

Psalm 127
Genesis 28:10-29:12
Psalm 127
Hebrews 2

“The Quivering Warrior”

January 31, 2010

[Call – Psalm 135
connects to Isaiah 59 prayer of confession through idolatry theme]

You may be thinking – wait, we’ve already finished Genesis!
Why are we going backwards?!

We’ll be focusing on Psalm 127 today,
but quite frankly Psalm 127 builds on a whole lot of themes in Genesis –
so Psalm 127 also serves to wrap up our Genesis series as well.

From this passage in Genesis 28-29 I would call your attention to three things:

- 1) Bethel, the place where God gave Jacob sleep, means “house of God” –
and Psalm 127 says that unless the LORD builds the house, the labors toil in vain.
- 2) Genesis 28-29 deals with the land – as Jacob is departing from the land
as well as the seed – as Jacob is looking for a wife (and meeting her)
as well as the blessing to the nations (all families of the earth shall be blessed).
- 3) Genesis 29 focuses on the strength and might of Jacob
as he moves the stone that took three men to move.

Psalm 127 will build on these themes.

So let us sing Psalm 127
Read Hebrews 2

Hebrews 2 gives us a proper context for understanding Psalm 127.

Psalm 127 closes with a picture of the blessed man as a man with lots of children.
Psalm 127 concludes by showing us the fulfillment of the promise of the Seed.

And Hebrews 2 tells us that this promise is fulfilled in Christ.

God’s purpose was to bring “many sons to glory” –
but to do that, he had to make “the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.”
In order to deliver “the children” from bondage to death
the Son had to partake of flesh and blood –
in other words, in order for the eternal Son of God
to become the eschatological Son of God,
he first had to become the incarnate Son of God.

But because the eternal Son became the incarnate Son,
because he took upon himself our flesh and blood,
therefore he has become the eschatological Son – he has become the Last Adam –
who declares,
“Behold, I and the children God has given me.”

Jesus is the singer of Psalm 127.
We sing Psalm 127 as those who are in Christ.
Psalm 127 becomes true of us only because it was first true of Jesus.

A Song of Ascents. Of Solomon.

Psalm 127 is one of the songs of ascents –
songs that were sung as pilgrims ascended to Zion –
as they came to celebrate the feasts of the LORD in Jerusalem.

It is also said to be “of Solomon” –
which may mean “by Solomon,” “for Solomon,” or even “about Solomon.”

1. The Vanity of Labor (127:1-2)

*127:1 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.*

Remember Jacob at Bethel?

Jacob speaks of this place as “the house of God and the gate of heaven.”

What is?

A hunk of rock?

Jacob goes out into the “wilderness” (as it were)
confident that God will bring him home again
because he understands that the LORD is the one who would build his house.

Jacob understood that unless the LORD builds the house, your labor is in vain.

The Solomonic context of Psalm 127 fleshes this out.

God had told David that David was *not* the one who would build a house for God’s name.

Rather, God would build David’s house.

And then David’s *son* would build the temple – the house for God’s name.

The Solomonic context of Psalm 127 invites us to see this “house”
as the house of God – the temple –
which God is building.

The city is Jerusalem – the holy city –
the place where God’s house has been established.

And that is why if you would understand and apply Psalm 127 correctly
you need to see Psalm 127 first about Jesus – the Son of David –
the heir of God’s promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,
the true Israel, and the heir of David.

And so therefore, the House and City that we are talking about here is the church –
the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Too often we start with our own homes – our own families.

But if you start with your own home and family,
then it turns into a “me” centered story.
And quite frankly, you are not that important!
You are not the center of history!

Jesus is.

And it is precisely *because* Jesus is the center of history
that you *do* have value and importance!
Because you are a part of what Jesus is doing in history –
because you have been joined to *his* house, *his* city, *his* family.

Do we really believe that our Lord Jesus Christ is head of his church?

Do we really believe that *he* is the one who rules?
Yes, we build and labor,
but we build and labor under the direction of our Savior.
Yes, as a pastor I labor as a builder and watchman,
but it is the LORD who builds his house;
it is the LORD who watches over his city.

Likewise in your day-to-day labors as a part of the family of God
as you build together as part of the body of Christ –
as you watch over your children, or your students –
you need to remember that all your labor is useless,
all your watching and guarding is pointless,
unless the LORD builds and watches.

But this confidence in the sovereignty of God should not make us passive.

Rather, it is the reason why we can throw ourselves into our work with *reckless* abandon!
Because we know that our LORD Jesus Christ is the one who builds.
He is the one who watches.
And so, because Christ is the head of his church,
we can have confidence that he *will* do his job well!

If I thought that Michiana Covenant *needed* me,
I would never dare to go on sabbatical.

And that is the point of verse 2:

*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.*

What is the point of all your labor?

Why are you stressed out about life?

It is because you are operating under the idolatrous assumption
that you are in charge.

But you are not.

You are not God.

He is God!

All your running around trying to control things, manipulate things, run things,
is just wearing you out!

And it's *not* working!

