

Psalm 127 – The Folly of Leaving the Lord Out

Introduction

I have sometimes regretted that I didn't read much as a kid; but the few times I did check out a book from the school library, it was likely to be a title in the "Choose Your Own Adventure" series. Maybe you know the series from the 80s & 90s. It's a fascinating idea...the reader assumes the role of the main character, and every few pages he gets to make a decision about what comes next in the story. "You come to a fork in the road...If you take the left branch, turn to page 20. If you take the right branch, turn to page 61." This a compelling motivation to read a book. You get to choose! The story (apparently) goes just the way you want it to go...and if it doesn't, you get to go back and choose a different option. It is fun as a kids' book, but it's surely not the way life works. In later books the authors included loops that never ended and hidden endings that you couldn't access without cheating.

Turns out that "choose your own adventure" gives the impression of reader autonomy, but it's a trick. Just like every other book, readers are at the mercy of the author—and what the author has written.

Psalm 127 sees the deception of "choosing your own adventure" and reminds us to submit to the Lord in even the most basic categories of domestic life: building a house, providing security in the community, working to put food on the table, even growing a family,¹ even these are subject to God's involvement.

If anyone could promote the value of success and ambition beyond the home, it was Solomon—builder of a kingdom and a man of world renown. But what he speaks of here is not how to achieve worldwide success, but the blessings of God on something so simple as the family. When he writes here about a house and a city, it is best to take the Psalm at face value, rather than attempt to see some allegory from Solomon about something more "grand."² For at least two reasons:

First, Solomon speaks from experience in Psalm 127. He built two houses: one for the king, and one for the Lord. That project took 20 years to complete.³ So he was well acquainted with the demands of construction: design and planning, managing subcontractors, change orders and delays in construction, paying bills. Headaches and stress are easy to come by. As king, he was also involved in the security of the kingdom. Not only protecting Jerusalem proper, but Solomon expanded the kingdom more than any other king in Israel, so he was well acquainted with civic

¹ An "adventure" of sorts...

² Interpreters have taken strides in all different directions about what the Psalm "actually" means. J. Stephen Yuille, *Longing for Home: A Journey through the Psalms of Ascent* (Wapwallopen, Pennsylvania: Shepherd Press, 2015), 82, lists as many as nine off-target interpretations.

³ 2 Chronicles 8:1

demands like securing borders. And as the son of David, he was well aware of his responsibility to continue the royal line. Whether he recognized his responsibility as David's son, or considered God's provision through his own son, his words are as much personal testimony as instruction in wisdom. Second, Psalm 127 is congruent with Solomon's other works. Proverbs and Ecclesiastes address these same topics through the lenses of faith in the Lord. Here are comments on what wise living, according to faith, looks like.⁴ So Psalm 127 as a wisdom psalm functions like a proverb. We develop a principle then apply that principle to other similar situations. In that way, this psalm may be the most practical chapter in the whole Bible, not necessarily the most important, but practical. Who among us is NOT concerned with providing for and protecting a home? Who among us is outside the bounds of trusting the Lord for everything?

That is the principle. God's children have every reason to trust Him for success and blessing. The folly of leaving the Lord out of this ambition means trading restful faith for anxious autonomy, satisfaction for stress, a life of blessing for a life of fruitless ambition. But our generous Father has already determined to give good gifts to his children.

While Psalm 127 sounds a little different than the previous ones in the Psalms of Ascents, we are reflecting on the same theme. We look to the Lord because it is not man who solves his own problems, it is the Lord who grants our stability, keeps our life, secures our peace, provides our relief, guards us, surrounds us, and reverses our misfortunes.⁵ By the time we read Psalm 127, we think, OF COURSE! We are dependent on God's kind hand for every blessing. To operate under any other way of thinking is to follow the course of a hamster on a wheel—always running but never arriving.

Here we are reminded of the way God works⁶, but more importantly to **trust** the way God works. And by submitting to God's providential care, His faithful ones recognize their Father's blessing. In v. 1-2, we'll see the wisdom in trusting the Lord for *success*; in v. 3-5 the wisdom of trusting the Lord for *blessing*. May we recognize not only the hope of **future** blessing in Christ, but also the reality of God's **present** blessing in Christ.

Trust the Lord for Success (1-2)

I don't mean, write your own definition of success then wait for the Lord to work it out. That is precisely the opposite of what the Psalm is describing. That is the "choose your own adventure" approach, in fact it's more like the error of prosperity doctrine. V. 1-2 are explicit that the Lord determines success, "unless the Lord...unless the Lord..." but also imply that He defines success. His providence is concerned with both. If we pursue either the wrong things, or the right things apart from the Lord's designs, vanity is the result of our activity. Each of you pursue many good

⁴ Along with 128, there are 2 wisdom psalms in the Psalms of Ascents.

