

## “Life in the Slow Lane” (Psalm 127:1-5)

*The Tacoma News Tribune* carried the story of Tattoo the basset hound. Tattoo didn't intend to go for an evening run, but when his owner shut the dog's leash in the car door and took off for a drive with Tattoo still outside the vehicle, he had no choice. Motorcycle officer Terry Filbert noticed a passing vehicle with something dragging behind it. He realized it was a basset hound picking up his feet and putting them down as fast as he could. He chased the car to a stop. Tattoo was rescued, but not before the dog had reached a speed of 20 to 25 miles per hour, rolling over several times.

Too many of us end up living like Tattoo; our days marked by picking them up and putting them down as fast as we can. It's time to learn another way to live.<sup>1</sup> God has a timely word for us amidst this busy holiday season. It is found in Psalm 127. This chapter is one of the most practical passages in the Bible. It deals with two areas of our life that demand most of our time and cause us the most trouble. They are also the two areas, which often compete with each other for our attention and energy. The two areas are those of our work and our family. These five verses will instruct us how to correctly arrange our priorities in these most important responsibilities.<sup>2</sup>

Psalm 127 begins with these words: “**A Song of Ascents, of Solomon.**” The title “**A Song of Ascents**” refers to 15 psalms, found in Psalms 120-134. Jewish people that went up to Jerusalem to keep the annual feasts likely used these psalms. On the way, to help focus their thoughts, they would sing these psalms. Just as God used these psalms to guide His people on their way to the temple, so today He can use these same verses to effect a change in the church, to bring His people into a closer relationship with Him, and produce a radical change in lifestyle on our journey to heaven.<sup>3</sup>

In 127:1-2, Solomon tells us how to live a restful and reliant life. Three times in these verses Solomon uses one of his favorite words: “**vain.**”<sup>4</sup> The vanity of human activity is set forth in five futile pursuits: labor at building a house, guarding a city, rising up early to work, staying up late to work, and eating food earned by heavy labor.<sup>5</sup> These verses recall the spirit of Ecclesiastes with its emphasis on vanity.<sup>6</sup> It is foolish, frustrating, and futile to attempt projects without seeking God's blessing.

The first example Solomon cites is labor. He writes, “**Unless the LORD builds the house,<sup>7</sup> they labor in vain who build it.**”<sup>8</sup> Who would ever have thought the Lord would stoop to house building? Doesn't He have better things to do? And, after all, isn't this something we can do for ourselves? It is simply a matter of making a plan, gathering materials, and putting them all together. Why does God need to be a part of house building?<sup>9</sup> The answer is simple: God makes no distinctions between what is sacred and what is secular. We are told in the New Testament, “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men” (Col 3:23). God is interested in every kind of labor. There is no work from which we should exclude Him. Bottom line: You can't build without the Lord. In John 15:5, Jesus says, “Apart from Me you can do nothing.” That's the heart of Psalm 127. You can work and work hard, but apart from God's involvement, all of your efforts will amount to spitting into the wind.<sup>10</sup>

The second example Solomon cites is homeland security. He writes, “**Unless the LORD guards the city, the watchman keeps awake in vain**” (127:1b). Security has always been a priority to men. In ancient times huge walls were built around cities. At various points along the wall were elevated towers. Watchmen were stationed there at all hours of the day and night. They prevented unwanted persons from entering into the city. They warned the people of the city of imminent attacks. Today we have security guards, watchdogs, and sophisticated electronic devices, all designed to provide the same security sought by the ancients. Yet, all of the precautions in the world are not enough to keep us safe.<sup>11</sup> Rather, our security must lie in the Lord. We must depend upon Him.

This begs the question: Will our nation's prosperity endure? Will our nation continue for long? The answer to this question is clear: Unless, the Lord guards the city, we will be reduced to nothing! This is especially true of America. We are a proud nation that rests in military might. Unfortunately, we are becoming increasingly less dependent upon God. The end result will be our destruction as a nation.<sup>12</sup>

It goes without saying that both of these activities are worthwhile. We should attempt to build houses; we should have a police force and military. Solomon is simply saying, in each case, our work and security is in vain when we engage in the activity alone, without God's involvement.

