

A Household More Enduring Than Solomon's

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[0 : 0 0] Well, now we come to our reading from the Bible, which tonight is Psalm 127, Psalm 127. And if you have one of our big hardback Bibles, you'll find this on page 518, Psalm 127, page 518.

Now, if you have the Psalm open before you, you'll see that it has a title. Well, actually, there are two titles given to it in the ESV Bible. The first one, Unless the Lord Builds the House.

Now, that's something just put in by the modern editors of the Bible. But the other title is more important, A Song of Ascents of Solomon. And that is part of the original text.

That's part of the inspired text. And you'll see if you look around that every psalm from Psalm 120 through to Psalm 134 is also called a song of ascents.

So we have here a group of 15 psalms in total. Most of them are pretty short psalms as well. Four of them are ascribed to David. Ten of them have no named author.

[1 : 1 1] And just this one, 127, is ascribed to Solomon. Now, nobody knows for certain why these psalms are called the Songs of Ascents. But the best guess of most Bible scholars is that they were sung by the Jewish people, the Israelite people, on the road to Jerusalem.

The law of Moses required the Jews to go to Jerusalem on pilgrimage two or three times a year to celebrate the great festivals, like the Passover in the spring or the Feast of Tabernacles in the autumn.

And so groups of Jewish people, family groups and clan groups from the farms and the villages and towns, they would be on the road for perhaps two or three days on their way to Jerusalem.

And they would sing as they walked. And these were their songs. That's good to sing while you walk. During the First World War, some of our soldiers used to sing on the march.

And those songs that I guess we've been hearing on the radio again in the last day or two, like it's a long way to Tipperary. And keep the home fires burning while the hearts are yearning.

[2 : 1 4] Those are the kind of songs that the soldiers sang on the road to sing, to keep your spirits up, and to help you to think about the meaning of your life. Now, these psalms are called songs of ascent or ascents because Jerusalem is built on a number of hills.

So as you walk to Jerusalem, especially the last few miles, you're going up. You're ascending to the city. And my plan, God willing, is to look at five of these songs of ascents over the next five Sunday evenings.

And I want to give them the title, Songs on the Road. So here is our first, Psalm 127 of Solomon. 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. 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.

[3 : 30] 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. Amen.

This is the word of the Lord. Well, do let me ask you to turn up Psalm 127 again. Please.

And then let us bow our heads for another moment of prayer. Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

Thank you, dear Father, that you have spoken to us in the Bible and that you speak to us today in the same scriptures. And we pray that you will help us to love you, to know you better, and to serve you more wholeheartedly.

We ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. So Psalm 127. And my title this evening is A Household More Enduring Than Solomon's.

[4 : 41] Now we'll get to the psalm in a moment, but I just want to say one or two other things first before we get into the text. I want to say something about our current situation here in our church, because I do think that this Psalm 127 will help us in our present position.

On our church's in tray, there is a challenge. A challenge to build and to grow and to spread. In fact, a challenge to plant the gospel in two new locations.

In Kelvin Grove, which is that-a-way, and in Queens Park, which is that-a-way. Now it's a big challenge to organize and nurture a church in just one location, as we know.

But the prospect of taking on two new centers of operation next year is really very stretching. Many of you were at that Wednesday evening meeting, not last week, but the week before.

And I thought it was a most encouraging meeting, but I think at the same time that all of us gulped at the prospect of the implications of what we were taking on. We've been asking ourselves the question, who will do all the work required?

[5 : 51] Where shall we find the personnel to provide music, to do administrative tasks and backup, teaching, preaching, catering, leadership of small groups and children's work and youth work, etc., etc.?

So the task in front of us is a task of building. Building the Lord's work. Building up and extending the household of the Lord's people.

And this metaphor of building is one of the metaphors taught by the Apostle Paul. For example, he writes this to the Ephesian Christians, Ephesians chapter 2. You are members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure being joined together grows up into a holy temple in the Lord.

In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. So Paul pictures the church there as a building which is being built up by God himself.

A building fit for God to dwell in. And its members are God's household. Similarly, in 1 Corinthians chapter 3, Paul writes, Like a skilled master builder, I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it.

[7 : 18] Let each one take care how he builds upon it. So if we think of our task in the years ahead as a task of developing the building and strengthening the household of God, we're thinking in the right way, because we're allowing Paul's teaching to mold the way that we look at the work of evangelism and pastoral care.

But what sort of a building will we build? Will it be an enduring building? A strong building that can withstand the shocks of wind and weather?

