

July 12, 2020

## Psalm 127

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)  
A Song of Ascents. Of Solomon.

<sup>1</sup> Unless the Lord **BUILDS the house**,  
those who build it labor *in vain*.

Unless the Lord **GUARDS** the city,  
the guard keeps watch *in vain*.

<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 **sleep** to his beloved.

<sup>3</sup> **SONS** are indeed 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 sons of one's youth.

<sup>5</sup> Happy is the man who has  
his quiver full of them.

He shall not be put to shame  
when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

### **The Psalms of Ascent 120-134.**

Eugene Peterson writes that "in the pastoral work of training people in discipleship and accompanying them in pilgrimage, I have found, tucked away in the Hebrew Psalter, an old dog-eared songbook. I have used it to provide continuity in guiding others in the Christian way and directing people of faith in the conscious and continuous effort that develops into maturity in Christ.

The old songbook is called, in Hebrew, shiray hammaloth—Songs of Ascents. The songs are the psalms numbered 120 through 134 in the book of Psalms. These fifteen psalms were likely sung, possibly in sequence, by Hebrew pilgrims as they went up to Jerusalem to the great worship festivals. Topographically Jerusalem was the highest city in Palestine, and so all who traveled there spent much of their time ascending.

But the ascent was not only literal, it was also a metaphor: the trip to Jerusalem acted out a life lived upward toward God, an existence that advanced from one level to another in developing maturity—what Paul described as "the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus" (Phil 3:14).

**BUILDS the house** This expression, used elsewhere in the psalms, can refer to divine activity (of God) and human activity. The expression "build a house" is capable, therefore, of having varying meanings or connotations. In this context, it could refer to any or all of the following activities (divine and human): building Zion or the sanctuary; building the palace or temple; building the Davidic line or house; or building anyone's line or house. Physical structures family households, and human communities all come under the possible purview of this verse. (Patrick D. Miller. *Interpreting the Psalms*, p. 132)

**BUILDS & SONS** these 2 Hebrew words are related. They have different meanings but similar soundings: "banah" (to build) and "banim" (sons, or children). The house built in verse 1 is related to the children that are the heritage of the Lord in verses 3-5. The similarity of the words, and the meaning underneath them hold the two parts of this psalm (1-2 & 3-5) together.

**GUARDS** : in Hebrew the word [shamar] means to watch over or guard. It describes a very basic function of God. This theme and expression of confidence in the Lord's keeping watch runs throughout the psalms (25:10; 34:20; 86:2; 97:10; 116:6). It is one of the fundamental blessings in the Aaronic benediction – in Numbers 6:24  
"24 The Lord bless you and **KEEP YOU**; [shamar]

## Psalm 127

The Message Translation  
A Pilgrim Song of Solomon

<sup>1-2</sup> If God doesn't build the house,  
the builders only build shacks.  
If God doesn't guard the city,  
the night watchman might as well nap.  
It's useless to rise early and go to bed late,  
and work your worried fingers to the bone.

Don't you know he enjoys  
giving rest to those he loves?

<sup>3-5</sup> Don't you see that *children are God's best gift?*

the fruit of the womb his generous legacy?

Like a warrior's fistful of arrows  
are the children of a vigorous youth.

Oh, how blessed are you parents,  
with your quivers full of children!

Your enemies don't stand a chance against you;  
you'll sweep them right off your doorstep.

## Romans 12:1-21

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> [the apostle Paul] appeal to you therefore,  
brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to

<sup>25</sup> the Lord make his face to shine upon you,  
and be gracious to you;

<sup>26</sup> the Lord lift up his countenance upon you,  
and give you peace.”

*in vain* : the psalm begins in talking about three activities that are doing in vain, potentially useless or empty, depending upon how they're done.

**sleep** the meaning of the Hebrew word used here [shena] is difficult to determine. Historically it's been thought to mean “sleep.” More recently scholars find it more likely that it means either “prosperity” or “honor.” In this case the verse refers to those who seek to attain wealth or high position by the drive of their own achievements, presumably without looking to God for help or placing their labors in God's hands. Such activity and efforts are ultimately empty. It's God who gives wealth and honor. (Patrick D. Miller, p. 133).

*children are God's best gift?* This theme of children as a joy and reward, who provide blessing and security can be problematic when we hear it in our modern 21<sup>st</sup> century context. “The psalm seems to have in view primarily sons and the father rather than children and parents in general. The contemporary community can and should interpret the psalm in a more inclusive way, recognizing the joy and reward for both mothers and fathers in having both sons and daughters; the original intention was probably more male-oriented.” “The problems of over-population and unwanted children, even the painful moral dilemma of abortion, seem to press upon us the possibility that the gift and blessing has been turned into a curse. But these genuine and serious problems that arise out of the act of procreations, which like every human act is complex, morally ambiguous, and consequential even as one claims the mystery of God's involvement, should not be allowed to overshadow the even larger experiential reality that children are one of the richest manifestations of the blessing of God on human life and one of the clearest points where people sense the mystery and joy of God's gift.” (Patrick D. Miller, pp. 134-5)

present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. <sup>2</sup> Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

<sup>3</sup> For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

<sup>4</sup> For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ...

<sup>9</sup> Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; <sup>10</sup> love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup> Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

<sup>18</sup> If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. <sup>19</sup> Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” <sup>20</sup> No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

#### QUESTIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF EXAMEN & CONTEMPLATION

- What part of today's psalm grabs you?
- What is the poet saying about things done in vain and those that matter and make meaning?
- How do you discern the purpose of God? Where is God at the center of what you're doing in your life?; or more at the perimeter or periphery? Why?
- How do you overestimate your importance? How and where do you underestimate your importance? Why?
- How is God inviting you through this psalm to plant your roots deep in the nurturing love and empowering grace of God, like a tree planted near a stream of water (Psalm 1)?