In 127:2a, Solomon provides three more examples that stem from work holism. He argues, **"It is vain for you to rise up early, to retire late, to eat the bread of painful labors."** In Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, we are told that there is a time for everything. When our work totally consumes us we do not have time for other vitally important responsibilities. Too much work is counterproductive. Now all of us know that occasionally it is necessary to "burn the midnight oil." While everyone finds occasions, which require extra effort and longer time commitments, we must not make this the pattern.<sup>13</sup> This Psalm does not encourage believers to lounge around with feet kicked up drinking Pina Coladas. We are not to mooch off friends either. The point that Solomon is making is: Rest in the Lord and don't labor independently of Him.<sup>14</sup> There is a saying, "Little is much if God is in it," but the reverse is also true, "Much is nothing if God is not in it." That's what this Psalm says: Unless our activity is ordered and directed by the Lord, it is a waste of time and energy.<sup>15</sup>

Why is prolonging our labor vain? Because it violates a basic spiritual principle: God gives to those who have learned to rest in Him, not to those who strive in their own strength. In the last phrase of 127:2, Solomon says, **"For He gives to His beloved<sup>16</sup> even in his sleep."** Some translations say, "For He gives to His beloved sleep."<sup>17</sup> Either is a possible translation from the Hebrew. One implies that God helps a person rest at night; the other implies that while a person is resting God is busily at work in the world to bless him. Which fits the context better? The first half of 127:2 says that it is vain to rise up early and retire late. But how would the simple statement that God gives sleep discourage a person from getting up early and going to bed late? Man is not interested in his sleep; he's worried and wants to be about his business. But if Solomon meant, as I think he did, "God gives to His beloved in his sleep," then there is a tremendously strong incentive to stop being anxious and cutting our sleep short. The incentive is this: God can perform more good for those who trust Him while they sleep than they can perform with anxious labor for themselves while awake.

Victor Hugo, a 19<sup>th</sup> century writer, once said, "When you have accomplished your daily task, go to sleep in peace; God is awake."<sup>18</sup> Are you able to put the efforts of the day aside and get a decent night's sleep? Do you allow yourself the freedom to sleep in on occasion? Or, are you so consumed with commitments that you rob your body of rest and resort to caffeine or other stimulants and strategies to keep all the balls in the air?<sup>19</sup>

Have you ever wondered why God made us in such a way that we have to sleep away a third of our lives? God could have designed a human being that was always fresh and rested and needed no sleep. Why did He decree that sleep be part of human experience? I'll give you my opinion. He wanted to give a universal reminder to the human race that we are but children and ought to own up to it (Ps 103:14).<sup>20</sup> We are so frail that we have to become helpless and unconscious and blind and weak everyday in order to live at all. Sleep is a terribly humbling experience. We are never weaker and more childlike than when we sleep in faith. Yet, God has said, "My power is perfected in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9a). If God's power is made perfect in our weakness, we can rest assured that God works with all His might through the night on our behalf. The truth be known, God can accomplish much in our lives even as we sleep.

This Psalm contains a principle, which relates to those who may never have come to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. No matter how much you strive to earn a righteousness, which you hope the Lord will accept your efforts will always be futile. Your works will never be acceptable to God. He has chosen to save men by His grace, not by their works. To be saved you must recognize yourself as a sinner, and your efforts to be righteous apart from God are worthless. Simply resting in Him can save you. (See Rom 4:4-5). God not only gives sleep to His children, He also gives to His children “in sleep.” That is when there is no toiling and striving; only resting in His goodness and faithfulness. If you are tired of working hard to please the Lord in attempt to earn your way to heaven, trust in His Son today. Jesus Christ has accomplished the work for you. It’s finished (John 19:30). You can rest in that reality and stop striving.

[If man receives the blessing while he is sleeping, it is evident that the fruit of his labors depend on God’s gracious gift rather than on his own efforts. The Lord delights to give good gifts to His beloved children. Children are an illustration of God’s gifts of grace.]<sup>21</sup>

In 127:3, Solomon states, **“Behold, children are a gift of the LORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward.”** The word **“behold”** should arrest our attention. Children are not necessary nuisances—they are **“a gift of the LORD...a reward.”** The folly of continual labor and not trusting in the Lord should be obvious when one considers that much of what we enjoy does not come from our own efforts. Many of life’s greatest blessings come as gifts from God. Children are one of these great gifts. The Lord gives them to a couple or withholds them as He chooses, regardless of how much a husband and a wife may strive to obtain them.

Children are a gift and reward because they teach us more about God and ourselves than any number of sermons or books. Children are also a gift because they give us the privilege of developing future disciples that can revolutionize this world. Finally, children are a gift because of the pleasure they bring us. I’ve talked with a number of couples that long to have children but have been unsuccessful. They have said, “I wish parents wouldn’t whine about their kids...we would love to have their trials and inconveniences.” One final note: Isn’t it interesting that children, while given by God, are conceived when we are at rest, not when we toil. Children are normally conceived in bed. What a beautiful illustration, then, of what we are told in 127:2, that God gives to His beloved in his sleep.

