



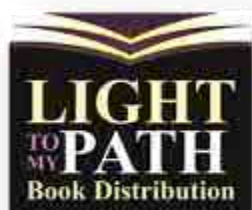
F. WAYNE MAC LEOD

Unless the Lord Builds the House

Uncovering the Futility
of Anxious Toil:
Reflections on Psalm 127:1-2

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F. Wayne MacLeod

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

In this study I would like to take time to reflect on Psalm 127:1-2:

A Song of Ascents. Of Solomon.

*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.*

*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. (Psalm 127)*

There are personal reasons for this study. I struggle with anxiety and need to remind myself of the truths stated in these verses. In recent years the Lord has also been teaching me that He has a purpose in everything He does and only what He does will last. I am learning to expect Him to work and trust more in what He does. He has been teaching me also the vital importance of knowing His leading in the ministry He has given me. It is my prayer that my reflections on this passage (though they be for personal reasons) will be a blessing to you also.

Psalm 127 is introduced as “A Song of Ascents.” There has been some debate over the meaning of this title.

Many scholars believe the title indicates that these psalms were sung by worshippers as they ascended the road to Jerusalem to attend the three pilgrim festivals (Deuteronomy 16:16). Others think they were sung by the Levite singers as they ascended the fifteen steps to minister at the Temple in Jerusalem. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Song_of_Ascents)

While it is unclear as to the exact definition of the phrase “Song of Ascents” it appears that it was a psalm written for people who were coming to worship the Lord. A Song of Ascents was a call to worship and gave cause for worshippers to bring praise to the Lord.

As a song of Ascents, Psalm 127 speaks of our need for the Lord and His willingness to come to our aid in times of need. It reminds us that we can rest in the wonderful security He provides and how He richly blesses us with good things. This is cause for worship and praise.

There is a second detail mentioned in the introduction to this psalm. This is a song written by Solomon. Knowing the author of the psalm helps us to get a better perspective on its meaning and provides the background of its composition. Let’s take a moment to examine a few details about Solomon’s life.

As Solomon begins the psalm, he speaks about building a house. This is something for which Solomon was famous. As the king of Israel, he built one of the most luxurious houses of worship the nation had ever seen. Solomon’s father David had made elaborate plans for the construction

of this temple. Listen to what David told Solomon in 1 Chronicles 22:

[14] With great pains I have provided for the house of the LORD 100,000 talents of gold, a million talents of silver, and bronze and iron beyond weighing, for there is so much of it; timber and stone, too, I have provided. To these you must add. [15] You have an abundance of workmen: stonecutters, masons, carpenters, and all kinds of craftsmen without number, skilled in working [16] gold, silver, bronze, and iron. Arise and work! The LORD be with you!" (1 Chronicles 22)

A talent was about 75 pounds or 34 kilograms. This meant that David had provided 3,400,000 kilogrammes (7,500,000 pounds) of gold for the construction of the temple. He also provided 34,000,000 kilogrammes (75,000,000 pounds) of silver. The bronze and iron he accumulated for this project was "beyond weighing". Also, on this list of supplies for the temple were the timber and stone which was not counted. Many skilled workers were hired to construct the temple. The end result was a structure that was the marvel of the world at that time. The temple that Solomon built was an impressive structure.

The blessing of God was not only on the temple that Solomon built but on the whole nation of Israel who experienced wealth and prosperity during the time of his reign. Evidence of this can be seen in 1 Kings 10:21:

[21] All King Solomon's drinking vessels were of gold, and all the vessels of the House of the Forest of Lebanon were of pure gold. None were of silver; silver was not considered as anything in the days of Solomon. (1 Kings 10)

Notice the phrase, “silver was not considered as anything in the days of Solomon.” As precious as silver was, it was not valued in those days because of its abundance. Solomon is described in 1 Kings 10 as being richer and wiser than all the kings of the earth:

[23] Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. (1 Kings 10)

Why is it important that we examine these facts about Solomon? Solomon's opening remarks in this psalm speak about building a house. He was known for building the magnificent house of the Lord in Jerusalem. He was also known for building the house of Israel as a nation and bringing it to new heights of riches and prosperity. Solomon knew what it was like to live in prosperity, and the blessing of the Lord was powerfully on his construction projects and administration of the nation.

Having said this, however, there is another important detail we need to examine in the life of Solomon. After completing the construction of the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, the Lord God spoke to Solomon and gave him a very important warning. Listen to the words of the Lord in 2 Chronicles 7:

[19] “But if you turn aside and forsake my statutes and my commandments that I have set before you, and go and serve other gods and worship them, [20] then I will pluck you up from my land that I have given you, and this house that I have consecrated for my name, I will cast out of my sight, and I will make it a proverb and a byword among all peoples. [21] And at this house, which was exalted, everyone passing by will be astonished and say, ‘Why has the LORD done thus to this land and to this house?’ [22] Then they will say, ‘Because they

abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers who brought them out of the land of Egypt, and laid hold on other gods and worshiped them and served them. Therefore he has brought all this disaster on them.” (2 Chronicles 7)

The Lord God told King Solomon that if Israel turned from Him to serve other gods, He would remove them from their land and cast the house of worship Solomon had built out of His sight. In other words, God would destroy the temple that Solomon built if the people did not worship Him alone. He would even remove the people from their homes by exiling them in foreign lands if they turned from the one true God. As wonderful as their temple and nation were, they could lose it all if they did not walk with God in truth and sincerity. All of Solomon's work would come to nothing if the people turned away from God.