Think of what we saw in our Genesis series:

In Genesis 2 Adam was alone.

God said that it was not good for Adam to be alone.

So God sent every animal to Adam to see what he would name it.

Adam labored in the naming of the animals.

I wouldn't say that Adam was particularly anxious in this toil,
but plainly when he reached the end of his labors,
“there was not found a helper fit for him.”

There was nothing Adam could do to name such a helper.

And so the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam,
and the LORD God created woman from the side of man.

Do you remember what we saw about the Hebrew word there?

Literally, the LORD *built* Eve from Adam's side.

The language of the creation of Eve is used again
in Solomon's building of the temple.

Unless the LORD builds the house...

Likewise in Genesis 15, God tells Abram to cut the animals in half,
and after doing this, Abram watched over the animals,
driving away the birds of prey, waiting for God to arrive,

so that they could walk through the animals together
But instead, God put Abram to sleep –
and God alone walked through the divided animals,
thereby demonstrating that he alone is responsible for the covenant.
God has established his covenant –
and even as he established his covenant, so he will fulfill it.

And perhaps it is not accidental that the very next verses
go on to talk about how Sarah sought to be “built”
by having children through Hagar (Gen 16:2).

Sarah did not understand:
unless the LORD builds the house...

The LORD’s purpose was indeed to build her up –
but he would do it in his way.
And so all her labor would be in vain apart from God’s sovereign grace.

And of course, all of this is rooted in what happened in Genesis 3,
when Adam and Eve sinned against God.

And when Adam sinned, God drove him out of the garden,
and told him that he would eat his bread in the sweat of his face.
Only through anxious toil would Adam live.

Truly, because of Adam’s sin,
we eat the “bread of anxious toil” –
we live in an estate of sin and misery.

In other words, all of our anxiety and fear is rooted in our rebellion and idolatry.
We eat the bread of anxious toil because we do not really believe that Jesus is Lord!

You may be familiar with Jesus’ words,
“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?” (Matt 6:25)

But that telltale “therefore” is there for a reason!

What has Jesus just said?
Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth (6:19)
Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (6:21)
No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and money (6:24)

In other words, Jesus exhortation “do not be anxious”
is rooted in his warning against idolatry.

If you are getting anxious about food and clothing,
that is a telltale sign that you are serving something other than God.

And remember that Jesus is speaking to people for whom this could be a real problem.
Jesus is speaking to people for whom famine and starvation was a real possibility.

What is it that you seek?
If you are seeking *anything* other than the kingdom of God,
then in vain do you rise up early and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil.

So how can our labor be fruitful?
How can our labor be *not* in vain?

Paul speaks of this in 1 Cor 15.
The centerpiece of his argument is the resurrection of Jesus.
Your labor – your work – has meaning and purpose
because of the resurrection of Jesus.

After spending 50 verses on the centrality of the resurrection –
showing how the resurrection of Jesus is at the very heart of the Christian faith,
Paul concludes:

“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable,
always abounding in the work of the Lord,
knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” (1 Cor 15:58)

What is he saying?
Paul is saying that your work
(your work of parenting, of teaching, of loving your neighbor –
which includes all that you do in the home, in the workplace,
in the neighborhood, in the church)
is not in vain because of the resurrection of Jesus.

Because the resurrection of Jesus is precisely what Psalm 127 is pointing us to:
it is in the resurrection of Jesus that the LORD built his house
(destroy this temple, and I will raise it in three days –
Jesus *is* the house that God builds).

And because Jesus is raised from the dead,

and you have been raised in him,
therefore your work in the Lord is not in vain.

If the first part of Psalm 127 shows us that Christ is the house – the fulfillment of the land –
then the second part of Psalm 127 shows us that Christ is the blessed man –
the fulfillment of the seed.

2. The Fruit of the Womb as Inheritance/Reward (127:3-5)

*3 Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD,
the fruit of the womb a reward.*

*4 Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the children [sons] of one's youth.*

Again, think about this in the light of what we saw in Genesis:

Adam and Eve were commanded to be fruitful and multiply –
the fruit of the womb was a part of God’s blessing from the beginning.
And after the Fall, God promised Eve that her Seed would crush the head of the serpent;
and the long conflict of the patriarchs
over the barrenness of Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel
reminds us of how the blessing of the ‘fruit of the womb’
has been imperiled by our fallen condition.
Barrenness is not “a curse” per se,
and yet it is part of what happens when things are not as they should be.

Our bodies malfunction in various ways.

If you read Psalm 127 in a self-centered way,
then you could either end up with a self-righteous attitude:
“God has rewarded me by filling my quiver!”
or you could despair:
“I don’t have children, so God must not love me.”

But if we see Psalm 127 in a Christ-centered way we read it correctly:
he is the Seed – and he is also the one to whom God rewards with children.

As we saw from Hebrews 2,
“Behold, I and the children God has given me...”

Think of how Jacob spoke of this in Genesis 33:5
when he told Esau that God had graciously given him all these children;
and at the end of his life, Jacob blessed his sons in Genesis 49,
seeing the glory of Christ in the future of his sons.

