

James 4:13–17

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[0 : 00] Our scripture reading today is taken from the book of Psalm 127.

This can be found in the Blue Bible provided for you on page 518. Again, the scripture text is Psalm 127 on page 518.

Please stand for the reading of God's word. So, unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.

Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain. Then you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil, for he gives to his beloved sheep.

Behold, children are heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward.

[1 : 18] 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.

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated. Let's begin with a word of prayer.

Father, our great God, we know that your word is able to correct us and to instruct us.

And as James tells us, it is able to save. And so we pray today that you would give us ears to hear and eyes to see wondrous things in your word.

Father, help us to hear in such a way that our hearts will obey you. We acknowledge our complete dependence and ask for your help in understanding and obeying your word this day.

[2 : 28] In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Well, we've come to Psalm 127 in our summer series on the Psalms of Ascent.

And today we come to a psalm that shares many of the themes that we've been seeing. But yet this psalm also stands apart and is unique in some different ways.

Now, David wrote almost half of the psalms, 73 in all. We've already looked at a couple of them in this series, and we'll be looking at a couple more in the coming weeks.

Moses wrote one psalm, Psalm 70. The sons of Asaph and Korah wrote several. And Solomon wrote two, Psalm 72 and Psalm 127, which we'll be looking at today.

In looking at Psalm 127, there are a couple things that will help us to get to the heart of this psalm. The true meaning and significance of this in all psalms lies in its relation to the person and work of Jesus the Christ.

[3 : 38] This means that the psalms, like all of the Old Testament, applies to Christians. But none of it applies apart from fulfillment in Christ. If this is where we're going, the main ways that we're going to get there is by looking at a couple of word plays.

We're going to look at a couple of themes central to this psalm. We're going to look at the unity of the first and the second part of the psalm and see how you can't understand one part without the other.

And then we're going to look at the Old Testament background to Psalm 127. Now, David Helm mentioned that preachers don't usually preach on the titles. And he reminded us that the titles, they're not just some 20th century, 21st century insertion, like unless the Lord builds the house that we see at the top of the page.

They are nothing less than the very words of God. Psalm 127's title tells us that it's a song of ascents of Solomon.

So knowing that this is a psalm of Solomon, it's not surprising then to find that this psalm is considered to be one of a handful of wisdom psalms.

[4 : 52] Included in the group is Psalm 137, 49, 73, Psalms 111, 112, and then 127 and 128.

Some very well-known psalms are wisdom psalms. Now, these psalms are called wisdom psalms because they share features with some of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, such as Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, in terms of their literary structures, their vocabulary, and some of their themes.

They frequently deal with topics such as the fear of the Lord, obeying his laws and teachings. They teach us that whoever keeps God's ways and commands will be blessed.

And they teach us that wisdom is personal, and it's very much about relationship with God. And so it's not surprising that we find this psalm of Solomon, the great wise man of the Old Testament, shares some characteristics with other Old Testament wisdom literature.

One of the very first things that stands out is the threefold repetition of vanity. In vain, we hear it ring out clearly three times. Now, vanity here points to futility and the meaninglessness of building a house apart from dependence on the Lord.

[6 : 25] It's a warning against wasting your life by deceiving yourself that you're self-sufficient. And it reminds us of other wisdom literature, like Ecclesiastes 2, which says, I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me.

And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? This also is vanity. Ecclesiastes 5.12 also talks about the vanity of work and it talks about rest also.

Sweet is the sleep of the laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep. So let's look at verses 1 and 2 of Psalm 127.

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman 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.

[7 : 37] And so we are told that unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Now at a time when houses are on many people's minds and housing bubbles and bailouts are in the news, it's easy to think that this psalm is an advertisement for Home Depot or HGTV.

I can imagine the HGTV version of this psalm would be something like, unless the Lord flips the house, the flippers labor in vain. This psalm can also be taken as an endorsement of middle class values.

You have the home in verse 1 and you have the family in verse 3 and about the only thing missing is the dog. But this isn't just any house of wood and plaster and stone.

Notice the emphasis on the Lord building the house in verse 1, on rest in verse 2, and on offspring in verses 3 through 5.

As I read this psalm and I saw that these are the dominant themes, I couldn't help but notice strong allusions to 2 Samuel 7 here.

[8 : 57] Indeed, the connections with the covenantal promises and blessings, both to Abraham in Genesis and to David in 2 Samuel 7, are absolutely unmistakable.

The promises to Abraham point forward to this and the promises to David build on the promises to Abraham. The main promises in the Davidic covenant, a house, rest, a name, an offspring, are the main themes in Psalm 127.