⁵ Psalm 120-126 respectively

⁶ Which we call *providence*.

and right and worthwhile endeavors that are not in God's design for me to strive after, and vice versa. In the end those kinds of pursuits will prove vain.

We are not surprised that Solomon is the author with his frequent use of the phrase "in vain," which he applies to three activities in v. 1-2. But notice to which actions the phrase "in vain" is attached. There is a "building" of the house, but the "laboring" may be in vain. There is a "watching over" the city, but the "staying awake" may be in vain. There is an "eating of bread", but the "rising up early and going late to rest" may be a vain action.

The second portion of each line describes the difficulty of work. The strain which we bear up under to produce fruit in a world weighed down by the curse.

That strain is not wrong, in fact hard work is commendable! The builders do a fine work and the watchman do a fine work. Yet, it is vain when the investment of hard labor and sleeplessness is **without consideration** for the Lord.⁷

"To say the Lord builds [and the Lord watches] must be a theological interpretation of the work."⁸ God is not another tradesman on the crew, or a watchman in the tower. God uses means to accomplish his work.⁹ If you have ever had work done on your house, you know this style of communication. When you say you remodeled your kitchen...do you really mean that? Some of you would literally mean that, but usually, the idea is that you sponsored, planned, directed, enabled, even blessed (but surely paid for) that kind of activity. But likely some skilled tradespeople laid their hands on the work.

The idea is similar here. The Lord accomplishes through the means of man's labor. Laboring is not the problem here—v. 1 is not prescribing laziness instead of labor, not apathy instead of wise planning. On the contrary, v. 1-2 seem to presume an intensity to the effort. However, the intensity is not the primary concern. Neither is v. 2 promoting some specific length of a workday when it speaks of rising early and resting late. The number of hours is not the primary issue. We are thinking about the motivation and mentality behind the work. The issue is thinking that man's effort is sufficient without God's effort.

What does vain work look like?

It looks like man's effort without: dependence on the Lord; thankfulness to the Lord for the opportunity to work and for the results; obedience to his designs; humility toward the Lord's plans; concern for how to use the product for the purpose of the Lord; or a thought to the glory of God.

⁷ This point is explicit in v. 1, and implicit in v. 2. (Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. 3, Kregel Exegetical Library [Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2011], 682).

⁸ Ross, 3:681.

⁹ Theologians call this aspect of providence *concurrence* to say that God's work is bound up in the work of his creatures. So in Psalm 127, if God is building, He does so in and through the builders' work.

Why would one fail to consider the Lord?

Each of us might fall into this trap because of the lingering presence of sin. Since the fall, mankind has naturally left God out of his efforts.¹⁰ Man naturally works according to his own strength in everything.¹¹ Anxious toil began when Adam usurped God's command and went his own way.¹²

What is the effect?

Here's where the vanity comes in. Man's strength working alone is the greatest deception! An empty shell masquerading as lasting fruit.¹³ Intense labor doesn't indicate fruitful results. Jobsites and offices all over the world are filled with people who are very busy, but not producing much. Losing sweat or sleep over something: whether building a business or a trust fund; climbing a career ladder or climbing a mountain; writing books or collecting them¹⁴; making a sale or making dinner, raising crops or raising children; reconciling conflicts or bank accounts may only leave you sweaty and tired, without the product you intended.

Because in the end, the final product isn't up to you or me! We give it our best, then trust the Lord for it to succeed. It is vanity, empty deception, to imagine that our effort guarantees success; that is a burden that is more weighty than you can bear. You are too weak, too ignorant, too proud, too human. There is great relief here. Psalm 127 doesn't say, "unless you give it the best perfect effort, it is vain." But "unless the Lord". He determines success. You need not bear this burden.

Psalm 127 leaves open the possibility that your effort may give you exactly what you desired, with a generous bonus of anxiety to go alongside, because you aim in one direction, but God's providential plans are set in a different direction. Your anxiety makes the return on your investment not even close to worth your effort. The gain is nothing more than the "bread of anxious toil."

The question here is how do we apply ourselves to be sure our work, our ambitions, our plans, our hopes & intentions line up with the Lord?? Is there a way for people who are eager for obedience and holiness to demonstrate reliance on the Lord? When I return to this question, oftentimes some form of prayer turns up as a solution.¹⁵ But even more foundational than that,

¹⁰ Stephen Charnock and William Symington, *The Existence and Attributes of God: Two Volumes in One* (Grand Rapid, MI: Baker Books, 2000). Charnock equates leaving God out with a denial of God's existence (1:90) and a mockery of God's goodness (2:319).

