

## **Unless the Lord Builds the House – Ps. 127**

**CBC Ilderton**

**Andrew Hall**  
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In 1995, my summer employment was working to build homes on the north shore of Lake Superior. The scenery was exquisite; birch trees all around us whispering in the wind, the wash of waves up on the shore, the sunrise splashing colour across the lake. From the foundation to the roof, we worked tirelessly to build a new home for a family eager to settle in to a dream location.

As beautiful as the building was, it wasn't quite the same. When we left the construction sight, the building looked beautiful: exquisite trim, an open concept home with large windows looking out on the lake, finishing touches that made everything look so fine.

But it wasn't a home. The owners hadn't landscaped the yard yet. The building felt empty without furniture. The building had a certain character to it, but the homeowners would have to put their mark on it to build a home.

Psalm 127 is a psalm of Solomon that reminds us of the wisdom we need so we work unto the Lord, recognizing that hard work in and of itself is useless unless the Lord is the builder. And as we celebrate Labour Day this weekend as Canadians, we remember the gift of work from the hand of God. At the same time, we remember that work is not everything needed for life.

### **Work as Unto the Lord (vv. 1-2)**

We are told two important details about this psalm in the superscription. "A Song of Ascents. Of Solomon." These are part of the original psalm. These aren't additional headers added by the English translators but were handed down when the Psalms were delivered to God's people as a collection. And this little superscription gives us two hints about how we should understand this psalm.

First, this psalm is part of a collection of Psalms that began in Ps. 120 and ends in Ps. 134 called "The songs of ascents." These Psalms are all collected together and were used by God's people as they went up the holy mountain, coming in to Jerusalem to worship at the temple. This particular psalm is in the middle, with 7 ascent psalms before and 7 after. And as the people of God would go up to the holy temple for worship, this psalm would have been used in the middle of their procession.

Second, this psalm is of Solomon. It has the wisdom language of Solomon. It uses the language of Proverbs (hard work) and Ecclesiastes (vanity). And with these two little pieces of information, we can surmise what Solomon was driving at and how God's people would have used this psalm later in their history and worship.

When we read vv. 1-2, what we hear is the wisdom of God is necessary in the labours of humanity. "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. 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."

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Now many sermons have started with building a Christian home and how necessary it is for Christian homes to be governed in a way that makes the Lord central. This interpretation isn't wrong, but it's not where the psalm starts. It starts with Solomon. Solomon was the son of David, the king who had been promised that his throne would endure forever. David had wanted to build a house for God, but was told that because he had been a warrior king, it was not his job to build a house for God. That task would be given to Solomon, who would build the house of God (1 Kings 6 specifically uses the language of house for the temple).

So, during Solomon's reign, he began and completed the building of the temple – a permanent dwellingplace for the religious symbols of Israel's worship, specifically the ark of the covenant – a gold covered box containing the 10 commandments and with a lid on top where two angels of judgment guarded God's promises. Throughout Israel's history, the high priest would go once a year and confess the sins of Israel and take the blood of a sacrifice and sprinkle it on the top of the ark of the covenant – the place where justice and mercy met. Through Israel's history, God's presence had gone with them.

But when Israel settled in their homeland and Solomon created a permanent home for God, the building was just a building. It wasn't until Solomon prayed and offered a sacrifice at the dedication of the temple that God's presence inhabited it (2 Chron. 6:40-7:3). And suddenly, these verses take on a different meaning.

In vv. 1-2, the contrast is clear between human work and God's work. Human work under the sun becomes toil apart from God's blessing. God must fill the temple with his presence, otherwise the builders labour in vain. God's presence is what guards the city, otherwise the watchmen seek to protect the city of Jerusalem in their own power. God's presence must empower our work, otherwise humans think it's all up to them.

In other words, if we think that hard work is the only thing that matters for success, we are mistaken. We can work hard, we can have our strategies, we can plan, but unless the Lord's presence fills our work, it is vanity, a chasing after the wind.

