

“God in the Daily Climb”

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Solomon is Exhibit A for what it means to forget Psalm 127.

Psalm 127

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(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at corinthtoday.org/sermons.)

Personal and relevant

As a preacher, I’m aware that sometimes it feels to you (and honestly, sometimes to me as well) that the Bible doesn’t connect very much to our daily world. The stories in the Bible are often stories about people so far above us spiritually or psychologically or maybe even physically that it’s hard to relate. Moses parted the Red Sea. Samson was the biblical Superman. The Bible calls King David “a man after God’s own heart.” Jesus never sinned. The Apostle Paul founded the church.

Then sometimes we preachers get into lofty theology about God as Creator or the doctrine of the Trinity or human depravity or predestination or what heaven is like, and it all seems rather disconnected from the real world.

If you’ve ever felt that way, I have really good news about today’s Scripture and sermon! Here are some of the themes in Psalm 127.

Building. Has anyone ever built a house? I haven’t, but I love home renovation projects. I recently removed the columns and rails from our small front porch and replaced them.

Security. Last year when we were on vacation in Hawaii a guy roamed through our neighborhood in broad daylight poking around peoples’ homes. This past year we installed one of those video/audio doorbells that connects to an app on my phone. Now whether I’m in Hawaii or at my office I can pick up the phone and ask, “Can I help you?”

Work. I had to admit to the Board of Elders a couple of months ago that I'm working too many hours. So many I'm embarrassed to mention the number in a sermon. So this past week I met for the first time with a coach who's going to help me examine why I'm what's commonly called a workaholic.

Sleep. Another app on my phone connected to my wrist tells me not only how much sleep I got but whether it was deep or light sleep. More recently, my phone has the audacity to rate my sleep on a numerical scale, like I'm a high school freshman taking sleep class. I average about 74, which is a D-student in Sleep.

Children. Linda and I have three children, one of whom is married and one engaged to be married next year, and two-year-old grandson. All of them live too far away, but over the next 4-6 weeks we'll get time with each one.

Aging. How did I get to be 63 years old? How can it be that we Baby Boomers are now the geezers who openly calculate which one of our children will take us in or ponder which nursing home will be changing our Depends?

Psalm 127 addresses all of this and more. Does it sound relevant now? I've told you how each of these issues is personal and relevant for me. How about you?

God's gifts

Building: you don't control the outcome. "Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain" (1).

It's really amazing how many things in life we think we control but we don't. We choose different projects, for example – it could be construction but it could be anything you want to accomplish. Building looks like a very human activity. People dream of what they want. Architects design it. Engineers envision how it all can work. Interior decorators choose ways to make it pretty. Then actual human hands have to erect walls and pull wires and paint. Who needs God in that process?

Psalm 127 says all of it is "vain," which means pointless, without God. We take for granted that our plans will go forward. If I've learned anything about construction in my years here at Corinth or at home, it's that it always takes more time and money than you thought. But it's also that so much is really out of our control.

I don't know that I've ever run into a company that has their process and timeline down to a science more than Roger Colby, who's rebuilding our organ. They gave us a timeline based on decades of experience. They even build the organ offsite so that it's all more manageable. Well, guess what. One of their key suppliers, one that provides magnets necessary to the operation of organ pipes (who knew?) died suddenly this year. Don't worry, we're still going to have organ music for Christmas, but the point is that there are always factors outside our control.

Since life and death and health are not in our control, and the same goes for natural disasters and the economy, nobody can say of any building project, “I don’t need God’s help to get this done.” God will find a way to remind you otherwise.

Security: vigilance won’t provide it. “Unless the LORD watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain” (1).

This point probably isn’t very different from the first one. Hebrew poetry often reinforces the idea with a parallel thought. Security is another area where even the most experienced consultants will tell you that there may be ways to limit death and damage but you can’t completely avoid it. When it comes to human’s intent on doing evil, that’s even more true in a society that prides itself on freedom.

All the cameras and guns we have – or, in the situation of the psalmist, all the walls and watchmen you use to protect you – they ultimately don’t provide physical security much less security for the soul or the mind. There’s only One who has the power to control everything, and that’s God.

