

Psalm 127

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[0 : 00] I've opened the page in the Bible that would be a great help to me. And it is a great psalm that we've got this morning. And I think one of the reasons it's a great psalm to look at is because actually the ethos behind it is kind of one that I'm always drawn to about.

When we're looking at or thinking about a church plan, we always want to be one where we're committed to the Lord building the house of knowledge. And that's one of the themes, the big themes that it draws out is that it is the Lord who builds and watches over his people.

But that he uses us, his children, to do that. And that's what we're going to be thinking about as we look through this psalm. That it is the Lord who builds and watches over his people, but that he uses his children to do that.

And you heard me talking to the kids about building. Not by coincidence, I might tell you. Because we have this metaphor of the Lord building a great building project.

It's used time and time again throughout the Bible. And really, we all love to be involved, don't we? We all love to be involved in projects and plans.

[1 : 18] I don't know about you, but I'm one of those people. We all like to make plans for our future. The things we want to do. Maybe now we've, I suppose, we'll have already started making plans for the rest of the year.

We'll be thinking about when we're going on holiday or plans for the summer. Or maybe even further afield, if we're really organised, we may have even organised what we're going to do next year.

But I wonder, if we look back in the history of our own lives, of how many plans we make for ourselves, that we make in our life.

I wonder how many of them have actually turned out the way that we thought they would. You think right back to when you were bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, a teenager or in your early 20s.

When you're that age, it seems like you can make so many plans. You've got your whole life ahead of you. And we perhaps planned or dreamt of what our life might look like when we were 30, 40, 50, older.

[2 : 26] We wanted to live in that location, buy that house, have that good salary. And in our head, when we were planning that, it always works out, doesn't it?

The plans we make as we look forward to them, they always work out how we want them to. I thought we were going to travel and be so cultured. We've all made those plans, but how many actually come to fruition?

Nobody's life or plan turns out the way we dreamt them. There's always unexpected twists and turns. Sometimes our plans are better than we hoped, but sometimes they're not.

There is joy and there is disappointment. The reason I'm bringing this up is because we see that in our own lives and in the lives of one another.

We see that our life, our plans don't always come to fruition. And the danger is that we can transform that way of thinking about how we make plans.

[3 : 25] We can turn that way of thinking to how we perceive or think about God. Because we know he's got one big plan. We know he's in charge of everything. But because our plans twist and turn, we can think, well, God, is he able to complete his own plan?

What if he doesn't? And we might have questions for him. Will you do it, Lord? Will you complete your plan? How will you do it? And in the difficult moments of our lives, we might even say, Lord, it doesn't look like you're doing it.

Maybe we're even perhaps asking that at the moment. The project that God builds and watches over, he's not primarily talking about our own private individual life projects.

But he's talking about the great project of him building the people for himself. Of him building the church. Our lives are full of uncertainty.

Can we be certain about God building his people? His building projects. This psalm, I think, really gets to the nub of that issue.

[4 : 41] And it's there to sing to one another, as we have done. It's there to encourage us. And to encourage one another that what the Lord is doing, and our role in the building project.

It's there in the book of Psalms to sing to one another, to sing to God. That the Lord builds and watches over his people. And that he uses his children to do that.

And we're going to be looking at that in three points. The first one is the Lord doesn't depend on his children. The second is the Lord uses his children. And then the third is the Lord speaks through his children.

The Lord doesn't depend on his children. He uses his children. And then he speaks through his children. Before we jump into it, we just need a little bit of a road map, a bird's eye view perhaps, of what else is going on.

This psalm, as you read the title at the top of the psalm, it's written by Solomon. And if we know anything about King Solomon, he was used by God to build his temple on Mount Zion.

[5 : 40] You can read all about that in 2 Kings. And so it's entirely appropriate for Solomon to remind himself and God's people about what's going on when they're building the physical temple.

But what we get from this psalm, we realise, is that Solomon's aware himself that building God's house is not only about the physical temple, but it's about building God's people.

We read as well in that title, this psalm in particular. It's part of a special group of psalms known as the Songs of Ascent. And those songs were used after the temple was finished.

These songs, they were sung by groups travelling back to the temple for times of celebration, for festivals and feasts, reminding them of the Lord's work.

