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THE BLESSING AND RESPONSIBILITY OF CHILDREN

Psalm 127 & Ephesians 6:1-4

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Here's a familiar verse often seen in gift shops on coffee mugs and cross-stitch patterns and refrigerator magnets:

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Ps 127:1.

About ten years ago I spent a couple of weeks rising up early and going to bed late (Ps 127:2) building. Not an entire house, only some built-in cabinets for our daughters' bedroom. Before I secured the cabinets into the wall, the kids and I picked out some favorite Bible verses and wrote them on the backs of the cabinets, as a way of inscribing God's blessing on our house and their room. One of the verses was Ps 127:1: "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." Those "blessed" cabinets have gotten a lot of use since then.

The five verses of Ps 127 feature several familiar sayings that you might see in gift shop settings, e.g. "children are a heritage of the Lord" (v3) and the bit about a quiver of children (v5). What are we to do with these verses? Are they merely a handful of proverbs, or do they have a more coherent message when read together? Whenever we mine the Bible for platitudes, we're in danger of missing the meaning as originally intended. In this message I want to consider Ps 127 *in context*, and think about what it was supposed to mean before the days of coffee mugs and refrigerator magnets.

Ps 127 is one of fifteen Songs of Ascent found in Pss 120-134. The Songs of Ascent were a pilgrimage songbook for God's people to sing as they made their way to worship at the Jerusalem Temple. The songbook includes familiar songs like Ps 121 "I lift my eyes up" & Ps 126 "All those who go weeping will come back with songs of joy." The Songs of Ascent also include Ps 127 with its seemingly mundane focus on house-building, city-guarding and child-rearing. Kind of an odd song to include in a pilgrimage songbook, don't you think?

Building the Lord's House

Ps 127 is one of two psalms attributed to King Solomon. That this is Solomon's song gives us an important hint regarding the "house" being built in v1. It's not just any house. It's not even the king's palace (Solomon's house). It's the *Lord's* house, the temple itself, which was first built during Solomon's reign. Pilgrims singing Psalm 127 looked forward to seeing the Lord's house when they reached the end of their journey.

If Ps 127:1 is about building the temple, then is it kosher to inscribe this verse on cabinets and coffee mugs and refrigerator magnets? It all depends on what you understand this verse to mean.

One of the main points of this sermon series on relationships has been that marriage and family serve a larger purpose than self-fulfillment. Marriage and family are ultimately about building *that house*, the *Lord's house*.

The story of the Bible is the story of God's house. The story begins in the Lord's garden temple. Just as Donald Trump always displays an image of *himself* in all of his hotels and casinos, God displayed *his own* image in his temple. In the original garden temple, God placed a husband and wife to represent him as his field agents, or image bearers. Their work, through both multiplication and stewardship (Gen 1:27), was to build out the rest of God's house so that the whole earth might become a temple filled with images of him. This work was too much for Adam alone (Gen 2:18), so God made Eve to be a partner in building God's house.

At the conclusion of the Bible, the story ends imagining humanity's completed work. God's house is finished, and it's a city, longer, wider and taller than any city ever known. The Lord is present in that city temple, and so are countless men and women of every tribe and tongue, all image bearers for the Lord.

In between the beginning and the end, the Bible tells of how we rebelled against God, to build our own houses and families, cities and kingdoms apart from him, or even in opposition to him. God could have destroyed us, but instead he sent his Son to rescue us and restore us to him. Jesus made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, up to God's house, a faithful and perfect image-bearer of the Lord. But instead of welcoming him, the temple authorities put him to death. So God the Father raised Jesus to new life as the cornerstone of that great city envisioned at the end of the story.

Commit your life to Jesus and become a permanent member of God's house. Turn away from selfish ambitions of building your own house, and God will give you a place in the only house that will endure. He will make you a living stone in *that house*, *his house*, the house of God.