Work: the key question is why. “In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat...” (2).

Bob Buford’s book, *Halftime*, about moving purposefully into the second half of your life includes a chapter on “Finding the Center and Staying There.” What I found interesting about the chapter is that Buford says, “Most people who are in their first half want their lives orderly and neat, their religion rational.” I read that as saying that younger adults want control – control over their schedule, their careers, their spouses, their children, even their God. There’s actually an illusion early in adulthood that you are making your own decisions.

Later in life we become more comfortable with what we can’t manage. Things happen along the way – teenagers, for example, or unexpected turns of health or career – sometimes good, sometimes bad, and we find ourselves saying, “I am not in charge” – not of my kids, not of my spouse, not of my life trajectory or length. I can manage or alter some things, but there’s a lot more I can’t.

Psalms 127 offers perspective from the second half of life. The point is really not how many hours you work. I work a lot of hours, but I’m guessing they pale next to the hours of almost any mother, homemaker or not. It’s not about numbers; it’s about why. “Toiling for food” in the NASB is “the bread of painful labors.” This is not just about working too much; it’s about when work burdens you down, when it’s way out of proportion, when you’re close to burnout. The psalm says you have to stop and ask yourself, “Why am I doing this? Is it about fear? Worry? Pride? Control? Recognition? Who or what am I ignoring while I’m working? What will it matter in 20 years? Is this about God’s call or about my need succeed?”

Sleep: it's not just about rest. "For he grants sleep to those he loves" (2).

I also like the New American Standard Bible for the second half of the verse. Another way to translate this is, "For he gives to His beloved even in his sleep." The heart of the verse either way is God's generosity. God gives.

But here's the difference. In the NIV sleep is what God gives. In other words, stop working so hard because one of God's gifts to you is sleep. Did you know that researchers have discovered that good sleep removes poisons from your brain, and sleep deprivation increases the risk of Alzheimer's?¹

In the NASB God is giving to you even while you are sleeping. God created you to sleep about a third of your life. He could have created humans not to sleep at all. He easily could have done that. While it's true there are physical reasons you need sleep, the spiritual reason might be more significant. It reminds you that the at best you can be productive 16-18 hours a day. That's the most you can invest in your work, family, making the world a better place. You sometimes fool yourself into thinking you're doing all that on your own, but you're not. It's God at work in and through you. But guess what? He's on duty 24-7! He keeps giving, keeps providing, keeps renewing, even while his beloved child is, as we like to say, dead to the world.

Children: they are a gift. "Children are a heritage from the LORD, offspring a reward from him" (3).

This is a wonderful verse, an easy verse, for those who have all the children they want. It's a much harder verse for those who want to have children but can't, and perhaps even harder for those who have lost a child, no matter how many are still living.

Don't focus so much on the poetic language of "heritage" and "reward," as if we earned our children by good behavior or great faith. The point is rather that the miracle of a child is a gift from God. And like all of God's gifts, for reasons we never fully understand in this life, God's gifts are not distributed evenly. His gifts of money and talents and opportunity and, yes, children, are given in greater measure to some more than others. And whenever we see a child, we witness what only God could have done. Sure, we participate in the act of procreation, but the miracle that follows has to be a God-thing. Children are a gift from God.

Those without children or those who have lost them have an even deeper sense of what a gift they are. Children are not a right. Understanding that they are a gift gives us a deep sense of responsibility to cherish them, direct them, and give thanks for them.

¹ <https://www.inc.com/minda-zetlin/sleep-alzheimers-beta-amyloids-benefits-of-deep-sleep-boston-university-research.html>

Aging: you're going to need help. "Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their opponents in court" (4-5).

The psalmist's words here create a metaphor from a world different than ours. Few of us use bows and arrows any more, nor do our children defend us in court. Some translations say "at the gate."

Here's the point. As you age, you need provision and protection. You need someone to take care of you and someone to defend you. The psalmist is saying that children, these gifts from God, are that safety net. Our world, again, is very different, and most of us do not expect our children to provide for us or protect us.

