “building” the culture of our church toward the values and vision that God is calling us toward. While doing this, we will be specifically asking the Lord himself to “build the house” that he desires in this place.
- F. What:
  1. **Building a House for God’s Name: Studies in 1 & 2 Chronicles**: Beginning this fall we will be preaching the books of Chronicles in the pulpit. We will be looking specifically at two primary themes. First, we will see that God’s people are designed to live under the rule of the rightful king and with rightly ordered worship of God — when they are, God’s blessing is upon them, and when they are not, they are left in disorder. Second, we will look specifically at the nature of building God’s house as a place for worship and prayer to be offered to him as a central and essential aspect of God’s people.
  2. **Wednesday night prayer**: We will continue and strengthen our Wednesday night prayer meetings as a first expression of a broader prayer ministry at Redeemer Kansas City. This includes casting vision, training/developing (worship leaders, people who grow in leading prayer, etc.), consistency, and developing a long-term “model” for prayer meetings at Redeemer.
  3. **“How We Worship”**: This 7-week class is an attempt to create momentum and unity along the lines of our worship culture at Redeemer. As we find ourselves at a fertile moment for rebuilding our identity as a church, it is essential to build toward a unified, clear, and compelling culture of worship and prayer together. At the heart of the church, we are seeking to build *must be* a vibrant culture of worship (music) and passionate pursuit of the face of God.
  4. **“Foundations”**: This 10-week class will flesh out how our values (presence, transformation, movement) are upheld and pursued within the life of our church.
  5. **Outreach**: As an essential element of our future ministry together, we are building several “small beginnings” contexts for larger efforts oriented toward evangelism and disciple-making. This will include: (1) all church events; (2) consistent evangelism groups; (3) training and development; and (4) city partnerships.
  6. **Builders**: We have established particular avenues for the men of our church to answer the call toward building the house in this season. This includes a monthly prayer gathering and quarterly men’s breakfast. Our desire is to build men who will build God’s house, godly families, and a godly legacy.