As Solomon enjoyed the riches the Lord provided, he came to understand just how futile and fleeting those riches could be. Solomon describes the extent of his riches in Ecclesiastes 2:

[4] I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. [5] I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. [6] I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. [7] I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. [8] I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man. (Ecclesiastes 2)

[9] So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. [10] And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. (Ecclesiastes 2)

King Solomon enjoyed every pleasure imaginable and had everything he could ever want. (Ecclesiastes 2:10). He built houses, planted vineyards and gardens, bought slaves and servants, accumulated herds and flocks, silver and gold. He entertained himself with singers and concubines. What did he discover through this experience? Ecclesiastes 2:11 tells us:

[11] Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 2)

There was no ultimate satisfaction in all his achievements. His soul was not satisfied, and he longed for more. The riches of this world were not enough to give him the purpose he sought. Writing in Ecclesiastes 12:13, Solomon tells us where this search for meaning ended for him:

[13] The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. (Ecclesiastes 12)

What did Solomon learn? He learned that all the wealth in the world is insufficient to satisfy the soul and bring true meaning to life. Only loving God and walking with Him could bring meaning and satisfaction.

It is in this context that Solomon writes Psalm 127, reminding us of the wonderful blessings of the Lord but also the futility of these blessings without the Lord as our central focus and hope. It is in this context that we must interpret these verses.

For Consideration:

What is a song of ascents? How would Psalm 127 prepare the people of God for worship?

Psalm 127:1 begins with a reference to the building of a house. What experience did Solomon have in the building of houses?

What was God's warning to Solomon about the house he was building? What does this teach us about the importance of keeping God central in our hearts and lives?

What satisfaction did Solomon receive from the wealth he accumulated? What conclusion does he make in the end?

Take a moment to consider our modern society, its ambitious projects and wealth. How satisfied are we really with all these things? Why is it important for our society to understand their need of God in all that they do?

For Prayer:

Take a moment to thank the Lord for the good things He has given you. Recognize that they are from Him.

Ask God to help you to keep Him central in your heart and thoughts. Thank Him that true meaning does not come from possessions but from a relationship with Him.

Ask God to give you the grace to surrender all you have to Him. Ask Him to help you to enjoy what He wants you to enjoy and to surrender what you need to surrender.

Chapter 2 - The Lord Builds the House

*[127:1] Unless the LORD builds the house... Psalms
127:1 (ESV)*

One of the most difficult lessons in the Christian life for us to learn is that the Lord wants to work through us. This may seem like a foolish statement to make but the reality is that, while we know this in our head, we still live and minister as if everything depends on us. It is important that we emphasise this point in light of the passage before us.

As we begin this study of Psalm 127:1-2, I would like to reflect on the phrase “the Lord builds the house.” Solomon spoke in this context about a house. The Hebrew word used for house refers to a temple, palace or the building in which a family dwells. It also refers to a family. We see this use of the word in Psalm 115:10 when we read:

*[10] O house of Aaron, trust in the LORD!
He is their help and their shield. - Psalms 115:10*

The psalmist spoke here about the house of Aaron. He is not speaking about a building, but about the people who belong to Aaron's family. Verses 3-5 of Psalm 127 speak about children being a blessing from the Lord. This may indicate that Solomon was not thinking primarily about a building but a household when he wrote this Psalm.

While the use of the word house may be best seen as referring to a family unit, the principle Solomon teaches in verse 1 applies not only to our families but to all aspects of life. Solomon tells us that the Lord builds the house. What are we to understand by this phrase?

God is in the process of accomplishing His purposes on this earth. Listen to the words Jesus spoke to Peter in Matthew 16:18:

[18] And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16)

Jesus reminded the apostle that He would build His church and hell itself would not defeat it. This is the promise of Jesus. He will expand His kingdom on this earth and overcome the forces of hell that rally against it. Jesus was committing Himself to doing the work of building His church. It is true that He uses us in the process, but the task is His. He is in charge of building His church on this earth. To do this, He has sent His Holy Spirit to empower His servants to carry out His purpose. As we walk in submission to Him and His purpose, He will guide us each step of the way. The problem comes when we get the idea that we are in charge of building the kingdom. Instead of walking in submission to God, we begin to tell Him what we want Him to do. We begin to think that we can carry out the purposes of God in our own effort and wisdom. We take on the Lord's role and make Him our servant to accomplish our purposes for the church or for our lives.

Solomon reminds us that it is the Lord who builds the house. This is His responsibility and we dare not take it from Him. Instead, it is our duty to be humble servants, walking in obedience to Him.

The phrase, the Lord builds the house, shows us that He is the Lord and all powers of decision are in His hands. He will take it in the direction He wants to go, and we are to walk in obedience to His lordship.

I am thankful that in this matter of building the house of God, I am not the one who is in charge. I praise the Lord that he has taken this on Himself and that I have the privilege of simply learning to walk in obedience to Him. He empowers me to do what He wants to do. He leads me where He wants me to go. He protects me from the enemies that seek to destroy me and hinder my efforts to walk in obedience. Writing to the Thessalonian believers the apostle Paul said:

[3] But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. (2 Thessalonians 3)

As He builds His house, the Lord protects His servants from the evil one who seeks to thwart their efforts and render them helpless. Again, this is a responsibility the Lord has taken on as He builds His church.

