

# Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: The Master Musician's Melodies

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by  
William D. Barrick, Th.D.  
Professor of OT, The Master's Seminary



## Psalm 127 — God's Gifts

### 1.0 Introducing Psalm 127

- Psalm 127 is the second psalm in the third set of three psalms in the Psalms of Ascents (cp. Pss 121 and 124).
  - ✓ It is the middle psalm of these fifteen psalms.
  - ✓ This is the only one of the fifteen by Solomon (cp. Ps 72).
  - ✓ It is the first of six of these psalms to contain a beatitude (v. 5).

	I	II	III	IV	V
<b><i>Trouble – Problem</i></b>	Psalm 120 Anonymous	Psalm 123 Anonymous	Psalm 126 Anonymous <b>Zion</b>	Psalm 129 Anonymous <u>Israel</u> <b>Zion</b> <b>Blessing</b>	Psalm 132 Anonymous <b>Zion</b> <b>Blessing</b>
<b><i>Trust – Power</i></b>	Psalm 121 Anonymous <u>Israel</u>	Psalm 124 <b>David</b> <u>Israel</u>	<b>Psalm 127</b> <b>Solomon</b> <b>Blessing</b>	Psalm 130 Anonymous <u>Israel</u>	Psalm 133 <b>David</b> <b>Zion</b> <b>Blessing</b>
<b><i>Triumph – Protection</i></b>	Psalm 122 <b>David</b> <u>Israel</u> Jerusalem “house of the LORD”	Psalm 125 Anonymous <u>Israel</u> Jerusalem <b>Zion</b>	Psalm 128 Anonymous <u>Israel</u> Jerusalem <b>Zion</b> <b>Blessing</b>	Psalm 131 <b>David</b> <u>Israel</u>	Psalm 134 Anonymous <b>Zion</b> “house of the LORD” <b>Blessing</b>

- ✓ Psalm 127's theme: *Troubled travelers turn to God for a tranquil and trusting sleep.*
- The city motto for Edinburgh, Scotland is *Nisi Dominus Frusta* (“Without the Lord, Frustration”), derived from Psalm 127:1.

## 2.0 Reading Psalm 127 (NAU)

- 127:1** A Song of Ascents, of Solomon.  
Unless the LORD builds the house,  
They labor in vain who build it;  
Unless the LORD guards the city,  
The watchman keeps awake in vain.
- 127:2** It is vain for you to rise up early,  
To retire late,  
To eat the bread of painful labors;  
For He gives to His beloved *even in his* sleep.
- 127:3** Behold, children are a gift of the LORD,  
The fruit of the womb is a reward.
- 127:4** Like arrows in the hand of a warrior,  
So are the children of one's youth.
- 127:5** How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them;  
They will not be ashamed  
When they speak with their enemies in the gate.

## 3.0 Understanding Psalm 127

### 3.1 Outline

- Psalm Heading (v. 1a)
- I. Dependence on the Lord (vv. 1b–2)
  - II. Descendants from the Lord (vv. 3–5)



### 3.2 Notes

- **v. 1** “Unless the LORD”
  - Psalm 127 focuses on the Lord’s essential involvement in whatever His people attempt.
  - Solomon makes no allowance for self-reliance in any labor.
  - God alone performs as the agent of success — especially in regard to the family.
  - “Labor is to be a matter of collaboration with God (1 Cor 15:10, 58).” — Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 181.
  - Compare John 15:5 and Colossians 3:23–24.
- **v. 1** “builds the house”
  - Differing viewpoints propose two different references for this “house.”
    - ✓ The Temple or palace that Solomon built.
    - ✓ Raising a family — “build” can mean to “have/obtain children” (Gen 16:2; 30:3) and “house” can refer to a family (Exod 1:21; Ps 113:9).
  - Solomon’s son Rehoboam undid much of what Solomon had

produced, reducing the glory of both Temple and palace, exceeding the idolatry allowed by Solomon, and rupturing Solomon's peaceful coexistence with neighboring powers (1 Kgs 14:21–30).