We'll look a little later at where name and reputation appear in Psalm 127, but let's look at 2 Samuel 7. That can be found on page 259 in the Bibles provided.

2 Samuel 7. Page 259. Now in 2 Samuel 7, David, having just defeated the Philistines and Jebusites, wants to build a house for the Lord.

So, verse 1, Now when the king lived in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his surrounding enemies, the king said to Nathan the prophet, See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent.

[10 : 25] And Nathan said to the king, Go do all that is in your heart, for the Lord is with you. Instead, the Lord says, He will build a house for David, in verses 4 through 17.

Verse 4, But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan, Go and tell my servant David, Thus says the Lord, Would you build me a house to dwell in?

I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, Why have you not built me a house of cedar?

Now, therefore, thus you say to my servant David, Thus says the Lord of hosts, I took you from the pasture, the pasture from following the sheep, that you should be the prince over my people Israel.

And I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth.

[11 : 38] And I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place, and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more as formerly.

For the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel, and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house.

When your days are fulfilled, and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.

He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.

When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men. My steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you.

[12 : 42] And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever. In accordance with all these words, and in accordance with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.

So the word house is used in both a literal sense, house meaning temple, in verses 1 through 7, and then in a secondary meaning, as temple in verse 13.

And then it's used in a figurative sense, house meaning dynasty, in verses 11 through 16. This same wordplay on the word house can be found in Psalm 127.

And there was a wordplay of sorts between rest and the idea of trusting in the Lord already in Psalm 127. In Hebrew, the psalm deploys another wordplay that is lost in English that shows that the first half and the second half of the psalms are a unity.

Builders, in verse 1, and sons in verse 4 sound very, very similar in the Hebrew. So there's a number of these wordplays. And above all, there's the wordplay on house.

[14 : 03] Again, the word house can refer to a building or the temple. We can see house used for temple in several other of the psalms of ascent. Look at 122, verse 1.

Psalm 122, verse 1. I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord. And verse 9.

For the sake of the house of the Lord, our God, I will seek your good. Also, in 132, verse 5.

Psalm 132, verse 5. Until I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling place for the mighty one of Jacob. It's referring to building him a temple.

In 134, verse 1. Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who stand by night in the house of the Lord. And then 135, verse 2.

[15 : 05] O servants of the Lord, who stand in the house of the Lord, in the courts of the house of our God. So, we can see that house is used all over where we've been traveling the last few weeks and where we're going to be going.

By extension, this can be applied to city in a metaphorical sense. And more importantly, house can refer to a household built up, in this case, by the blessing of children in verses 3 through 5.

So, the two uses of the word house are playing off of each other. And a substantial part of the meaning of the passage comes out in the interplay between these two different senses of house.

And this is a play on words, but it's a play that's of the most serious kind. Any faithful Israelite during the period of Solomon and David would have been able to see that God had not yet fulfilled his promises.

Certainly, David's sons Absalom and Amnon were not the promised sons who had established the throne of his kingdom and reigned forever in righteousness. And like all of the Old Testament kings, Solomon is far from perfect.

[16 : 21] In Deuteronomy 17, the Lord commands kings not to multiply horses, wives, or gold. Solomon sins in all three of these areas by collecting huge amounts of gold each year by taxing people heavily.

He gathered a large number of horses and chariots just like the Egyptians. And finally, Solomon marries foreign women and these women turn Solomon to other gods.

So despite his wisdom, Solomon acts very, very foolishly. Because of his sin, the Lord punishes Solomon. The Lord chastens him by men, but the Lord has promised not to utterly forsake him.

He promised that to his father David. He chastens him by tearing apart the kingdom, tearing it in two, and cutting back the house of David, but he does not completely forsake it.

Surely, when we look at David's sons, there must be a greater king coming. A king who will sit on David's throne forever, ruling in faithfulness.

[17 : 31] A king who will truly bring rest to his people. A king who will build a temple that will never be destroyed. Yes, David's son Solomon will build the Lord a house.

He'll build a temple, but the Lord will build David a house of much greater importance. He will build him a dynasty that has the Davidic king, the Messiah, that sits on the throne forever, reigning in justice and righteousness.

righteousness. Both in his glories and failures, Solomon points us to the greater son of David, Jesus Christ. And that is how the New Testament opens in Matthew 1.1, the book of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Peter says that through Jesus the Messiah, you yourselves, like living stones, are being built up into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

So, the main thrust of this psalm is on trusting and resting in God to work on our behalf. It's about dependence on God rather than depending on men.

[18 : 52] And it's the opposite of anxious toil. This trust is completely the opposite of anxious toil.