All Your Work Matters to God

God's plan to be fill the earth with his glory, populating it with his image-bearers, should not be understood solely as a call to evangelism. Not to say that sharing our faith isn't important—it is, and we ought to be doing a lot more of it. Evangelism, however, is only a small part of the work of building God's house.

God cares about *all* our work. He is the Creator. As those who are made in his image, we create because the Creator created us to create. Therefore, all our work matters to God—not merely our jobs, but all the work of our lives. We write and make and teach and do as his field agents,

building his house, so that someday the earth will be completely filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the seas. Both marriage and family were instituted by God to facilitate this work.

The Blessing of Children

God's plan to build his house is essential context for Ps 127, a song for pilgrims, passing through places where it feels like the Lord is absent, where people in rebellion against him are building their own houses and families and kingdoms. The pilgrims are on their way to a place where it feels like the Lord is especially present, to worship him there, and to be renewed in the mission of establishing God's presence everywhere.

The gist of Ps 127:1-2 is that we all have work to do, and our work matters to God. Unless the Lord is in our work, guiding and blessing it, then all our efforts are worthless:

- Unless the Lord builds the house, our building is in vain. (v1)
- Unless the Lord oversees the city, our oversight is in vain. (v1)
- You get up early and go to bed late worrying, because only those whose labors are unto the Lord can sleep soundly at night. (v2)

These verses remind us of what we all know too well. We have so many responsibilities, so much on our minds, that we often lose the forest for the trees. We get so busy doing work that we forget that it's ultimately God whom we're serving. Then we enter a downward spiral of worrying more, sleeping less, and increasingly doing our work in vain apart from the Lord. We end up "eating the bread of anxious toil," (v2) aka burned out, because we took our eyes off the Lord.

For this diagnosis of burnout, Ps 127 offers two remedies. First, implicit in Ps 127 is the remedy of repentance, something we do every time we gather as a church. Confess your sins, repent and return to the Lord. Put Rom 12:1 into practice, i.e. present yourself as a living sacrifice to God. Bring everything you think and say and do under his loving care and sovereign kingship.

The second remedy for burnout in Ps 127 is to have kids! Consider the rest of the psalm:

*Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord,
the fruit of the womb a reward.
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the children of one's youth.
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. (Psalm 127:3-5)*

If you're a parent of young children, you're probably not feeling the practical aspects of this remedy for burnout right now, and that's to be expected. There's no guarantee in Ps 127 that children will instantly make you wealthy, prosperous, and carefree.

On the other hand, we must consider what these verses say, namely that *children are a heritage, a reward, and a blessing from the Lord*. The overwhelming witness of the entire Bible says the same, at least for those who follow the Lord.

Many voices in the world today regard children as a curse rather than a blessing. Abortion is an extreme expression of this view, in that a baby is so unwanted, so much a curse, that it must be destroyed. Yet even those who are politically pro-life may still regard children as a curse rather than a blessing. Children are expensive. They're inconvenient. They wear you out, starting with pregnancy, then labor, delivery, breastfeeding, stretch marks, sleep training, babysitting, potty training, laundry, table manners, homework, recitals, sports, summer camp, puberty, drivers' education, prom, graduation, and paying for college. The costs in terms of work and time and money are enormous. So who in their right mind would say that children are a blessing?

God would. God does. The same God who created us and now pours his life into us in order to accomplish something that he could do without us infinitely more efficiently. He could build his house and fill the earth with his glory in an instant without our help. Instead he chooses to do it in relationship through us, one generation at a time. This same God says that children are a blessing, even though they are time-consuming and expensive. God gives us time and money, not for us to use as we please, but to support us as we serve him. If God also blesses us with children, we shouldn't think that we're cursed. We should trust that he knows what he's doing and look to him for the necessary resources to care for them.