Now, as we know, we're not in ancient Israel anymore, but that doesn't mean the Lord isn't building. Just like Solomon knew, God was building a people. He's still doing that today, building his church.

[6 : 38] And like he used Solomon to build back then, he's using his people, others, today. However, there is a wrong way to think about our role in God's work.

And that's what we're going to look at our first point. The Lord doesn't depend on his children. And in these opening verses, as we sing unto one another, as we have done, there is a, there's kind of like a little warning, a criticism perhaps, of people doing things with the wrong attitude.

The wrong mindset that is revealed by their actions. They've fallen into the trap. And this is there to prick their conscience of thinking that the building project of God is dependent on them.

Just look with that, just look with me from verse one. We've got people building, labouring. We've got the watchmen keeping guard, watching over the city. We've got people rising early and going to bed late, getting work done.

But there is something deeply shocking that the soundness tells us about all their effort. And it's that phrase that's repeated three times, in vain.

[7 : 53] In vain. It's all in vain. Worth nothing. That word for vanity, basically, it's kind of connected to a word that means like a mist that vanishes.

Just look with me again. Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain.

In vain you rise early and stay in the day, toiling for food to eat. For he grants sleep to those who love. All the effort, the productivity that on the outside looks good is vanity.

It's nothing. It's like a mist that disappears if the Lord is left out of the equation. Now I don't know how that lands with you, but I think it is quite shocking.

Have you ever, maybe perhaps you finished a job, done something perhaps, spent ages on a task, and imagine someone coming up and saying, what you've done there is totally pointless.

[8 : 58] What a waste of time. If that happens to us, we'd be quite offended. I remember one Christmas, my mum spent all day making dinner, and she forgot to put sugar in the pudding.

It's a complete waste of time making the pudding, because it tasted awful. It had been a complete waste of time. Her efforts were completely vain. But that's not the worst thing.

Not only is it worth nothing, but what we see has devastating effects. We get that phrase, toiling for food to eat.

Or I think another translation puts it, eating the bread of anxious toil. Not only is it to no avail, but thinking that God is somehow dependent on us, it brings anxiety.

It brings worry and fear. Sleep is replaced with early mornings and late nights. And that's because we have limits. We have limits.

[10 : 05] We can't get it all done. Building up God's people is too big a job. We'll always run out of time. We'll always get tired. We'll always get hungry and thirsty.

But we'll always feel that there is more to do. The psalmist is on to something. And we know something of that, don't we? Now, I want to caveat that hard work for Jesus and his church is a good thing.

It's a good thing. And the Bible encourages us to work hard for Jesus, to sacrifice and commend us for it. But let's not think this means that we don't do anything.

That we just somehow let go and let God. This is not directed at that. But it's directed at those actions where sleeplessness is caused by anxious toil.

Because we're burning the candle at both ends, somehow thinking that God is dependent on us if we don't do a little bit more. And perhaps we have often, I know I have, caught ourselves doing that when we think about church.

[11 : 15] That somehow the growth of church is down to how much effort we put in. That somehow God won't manage without us. And even as I say that, when we say it out loud, it sounds ridiculous.

But we still think that way sometimes. What it does reveal is that our actions actually reveal actually what we think deep down.

Now, we never openly admit that. And whilst this is primarily about the building of the church, of course it is, don't we also know something of that in our own personal lives?

We've got busy jobs, time is of the essence. We can often catch ourselves thinking, oh, if I get another hour's work done just now or really tomorrow morning, just squeeze in that little bit extra.

What happens is the things we're supposed to enjoy become a source of anxiety for us. We can't sleep. In our family's workplace and in church. And the real root of it is trust.

[12 : 19] Because what's happened is we've replaced trust for God with trust in ourselves to build our own lives and to build his church. Because deep down we doubt that God can fulfill his plan.

We've looked at human failed plans. We've experienced our own human failed plans. And think, what if God doesn't come through? What if he doesn't come through?

Let's remind ourselves. This is what the psalmist intended to prick our conscience, that God is not dependent on us. He doesn't need us to keep his watch. He uses us. Absolutely, what a privilege.

But he doesn't need us. He can use someone else. This, the building of God's people, is not our burden to carry. God was building his church using other people before we were born.

And he'll continue building it after we're gone. Which means at the end of the day we can sleep with peace. Because we know it's not dependent on what we do or don't do.