Paul says to the Corinthians, Let each one take care how he builds on the foundation. And he goes on rather ominously to say that we can either build with durable materials, gold or silver or precious stones, or, perish the thought, with wood, hay or straw.

Perishable materials which will not endure the searching test of fire. So as the Tron Church sets out on its new adventures, we must resist any temptation to be jerry builders.

The job needs to be done well, and there's the challenge for us. So let's turn now to this psalm, because I trust it will help us. Verse 1. Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.

[8 : 41] Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. Now it's a great help to us to know that Solomon wrote this psalm.

In fact, knowing that this was written by the king of Israel, who was also the son of David, helps us to understand what Solomon is talking about here. These verses are not written by some small private individual like you or me.

If it was the work of a small farmer or a village shopkeeper, it would have a much narrower focus and application. We might think that it was just about a private individual building his own three-bedroom house and raising his own little family of children.

But this is written by the king of Israel. In fact, one of the great kings of Israel, who took his responsibilities so seriously that when he was very newly crowned king, he asked the Lord to give him not riches or fame or long life, but wisdom so that he could govern his people justly and ably.

And God did indeed give him wisdom. And the crowning achievement of Solomon's reign was that he built a house. Not a three-bedroom semi-detached, but the most important house in the world, the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem.

[10 : 02] It was the thing that he was specifically commissioned to do. And the Old Testament history books, the books of Kings and Chronicles, regard the temple as being so important that the account of building it and launching it is given four long chapters in the first book of Kings and seven chapters in the second book of Chronicles.

Now Psalm 127 reads almost as if Solomon is writing it to himself as a kind of memo to self to keep his thinking on the right lines as he oversees this great task of building the Lord's temple in Jerusalem.

As though he's saying to himself, Solomon, remember, unless the Lord oversees and sustains the work of building this temple, all your stone cutters and joiners and metal workers are laboring in vain.

Unless the Lord watches over the city of Jerusalem while the temple is being built, all your teams of night watchmen are superfluous. And look at verse two as a memo to self.

Solomon, get your lights out by 10.30 and do not get up until seven in the morning. Don't wear yourself out by pouring over the architect's plans until midnight and then getting up at six in the morning to go jogging.

[11 : 22] That is not the way to carry on. In fact, there's a very interesting and touching detail in verse two which strongly authenticates this psalm as being the work of Solomon.

Back in 2 Samuel chapter 12, no need to turn it up, but back in 2 Samuel 12, we have the account of Solomon's birth. I'll read it. Then David comforted his wife Bathsheba.

Now she needed comfort because her first baby had died as part of God's judgment. Then David comforted his wife Bathsheba and he went into her and lay with her and she bore a son and David called his name Solomon.

And the Lord loved him and sent a message by Nathan the prophet. So he called his name Jedidiah because of the Lord.

Now do you see what's going on there? This baby is born and David the father calls him Solomon. That's what fathers did. They would call their son whatever they wanted to. But David's friend, the prophet Nathan, comes to David, I guess within a day or two of the birth, and he says to him, your majesty, I've had a word from the Lord about this boy.

[12 : 36] You are to give him another name, a second name, Jedidiah, which means beloved of the Lord. Isn't that delightful? For some reason, the Lord had a particular love for Solomon and he gave him this second name, my beloved Jedidiah.

Now look at verse two in our psalm. All this late to bed, early to rise stuff is useless for the Lord gives sleep to his beloved.

The kind of cryptic remark and the Hebrew word used there comes from the same root as Jedidiah. Isn't this Solomon's memo to himself? In the midst of this great building project, a project which took several years to complete, up the stairs and into your bed, Jedidiah, sleep is the Lord's gift to the one that he loves.

Solomon, of course, went through his whole life knowing that his second name was Jedidiah. And that knowledge of his name peeps out in this last line of verse two. And then why should Solomon have added the three final verses about children?

Because producing a family was all part of his responsibility as the king of Israel. These verses, like the first two, need to be read in the context of Solomon's own life.

[13 : 59] The children of the king of Israel, look at verse four, are to be weapons in the king's armory, like arrows in the hand of a warrior.

Is the way verse four puts it. Now you and I, if we have children, don't think of them as weapons, do we? They might be a handful at times, but they're not a quiver full.

They're not arrows to be shot at our enemies. But they were for Solomon. Look at verse five. 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 when enemies come, when some pagan king, backed by a strong army, comes and threatens the gates of Jerusalem, Solomon can come to the gate and speak to him. And if King Solomon is backed by his own muscular sons, armed with spear and sword, the enemy king will realize that he might just have bitten off more than he can chew.