Imagine a hard-working cabinet maker, struggling to make a profit because of the high cost of materials. One day he inherits a forest of hardwood trees and a state-of-the-art sawmill. Does he say, "Oh no, I'm cursed! Now I've got to take care of all this property, learn how to run a sawmill, and pay taxes on the whole thing?" No. Though he might not have known it at the time, this gift is just what he needs to do his job! That's why it's a blessing. Granted, it's a time-consuming and expensive blessing, but in the end it will be a huge net positive for the cabinet maker's work.

God blesses us with children to help us with our work. It takes time, but as kids grow in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, they become our partners in building God's house. Though we often take pride in our own abilities, the truth is that we are in urgent need of more teammates, for as Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few." We can't do it alone, and thankfully, we don't have to. "The Lord gives to his beloved sleep" (v2) often comes by very natural means after many nights of lost sleep, as God raises up the next generation (vv 3-5) to help with the work. Sure, babies can be cute, little kids can say a lot of funny things, and all those moments can be "blessings." But the thrust of Ps 127 isn't

sentimentality. Ps 127 says that children are the reinforcements we need. They're (v 4) like arrows in the hands of a warrior. They're (v 5) like cheering soldiers at the gate. With their help, God's presence will be better known and experienced in our world.

Do Children Interfere with God's Kingdom Work?

Sometimes Christians can become blind to the blessing of children because of an over-inflated view of their own importance to God's kingdom. "If I didn't have to spend so much time caring for these children, then I'd be a lot further along in my real calling to [fill in the blank]." This is just a spiritualized way of calling children a curse.

I unthinkingly took this perspective when I was a younger man. When my wife and I were first married I was in medical school, but for all the wrong reasons. I wasn't seeking to build the Lord's house but rather to build my own. My identity and future depended upon becoming an academic physician, with all the wealth and prestige that would come from it.

A year into marriage, God called me to repentance, and in my case that meant a career change. I left medicine and went to theological seminary, trusting God for money and for clarity in how I was to serve God in building his house. Over the next several years, my wife and I started hearing from God more clearly, first for me to be a pastor, then more specifically an Anglican church-planter, then moving to Washington, and so on. After finishing school, we moved to Washington and I got to work on what I understood God calling me to do.

I'll never forget the summer of 1999, after my wife and I had been married for 6 years. We were settled in the city and I was hard at work when my wife said that it was time we started having kids. I was completely caught off guard. Though I'm sure we had talked about having kids from time to time, the last time I remembered having the conversation was when we were dating, when it felt like starting a family was a long way off. My feelings hadn't changed since.

My wife said that even though our finances were tight, we finally had enough to support a family. True, but couldn't she see how hard I was working? How could we bring kids into the world at such a time?

My wife was right, of course. As our family has grown, God has been faithful to provide for our needs. Our kids have become great teammates in house building for the Lord's sake. The older they get, the more we realize the blessing of having a brother and sisters who are indeed our brother and sisters in Christ. Even as we encourage and pray for them, they do the same for us. Our work here is much better because of our kingdom partnership with our children.

God's way is almost always the slow way, working through multiple generations, rather than one superhero. Sure, the Apostle Paul covered a lot of ground by himself, but read his story carefully and see how much he depended upon others, especially men like Timothy whom he regarded as his own son. Likewise, children are a *blessing* for those who follow the Lord.

What is our Responsibility to Children?

Paul writes, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4). In other words, raise them as Christians. Why? So that they may become faithful image-bearers of the Lord.

This seems like such an obvious point, and yet it runs contrary to cultural assumptions about children. Nobody today will criticize you for raising your kids to be rabid fans of the Nationals or the Redskins. Nobody will blink if you instill in them a deep American patriotism. But if you make their religious choices for them, that's brainwashing. Religion, they say, is a private matter. You shouldn't force it on anyone, not even your own kids. Let them grow up neutral. Then if its real they'll choose faith when they reach maturity.

Paul says in Eph 6:4 to "bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."