[13 : 26] He's the one in charge doing it. How might we feel as a church plan, this more intensely at the moment?

We might feel it because we're small. If we were bigger, we'd have more bodies around to do more. And so we might feel like we have to rely on ourselves.

He knows our situation. He knows what we can and can't do. But the building project hasn't stopped. But he's still bringing people to new life. He's in the business of saving people. You can work like a dog.

Have very little sleep. Tell everyone about Jesus. Do all the kids' work. Be on hosting every week. But you can't save anyone. God reveals.

God reveals Jesus Christ through his work, by his spirit, to spiritually dead people. And they become alive. God does that. He does that. He builds his house. He's watching over the city.

[14 : 27] God does that. God does that. God does that. God does that. So, we know we've heard that. And we might be left with a big question. Okay. So, if it's all down to God, then do I have a role in this?

What is our role? And the answer to that comes in the next three verses, which we're going to look at is the Lord uses his children. Now, a little bit of background into this.

On a first read, I think it might seem a little bit confusing. How is the second half of the psalm connected to the first? How are children connected with God building this house? And there's a few things to say.

Firstly, this would have been shocking to read in those days. Children were seen as inferior, lesser, not as important. And even in the UK, I suppose, even not so long ago, it used to be a little bit like that.

Not for the same reasons, but a bit like that, that children should be seen and not heard. Now, it was slightly different in ancient Israel. They were seen as inferior, not because they were irritating, but because they couldn't do the same as a fully grown adult.

[15 : 32] They weren't as useful. They were just another mouth to feed that needed providing for. But look at the emphasis here on children. Verse 3, I think we start.

Children are a heritage from the Lord, an offspring, a reward for him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior, a children born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them.

That would be shocking to hear. Children. So the way that God is going to use his house, he's going to watch his city, he's going to use children. They're like arrows in the hands of a warrior.

It would have been like, there would have been a John McEnroe moment. Are you serious? It's not adult strength, it's not skill or wisdom or ability or productivity that God will use for children.

Children know. Children know. The reason, the real reason for that is that children know inherently that they depend on their parents to provide for them.

[16 : 35] Children know their limits. Children know what they can and can't do. And we get this, it's an amazing picture in verse 4. For an ancient warrior, as you'll know, an arrow was an offensive weapon that was intended to be used against long-range targets.

It's different to a sword or a spear that could be used for close combat. Because an arrow is propelled at great strength and aimed by the archer. And they're used particularly because they have a long range.

The arrow reaches where the archer can't get to. The psalmist is saying that about children. In the same way that an arrow extends the reach of the archer, children extend the influence of their parent beyond what they can do personally.

The child, armed with the parent's values and words and the way that they've been raised, can go where the parent cannot reach.

They're fired by the parent into different circumstances and situations, into life. That's not just terms of physical location, but they carry with them everything that they've been taught by their parents.

[18 : 04] Everything that they've been passed on. The influence of the parents is extended. What does that have to do with building the church?

It's everything to do with building the church. Because God still uses children today to build. But who are his children? It's us.

It's the church. We're his children. It's those who depend on him. Those he has adopted spiritually into his family. Those who call God their father. That's God's children. It's us. He's the archer.

And we are like the arrows. He's filled his quiver with us, his children. And we're there to be fired by him to extend his influence into enemy territory.

To pass on his values. To spread his word. To be salt and light in the community. To tell people about him. And as we do that, the family grows. More people become born again.

[19 : 01] Become spiritual children of God. We're his children. Fired by him. To be used by him. Okay, so we know that it's God who builds his house.

But he uses his children. And he uses to extend his influence. But the third thing that we need to address is what are we supposed to do then? What does it mean to extend God's influence and to be involved in this great building project?

Which is where we're going to move to. The Lord speaks through his children. There are lots of ways that God's children can be used to extend his influence.

And I don't want to relegate doing certain things through deeds, acts of mercy. There's lots of things. But I think there is something specific mentioned in the psalm. And the thing that is specific that's mentioned is speaking.

It is speaking God's word. Now, I don't think you've probably had this embarrassing experience when it comes to children repeating what they've heard their parents say.

[20 : 10] Maybe, like me, you've experienced that situation with your own children, particularly little ones. They've been listening, perhaps, to a private conversation and then repeated to someone else.