We see evidence of God's protection in the days of Moses. When the Israelites were fleeing from their Egyptian enemies, they found themselves on the shores of the Red Sea with nowhere to go and the Egyptian army fast approaching. Fearful of what was going to happen to them, the Israelites began to accuse Moses of bringing them into the wilderness to destroy them. They failed to see that God was their protector. After speaking with God about this matter, Moses spoke to the fearful Israelites and said:

[13] And Moses said to the people, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you

shall never see again. [14] The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.” (Exodus 14)

There was nothing the people could do but wait on the Lord and expect His deliverance. The Lord God had taken on the task of being the protector of His people. That day He opened the sea before them and allowed them to cross over on dry land. The response of the Egyptians who were caught in the sea when they tried to cross over after the Israelites is significant:

[25] ... And the Egyptians said, “Let us flee from before Israel, for the LORD fights for them against the Egyptians.” (Exodus 14)

That day the Egyptians themselves saw that the Lord fought for His people. When His people could do nothing, God reached down from heaven and opened the waters of the Red Sea, making a way for them to cross. The Egyptians marvelled at what the Lord did for His people that day.

When the Moabites and Ammonites took up arms and invaded the nation of Judah, King Jehoshaphat was deeply concerned. Not knowing what to do, he called the nation to fast and seek the Lord. During that meeting, a prophet by the name of Jahaziel heard the word of the Lord for the people of Judah and prophesied:

[15] And he said, “Listen, all Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem and King Jehoshaphat: Thus says the LORD to you, ‘Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed at this great horde, for the battle is not yours but God’s. (2 Chronicles 20)

God had committed Himself to fight for His people and deliver them from their enemies.

As God expands His kingdom, He leads His people step by step. Time does not permit us to examine the many illustrations in Scripture of how the Spirit of God led His servants in what they were to say and to whom they were to speak. The apostles were clearly directed by the Spirit in what they did. They chose to be sensitive to the leading of God in their lives and ministries.

The God who led Paul to Corinth also empowered him in the work he did in that city. Listen to what Paul told the believers in 1 Corinthians 2:3-5:

[3] And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, [4] and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, [5] so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (1 Corinthians 2)

While Paul saw himself as weak and fearful, he also knew the power of the Spirit in His life, enabling him to accomplish the work God had given him to do in the city of Corinth. Paul was fully aware of the power of God at work in his life as he went to this great city. He told us clearly that the work that was done in that city was the work of God and not the work of human hands. God used Him as an instrument to accomplish His great purpose for building the church in Corinth.

The great apostle Paul was under no misguided sense that he could change anyone by his human wisdom and skill. Writing to the Thessalonian church he said:

[11] Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, [12] and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, [13] so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. (1 Thessalonians 3)

Paul was waiting on the direction of the Lord to bring him to the believers in Thessalonica and he knew that it was the Lord who would make these believers increase and abound in love for one another. It was also the Lord who would establish their hearts and make them blameless before the Father. This was not within Paul's ability. He could not change the hearts and lives of these people, but He could be an instrument in the hands of God for this change to take place.

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah the Lord said:

*[15] Shall the axe boast over him who hews with it,
or the saw magnify itself against him who wields it?
As if a rod should wield him who lifts it,
or as if a staff should lift him who is not wood! (Isaiah 10)*

Can an axe boast about cutting down a great tree or the saw about reducing that tree to small blocks? If there is to be any praise given, it would be to the one who swings the axe and uses the saw. Shall we who are instruments in the hand of God, boast of the work that God has done as if we could do it without Him?

Often, we want to take the credit for what God is doing; we want to take on the responsibility of changing the world or building the kingdom of God in our own strength. Solomon tells us in this Psalm that the task of building the house is

the Lord's. It is not our responsibility to take on. Our responsibility is to be obedient servants and clean instruments that He can use.

The first lesson we need to learn from Psalm 127:1 is that we are not in charge. The Lord is the One who is building the house. While we are instruments, He is the architect. He is the planner. We are part of that plan, but He is in control. Our responsibility is to walk in obedience to Him, His leading and purpose.

For Consideration:

Whose responsibility is it to build the church according to Matthew 16:18?

What is the difference between being responsible and being an instrument in the hands of one who is responsible?

Is it within our power in the flesh to accomplish God's purpose on this earth? Can we do this without God?

Can an instrument boast of its accomplishments when all the power and skill are in the hands of the person who uses it?

What is the promise of God to protect and lead us as instruments in His hands?

Why is it so tempting for us to want to be in charge of the work of the Kingdom of God?

For Prayer:

Thank the Lord that He is in charge of building His kingdom. Thank Him that He cannot fail and that even hell itself cannot defeat His purpose.

Thank the Lord that He is willing to use you as an instrument in His hands to accomplish the work He is doing.

Thank the Lord that He cares for His tools (you and me). Take a moment to recognise before the Lord how He has cared for you.

Ask God to give you grace to walk in submission to His Lordship. Ask Him to cleanse you and make you faithful instruments in His hands for His kingdom.

Ask the Lord to forgive you for times you wanted to take on His role and be in charge or do things your own way.

Chapter 3 - Those who Build

*[127:1] Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain. - Psalms 127:1 (ESV)*

In the previous chapter, we examined the phrase “the Lord builds”. The Lord is in the process of expanding His kingdom and building His church. This is His work—it is our privilege to walk in submission and obedience to Him as He unfolds that plan. In this chapter, we will see how Solomon took this thought a step further.

Unless

Notice how Solomon begins verse 1 with the phrase, “unless the Lord builds the house.” The word “unless” is significant. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word unless in this way:

- 1: except on the condition that: under any other circumstance than*
- 2: without the accompanying circumstance or condition that: but that:*

([https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/unless\[1\]](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/unless[1]))

The idea here is that if the Lord does not do the building there will be consequences. If we want to see a certain result, then it is necessary that the Lord build the house.