Our responsibility to children is not merely to feed and protect them, not merely to make sure they get enough sleep and get a decent education. Above everything else, we are to raise them as mature disciples of the Lord. Through spiritual nurture, they must be able to hear his voice and follow him with happy hearts.

Spiritual nurture is what's really scary about having children. Bringing them into the world is relatively straightforward, as long as its biologically possible. Providing food and shelter isn't too hard, since it's something we already do for ourselves. But discipling them into Christian maturity? If I had really considered the difficulty of the task, there's no way I would have agreed to become a dad. But thank God I didn't know enough to be worried. In our weakness, He is strong (2 Corinthians 12:9). God loves to give grace to the needy, and the discipleship of children is a ministry of constant need. In fact, it's where you experience the most joy in parenting. Doing for them what we can already do on our own strength is no big deal. Depending upon the Lord and seeing him at work in their lives is beyond wonderful.

Our responsibility to children, then, is holistic nurture with particular emphasis on spiritual formation along the lines of the Great Commission. We're called to baptize and make disciples of our children, teaching them all that the Lord has commanded. And thankfully He promises to be with us in this work to the very end (Matt 28:16-18).

Who is Responsible for our Children's Spiritual Nurture?

All Christian adults are responsible for the spiritual nurture of children. Not everyone can have children, but we all can nurture them.

Many couples (roughly 1 in 10) want to have children but are biologically unable to do. Many single adults want to be married but aren't. Particularly in a place like Capitol Hill, where there are a lot of young families, it's easy for adults without children to feel like outcasts. But in our church, we believe what God's Word teaches about love, sex and relationships. The nuclear family is not God's cure for loneliness. The Bible envisions an institution so healthy, so warm,

that all who experience it do find an answer to loneliness. In this institution a person can know and be known, love and be loved. This institution is not the nuclear family but the church. If you're someone who feels stuck, whether single or wanting children, there's no need to hide in the shadows here. You are welcome just as you are. Share your burdens with us. Let us weep and pray with you. And help us bring up the next generation in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Not everyone can have children, but anyone can nurture them. The responsibility of nurture belongs primarily to parents and then to everyone in the church.

Those who are parents are primarily responsible for the spiritual formation of our children. It's every bit as important as food on the table. Talk about the Lord with your kids. Pray and study Scripture together. Love your neighbors and practice mercy together. Teach your children generosity. Let them see you tithing to the church. Bring them into decisions on how to give away other money and goods and how to volunteer your time. Bring your kids to church whenever the doors are open in order to build into them rhythms of worship and community, work and rest. Treat them as members of the church, knowing they have a role to play here just like everyone else.

For those who aren't parents, you need to know that no parent is omni-competent. None of us has unlimited spiritual wisdom. There's no way without your help that we can bring our kids to maturity the Lord. Yes, we need you in the children's ministries of the church, the nursery and Sunday School and youth group, but the need also extends far beyond programmatic elements. Those adults who regularly do one-off things with our kids are a lifeline. Take them to baseball games, invite them over for cookouts, teach them skits and songs, etc. All of these experiences are formative. Adults who love Jesus and our kids have a tremendous, long-lasting impact on the discipleship of our children.

Also remember that it's not just the kids within our congregation who need spiritual nurture. There are so many good ministries here to care for under-privileged children in the community (e.g. the Porch, Little Lights, DC127 and the Capitol Hill Pregnancy Center). If you can help with any of these ministries, please do so. Or consider simply loving one or more of the kids in your neighborhood. Bring them to church and we'll help you.

In any case, we're all called to the work of nurturing children. Jesus said we should pray to the Lord of the harvest to send us more workers (John 4:35-36). God is answering this prayer in part by sending us children. They have the raw talent to be faithful disciples, but they need nurture. So the question is not whether I should nurture, but whom? Ask the Lord. He knows. And as you invest in them, you'll see the heritage, the reward, the blessing that is promised in Ps 127.