The way that we work hard is unto the Lord. We commit our work to him (1 Cor. 15:58). We recognize he has given us every good deed for us to do, and he's prepared it beforehand (Eph. 2:10). We remember that hard work alone will not bring results – we have to entrust our work to God, leaving it in his hands, and sleep (Ps. 127:2).

So part of our working as unto the Lord is resting. By resting, by taking time off where we completely shut off from work, we are saying, "I trust in your power and presence to establish the work of our hands." By resting from our work, by turning off our minds from work, by taking a holiday from our work, we functionally live a life of trust. Through our rest we say that God must establish the work of our hands. All of our hard toil, our planning, our strategies, our goal setting, our long hours are vanity and a chasing after the wind unless we pray like Solomon and ask for God's presence to flood and fill our work done in his name. So we labour as unto the Lord.

**Live in the Blessing of the Lord (vv. 3-5)**

As we work unto the Lord, there is a blessing that comes. At the end of this psalm, the blessed man of Psalm 1 who meditates on God's instruction is the one who applies the Word of God to all of life. He works hard, he rests hard, and he sees that God's good gift to him is that 'whatever he does prospers' (Ps. 1:3). But before we get an idea in our head that Christians should just have complete success and become healthy and wealthy and powerful, let's realize how we prosper.

Solomon tells us that children are a heritage from the Lord, like arrows in the hand of a warrior, a reward and a blessing. For people in the ancient world where there was no employment insurance, retirement funds, or other social programs, your children were your social security and retirement plan. To have a family was to be blessed. Children would care for you in your old age. Children would extend the reach of your influence. This is why children are compared to arrows in the hands of a warrior.

But the language of reward and heritage was the language that was used to describe the gift of the Promised Land in Joshua (e.g. Josh. 14:9, 13). Although the land belonged to the Lord, he gave it to his people and their children and secured it. While Israel had to fight for the land, their battles were to be fought in dependence upon God. As they trusted in the Lord, the land would remain secure.

But now Solomon says that children are this heritage. And most certainly Solomon would have been thinking about the promise that God had made to his father in 2 Sam. 7:12ff. There, God had promised Solomon's father David that there would always be a king on the throne from David's family line. God would secure his people's future by David's son. And as David's son ruled with justice and mercy, there would be perfect justice – no one would put him to shame.

Many years later, the Son of David was born. And this son's influence would extend the rule of righteousness far more than David or Solomon had seen. His kingdom would extend further than the Promised Land – it would extend to the whole world. And that son of David is King Jesus. Through King Jesus, he would give security to his people. Not that we would become healthy and wealthy here, but that our work would be secured by his work. You see, it was King Jesus who would do his work by healing the sick, raising the dead, casting out demons, who would show that the kingdom of God was among us. It was by him going to his throne – a cross – and laying down his head in rest by dying that he would secure his people's future. It is this king who would bring every spiritual blessing to God's people so that Paul could say in Ephesians 1 that those who are in Christ have every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies.

The way that we live in the blessing of God is by trusting in the work and presence of God in Jesus Christ. We work, we rest. We pray, we labour. We leave the results in God's hand. And one day, God will reveal to us how he has made every good work of ours prosper. We may not see it now, but because we trust in Christ, we know that our labour in the Lord is not in vain.

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So we live in this tension: work hard and trust the Lord. We pray that he will take our work – whether it is the labour that we do in our employment, the hard work of parenting, the work of serving others through our volunteering – and bless it by his presence and power.

After building homes, I had the privilege of returning to one house and meeting the home owners. The yard was landscaped to accentuate the beauty of lake life. The interior of the home was filled with the smells of food and life. The décor spoke of the home owner's character and personality. And it was a joy to see how the presence of these owners had made their house a home.

When God takes up residence in our lives and rules by the presence and power of King Jesus, he can take every hard act of labour and establish the work of our hands. God will be pleased to show us in eternity how he has done abundantly more than we could ask or think. So let's work hard, as unto the Lord, and let's depend upon him to establish the work of our hands.