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Psalms 127-128 “Except the Lord Build the House”

Intro. In my series on the Christian family, we move now to a general message about the family. The family was established by God in the Old Testament, and I believe the Old Testament provides the foundational truths that we would do well to follow today. So today we look to Psalms 127 and 128, which focus on the Hebrew family. These Psalms are rightly placed together.

Do you want to have a blessed, happy life? Surely you do! Well these Psalms remind us of life’s basic values: a right relationship with our Creator, meaningful work to do, a happy marriage, and the blessing of children. These are the basic values that make for a blessed and happy life. Such values should be as cherished today as in the poet’s time.

So let first of all consider:

I. THE FOUNDATION OF A GOOD FAMILY

Any building should have a good, strong foundation. Otherwise, it will not stand the test of time. Psa. 128:5 says, “The LORD bless you out of Zion....” I believe God wants to bless you and your family. But you have to lay the right foundation in order to have a family that is blessed by God. First, you must:

A. Fear God – Psa. 128:1 says, “Blessed is every one who fears the LORD....” Then, after describing the family that fears the Lord and walks in His ways, he says in v.4, “Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD.” Twice in this Psalm we are encouraged to fear the Lord. To have a good family, each family member should have a healthy respect and reverence for God. Parents should demonstrate this respect or fear of the Lord in their life and in their words, and they should teach their children to respect God. They should be taught never to take God’s name in vain. They should be taught that God is holy, and just, and that sin has consequences. My friend, you can never have a blessed home until the fear of the Lord is in that home.

Do you and your children fear the Lord? Now if you fear the Lord, then you will lay the second foundation for a good home:

B. Follow the Ways of God – Psa. 128:1 also says, “Blessed is every one who ...walks in His ways.” This basically means to live in obedience to the Lord. Children know if their parents love the Lord, if they serve Him, if they obey Him, and if He is important in their lives. So I believe we should read God’s Word as a family, to discover His ways, and then walk in them, living in obedience to Him. You can go to all of the marriage and family conferences you want to, but you will never have a happy home until your relationship with God is right.

Do you and your children seek to follow God, and obey Him? Another foundation to a good home is to have:

C. Have Faith in God – This is implied in Psa. 127:1, which says, “Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it....” The word “vain” is used three times in vv.1-2. My friend, everything is vain unless God is in it. So we must look to the Lord, and trust in Him to bless

our families. You must wholly depend upon God, and look unto Him in prayer. This also means that your relationship to God should be a priority in your life, and in your home. Jesus said it this way, “But seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matt. 6:31). Put God first in your home. That’s what is most important. Everything else should be secondary. If you put God first, He will bless your home, and meet the needs of your family.

Now the Psalmist gives 3 examples or applications of this truth that we should trust God, and seek His blessings. To do otherwise is vain. For example:

1. It Is Vain to Build a Home without God – Again, Psa. 127:1 says, “Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it...” The “house” (*bayith*) in v.1 may refer to the physical structure of a home, a house. However, the word could refer to a family that lives within the house. It is a fact that *ben*, a son, and *bath*, a daughter, and *bayith*, a house, come from the same root, *banah*, to build, because sons and daughters build up a household as brick and timber constitute a building. So you can build up a family by having children, but it will be in vain if God is not invited to build the home, and be Lord of the home. And unless you commit your home to God, and trust in Him, you can build a nice house, but money can’t buy a home and a family that endures.

There are countless couples in our country today who are building a family without God. They either do not get married at all, or do not seek God’s blessing on their marriage through the counsel and blessing of a minister of the Gospel. When they have children they do not dedicate them to the Lord; they do not bring them to church; and they do not teach them the ways of the Lord. As the Scripture says, it is all vain to build a house that way.

By the way, this is equally true of every church. Unless the Lord builds it, and is honored by it, the whole structure must sooner or later fall in hopeless ruin. Even so, we need God’s help and blessing to build our new building. I trust the He has been with us in the design of this new building. It will meet the needs of several different ministries. Now, we are on the verge of beginning construction. Pray that He will send us the right subcontractors. Pray that Chesterfield County will be fair with us. Furthermore, He has great resources. He can enable us to give to pay for this new building in just a few years. So let us look to Him, trust in Him, and obey Him. Men desiring to build know that they must labor, and accordingly they put forth all their skill and strength; but let them remember that if the Lord is not with them their designs will prove failures. Do you remember the story of the builders of Babel? They said, “Go to, let us build us a city and a tower.” In vain they toiled, for the Lord’s face was against them. Let us not make the same mistake.