In verse 2, 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. Now, his beloved here points to Solomon who we are told in Samuel 12, verse 24, is named by the prophet Nathan the beloved of the Lord.

but this also, it also may refer to when Solomon was promised wisdom and given wisdom, it was actually during his sleep in 1 Kings chapter 3.

And God gives many of his gifts during sleep. He gave to his beloved the first Adam while he slept. but his beloved also refers to all his children, to all of us, all who rest in him.

God richly blesses us with physical rest and sleep and he graciously gives us physical security. The watchman may guard the city but the only true watchman or keeper is the Lord.

[20 : 11] We remember from Psalm 121, verse 4, we're told that he who keeps Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps. And even more, he has promised us spiritual rest in security.

Either it will be the Lord's doing or it will be pointless. There's no third option. The point seems to be this, hard work by itself is not what counts.

It's one's relationship to God. For he is able to bless us even while we sleep. The Lord Jesus said, Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life.

What you will eat or what you will drink nor about your body what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air.

They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns and yet their heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you being anxious can add a single hour to this span of life?

[21 : 15] And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field how they grow. They neither toil nor spin. Yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

But if God so clothes the grass of the field which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you O you of little faith?

Therefore do not be anxious saying what will we eat or what shall we drink or what shall we wear? For the Gentiles seek after all these things and your heavenly Father knows that you need all of them.

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you. And we have reason to believe also that the Lord Jesus himself slept well, pretty well in some very turbulent situations because he rested in his Father's hands.

Look at verse 3. 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.

[22 : 35] 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. So the two parts of the psalm are so well marked that some have thought that they're completely two separate poems.

And the majority opinion seems that seems to be that there's no obvious unifying design. But we've seen through the play on words house and offspring and builders and sons that this psalm is a unity.

In fact, you cannot understand one part without the other. Both parts proclaim that only what is from the Lord is truly strong. In verse 5 we are told that the man with many children will not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

Now the ESV is a very good translation. The Bible that we have here. But the footnote at the bottom says sons. But the footnote at the bottom that says sons is actually a much better translation because it does justice to the historical setting.

Now full disclosure, I delight in my daughter Zoe. I wanted to have a daughter. I grew up in a house with four boys, my dad, one, my mom.

[24 : 00] One woman, male house. I delight in women, in my daughter, in my wife. But sons is a much better translation here.

Women were not allowed to testify in a Jewish court. And fathers did not send out their daughters to war. It should be translated like arrows in the hand of a warrior so are the sons of one's youth.

Sons could defend the family interest at the city gate where legal and economic issues of the community were settled and where the defenses of a city were set up during times of war.

In Proverbs 31, the Psalms and a lot of places in the Old Testament, we see that gates are also a place of reputation or a place to defend one's name.

In Psalm 120, verse 4, we hear of the arrows of an enemy attacking. Here we hear of sons providing social security, being like arrows in coming to the aid and defense of aging parents.

[25 : 14] In keeping with wisdom literature, the emphasis here is also on good and godly sons. Solomon speaks a lot about foolish sons. And he says that they bring shame.

Proverbs 17, verse 2, a wise servant shall rule over a son that causes shame and shall have part of the inheritance among the brethren. And then Proverbs 17, verse 25, a foolish son is a grief to his father and bitterness to her who bore him.

It's wise sons that bring honor to their parents. If they are well bred, they will shoot at their parents' enemies. And if they're evil bred, they will shoot at their parents'.

So how does this apply to Christians? Christians living on the south side today? Paul tells us in 1 Timothy and the words of the Lord Jesus teaches that children are to take care of their aging parents.

They're to provide for their needs. But notice here that this is not just sons that are to take care of their aging parents now. This points to a significant change brought about by Christ.

[26 : 31] From the opening chapters of Genesis, we see a clear relationship between blessing and offspring. In the context of creation, the command of procreation is given in the immediate context of blessing.

The main drama of the creation account is God's covenant blessings to Abraham, central to all the temporal elements of the blessing, like land, is the particular blessing of offspring.

Notice also the mention in Genesis 22, 17. It says, I will surely bless you and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the shore and your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies.

Another strong allusion to covenant blessing found in Psalm 127. The centrality of offspring and the connection between blessing and offspring appears, again appears as we've seen in the Davidic covenant in 2 Samuel verse 7.

Now, Barry Danilak, I don't know who knows Barry from College Church, but he's a friend of Holy Trinity and he is at Tyndale House at Cambridge. He highlights the importance of offspring in perpetuating one's name.

[27 : 58] He shows that dying childless meant not only physical death in Israel, but having one's name blotted out of Israel. Also the concept of inheritance which we can see in our passage today.