If the rising generation is strong, Solomon is not going to be put to shame in some hostile altercation at the gates of Jerusalem. In fact, the idea of the dynasty, the ongoing generations of the kings of Israel, is written into the very fabric of the Old Testament.

[15 : 16] And Solomon would have known this very well. As you know, the first king of Israel was Saul. Saul reigned for many years, but he died in disgrace because he had turned away from the Lord.

He proved to be fundamentally disobedient to God. And so the Lord raised up David to replace him. David loved the Lord and he served the Lord unlike Saul.

Now it is true that, it is true that David had a serious episode of sin and disobedience when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered Bathsheba's husband. But unlike Saul, as soon as David was confronted with his sin by Nathan the prophet, remember that great incident, you are the man, as soon as that happens, he repented and he was forgiven.

David was the king of God's choice. And when he was established as king in Jerusalem after Saul's death, the prophet Nathan came to him and gave him the Lord's message.

Now I'll read out a part of this. This is the Lord speaking, most of it in the first person singular to David through the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel chapter 7. So here's Nathan speaking to David.

[16 : 26] 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 shall 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. But my steadfast love will not depart from him as I took it from Saul whom I put away from before you.

And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever. 2 Samuel chapter 7.

That is a very important prophecy in the unfolding story of the kingdom of Israel. And did you notice what the Lord promises to David there? First of all, a son.

[17 : 33] And that son, of course, is Solomon Jedediah who will build a house for the name of the Lord and that is the temple. But the Lord is also promising David a house in a slightly different sense.

In the sense of an ongoing family line. And we sometimes speak of the house of Stuart or the house of Windsor when we're talking of the monarchs of Britain.

And we use house in the sense of an enduring royal family. And that's what the prophet Nathan has in mind as he speaks to David. And our Psalm 127, although it's only a little psalm, only five verses long, it speaks of both of those houses.

The house of verse 1 is first and foremost the temple in Jerusalem. But the children in verses 3 to 5 are the succeeding generations of Solomon's family who will not in the end be cowed by their enemies.

The kingly line of Israel will in the end, in its ultimate king, the Lord Jesus, put all its enemies under its feet. And I think all of that is necessary historical background to our understanding of the Psalm.

[18 : 48] We'll understand this Psalm much better if we can see what Solomon was thinking about and what he was coping with when he wrote it. Well, let me pause just for a moment to fire a gentle broadside.

If you pick up a Bible passage of this kind and then ask, what does this passage mean to me? You'll be asking the wrong question.

The question to ask is not, what does this passage mean to me? But, what did Solomon mean by it? The meaning of a Bible passage is determined by the writer's intention, not by the reader's response.

John Stott, who died a few years ago, was a very fine Bible teacher. And I once heard him say this, and I shall never forget it, a Bible passage means what its original author meant.

So, if you or I pick up this psalm and ask, what does this mean to me? we'll come up with all sorts of nonsense. Nonsense based on our own narrow experiences of life and our personal eccentricities.

[19 : 54] But when we ask, what did the author mean by these words? A much wider and richer world is opened up to us. And as we discover what the human author meant, we shall also be discovering what the divine author meant and means by it.

So, to ask, what does it mean to me is to gag the voice of God in favor of our own voice. But when we ask, what did Solomon mean by these words, we begin to open our ears to the voice of the Lord.

Well, let's look a bit more closely now at the psalm and we'll ask ourselves what Solomon meant and what the Lord means to teach through it. And we'll look at this under two headings. First, there are two ways to build.

Verse 1, just verse 1, gives us a picture of a right way to build and a wrong way to build. In both of these ways, there are plenty of people being active.

The joiners and the plasterers and the stonemasons are working with their sleeves rolled up. They're busy. There's plenty of activity going on. But in one method, the hand of the great unseen builder, the Lord himself, is also at work.

[21 : 07] And in the other method, it's not at work. The hand of the Lord. If the Lord is building the house, says Solomon, the work of the human builders will be fruitful and lasting.

But if the Lord is not building the house, the work of the human builders is in vain. Do you see how that bleak little phrase, in vain, comes twice in verse 1 and once in verse 2?

There can be a great deal of human activity, but it can all be useless. A good Bible example of the wrong kind of building is the Tower of Babel, Genesis chapter 11.