2. It Is Vain to Guard Your City or House without God - V.1 also says, “Unless the LORD guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.” In biblical society it was common to have walled cities with watchtowers. The city would employ guards to look for the approach of an attacking army, to warn of an impending attack. But without looking to the Lord for protection, all such attempts would be futile. When Israel turned from God, the Assyrians and Babylonians were able to overwhelm them, and defeat them, in spite of all their efforts to defend their cities.

Do you take measures to protect your house and family from danger? You probably lock your windows and doors. But even if we set guards over our home, and they stay awake through the night, and do their duty, still the place may be surprised if God be not there. Fires may break out in spite of the watchmen; a tornado may sweep over it; or sickness may suddenly come into it. Take measures to protect your home and family, but the best thing you can do is trust in the Lord for His protection. He is better than an army of sleepless guards.

Even so, you may warn your children of the dangers of drugs & alcohol, and the many other earthly dangers that they face, but if you do not trust God for the protection of your family, your words and effort will be in vain.

3. It Is Vain to Work Hard without God – Do you try to provide for your family, and obtain nice things for your family? Well the Psalmist says in v.2, “It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows...” This could expand on the previous reference to setting guards around the city, who stay awake late at night, or who rise early to watch for dangers. It is vain to lose sleep in such a way if you are not trusting in the Lord for protection. However, the reference to “the bread of sorrows” leads me to believe that he is talking about wearisome effort & hard work that is expended to obtain bread. In fact, the word translated “sorrows” (*‘etseb*) is used in association with employment half of the time the word is used. Even so, some work long hours, denying themselves needful rest. They work 2 jobs, or work 60 hours/week on the 1 job they have. They threaten to bring themselves into the sleep of an early death by the neglect of sleep which refreshes life. Working to the exclusion of rest or to the neglect of family may be a cover-up for an unwillingness to trust God to provide. Too many have no faith in God, and instead hoard up money as their only trust. So here we see yet again that human effort which lacks the Lord’s blessing comes to nothing. It is all vain. Hard work and anxious toil alone will not get the job done. You and your wife can work three jobs, and acquire a nice house and many nice things, but what will it all be worth to you 50 years from now if you do not create a lasting and good family structure? What good is material wealth if in the end you do not have a loving family to enjoy it? What is required is a combination of human effort and divine blessing: work as though all depends on us, and pray as if all depends on God.

A hard working man heard an interesting conversation his two year old daughter had with his wife. They were discussing geography and the mother asked, “Where does mommy live?” “Minneapolis,” answered the child. “Where does grandma live?” “Baltimore,” said the little girl.” “Where does grandpa live?” She dutifully answered, “Baltimore.” Finally the question came, “And where does daddy live?” “At work,” said the girl. Do you suppose the man spent more time at home after that?¹

So we have seen that the foundation to a good family is to fear God, follow God, and put your faith in God. Once you lay that foundation, then you are ready to build up your home. So let’s see next of all:

II. THE CHILDREN OF A GOOD FAMILY

I have already pointed out that we build a home and family by having children. I believe it is generally God’s will that a married couple have children. Now if you are going to have children, it is helpful to have the proper attitude toward having children. More and more couples in our day choosing not to have children. Or they limit themselves to 1 or 2 children. Often, it is because they have a wrong attitude toward children. Notice what this Psalm teaches about children:

A. Children Should Be Viewed as a Blessing – Psa. 127:3 says, “Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward.” As we see here, the Lord gives children, not as a penalty or a burden, but as a favor. They are called a “heritage,” which literally refers to an inheritance or possession. God may not give you an inheritance of houses and lands, but if He gives you children, they have an inheritance that has more lasting value than earthly

¹ *Preaching*, May-June '05, p.72.

wealth. They are also called “a reward,” which refers to payment of money for one’s labor. Children are a lot of work, but the Lord will reward you for your labor through your children. They bring joy & laughter. Kids can say & do the funniest things. They can be so loving. Children are indeed a great blessing, though at times they are indeed a mixed blessing. They are a burden, but love bears the burden gladly.

And notice the description of children found in Psa. 128:3, “Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the very heart of your house, your children like olive plants all around your table.” The olive tree is an evergreen, a symbol of vitality. They can live hundreds of years. They have lasting value. Furthermore, olive trees were very important to the Israelites. They provided oil for light, and oil for baking. So comparing children to olive trees was one way to show how valuable they are to a family.

Children are also a blessing as we enter our senior years. Those who choose not to have children often regret it when they are old, when they have no family to care for them, and show an interest in them. So we dare not treat children as an inconvenience when God values them so highly.

Kids & young people, you really should bring joy and blessing to your parents. Are you a blessing to your parents? You should bring joy to your home. Show love & respect to your parents. Be obedient to your parents. Help out around the house. Fulfill God’s plan for the home and be a blessing! I can assure you, that if you bless your parents, both they and God will bless you. Ex. 20:12 says, “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you.”