But somebody will have to. Part of the reality of aging is that eventually most of us revert to a childlike state of need. And wherever that provision and protection come from, it too is a gift from God.

Taking God seriously

Through the years, commentators have struggled over the unity of this psalm. It looks like two mini-psalms with very different themes that someone threw together, maybe just so we ended up with 150 psalms instead of 151. Not so. The psalm refers to one's "house" (a building) in the first two verses, and one's "household" (a family) in verses 3-5. That's an intentional play on words. (See 1 Chronicles 17:1-14).

On a theological level, the psalm fits together because it is all about God in daily life. Commenting on this psalm, Eugene Peterson says, "The main difference between Christians and others is that we take God seriously and they do not." That's true, at least in theory. Tragically many Christians are practical atheists.

I skipped over the title to the psalm, which identifies it as one of fifteen psalms titled the "Psalms of Ascents." These are psalms which probably written for the pilgrimage to Jerusalem required of faithful Jews three times a year. Thus my sermon title: "God in the Daily Climb." I love that there's at least one Psalm of Ascents that focuses our attention on everyday activities like work, sleep, and family.

Something else sets this psalm aside. It's the only one of the Psalms of Ascents that adds, "Of Solomon." That means it was either written by Solomon or about him.

What one word do you associate with Solomon? I'm guessing it's wisdom. But Solomon was one of the most complex and multi-layered persons in the Bible, if not in history. Honestly, we could also associate the word "stupidity" with Solomon. Solomon began well but finished poorly. He was the second child born to David and Bathsheba after the first, conceived in adultery, died. God himself instructed David to name

Solomon “Jedidiah,” which means “Beloved by Yahweh” (2 Samuel 12:25). Remember Psalm 127:2? Even while we sleep, God gives to “his beloved.”

When Solomon became king, God came to him like a genie in a bottle, except he got one wish instead of three. Solomon asked for wisdom, and God said since he didn’t ask for riches or fame he would get wisdom but also would get riches and fame. His reputation spread as he built a magnificent temple and palace. His borders expanded. It was indisputably the height of prosperity, security, and geography in the history of the Jews.

But 1 Kings 11 describes the sad ending of his life. His downfall was women, lots of women, 700 wives and 300 mistresses. Many of these were foreign women, whom he married to seal alliances and expand his borders. They turned his heart away from God, and by the end of his life he was joining his wives in worshipping the gods of the Canaanites whom Israel had displaced in the land under Joshua.

This has me wondering when this psalm was written. Did Solomon write it before his own halftime, early in life, when he was sure he was God’s beloved who would be blessed by God? Or did he write it after halftime, when in a moment of spiritual clarity, he realized he had tried to build his own house? Did you know that the Bible only mentions three children of Solomon? A thousand wives and three children, at least three worth mentioning! Did he write this psalm later in life when he realized children are, indeed what only God can give even if you sleep with a thousand women?

One more option: Was this psalm written many, many years later, centuries later, when someone wrote “of Solomon”? The Hebrews certainly allow for that translation. Was Psalm 127 written by a later priest who wanted the Jews as they ascended to Jerusalem to think about what really matters in daily life? Is Solomon really a negative role model for what it looks like to let God guide the daily climb?

Regardless of who wrote it and when, Solomon’s life is ironically Exhibit A for what happens when you forget Psalm 127 – that you’re not in control, that unless the Lord is in charge of your projects, your security, your work, your sleep, your children, and your aging, your life loses its significance. God is not just for Sundays, for your prayers and worship. God must be intertwined with every aspect of the daily climb.

So I have an assignment for you on this Thanksgiving week. Take a sheet of paper for each weekday, and write those six words, one on each sheet: projects, security, work, sleep, children, and aging. Each day journal first your gratitude, how you have seen God at work in that area of your life. Then write what it means to “take God seriously” in that area – to release control and invite him to direct your daily climb.

In Christ, you are God’s beloved. This is a week to remember how he gives while you sleep and while you work, in your house and in your household. As you give him thanks, give him also your complete trust. Amen.