You remember the story how people got together and they produced a great deal of human activity. You can hear just how busy they were and how committed they were in the words they say to each other.

Come, they say, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly. So they founded the Busy Bee Brick Factory and they produced enormous quantities of bricks. Then they said, come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens and let us make a name for ourselves.

[22 : 15] Now that dream of building the tallest building on earth has been around for a very long time, hasn't it? I think the tallest building at the moment is in Dubai, isn't it? I guess in a few years' time it'll be somewhere else.

That dream lives on. But the problem with the Tower of Babel was that the Lord had no part in it. In fact, the people who built the Tower explicitly excluded him from their plans.

Let us make a name for ourselves, they said. They had no wish to honour the name of the Lord. They were out for their own glory and their own reputation. But their building proved to be in vain, because the Lord came to inspect it, and he was not pleased with this self-motivated, self-honouring project.

The people said, let us make a name for ourselves. But God said, let us confuse their language so that they can no longer understand each other's words. And the Lord scattered them and dispersed them, and the great building project was abandoned and came to nothing.

The people were very active, but the Lord was not building with them. And the ruin of the Tower of Babel is a perpetual monument to the folly of trying to build without seeking to honour the Lord.

[23 : 29] God Well, this is going to make us ask, what does a project, I'm thinking of our sort of work today, what does a project look like when the Lord and the people are working together and building together?

What does it mean for the Lord and his people to be co-builders and co-workers? The key question to ask must be, is the project in line with the Bible's teaching?

If it's in line with the Bible's teaching, it's in line with the will of God. So what are the core features of gospel work as the Bible teaches it?

I'll just mention six very briefly. First, the work seeks to honour God the Father and to honour the Lord Jesus. Hallowed be thy name is a core ingredient of Christian prayer.

Second, the work seeks to honour the message of the Bible. Paul writes to the Thessalonians, pray for us that the word of the Lord, the message of the Lord, may speed ahead and be honoured.

[24 : 34] Third, the work seeks to save the lost. Jesus said about his own ministry, his own role, the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.

Fourth, the work is marked by prayer and the ministry of the word. Those were the two things identified by the apostles as fundamental to their ministry.

Fifth, the work seeks to promote godly living in the church. Paul writes to Titus of the knowledge of the truth which accords with godliness. And sixth, the work seeks to harness the energy of every Christian in the fellowship.

Paul writes to the Romans, having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them. That's what this form is all about, isn't it? Harnessing the energy of all of us.

Now, you could develop that list a lot further. I've just picked out half a dozen features of what the Bible teaches about gospel work, just as examples, to make the point that if we do our work and develop our work along Bible-taught lines, we know we're following the Lord's will for us, and we can have confidence that he's with us as our co-builder and co-worker.

[25 : 52] But if our aim were to be to advance and honor our own name, or perhaps to rewrite the gospel, taking bits of it out and putting new bits in, or to redefine ethical behavior and to throw off the ethics of the Bible, we could have no confidence that the Lord was building our project with us.

So let's stick to the kind of gospel work taught in the Bible as we take on the Kelvin Grove and Queens Park projects, and we can be assured that we're not building without the arm of the Lord sustaining us and giving us energy.

But let's notice from verse 1 that there is no suggestion that the Lord's work can go forward without the active involvement and work of the human builders. It's the Lord and the people working together which builds the household or the house.

Real gospel work is always simultaneously his work and our work. It's he who supplies us with mental and physical energy for the work. This is something that the Apostle Paul teaches us in Colossians chapter 1 where he's writing to the Colossians about his great aim and that is to present every Christian mature in Christ.

And about that aim he says, for this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

[27 : 21] Doesn't that put it well? I toil, says Paul, and he supplies me with the energy. Now this means that as the Lord gets to work, we get to work as well.

But what the Bible never allows for us is to head for the armchair or the feather bed and then to do nothing while the Lord works without us. No, it's not like that. The Lord works through his people and he fills them with the strength needed for the task.

Would you really want to be a lazy bones Christian? Well, yes, you might say. Sometimes. Lovely idea. Well, we all have idle slob written somewhere into our DNA.

I certainly speak for myself. But the Lord, in his kindness, has the habit of turning the sluggard through 180 degrees. Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.

But when the Lord is building the house, the work of the human co-workers proves very fruitful. So two ways to build. Now second, let's notice from the rest of the psalm, verses 2, 3, 4, and 5, let's notice three aspects of fruitful labor.

[28 : 36] The first is that the Lord's workers are guardians of the work. Still in verse 1, unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.