B. Have Children While You Are Still Young – This is implied in v.4, which says, “Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one’s youth.” As we see here, youth is the time of life to have children. Grandparents certainly know how true that is! Yet many are waiting until they are in their mid to late 20’s to get married, and waiting until their 30’s to have children. Some wait through no choice of their own. But others choose to delay having children while they focus on their career and material prosperity. I do not believe that is morally wrong, but it is unwise. Physically, a woman is best suited to bear children in her late teens through mid to late 20’s. Furthermore, this modern trend to delay having children is creating a problem. It’s called the sandwich generation. If you delay having children, you will probably need to care for both parents and children at the same time. That can be a heavy burden indeed. Also, the longer you wait to have children, the less likely you will be able to have several children. Furthermore, it will be less likely that Psa. 128:6 will be fulfilled in your life, “Yes, may you see your children’s children.” If you wait until your 30’s to have children, and if your children wait until their 30’s, you will probably need to live to be at least 65 just to see your first grandchild, and you are less likely to have the joy of seeing them all born and grown up.

C. Consider Increasing the Blessing! Psa. 127:4-5 says, “Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one’s youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them....” A quiver is what you put your arrows in. A quiver probably holds at least 8-10 arrows, wouldn’t you agree? So the Psalmist is certainly commending the idea of a large family, and he says that the father of a large family is blessed, or happy. Those who have few children see them soon gone. They grow up so quickly. Then the house is empty & silent. As we get older we often wish we had more children, and we are more likely to agree that those who have several gracious children are upon the whole the happiest.

However, many believe that you will be happier with only one or two children. You think about the money you will save. You think about quickly getting past the days of changing diapers. Of course, a large number of children means a large number of trials; but when these are met by faith in the Lord, it also means much love, and a multitude of joys.

Many object to the idea of having more than two children based on the population explosion. If we are overcrowded we must remember that the Lord does not order us to remain in an overcrowded area. There are plenty of places left on this earth where man is not overcrowded, places waiting for hard work and development.

Others object by saying that they cannot afford more children. We need not doubt that if God gives us children as a reward, He will also send us the food and clothes which He knows they need. We can trust God to provide. He who gave them will feed them. Susan Morgan gave a testimony last Sunday night of how the Lord has provided for their 9 children. Besides, to have many children about us is better than to have much wealth about us.

A certain Christian preacher wrote of a great man coming into his house, and seeing all his children standing in the order of their age and stature, he said, "These are they that make rich men poor." But he immediately received this answer, "Nay, these are they that make a poor man rich." We know the worth of lifeless treasures, but who knows the worth of living treasures?

Next, I want to address another contemporary issue we are facing today regarding the subject of having children. Based on this Psalm, I say:

D. Give Your Children Direction & Moral Training – It is well that David calls children "arrows" in v.4. We know that sticks are not arrows by nature; they do not grow so, but they are *made* so. So children by nature are rugged and undisciplined, but by education & spiritual training & discipline, they are refined and reformed. Arrows also need to be aimed properly to do any good. Even so we need to aim our children in the right direction.

Now look at Psa. 128:3 and we will see another way we should influence our children. The Psalmist says, "Your children [will be] like olive plants all around your table." In this passage the husband, wife, and children gather about the table. We have lost the family meal in too many homes, and we are worse off because of it. We rush to this activity and that activity, and if we eat together, it is in the car after we get a drive-through meal. The family is better off if they eat together, play together, go places together, and certainly if they are involved in the things of the Lord together. When you are together as a family, look for opportunities to talk about the Lord. Talk about the difference between right and wrong.

III. THE BLESSINGS OF A GOOD FAMILY

I have challenged you concerning some of the right and wrong steps toward having a good, Christian family. Now why should you put God first in your home, and work to educate and develop your children spiritually? Why should you bear the burden of children? I have acknowledged that though children are a blessing, they are also a burden. They can be expensive to raise. They can add stress to your life. I don't know if I got most of my grey hair from being a pastor or from being a parent. Well even though children can be a burden, they can also be a great blessing. And there are indeed a number of blessings that God promises to those who follow His plan for the home. These include:

A. Peace & Good Sleep – Psa. 127:2 says, “It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows....” Don’t be among those who are working so hard to build a house on their own, without God’s help and blessing. So many parents work themselves to death so that their children can have better clothes, better sporting gear, better car, and a better education than their neighbor’s children. That’s giving in to the pride of life. But if you trust in the Lord, put Him first, and seek His blessings, notice what blessing he will grant you, “so He gives His beloved sleep.”