There is a cost to pay for not letting the Lord build the house.

Those who Build it

We see two phrases in verse 1. First the phrase “the Lord builds” indicates that it is the Lord who is doing the work. Notice also, however, that we also have the phrase “those who build” in the same verse. This indicates that there are others besides God who are building.

These two phrases, “the Lord builds” and “those who build” do not contradict each other. They show that we join hands with God in the work He is doing. In other words, we partner with God in His kingdom building efforts. He chooses to use us in His wonderful purpose on this earth. He sends us out in His name and under His banner. He employs us in the work He is doing.

While this partnership is what God expects, we can often find ourselves working independent of God. It is possible to build our homes and ministries in human wisdom and strength apart from the Lord. Admittedly, we owe our strength and wisdom to Him and, in this sense, we could do nothing without Him. What I am speaking about here, however, is a decision to make my own plans and achieve my own personal goals without trusting the Lord or taking Him or His purpose into consideration.

We can accomplish many things in human wisdom. In Genesis 11. We read about the descendants of Noah who survived the flood. They determined to build a great city with a tower that would reach into heaven. They did not take the Lord into consideration in this decision. The Lord wanted them to spread out over the surface of the earth

and repopulate it, but they wanted to stay together and make a name for themselves.

As they embarked on this great construction project the Lord came down to see what was happening. Listen to what he said in Genesis 11:6:

[6] And the LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. (Genesis 11)

Notice the phrase: "This is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will not be impossible for them." Consider the important things that have been done in human wisdom and skill. Great businesses have been built employing tens of thousands of people. Great advances in medicine have been seen in our age. Diseases that once took lives are now curable. I have often been amazed at how we can pick up a phone and speak to a person far away. How does that voice pass through the air and into our ears? How do pictures and words pass from computer to computer? It seems that nothing is impossible for us now with our knowledge of technology.

Many of those who have advanced technology do not know the Lord. Great businessmen have built their companies using worldly business principles without any concern for the Lord or His purpose. Great churches have been built using these same techniques. The words of the Lord still ring true in our day – "nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them."

It is quite possible to do "great" things without seeking the Lord or His purpose. We cannot measure our faithfulness to the Lord based on prosperity. You can be a very wealthy

person and not walk with the Lord. You can achieve wonderful things in life and not know the Lord. Solomon reminds us that we can build our houses apart from the Lord and His purpose. Solomon's distinction between the Lord building and "those who build" may be to show us that there are many things we can do apart from God and His purpose.

What is important for us to understand in Solomon's use of the words "unless the Lord builds" is that there is a danger attached to building without taking God's purpose into consideration. Solomon goes on to explain this in the next phrase of verse 1.

Labour in Vain

Solomon tells us that unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it, labour in vain. What does it mean to labour in vain? There is a good example of this in the Gospel of Matthew:

[22] On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' [23] And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.' (Matthew 7)

Jesus spoke in this context about individuals who had ministered in His name. They prophesied, cast out demons and did mighty works in the name of Jesus. To all outward appearances they had a very powerful and successful ministry. I am sure these individuals had large followings. The response of the Lord toward these individuals, however, is shocking. "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness." Notice three things in this response of the Lord.

First, the Lord tells these individuals that He never knew them. There was no connection between them. These individuals were performing their ministry apart from Christ and without an intimate relationship with Him. They were not in tune with God and His purpose for their lives.

Second, the Lord tells these individuals to depart from Him. Though they did things in the name of Christ, they did not have His approval. Their ministries were successful from a worldly perspective, but these servants were not walking in God's purpose for their lives. They were not connected to Him as a branch is connected to the vine. They served in their own wisdom and for their own pleasure. They did not belong to Christ and as such had no part of Him, though they ministered in His name.

Finally, notice that the Lord calls these individuals "workers of lawlessness". Can you imagine a person who prophesied, cast out demons and performed miracles in the name of Jesus being a worker of lawlessness? This is obviously the case in Matthew 7. They were lawless in the sense that they were not walking in the purpose of God for their lives. They were not ministering according to His purpose for their lives. They used His name for their own purposes. They did not seek His heart but their own. They were not true and humble servants of God. They did not wait on Him and seek His heart but rushed forward with their own agenda. It was not God who was building their house but themselves. The result was devastating.

Can you imagine standing before God and telling Him all you did for Him, only to hear Him say, "I never asked you to do that?" What would it be like to have a whole lifetime of effort come crashing down on us? What would it be like to realize that you had wasted your life doing my own thing and not what God had called me to do? Can you imagine

coming to the realization that you had been pursuing your own goals and ambitions and had failed to walk in God's purpose? You forged ahead with your plans, but God was not in them. Now as you stand before your Judge, you realize that all you have to show is the fruit of your own ambitions and desires. All your efforts have been in vain, for you failed to walk in the purpose of God, choosing to trust your own wisdom and desires instead.

In Exodus 33 we read how the people of Israel angered the Lord with their sin. The Lord spoke to Moses and told him that while He would send His angel to be with them on their way to the Promised Land, His personal presence would not go with them. If the presence of God went with them, He might consume them on the way because of their sin.