So the Lord's workers are watchmen as well as builders. Now in Solomon's day, there would have been hundreds of sentries posted on the walls of the city of Jerusalem. And their task was to watch out for the attack of any enemy.

They were guardians and protectors. And if any threat appeared on the horizon, they were to shout out, enemy in sight, prepare to defend the Lord's city. So the Lord's work of building the household of God needs to be protected by watchful guardians.

And I guess in the average Christian congregation, it's likely to be the more senior people who are better equipped to be on the watch, because they're the ones who know their Bibles better, at least they ought to be.

When you're a very young Christian, you're comparatively clueless about the dangers that can threaten a church. But the Bible soon teaches you that there are many dangers. False teaching, which always leads to false living.

[29 : 46] The New Testament letters are constantly warning the congregations against false teaching and false living. So we need to develop a nose that can scent false teaching and pick up the bad smell of false living.

And when we scent it, we must sound the alarm. The Lord gives us all a chair in the responsibility of protecting the family from danger. Then secondly, from verse 2, fruitful labor includes refreshing rest.

I know I said something a bit snooty a moment ago about the feather bed and the armchair. But in verse 2, Solomon makes the point that a combination of overwork and anxiety is a very bad thing.

It is in vain, he says, that you rise up so early and go so late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil. He puts it so powerfully.

Think of him. There he is, the young king of Israel, feeling the weight of the world upon his shoulders with this great project, burning the midnight oil, taking his first slug of coffee at 5.30 in the morning.

[30 : 57] Don't be like that, he's saying to himself and to us, for the Lord gives his Jedidiah sleep. When I get home later this evening, I shall have a brief skirmish in the kitchen with some cheese and biscuits.

And then I shall be upstairs to bed and I shall know nothing until the cocks start to crow. Now, a little bit more seriously, verse 2 does contain an important message for us.

Sleep is a gift from the Lord God. He gives his beloved sleep. And it's not a gift to be despised or refused. Think of Jesus in the boat on the Sea of Galilee with his disciples when the storm suddenly blew up.

They were terrified. But when they went to look for Jesus, he was at the back of the boat fast asleep with his head on the cushion. I think he had understood the second verse of Psalm 127.

Students, are there students in the congregation? Don't be up till one in the morning playing computer games. You will get exhausted. Older people, that's people of 24 and older, draw a line under the day's work when the time comes.

[32 : 13] Switch off that screen. Give yourselves 10 hours break. I was going to say 12. At least 10 hours break from emails. You need to, otherwise you'll get hollowed out.

Sleep is a gift of God to his beloved, to those he loves. So fruitful labor involves guarding the work, being watchmen, resting from the work, and finally raising the next generation.

This is what the last three verses are all about. Now I know that we can look at these verses and read them in a personal way. And there is a personal application of them to married couples who are given children.

Children are a blessing to their parents. But Solomon's big concern in this psalm is with the building of the Lord's house and the Lord's household. In any Christian congregation, not everybody marries and not every married couple is given children.

But we can all be concerned with the raising of the next generation of the Lord's family. Because as they are trained in the Lord's warfare, they do become like arrows in the hands of a warrior.

[33 : 21] Think of it. Who is going to be battling for the gospel in 30 years' time? Not going to be me. I shall be subterranean. Or at least in Zimmerland. But our children and our young people, those who are growing up now in the nurture of the Bible today, they are the Lord's arrows and warriors for the future.

Let's nurture them, therefore. They're the most precious resource. As verse 3 puts it, they are a heritage from the Lord. And a heritage is something to be cherished and looked after very carefully.

Well, friends, we're almost there. We're coming into land. The building of the Lord's house and household is Solomon's concern and God's concern. And that's why it's our concern as well.

It is a great privilege to be involved in this work. It is a great joy. It's demanding. But when the Lord builds with his co-builders, when the Lord watches over the city with his fellow watchers, when the Lord gives sleep to his weary beloved, and when the Lord gives and raises the next generation of his fellow workers, then the Lord's people can embrace new challenges with confidence.

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. But when the Lord builds with the builders, the household is blessed and the building will endure.

[34 : 51] Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Dear God, our Father, we thank you so much again for the wisdom given to Solomon and for the way in which this psalm speaks of the ongoing growth of the work of building the house and the household.

Give us grace, dear Father, to serve you with all our hearts, we pray, and teach us how to do it. Be with us and give us strength to our arms and our minds as well to think about things and to apply ourselves to this joyous work of building your kingdom.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.