In 127:4, Solomon goes on to say that children are **“like arrows in the hand of a warrior.”** In Solomon’s day grown children normally cared for their parents in their old age. Children would defend parents as they became increasingly dependent and vulnerable. As 1 Timothy 5:8 instructs, this should be true today as well. When parents become old, they should be able to depend on godly children to fight for them as a warrior, and also provide for them as a hunter does with his bows and arrows.

Solomon closes this section with these words: **“How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them;<sup>22</sup> they will not be ashamed when they speak with their enemies in the gate”** (127:5). The city gate was the place of business. It was also the place where justice was administered.<sup>23</sup> Negotiating in the gate pictures defending against enemies who would seek to rob the defenseless through legal maneuvering and bring shame on them. The parents of many children had no such worry. Their children saw to it that their parents were treated with respect and with honesty and justice. Let their enemies try to take advantage of them! Children are to defend their parents in civil or legal matters so that they do not suffer loss or injury. Children dependent on the Lord will attempt to see that justice is done.

Do you see the point of the Psalm? The believer that puts too much stock in his own efforts has failed to understand the grace of God. In His grace God has provided man with a time of rest and relaxation. And in His grace God has made provision for many of our needs through the gift of children.

Contrary to popular opinion, God's gifts are not acquired by feverish efforts, burning the candle at both ends, but by resting in His grace.

In my estimation, this Psalm is the Old Testament counterpart of John 15:1-11. Jesus teaches us that the key to being fruitful is abiding in Him, not in frantic efforts. I do not mean to suggest that abiding in Christ precludes activity, but I do think it should govern our work. We need not strive to the point that God's priorities are reversed. We dare not strive beyond the limits God has given. Our activity should leave room for important concerns, like raising children and having time for rest, reflection, and worship.<sup>24</sup>

This Psalm also reminds me of the words of Zechariah 4:6: "'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the LORD of hosts." There is such a danger that we depend on the power of the dollar or on human ingenuity; but the Lord's will is not accomplished in that way. It is by His Spirit that we build for eternity. It is not what we do for God through our own resources, but what He does through us by His own power. All we can do is provide wood, hay, and stubble. He can use us to produce gold, silver, and precious stones. When we act in our own strength, we are spinning our wheels. As we include God in all our endeavors, our lives become truly efficient. Human resources produce human results. Supernatural weapons produce supernatural results.<sup>25</sup>

I challenge you with these thoughts from Ken Boa: "For many believers, Christ is *present* in their lives, but His lordship is often resisted or rejected. For others, He is *prominent* in their lives, but there are still areas, such as work and finances, in which they hold onto the driver's wheel. This is usually because they think they are in control or because they are afraid to trust Him in these particular facets of their lives. But there are also believers for whom Christ is *preeminent* as the focus of their being and pursuits. These people acknowledge His sufficiency and supremacy by relegating all areas to His rules and authority. For them, Christ is the central hub who orders and integrates every spoke of life." (Author's italics)<sup>26</sup>

Today, in your life, is Christ present, prominent, or preeminent?

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Preaching Today Citation: John Ortberg, *LeadershipJournal.net* (7-11-02).

<sup>2</sup> It is critical to note that Psalm 127 has nothing to say about the need for work. Solomon, the author of this Psalm, is also a contributor of much of the wisdom of the book of Proverbs. In Proverbs he has many words for the sluggard. The sluggard is described as one who avoids work as much as possible. He delays starting a task and seldom finishes the few things he starts. He always has an excuse for his indolence, no matter how contrived (“There is a lion in the road ...” Prov 26:13). Solomon’s advice is simple: “Get to work!” (See also Prov 6:6-8; 10:4, 22; 12:24; 20:4) In Psalm 127, Solomon deals with the one who cannot seem to stop working. Here he addresses the workaholic, showing him the circumstances in which work is worthless because it is futile. We should understand that what we are considering is a very specialized study on the subject of work. It does not seek to say everything, which could be said but speaks to the one who over-indulges in work, to the detriment of more important matters.

<sup>3</sup> See R.T. Kendall, *Higher Ground* (Scotland, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 1995), 10-11.

<sup>4</sup> There is a double emphasis on “vanity” at the beginning of Ps 127:1.

<sup>5</sup> See also Walter C. Kaiser, Jr, *The Journey Isn’t Over* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 82.

<sup>6</sup> See Eccl 1:2 [5 times], 14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3:19; 4:4, 7-8, 16; 5:6, 9; 6:2, 4, 9, 11-12; 7:6, 15; 8:10, 14 [twice]; 9:9 [twice]; 11:8, 10; 12:8 [three times].

<sup>7</sup> The building of a house can refer to building a house or building a household (see Deut 25:9; cf. Exod 1:21; Ruth 4:11; 1 Sam 2:35; 2 Sam 7:27), or both. The point is that God must do it. He must inspire and empower the construction. Otherwise, all human plans and efforts are vain. See Donald M. Williams, *The Communicator’s Commentary: Psalms 73-150* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1989), 427.