In His grace, God spared His people. He promised that His angel would accompany them on their journey. He would give them the land He had promised. The only thing they would miss was His presence and blessing. The thought of going ahead without the Lord's presence, grieved Moses tremendously. In fact, in Exodus 33:15, speaking to the Lord, Moses said:

[15] And he said to him, "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. [16] For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?" (Exodus 33)

Moses pleaded with the Lord to go with them on their journey. He could not imagine traveling to the Promised Land without the presence of God on their journey. How could he lead this people if it were not for the power and

provision of God? How could he deal with the constant grumbling and complaining if God's presence was not with them? In fact, Moses was so bold as to tell God that he did not want to leave the desert if God's presence was not going with him every step of the way. The only way people could know that they belonged to God was in the fact that His presence was with them in all that they did.

Moses cried out for the presence of God. He wanted the Lord to be with Him every step of the way. He wanted the blessing of God to be on every effort he undertook. He wanted to walk in communion with God and know His leading every moment of the day. He could not imagine serving without God's constant presence leading, blessing, and providing. He could not imagine living a day without constantly depending on God for wisdom in the decisions he was to make.

Being in communion with God was vital for Moses. He did not want to work independently of God and His purpose. He wanted to know God's blessing on every step he took. He wanted to be hearing from God and walking in surrender to His purpose. How different this is from those who prophesied in Jesus name in Matthew 7—forging ahead without His presence to guide and lead their every step. May God give us the heart of Moses to know His presence in all we do. To know His work in every part of our lives. May He give us the determination to refuse to go anywhere, unless we know that we are walking with Him and He with us.

For Consideration:

Take a moment to consider the “great” things done in the flesh in our day? What can be accomplished in the flesh?

Are all things done in Jesus’ name truly from Him?

What are the consequences of not allowing the Lord to lead us in our society? What are the personal consequences?

In Matthew 7 Jesus describes a group of individuals who prophesied in His name, did miracles and cast out demons. He tells us that He did not know them. Are all who see fruit in their ministry walking close to the Lord? Is it possible to see fruit if God is not in your ministry?

What was the attitude of Moses when the Lord told Him that His presence would not go with Him. Is this your attitude in life and ministry?

How much of what you do is in submission to the Lord and his direction? Have you ever found yourself not considering the Lord and His purpose in your life?

For Prayer:

Ask the Lord to give you greater discernment so that you are not deceived by those who serve in His name but do not belong to Him.

Ask God to give you the heart of Moses that seeks His presence in everything you do.

Ask God to help you to align yourself to what He is doing in your life and a willingness to die to your own ideas and purposes.

Thank the Lord that His purpose is perfect. Thank Him that we can walk in communion with Him in what He wants to do.

Ask the Lord for forgive you for the times you have vainly served him out of your own personal interest and pride.

Chapter 4 - Labouring in Vain

... those who build it labour in vain (Psalm 127:1)

We have already touched on the fact that it is possible serve in our own effort and wisdom apart from the leading of God. Solomon goes on to tell us that those who do so, labour in vain. The fact that these individuals are building the house indicates that they have been having a measure of success. As we look around us we will see many who do not know the Lord building their “houses.” Consider the success of non-Christian business men or women who build up large companies. Consider how many unbelievers live in prosperity and relative security in this world. On the other hand, we see many sincere and godly believers suffer and experience tremendous persecution for their faith. Job, who suffered in his day wrestled with this when he said:

*[6] The tents of robbers are at peace,
and those who provoke God are secure,
who bring their god in their hand. – (Job 12)*

He goes on in Job 21 to say:

*[7] Why do the wicked live,
reach old age, and grow mighty in power?
[8] Their offspring are established in their presence,*

and their descendants before their eyes.

*[9] Their houses are safe from fear,
and no rod of God is upon them.*

*[10] Their bull breeds without fail;
their cow calves and does not miscarry.*

*[11] They send out their little boys like a flock,
and their children dance.*

*[12] They sing to the tambourine and the lyre
and rejoice to the sound of the pipe.*

*[13] They spend their days in prosperity,
and in peace they go down to Sheol.*

[14] They say to God, 'Depart from us!'

We do not desire the knowledge of your ways. (Job 21)

Job describes a people who tell God to depart, yet they prosper abundantly in this life. On the other hand, Job, who served the Lord wholeheartedly, suffered the loss of family, friends and personal health. From a worldly perspective, it appears that Job's efforts were in vain and the efforts of those who told God to depart were prosperous.

What did Solomon mean when he said that those who build their house without the Lord, labour in vain? Let me make a few suggestions here.

"They labour in vain"

When Solomon tells us that those who build their house without the Lord labour in vain, he does not mean that they will not have success in what they are doing. The thief may enjoy the prosperity obtained from his or her ill-gotten gain. The worldly wise may enjoy the blessings of great business prosperity and live a rich and comfortable life. These individuals provide for their families and enjoy the richness of this earth by means of their worldly wisdom. If you were to ask them if their labour was vain, they would point you to the prosperity and respect they have obtained through

their efforts and tell you that their efforts have achieved what they wanted to achieve in life. From their perspective their labour has not been vain.

While many individuals achieve worldly success, none of this will be taken with them when they die. They will leave it all behind and stand before their Judge. Then they will see that all their labours were in vain. These worldly possessions and successes will mean very little to them at that time.

Vanity of Fighting God

This brings us to a second point. Joseph's brothers fought against the plan of God for Joseph, but God still accomplished His purpose in him. They sold Joseph into slavery, but God raised him up to be a leader in that country.

Jesus was crucified by the Romans. God used their efforts to bring about the salvation of His people.