¹¹ Jeremiah 17:5 – Thus says the Lord: "Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD"

¹² In the original, "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread," in Genesis 3:19 is nearly word for word equal to Psalm 127:2, "eat the bread of anxious toil"

¹³ "Vain" in Psalm 127 is a different word than "vanity" in Ecclesiastes. Alec Motyer, *Journey: Psalms for Pilgrim People* (InterVarsity Press, 2009) describes the difference as when the vanity is recognized. In Ecclesiastes, the vanity is recognizable in the present. In Psalm 127, the endeavor proves to be empty and fruitless sometime in the future.

¹⁴ Theology books included!

¹⁵ Proverbs 16:3; Isaiah 55:6; Matthew 18:19; Luke 11:9-13; John 15:7; Philippians 4:6; James 1:5; 1 John 5:14-15

because even possibly prayer could become an anxious toil, Psalm 127 is urging us to live life in a spirit of trust. Of being content with God's providential work. Not always striving in opposition to how the Lord works out your life, but trusting his providence. Where has God placed you and how can you serve Him there? What has He given you in terms of resources, skills, time, etc. and how can you use it to glorify Him?

This kind of trust is demonstrated by taking advantage of the gift He has already provided: sleep! Extending the day, striving in anxious work apart from trusting the Lord is vanity, because He gives to his beloved, sleep. He has not planned for you to engage in a lifelong struggle of anxious toil, but for you to work, to glorify God, then with heart and mind at peace, to both lie down and sleep. And in the Lord, sleep can be sweet, because the Lord is trustworthy.

If sleep seems like a small blessing to you, you must be still young, but give it time, and you will come to appreciate the gift of sleep. Notice again the contrast the psalm makes: **without** the Lord—**anxious toil**. **From** the Lord—**sleep**. Even now, God has provided a remedy beyond the toil which exists under the curse. So we lie down and are refreshed with sleep and avoid anxiety. And some of you might say, "Yeah right...it's not that easy." I can sympathize with you. I have had seasons of 3am wakefulness, anxious about the coming day and how I was going to "fix it."¹⁶ Reminding myself at 3am that God provides sleep to his beloved has sometimes resulted more in doubting my status as "beloved" rather than put me back to sleep.

If you can sympathize with *me*, let me point out another detail of v. 2. NASB translates "he gives to his beloved **in his** sleep," which changes the perspective slightly. The idea is that not only do the final results belong to the Lord, but the work in the meantime is borne most heavily by the Lord. We get a break, and go to sleep, but our benefactor neither slumbers nor sleeps.¹⁷

Jesus spoke of this same principle with reference to the kingdom in Mark 4:26–27 "And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how." Every night you go to sleep—you get a break, even if very brief. But the Lord keeps working. How much has he accomplished while you slept? Surely much more than you know.

All those pithy phrases we use: (1) I'll sleep on it. (Meanwhile some epiphany comes with the morning.) (2) Give it time. The matter will take care of itself. Those aren't coincidence expressions, those are just substitutions for the fact that God will take care of things while you go take a nap.

Ed Welch¹⁸ points out that anxiety and worry is the fruit of: (1) looking for control, (2) thinking you are the only one who can resolve a matter (3) fear of the consequences of the matter not getting resolved. If you sometimes see the clock at 3am, remind yourself of Psalm 127 truths:

¹⁶ Or not...

¹⁷ Psalm 121:4

¹⁸ Edward T. Welch, *Running Scared: Fear, Worry, and the God of Rest* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2007), 49–54.

Ultimately, success depends on God, He takes care of more while you sleep than you do while awake, and He is all-wise in his work. So this anxious toil in v. 2, as the product of not considering the Lord, is more of a characteristic of those who do **not** know the Lord, than those who do.

But brothers and sisters, we **do** know the Lord! Or more importantly, the Lord knows us. Solomon writes these things to the one known and loved by God. When Solomon uses that term “beloved” in v. 2, he is giving another personal testimony. At his birth, Solomon was also called Jedidiah—“beloved of the Lord.”¹⁹ He testifies that God grants restful sleep to his children, because Solomon himself has received it. When I say “beloved,” maybe you’re also thinking about Jesus, who at his baptism likewise bore the name Beloved from the Father.

In his death, this beloved Son of God bore our enmity with God, reconciling us to the Father—imputing to us his status with God. So now, for all those who are in Christ, we too are beloved of the Lord. So Psalm 127 is speaking about redemption realities for us, that the effects of the curse have been reversed for us—we don’t see the final conclusion yet, but we get a glimpse of it every night when we go to sleep. We are no longer bound to a vain life marked by anxiety or worry, but we own a life under the blessing of God! So, work hard and go to sleep, trusting the Lord for success.