- The dynasty (“house”) of David declined in stability, unity, wealth, power, and influence during Rehoboam’s brief reign.
- Compare Ecclesiastes 2:18–23.
- v. 1 “in vain”
  - Although this word comes from a different root than “vanity of vanities” in Ecclesiastes (1:2), the concept is closely related.
  - Both in Ecclesiastes and Psalm 127, everything is “in vain” if the Lord is omitted from one’s endeavors.
- v. 2 “To eat the bread of painful labors”
  - Solomon is not slighting honest labor. He shows the futility of feverish, fretting, and fanatical labor. This text addresses the workaholic and those who are fiercely self-sufficient.
  - Scripture demands work to support one’s family and not be an unnecessary burden to others, but condemns laziness.
    - ✓ Genesis 3:17; Proverbs 21:25; Ephesians 4:28; 1 Thessalonians 4:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:10; 1 Timothy 5:8.
- v. 2 “beloved”
  - The Lord instructed the prophet Nathan to name Solomon Jedidiah (“beloved of Yah”; 2 Sam 12:25).
  - Thus the names of Solomon bracket the first half of the psalm and provide the means of emphasizing divine care and provision for His people.
- v. 2 “sleep”
  - “Sleep” plays on the word “vain” — both are 3-letter Hebrew words with identical first and third letters. The middle letter of both have a similar appearance, though different letters.
  - Even the meanings are somewhat parallel. “Vain” has the idea of “empty” or “nothing.” In sleep working hands are empty and the mind works on nothing.
  - Thus, the strophe has cohesion.
  - NAU’s “*even in his sleep*” represents a less direct way of reading the text. It is better to read it as “He gives to His beloved sleep.” Compare Psalm 4:8; Proverbs 3:24; 19:23.
- v. 3 “Behold”
  - The second half of Psalm 127 commences by calling attention to the ultimate illustration of divine care and provision — children.
- v. 3 “children”
  - This word (*bānim*) sounds very similar to “build” (*bōnim*) in the first half of the psalm (v. 1). The assonance helps unite the poem.



- According to John Phillips, *Exploring Psalms*, 2 vols., John Phillips Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2002), 2:487–89, children are: Our Heritage (v. 3), Our Helpers (v. 4), and Our Happiness (v. 5).



- v. 4 “Like arrows”
  - Some commentators argue for limiting verses 3–5 to “sons” rather than to “children.” One of their arguments involves the military simile.
    - ✓ “Protection and defensive power are guaranteed by the sons.” — Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, trans. by Hilton C. Oswald, Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 455.
  - Another argument involves the civil issue of support in court cases heard in the city gate, a place where the men of the city conducted judicial and governmental business.
- v. 5 “blessed”
  - What a contrast to “vain” in the first half of the psalm. Even the sounds of the two words are reversed (v. 5 *’ash<sup>e</sup>rey* vs. v. 1 *shaw<sup>e</sup>’*).
  - Compare the Psalter’s other beatitudes: 1:1; 2:12; 32:1, 2; 33:12; 34:9; 40:4; 41:1; 65:4; 84:4, 5, 12; 89:16; 94:12; 106:3; 112:1; 119:1, 2; 128:1, 2; 137:8, 9; 144:15; 146:5.
- v. 5 “gate”
  - References to the city (v. 1) and the city’s gate (v. 5) bracket the psalm.
  - A city is only as strong and secure as the families within its walls.

#### 4.0 Singing Psalm 127

##### “We Build with Fruitless Cost, Unless”

(Tune: “Amazing Grace”)

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|---|---|
| 1 We build with fruitless cost, unless<br>the Lord the pile sustain,<br>Unless the Lord the city keep<br>the watchman wakes in vain.          | 2 In vain we rise before the day,<br>and late to rest repair,<br>Allow no respite to our toil,<br>and eat the bread of care.          |
| 3 Supplies of life, with ease to them,<br>he on his saints bestows;<br>He crowns their labor with success,<br>their nights with sound repose. | 4 Children, those comforts of our life,<br>are presents from the Lord;<br>He gives a num’rous race of heirs,<br>as piety’s reward.    |
| 5 As arrows in a giant’s hand,<br>when marching forth to war,<br>E’en so the sons of sprightly youth<br>their parents’ safeguard are.         | 6 Happy the man whose quiver’s filled<br>with these prevailing arms;<br>He needs not fear to meet his foe<br>at law, or war’s alarms. |

— N. Brady and N. Tate (1821)

[http://www.cgmusic.com/workshop/newver\\_frame.htm](http://www.cgmusic.com/workshop/newver_frame.htm)

## **5.0 Praying Psalm 127**

- O Lord, help me guide my family according to Your will. [v. 1, ]
- At bed time and all times, give me a calm trust in Your presence and work. [v. 2]
- Thank You, Father for the children whom You have given to me. [v. 3]
- Lord, provide me with confident faith as I live life in a hostile world. [v. 5]

## **6.0 Applying Psalm 127**

- Rather than self-reliant, we need to learn reliance on God.
- Without God all labor is useless, worthless, vain.
- God-centered families are God-blessed families.
- God is the Builder of the house,  
the Bulwark of the city,  
the Booster of the worker,  
and the Blessor of the family.

The entire miracle of procreation and reproduction requires our participation, but hardly in the form of what we call our work. We did not make these marvelous creatures that walk and talk and grow among us. We participated in an act of love which was provided for us in the structure of God's creation.

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The pilgrimage is not at the center; the Lord is at the center. No matter how hard they struggled to get there, no matter what they did in the way of heroics—fending off bandits, clubbing lions and crushing wolves—that is not what is to be sung. Psalm 127 insists on a perspective in which our effort is at the periphery and God's work is at the center.

— Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*  
(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 106, 107