And it's humbling, embarrassing, but hilarious as well. It means you probably need to take a little bit more care with what you say when your kids are around.

But this is not what's happening here. This is not what's happening. God doesn't want us to hold back from what he hears, what we hear him say to us. He wants us to repeat the words of his words, the words of our Heavenly Father.

And we'll not be put to shame and neither will he when we do that. And so we move to verse 5. The confusing thing about verse 5 is that it can be actually translated two ways.

The they that we read can either be they or he. So it could either mean they will not be put to shame when they contend with their opponents in court. Or it could be he will not be put to shame.

[21 : 15] That word for contend is debah, which actually is the word for speak. And it can be either the man who fills his quiver, that's God, that doesn't need to be shamed, in our case God the Father.

Or his children, the adults. The reality is, I think that the meaning of that is ambiguous because the reality is it's God. Because when we speak, God is speaking to us.

Because it's his values given to us, it's his words given to us that are taken to the enemies at the gates. In the ancient world, the gate was a term for the centre of all commercial, legal and intellectual life.

It was the modern marketplace, the public square. And the enemies are those that oppose God's people. In the New Testament, it would be the enemies that oppose the living God.

But it is his words, coming through his children, his arrows, that is their active contribution against his enemies. The Father speaks through his children to build his house. He is not put to shame and neither are we when we speak his words.

[22 : 22] God our Father wants us to speak. He wants to speak through us. When we speak of his values, of his gospel, of his words in the Bible, the wonderful news of his son. When we affirm who Jesus is, when we give a reason for the hope we have in him.

When we testify to the living God who's transformed us. When we speak of that, we extend his influence. He speaks through us. He's not put to shame. And neither are we.

And ultimately, ultimately, if we want to see that in the Bible, the primary example is we see that in the coming of his son.

Who was fired by the Father into a broken world. Who spoke perfectly the words of his Father, revealing God the Father through himself. And so, when you think of the story of the New Testament, it's so ironic, isn't it?

That when Jesus spoke to his enemies in the public square, it was in the temple. The house of God. The religious rulers from the temple wanted to shame him.

[23 : 27] Wanted him to die this most shameful death. And he was shamed in front of everyone. But now he sat at the Father's right hand and given the highest honour.

And the honour that was given to Jesus when he seemed at the right hand of God. By being united, when we share in something of that honour, by nature of our adoption as his children.

People might shame us. Maybe we've experienced that ourselves when we speak the Father's words. But the most important honour that we will receive when we won't be put to shame.

Is we won't be put to shame by the Father and neither by the Lord Jesus. When we speak his words and his values, he will be glorified. And we will share in that glory together with him.

And so as we come in for landing, this psalm is there to sing to one another as we have done.

[24 : 31] And to remind us, to warn us and to encourage us that God will build his house. He's making people for himself and we don't need to be anxious about whether he's going to come through. We don't need to think it's dependent on us, but he will finish what he's started.

It means we can build and watch and labour for Jesus with real joy, knowing that he's the master architect. He knows how it's all perfect together.

He's got it covered, we can sleep at night. But how amazing that he uses us. He speaks through us. And we extend his influence. On the last day we will be put to shame.

And neither will he. We take our lead from the Lord Jesus Christ. Through his finished work, we become children of God that are used by him.

And so, be encouraged today. Be encouraged today that the Lord's building his house. And in many ways, there's nothing that we don't know in that.

[25 : 33] We just need to be children. We just need to be children of our Heavenly Father. Having that dependence, that childlike faith. That trusts the Father. As our own children trust.

As our children and our church trust their parents. But the Father knows what he's doing. He knows what he's doing. He'll finish his plan. And he'll use us to build his house.

Let me pray. Almighty God, we do give you great praise and thanks. That the building project of your church is down to you.

And we trust you to come through on that. Often, Lord, we confess in our hearts that we have moments where perhaps it doesn't look like it and we doubt.

Forgive us, Lord, and change our hearts and help us to trust you. Speak to us through your word. And we pray that we would see that fulfilled in this place.

[26 : 38] We pray that you would use us. That you'd fill your quiver with us. And extend the influence by your words to a dying world. To enemies at the gate.

And that as they hear the good news, that they'd be transformed. And want to be part of your people. Bless us, we pray. Would you watch over the city?

Would you watch over us? And would you give us your house? We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.