Trust the Lord for Blessing

V. 3 begins, “Behold.” That word gets our attention. As if to say “Look here!” Here is the answer...Behold: children. Actually, the original reverses the nouns. “Behold the inheritance of the Lord: children”. Children are an inheritance better than a physical building. Children are the inheritance better than the relief of security. Children are the inheritance that is better than the produce of long hours at work. All of which are necessary and good, but only temporary. Children are an inheritance more lasting.

Just by way of their birth, they prove to be a means for their parents good. Bavinck said “children are the glory of marriage, the treasure of parents, the wealth of family life. They develop within their parents an entire cluster of virtues, such as paternal love and motherly affection, devotion and self-denial, care for the future, involvement in society, and the art of nurturing.”²⁰

As parents steward well this inheritance, and as the Lord works, those children, as God’s means for future well-being, are more effective than a hefty IRA or a stable government program. They are God’s means for you to have the greatest impact on the future. You may get a plaque on a wall, have your name inscribed on a building, or have a medical procedure named after

¹⁹ 2 Samuel 12:24-25

²⁰ Herman Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, ed. Stephen J. Grabill, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids, Mich: Christian’s Library Press, 2012), 96.

you, but children prove to extend your faith and your legacy far beyond those temporary rewards. Children are the link to future generations. This spiritual heritage far outweighs the fruit of all other ambition.

V. 3-5 are loaded with cultural references that need clarity. Here is where the figurative language comes in. When Solomon says “like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one’s youth,” he is indicating that children are a means of strength and stability to their parents, more effective than a guard tower. And that if they are shaped early in the father’s life, then they prove to be a useful strength for many more years than if they are born when the parents are middle-aged. Timing was more significant in ancient Israel than it is today. Our society requires a measure of wisdom to prepare to care for a family before beginning that family. But we could probably reduce that plan a bit. Parenting children may not require quite as much “establishment” as some think.

V. 5 says “Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them!” But like v.2 there is no clear number here, no description of how much is full. We are unwise to say that means “as many as we can get.” If we are drawing out the analogy, certainly the size of the quiver is an important consideration also. The point is that wisdom values children as God’s means of strength and stability. Rather than seeing them as a distraction and hindrance, they are valued resources in the family. Whether 2 or 4 or 8 is not the question, but, like v. 1-2, how do you *think* about the children God has given you?

These arrows are the means of confidence “in the gate” in v. 5. Like a visible sign of strength for the father bearing them. Not like the man in the gas station last week, who brought his complaint to the manager, flaunting his pistol on his side. I presume he thought it would make his arguments more persuasive. I didn’t wait around to find out. No, the arrows in v. 5 are more like defense attorneys and evidence, not threatening per se, but proving righteousness, bearing witness and defending their parents in difficult situations. We don’t attend to “the gate” these days, but children do go to court or creditors or hospitals or insurance companies to care for both the physical and financial needs of their parents.

And parents who recognize this value will be careful to steward their inheritance well. Don’t overlook this implication. Psalm 127 doesn’t give instruction as to how that stewardship works out, but certainly implies that it is necessary. The other lesser options of a heritage require great effort on the human side (even as we trust the Lord for His part). Why should we think any differently about children? The wise will be sure to search the rest of Scripture and find plenty of help.

I recognize we have families in many different situations who may wonder how does Psalm 127’s words about children apply to me. Some of you have been hindered from having children.

- Of all people you understand what Psalm 127 means when it says children are from the Lord. You demonstrate the essence of what it means to depend on the Lord for your children.
- Might I recommend reading William Cowper’s Hymn, God Moves in a Mysterious Way?

- I can't answer why God's providence would place you where you are, but I can encourage you to think on what is true.
- I would point out that children aren't the only blessing from your heavenly Father. Don't let the absence of one overshadow the numerous others that sustain you.
- Where God may have limited your biological family, he has provided this spiritual family. What fellowship you might miss in your family, find with the church body.
- Just as God sometimes sees fit to withhold marriage from some singles for the sake of some other ministry, so he may withhold children for the sake of some other usefulness for you. Look for what opportunities you might glorify Him where you are. And pay attention for how He might show you a different kind of mercy in your bitter situation.

Some of you have children who turned out differently than you expected. Or your children do much more to cause anxiety for you than to be a blessing.

- Don't give up. "Unless the Lord..." is your mantra, too. Your perseverance in trusting the Lord is an encouragement and example to the rest of us.
- Look for ways the Lord is using your circumstances for your good and look for how you might affect others.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, God has authored a plan that is far better than anything else we might have chosen. This Author has not written in trick endings or frustrating loops, but He has written in His plan the perfect measure of care that looks out for our every need. His redemption ensures our blessing in the kingdom to come, but we need not wait for the future to recognize his blessing. He gives to his beloved...even now. Praise God for that mercy!