And so, not surprisingly, we see that Christ *is* the blessed man of verse 5:

*5 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.*

The point here is that if you have lots of sons,
then when your enemies come to the gate of your town,
you won't be afraid,
because you'll have lots of sons who can go to battle against your enemies.

The NT takes this sort of language and applies it to spiritual warfare.

Blessed is the man – standard phrase throughout the Psalms (e.g., Psalm 1, 2, 32, etc.)

But!

This is not just blessed is the *man*.
Psalm 1, Psalm 32, Psalm 84, Psalm 112 –
these Psalms say “blessed is the man.”

There are three words that can be translated “man.”

Adam – the generic word for humanity.
Ish – which usually focuses on man as male –
although it can have a generic “human” sense as well.

Geber – which emphasizes the maleness of the person referred to.

Psalm 127 says, “blessed is the geber” – blessed is the strong one –

Three other Psalms speak of the blessed “geber”:

Psalm 34:8 – blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.
Psalm 40:4 – blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust.
Psalm 94:12 – blessed is the man whom you discipline, O LORD.

Here in Psalm 127, the word “geber”
is closely related to the word “gibor” in the previous verse –
translated “warrior.”

The blessed man, whose quiver is full of children,
may not be a warrior (a mighty man),
but he is *like* a warrior – he is strong, because of the sons of his youth.

Think of Jacob – whose strength enabled him to move the stone from the well,
that stone that took three men to move.
He had 12 sons – and truly he was blessed.

Even so, the Psalmist says, the man who has a quiver-full
is blessed by God.

So, then, how should *we* think about these things?
If Christ is the blessed man – the divine warrior –

who has been blessed with a quiver full of arrows,
then what does this mean for us who are in Christ?

I don't think that I could count the times that I have heard Psalm 127 applied to me:
“your quiver is full!”
(sometimes with the implication that maybe it is too full!)

But we need to remember that the man whose quiver is full
is our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are the arrows in *his* quiver.

But we can't stop there.
Because in Christ we do participate in the birthing of children for his family.
We are the bride of Christ.
And we give birth to children in his household by making disciples.

And this discipleship takes shape *both* in the discipleship of children
(think of Peter and Paul's admonitions to parents and children in their epistles)
and also in the discipleship of others in the family of God.

Children are a heritage from the LORD –
this can be true of your biological children
(*if you disciple them!*)
but it can also be true of your spiritual children.

It is precisely at this point that a modern debate arises.
Is it permissible (or some would say, is it preferable)
for Christians intentionally to avoid having children?

The reason why I call it a modern question
is because modern technology has created certain options that once did not exist.
There are several women in this room who would have died in childbirth by now
if it were not for the medical advances of the last century.

And this raises a lot of questions!
Some of those questions go beyond what I can answer from the pulpit.
The only things that I am to preach are those things that God has *said*.
I cannot tell you that God forbids all forms of birth control.
But neither can I tell you that God says its okay.
What I can tell you is that the modern notion that sex is just for fun
is utterly foreign to the scriptures;
and that the idea that what really matters is my comfort and convenience
is nothing but a lie from the pit of hell.

But what do you do when modern medicine brings a person back from the brink of death
and then tells you, Oh, and if you do that again, it's even more likely the next time?

I'd love to be able to say that scripture gives me the answer that I want:
but it doesn't.

Many would say that therefore the whole question of contraception is left to Christian prudence.

And in a sense, that is true.

But it must be *Christian* prudence.

Not the wisdom of the world.

Not the selfish dictates of my flesh.

It must be that wisdom that follows the way of the cross –
the wisdom that prefers the glory of the age to come
to the fleeting pleasures of this age.

If we are avoiding children for reasons of convenience,
then we are putting ourselves at the center of the story.

We are saying that my self and my comfort – my kingdom – is what matters.

I know that some people say, “Oh, but if we have fewer children,
that will enable us to do more in the church!”

But what is the implication of that way of thinking?

It seems to have an undercurrent that tends to say
“children only get in the way of kingdom service.”

This cannot be our attitude.

You were created by God to be fruitful and multiply.

That basic creational principle has not changed.

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

I'm not saying “go crazy and have as many kids as you can!”

Rather, I'm saying that we need to have a fundamentally different attitude towards *life*
than that of our culture.

No, if you have a lot of kids, then there are lots of things that you *won't* have!

But how important are those things?

Quite frankly, our middle class attitudes and lifestyles
have an awful lot of self-centered, Christ-denying tendencies.

If we are going to be fruitful in the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ,
then we are going to need to rethink an awful lot of the way we live.

If we are the family of God –

if we are the arrows in Jesus' quiver –
then those around us should see the honor and strength in the hand of Jesus.

I know that our neighbors got a chance to see this over the last few weeks.
Some have commented on the constant parade of people from the church
who came to our home while Ginger was laid up.
They saw the way that you cared for us in our time of need.

And yes, they were impressed –
but quite frankly, all kinds of people band together in tough times.

The real question for us as a church
is *how will we live when there is no pressure?*