Jonah ran from God's calling on his life, but God pursued him and sent him to Nineveh. Jonah preached with bitterness in his heart, but God used that message to bring repentance to the people of Nineveh.

The apostle Paul fought with all his might against Christians. He was a very important figure in their persecution, but the Lord knocked him to the ground and broke the hardness of his heart. He would from that moment, surrender his life to the One he had persecuted.

Listen to the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 139:

*[7] Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?
[8] If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!*

*[9] If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
[10] even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me.
[11] If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light about me be night,"
[12] even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is bright as the day,
for darkness is as light with you. (Psalms 139)*

The Psalmist had learned, that it was ultimately futile to seek to hide from the Lord. Anyone who chose to fight against him would lose in the end.

The prophet Amos describes the day of the Lord's judgement in the following way:

*[19] as if a man fled from a lion,
and a bear met him,
or went into the house and leaned his hand against the
wall,
and a serpent bit him. (Amos 5)*

Like the psalmist, Amos reminds us that it is vain to fight against the Lord or to attempt to hide from Him. Wherever we go, God is present and sees us. Those who build their house contrary to the purpose of God cannot succeed in the end. Though they may enjoy the security and prosperity of their efforts for a time, their house will ultimately crumble. Jesus describes this in Matthew 7:

*[24] "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and
does them will be like a wise man who built his house on
the rock. [25] And the rain fell, and the floods came, and
the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall,
because it had been founded on the rock. [26] And*

everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. [27] And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.” (Matthew 7)

The apostle John was given a vision of what would happen to Babylon, who seems to represent the wealth and prosperity of a worldly people. Listen to his words in Revelation 18:

[9] And the kings of the earth, who committed sexual immorality and lived in luxury with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning. [10] They will stand far off, in fear of her torment, and say,

*“Alas! Alas! You great city,
you mighty city, Babylon!
For in a single hour your judgment has come.” (Revelation 18)*

We see from these verses just how useless and vain it is to think that we can build our lives on anything other than the purpose of God and have it ultimately succeed. In the end, everything that is not built on the solid foundation of God and His Word will crumble. Those who build on any other foundation indeed do labour in vain.

Vanity of a Wasted Life

Thirdly, the vanity Solomon speaks about here can be seen in a life wasted. Listen to what the apostle Paul told the Corinthians:

[10] According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he

builds upon it. [11] For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. [12] Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— [13] each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. [14] If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. [15] If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.
(1 Corinthians 3)

Paul told the believers in Corinth that they could build their houses with different types of material. Some houses could be built with gold, silver and precious stones. Other houses would be built with wood, hay and straw. What is the difference between the two types of material? The difference is seen in the judgement. Those houses built with wood, hay and straw would be consumed in the fire of God's judgement while those constructed with gold, silver and precious stones would pass through that judgement unharmed.

It is all too easy to assume that the houses of gold and silver are more impressive than those built with wood and straw. This is not necessarily the case. Any effort that will not pass the judgement of God is an effort of wood and straw, no matter how impressive it is or how much money it makes. On the other hand, there are many small and seemingly unimpressive ministries that are being built of gold and silver. God does not see things as we see them.

Many impressive human efforts will not pass through the judgement. As we stand before the Lord and see the fire of His judgement consume our efforts of wood and straw, we may very well feel the vanity of our human efforts. We

may burden ourselves with things that are not in the purpose of God for our lives. We may live our lives for our own end, but one day we will stand before the Lord with all our works gone up in smoke. The labour of those who are not walking in the purpose of the Lord will be consumed in the end and they will see the vanity of their efforts.

We may enjoy the fruit of our human efforts for a time. We may bask in the prosperity that comes from our hard work. The day is coming, however, when all those works will be subject to the judgement fire of God. Have we done what He has asked us to do? Have we walked in His purpose? Have we built on the foundation He has laid out for us? Has He been in what we have been doing or have we done what we pleased? The answer to these questions will determine whether we have been labouring in vain or not.

For Consideration:

Can those who rebel against God still prosper in this life?

Can God use the vain efforts of those who do not seek His will to accomplish His purpose? Explain.

Can we ever fight against God and win?

How would you define a wasted life, or a life lived in vain?

What are works of wood, hay and straw? Can these works be impressive to look at? Why are they described as wood, hay and straw?

Is the Lord in what you are doing? Do you have a sense that you are walking in His purpose and according to His will?

For Prayer:

Ask the Lord to help you to walk in His purpose for your life.

Have you been fighting the Lord in any aspect of your life? Confess right now that all such efforts are in vain. Ask God to give you a surrendered heart to do His will.

Ask God to give you a greater desire that He would be in all you do. Ask him to forgive you for times you have done things your way.

Ask God for discernment so that you are not deceived by impressive human works that are not from Him.

Chapter 5 - The Lord Watches Over

... the Lord watches over the city (Psalm 127:1)

Let's move on now to the second part of Psalm 127:1. Here in the second half of the verse Solomon says:

*Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman
stays awake in vain.*

Let's take a moment to consider the phrase: "the Lord watches over." The Hebrew word use to translate "watches over" is used many times in the Old Testament. One the first occurrences of this word is found in Genesis 2:15:

[15] The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. (Genesis 2)

Here in Genesis 2:15 we read that the Lord put Adam in the Garden of Eden and gave him the responsibility to "keep it." The word translated "keep" here is the same word used by Solomon in Psalm 127:1. The idea is that Adam was to care for and look after the Garden the Lord had given him.