The concept of inheritance in the Old Testament highlights the importance of the offspring blessing relationship. The inheritance which represented God's blessing was only maintainable insofar as it could be passed on.

So offspring were central to maintaining the covenantal blessing for each individual Israelite. This explains the potential tragedy of dying a virgin or a eunuch or dying barren.

All three were potentially cut off from the blessing and people of God. And it's interesting that the very last verse, I noticed the very last verse before the promise to David in 2 Samuel 7, it is said that Michael the daughter of Saul was barren because she scoffed at David when he was rejoicing.

So the Davidic Messiah would not be through Michael. In Isaiah, a turn starts to occur which anticipates the New Testament.

[29 : 22] We are told in Isaiah 7, and remember the potential tragedy of dying a virgin or a eunuch or barren. All three being cut off, we are told in Isaiah 7 that the virgin shall conceive and bear a son.

In chapter 9, Isaiah makes the hope even more explicit. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and of peace, there will be no end. On the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness, from this time forth and forever more, the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

The critical point in the narrative occurs in Isaiah 53, verse 10, with the description of the death of the servant. Here Isaiah writes, when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring.

Barry Danilak points out that these are not physical offspring. For the servant's generation considered him cut off out of the land of the living. 53, verse 8.

[30 : 54] Alec Moyer explains, those who become the servant's beneficiaries through the reparation or offering become his children, his offspring or seed.

These new blessings come not through physical offspring. They come through the offspring who is God. It is a wonderful, it's wonderful and amazing then to find immediately on the heels of the climactic depiction of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53.

What follows is the song of the barren woman in Isaiah chapter 54. The one who did not bear physical children and was therefore in jeopardy of being cut off from future blessing now sings because her children will be more than the children of her who is married.

So it's in Christ that we have all the covenantal blessings and are joint heirs of an eternal inheritance.

In the New Testament, Jesus himself embodies all of the, all that the covenant signifies in the Old Testament. No matter how many provinces God has made, they are yes in Christ.

[32 : 15] Christ. Now this is not to suggest that our own children are not a wonderful blessing to us from the Lord. Of course they are.

As fellow Chicagoan Patrick Henry Reardon says, there is no room for a planned parenthood in this psalm. It is no coincidence that Christians often have the largest families and atheists have the smallest.

middle class values of house and home, of family, are good things if it is God that is worshipped in that house and family.

But as Psalm 127 points out, as much of a blessing as children are, they really should point us to the greatest expression and fulfillment of God's blessing to us through Christ.

As Paul spoke of in Galatians and Thessalonians, we should eagerly desire spiritual children. Paul compared himself in 1 Thessalonians 2 to a nursing mother.

[33 : 29] And a few verses later, to a father gently, compassionately exhorting his children in love. and he says in verse 19, for what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming?

Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy. So Paul is saying that he will be able to stand before the Lord Jesus at his coming, unashamed, in part, because of his spiritual children.

So this great psalm has many riches for us and much to teach us. It should teach us, first of all, consider Jesus.

Hebrews tells us that Jesus is the builder of a house, and if we do not consider him and rest in him, we will build in vain. Hebrews 3, verses 1 through 6.

Consider Jesus who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house. For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses.

[34 : 43] As much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. For every house has been built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.

Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant to testify to the things that were spoken later, but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son, and we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.

I don't know if you remember that from this year. So unless the Lord builds the house, well, the Lord will build the house. Christ will build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

But will our labor be in vain? Well, it will unless we depend on him. So consider Jesus. Number two, it's pointing directly to Christ, but it's also pointing to us.

Behold, what manner of love the Father has given unto us that we should be called sons of God, and that is what we are.

[36 : 05] Third, we should hear again the Great Commission in this psalm, and we should eagerly desire spiritual children, like Paul did.

We should give our lives to our children, but we should also desire spiritual children. fourth, be anxious about nothing for your heavenly Father knows what you need.

Instead, seek his kingdom first and his righteousness. And last, only the blessing and provision of God can bring about a successful outcome.

We can build ministries, buildings, with our money, our skills, our authority, but like Solomon, we may do it like all the other kings.

We may do it in a worldly way. Solomon started out good, but then he became like all the other kings and no longer depended on God. This psalm calls us to depend on God unless he builds the house.

[37 : 20] Solomon is a great figure whose great wisdom was sometimes not followed in his own life. His own building program, both physical and metaphorical, became foolish.

We see that in 1 Kings 9. His kingdom was a ruin in 1 Kings 11. In his household, not the least, not least his multiplied pagan marriages, which was a systematic denial of the claims of the living God.

So how important to ask God for the grace to live up to what we understand. Amen.