I believe there are two main truths from this verse:

1. We should have a quiet, peaceful sleep, without worry – The child of God should work, but if you trust God to provide, you will not need to overwork. Instead, you can have peaceful sleep. This peace is also implied in 128:2, “it shall be well with you.” Isaiah 26:3 says, “You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.” Through faith the Lord makes his chosen ones to rest in him in happy freedom from care. Laying aside of care, a forgetfulness of need, a quiet leaving of matters with God: this kind of sleep is better than riches and honor. Note how Jesus slept amid the hurly-burly of a storm at sea. He knew that He was in his Father’s hands, and therefore He was so quiet in spirit that the billows rocked him to sleep: it would be much oftener the same with us if we were more like *Him*. Thus Peter in prison when he was bound with chains, beset with soldiers, and to die the next day, yet see how fast he was found asleep (Acts 12:6, 7). Quiet sleep is the gift of God to his saints. To give sleep when the storm is raging; to give sleep when conscience is arraying a long catalogue of sins; to give sleep when death is approaching, oh! What gift could be more suitable? God gives quiet sleep as a token of His love. Prov. 3:24 says, “When you lie down, you will not be afraid; Yes, you will lie down and your sleep will be sweet.” Oh, what a blessing it is to have a good night’s sleep.

2. We should accept God’s provision of sleep - Some work too much and sleep too little in their pursuit of success without the help of God. But we should work enough and trust God to provide all that our family needs. And we should accept the limitations of effort that are set forth in nature. No man should work beyond his physical and intellectual ability, nor beyond the hours which nature allots. No net result of good comes of any artificial prolonging of the day at either end. Work while it is day. When the night comes, rest. There is a reason why it gets dark every day. God has designed darkness for sleep. You’re going against God’s order of things when you stay up all hours of the night, and sleep half of the day. Some of you are required to work at night. But for the rest of us, we should go to sleep by 10 or 11 at night, and get up with the sun.

B. Protection

1. From God – In Psa. 127:1 it says, “Unless the LORD guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.” The implication is that we should not rely upon human protection alone. We should rely also upon the Lord’s protection.

John Wesley was riding one day along a lonely stretch of road when he noticed shadowy forms ahead, forms that vanished behind a hedge almost as his eye took them in. He could not turn back; that was not his way, yet to go on meant danger and possibly death. There was no hope of human help on that deserted road, so John Wesley prayed. Almost at once he heard hoofbeats coming up behind him, and he turned in his saddle as another traveler rode up alongside. Wesley gave the newcomer a cheery greeting then silently the two spurred on down the path, on past the place where the robbers lay concealed. Seeing two men instead of one, the robbers let them pass. Wesley then turned to say something to his companion, only to discover that there was nobody there! The mysterious rider seemed to have vanished into thin air. John Wesley had received an unusual glimpse of his angel escort along the way.

2. From Your Grown Children – Look with me again at vv.4-5, “Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one’s youth. 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.” His sons will be his protection in court, which in that day was located at the city gate. He has as many witnesses in his behalf. His sons shall stand up in a just cause for him. Or this could refer to the gates of one’s home. If this is correct, it would refer to the protection many sons who provide against robbers and others who attack the home. Nobody cares to meddle with a man who can gather a clan of brave sons about him. And when you get old and weak and defenseless, your grown children should be there to care for you, and protect you from those who would take advantage of you.

C. Prosperity & Contentment – Psa. 128:2 says, “When you eat the labor of your hands, you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you.” You should enjoy the fruits of your labor, and the blessings of God upon your family.

D. Prolonged Life – Old age was considered a blessing and a sign of divine favor. So notice with me what v.6 says. Perhaps a priest pronounced the conclusion of this Psalm: “Yes, may you see your children’s children.” What a blessing grandchildren are. I’m looking forward to having grandchildren. You get to enjoy them for a few hours, or a day, or perhaps even a whole week during the summer, but then you get to send them home! And remember, you can’t have grandchildren unless you have children.

Conclusion: Don’t you want to have these blessings? Don’t you want to have a good family? Well I would like to call upon young couples to commit your home to God. I want to call upon parents with children at home to put God first in your home; to trust in Him. Don’t try to build a home and family on your own. It is vain to do that. You may want to commit your home to God at this prayer altar during this invitation. You will be glad you did. There may be some couples or families that need to make this your church home. You can’t have a Christian family without being involved in a church. Will you commit your family to the Lord?

Sources: Ronald A. Beers, ed., *Life Application Study Bible* (Tyndale House & Zondervan, 1991); Adam Clarke, *Adam Clarke’s Bible Commentary* (accessed from *Online Bible*), completed by 1832; Matthew Henry (on *Online Bible*); Alton H. McEachern, *Layman’s Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1981); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 2 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1982); G. Campbell Morgan, *Notes on the Psalms* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1947); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible [CD-ROM]* (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979 reprint); Fred M. Wood, *Psalms: Songs from Life* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1984). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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