Later in Genesis 3:24 we read that when Adam and his wife Eve sinned against the Lord and were driven out of the Garden, the Lord placed an angel with a flaming sword

to guard the way to the tree of life. In other words, this angel was given the responsibility to protect this tree and “keep” anyone from gaining access to it.

Jacob is said to have “kept” the flock of his father-in-law Laban. To do this he literally put himself on the line for those sheep. He fed them, protected them and provided for their needs so that they would prosper.

In Exodus 15:26 we read:

[26] saying, “If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer.” (Exodus 15)

Notice how God’s people were to be diligent in “keeping” His statutes. In other words, they were to do everything in their power to walk in obedience to the commands of God. They were to respect the will and purpose of the Lord and commit themselves to walking in His ways no matter what happened.

We read in Psalm 86:2:

*[2] Preserve my life, for I am godly;
save your servant, who trusts in you—you are my God. -
Psalms 86:2 (ESV)*

The word “preserve” is the same word used by Solomon in Psalm 127:1. It shows us that the Psalmist expected that the Lord would protect and keep his servants from harm and from those who would seek their destruction.

The expression, “watches over” used by Solomon is an important one. When Solomon tells us that the Lord watches over the city, he is telling us that the Lord cares for that city. There is a tenderness in His heart for the city and its inhabitants. His desire is to protect the city so that its inhabitants will prosper and become everything He wants them to become. He is willing to lay His own life on the line so that no enemy can access the city to harm its inhabitants.

Solomon tells us that it is the Lord who watches over the city. This again is significant. When the king of the city wanted to assure its protection, he would select watchmen to stand at the gate or to watch from the tower. These watchmen would listen for any sound that might indicate trouble for the city and report this to the king. They would be constantly scanning the horizon in search of any danger while it was at a distance so that the city would have time to prepare to face the approaching danger. If an enemy were to approach the city unnoticed, the first target would be the watchman. If they could kill the watchman before he had time to alert the king, then the enemy would have a chance of penetrating the city. The watchman was the first line of defence. He literally stood between the enemy and the city, risking his life to save them.

Where was the king when the watchman was guarding the city at night? He was likely at home in bed, resting securely. The king would not be a watchman himself. He was too important to put his life on the line in this way. What we read in Psalm 127, however, is that the Lord watches over the city. He is the city watchman. He sets Himself up between us and the enemy to protect us. If the enemy is going to get to us they must first pass through Him.

The King of kings, who is worthy of all honour and praise, watches over me. The greater protects the lesser. There is no greater demonstration of the extent to which God will go to protect and keep us then in the work of the Lord Jesus who laid down His life to secure our forgiveness. He died in my place. He faced Satan, sin and death so that I could be spared their fury.

Why does the Lord watch over the city and bear the force of the enemy attack Himself? John 3:16 provides us with the answer when it says:

[16] "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3)

God loved the world. The love of God is the only answer to why He would lay down His life. We will never fully be able to explain why God loves us in this way, but we dare not reject this love for it is our only hope. This tenderness and love for us is seen in many ways in the Scriptures. Listen to what the Lord Jesus said:

[26] Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? (Matthew 6)

[29] Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. [30] But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. (Matthew 10)

Consider the incredible tenderness and compassion of the Lord that not even a single sparrow would fall to the ground without His notice. Consider the fact that He knows us better than we know ourselves and that He has counted the

very hairs on our head. This is the God who stands guard over us. This is the God who protects and keeps the city.

The psalmist, reflecting on the fact that God keeps and watches over us says:

*[4] Behold, he who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.*

*[5] The LORD is your keeper
the LORD is your shade on your right hand.*

*[6] The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.*

*[7] The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.*

*[8] The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and forevermore. (Psalms 121)*

The God who watches over His people never sleeps. His eye is always alert, watching over us and protecting us from the enemy. He keeps us from evil that seeks to destroy us. The psalmist tells us that this care is forevermore. In other words, the Lord will always be our keeper. What tremendous security there is in this! There is never a moment that He is not watching out for us.

This does not mean that every step I take will be easy. Life, by its very nature, is hard. There will be struggles in this world because of sin. In those moments, however, I can be assured of the tender and loving care of the Lord. The prophet Isaiah reminds us of the Lord's presence in the difficulties of life when he says:

*[2] When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,*

and the flame shall not consume you.

*[3] For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.*

I give Egypt as your ransom,

Cush and Seba in exchange for you.

*[4] Because you are precious in my eyes,
and honored, and I love you,*

*I give men in return for you,
peoples in exchange for your life. (Isaiah 43)*

The psalmist reminds us of this same truth when he says:

*[4] Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow
of death,*

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,

they comfort me. (Psalms 23)

Yes, we may pass through deep waters, fiery storms and even the valley of the shadow of death. But in these circumstances the Lord promises to walk with us all the way. He will watch over us when we go through these trials. He will never leave our side. He will care for us until we enter His presence.

Solomon reminds us here that the Lord watches over the city. As a king, Solomon spoke about the city over which he was king, but the Lord's care is not reserved to cities only. He cares for us as His people. He watches over those who belong to us. We can have great confidence and security in His care for us.

For Consideration:

What does it mean to watch over something? Give some examples of those who have watched over something?

What qualifications does a watchman need to have?

Solomon tells us that the Lord watches over the city. What is significant in the fact that it is the Lord Himself who watches over the city?

To what extent is the Lord God willing to go to care for us and watch over us?

Does God's watch-care mean that we will never have any trouble in this life? Where is God when we are going through this trouble?

For Prayer:

Thank the Lord that He promises to watch over us?

Thank the Lord for the love and tenderness demonstrated in His watching over us.