<sup>8</sup> Kaiser writes, “Solomon, the consummate statesman and master builder, realized that without God all is vanity. For 13 years Solomon built his own house, and for seven years he built God’s house. He had fortified cities and had built gates over which archeologists still marvel. But Solomon acknowledged utter dependence on the Lord. Only God can prosper the works of our hands, no matter how diligent or industrious we may think we are or how deserving we believe ourselves to be.” See Kaiser, *The Journey Isn’t Over*, 82.

<sup>9</sup> The text does not say, “The Lord builds the house, so there is no need for anyone to work.” It is work, not needless worry or covetousness that is approved. The type of work that is “in vain” is the type for which one can imply or boast “I did it myself.”

<sup>10</sup> See Steve Farrar, *Gettin’ There* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2001), 114.

<sup>11</sup> See William MacDonald, ed. Art Farstad, *Believer’s Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Nelson, 1995 [1989]), 756.

<sup>12</sup> Kaiser writes, “It is so tragic that nations blindly conclude that longevity is all a matter of cleverness, clout, and courage.” See Kaiser, *The Journey Isn’t Over*, 86.

<sup>13</sup> In Proverbs 31, the virtuous woman is praised for working around the clock (31:15, 18). There she is commended for being hard-working, not slothful. Solomon is not contradicting Proverbs 31; he is putting this in perspective.

<sup>14</sup> See MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, 756.

<sup>15</sup> See MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, 755.

<sup>16</sup> The phrase “His beloved” is the meaning of the name of “Solomon” (see 2 Sam 12:25).

<sup>17</sup> See ESV. For variations see NIV, NRSV, NKJV, and NLT.

<sup>18</sup> See Kevin A. Miller, *Surviving Information Overload* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 105.

<sup>19</sup> See Doug Sherman & William Hendricks, *How to Succeed Where it Really Counts* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1989), 104. See also Doug Sherman & William Hendricks, *How to Balance Competing Time Demands* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1989).

<sup>20</sup> This principle is also true of the OT Sabbath. God longs to humble so encourages us to rest and depend upon Him. Eaton observes, “The Mosaic Law demanded 14% of the week should be restful (in keeping the Sabbath).” See Michael Eaton, *Preaching through the Bible, 1, 2 Thessalonians* (England: Sovereign World, 1997), 118.

<sup>21</sup> Some scholars have suggested that this Psalm was originally two separate psalms. They propose this because the connection between 127:1-2 and verses 3-5 is an enigma to them. I personally am convinced that there is a very clear sequence and progression of thought. Children provide an excellent conclusion to the argument of 127:1-2. Children illustrate and apply positively the truths previously taught from a somewhat negative perspective. The provision of children differs from that for which men toil. When men work they are striving for wages, not a gift. Wages are what we produce with the work of our hands. Gifts are those things generously and graciously given to us by another. Verse 3 informs us that children are a gift from God. They are a great reward.

<sup>22</sup> Under the OT law, God promised to bless the godly with children (Deut 28:4), but He gave no such promise to Christians. Therefore, it is a mistake to conclude that the more children a Christian couple has the godlier they are.

<sup>23</sup> See Ps 69:12; Gen 19:1; 34:20-21; Deut 17:5; 21:19; 22:15, 24; Amos 5:12.

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<sup>24</sup> Deffinbaugh writes, “Many may wonder about the implications of this psalm regarding birth control. I do not wish to be understood as saying more than I am. I am not here advocating that we should never practice birth control. I am suggesting that we should seriously evaluate our motives (and even our methods) for preventing children. Thus we can conclude that birth control is evil if it is motivated by selfish interests and if it is clearly an act of disobedience. Are we not having children to preserve our freedom? Is it that we don’t trust God to provide for our material and emotional needs? Psalm 127 emphasizes that “children are a gift of the Lord” (127:3). Therefore, we should carefully evaluate our real reasons for birth control and place a high value on having children. Yet it is just as possible to want children for the wrong reasons, as it is to wish to prevent their conception. We should test our motives by the principle: “whatever is not of faith is sin” (Rom 14:23). Methods of birth control, which are abortive rather than preventative, are clearly wrong. Beyond this, the Bible does not have a proof text for condemning or condoning birth control for everyone; it is a matter of personal conviction.” See Robert L. Deffinbaugh, “Psalm 127: A Word for Workaholics” from *A Psalm for All Seasons* ([www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org), Biblical Studies, 1998), 144.

<sup>25</sup> See MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, 757.

<sup>26</sup> See Ken Boa, *Reflections* Newsletter, September 1992.