Thank the Lord that even when you are going through difficulties, He is there with you.

Ask the Lord to open your eyes more fully to His watch-care.

Ask the Lord to give you confidence in His provision and protection when you are facing the trials of life.

Ask God to give you boldness in what He has called you to do, knowing that He is watching over you.

Do you have a loved one who has been wandering from the Lord? Ask the Lord to watch over them and entrust them into His care.

Chapter 6 - Unless the Lord Watches

*Unless the LORD watches over the city - Psalms 127:1
(ESV)*

In the previous chapter, we examined what Solomon said about the Lord watching over the city. As powerful and as rich as King Solomon was, he understood that it was not his strength that would save him. Not everyone understands this principle. We can sometimes have an elevated view of our human ability. The Edomites were an example of this. Consider the dialogue between the prophet Obadiah and the Edomites:

*[3] The pride of your heart has deceived you,
you who live in the clefts of the rock,
in your lofty dwelling,
who say in your heart,
“Who will bring me down to the ground?”
[4] Though you soar aloft like the eagle,
though your nest is set among the stars,
from there I will bring you down,
declares the LORD. (Obadiah 3)*

When Obadiah told them that they would be brought down, they simply said, “Who will bring me down to the ground?” (verse 3). They could not believe that they could be humbled in such a way. They were confident in their own ability

and their circumstances. God told them, however, that even if they set their nest among the stars, He would bring them down. They would not be able to resist Him.

The prophet Malachi also wrote about the Edomites and their confidence in their own ability.

[4] If Edom says, "We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins," the LORD of hosts says, "They may build, but I will tear down, and they will be called 'the wicked country,' and 'the people with whom the LORD is angry forever.'" (Malachi 1)

Notice the attitude of the Edomites in Malachi 1:4: "We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins." They felt that nothing could stop them. They believed in the power of their own ability. They felt they could even withstand the judgment of God. God reminded them however, that every time they rebuilt, He would tear down what they built. They could not prosper without Him.

The people of Israel who returned to Jerusalem from exile spent time building their own homes but neglected to build the temple. Haggai describes the result:

[6] You have sown much and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes. (Haggai 1)

They made money but never seemed to have enough. The blessing of God was not on what they did. They struggled to provide for their basic needs.

The Lord Jesus told a parable about a rich man who was intent on expanding his business:

[16] And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, [17] and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' [18] And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. [19] And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." [20] But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' (Luke 12)

The rich man acted as if his life was in his own hands. He made great plans for his future. He was going to get rich enough to retire, relax and enjoy his prosperity. God called him a fool, because that very night he would die and not enjoy any of his riches. The lesson here is that we are not in control of our future. Our destiny is in God's hands.

Listen to the words of Jesus in Luke 12:22-26:

[22] And he said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on. [23] For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. [24] Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! [25] And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? [26] If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? (Luke 12)

All our worrying and fretting will add nothing to our life. Just as the Lord provides and cares for the birds of the field, so He must care for us.

The apostle Paul reminds us that if God is for us, nothing can stand against us.

[31] What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? [32] He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Romans 8)

Our only true security is found in the fact that God watches over us.

Speaking to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, Jesus said:

[37] "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! [38] See, your house is left to you desolate. (Matthew 23)

Notice how the Lord Jesus longed to watch over His people. He wanted to cover them like a hen gathering her chicks under her wing. There they would have been protected and secure. They did not want what the Lord Jesus offered and rejected His protection. They ignored the prophets God sent to them. They wanted their own way. The result was that their nation was devastated (Matthew 23:37).

The reality of the matter is that we are absolutely dependent on God for life and protection. Unless the Lord watches over us, we have no hope. The world in which we live is a scary place. We know the power of Satan and evil that surrounds us. We see sickness and physical calamities every day. Friends and loved ones are struck with fatal diseases. We watch as family members are taken from us in

unexpected tragedies. We see nation waging war against nation. Acts of terrorism fill our news. Evil surrounds us and strips us of our children through addictions and abuses of all kinds. Crime and immorality fill our newspapers. Satan and his angels are actively at work in our societies and governments. Who can protect our cities, our families and our hearts from such darkness? Solomon tells us that “unless the Lord watches over the city” there is no hope. He alone can give us hope in such darkness. In Him alone is true security and blessing.

For Consideration:

Can we ever be truly secure in what this world offers?

How much control do we have over the events of our lives?

What does Matthew 23:37 teach us about the desire of the Lord Jesus to protect and keep those who belong to Him?

Have you experienced anxiety in your life over the concerns you face? Can you surrender to the will and purpose of God and trust in Him for your needs?

For Prayer:

Ask God to forgive you for trying to find security in the things of this world. Ask Him to help you to place your confidence in Him.

Thank the Lord that while we do not have control over the circumstances of our life, He does, and He longs to watch over us.

Thank the Lord for the tender longing He has for you. Thank Him that He longs to gather us like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings

Take a moment to surrender you plans and your concerns to the Lord. Give them to Him. Thank Him for the security He provides as He watches over you.

Chapter 7 - The Watchmen Stays Awake

... the watchman stays awake in vain (Psalm 127:1)

We have seen that our security comes from the Lord. It is the desire of God to protect and keep those who belong to Him. It is our privilege to rest in this protection and trust His purpose even when it does not make sense.

There is an interesting contrast in the second half of verse 1. Listen to what the verse tells us:

*Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman
stays awake in vain (Psalm 127:1b)*

If the Lord is watching over the city, why do we need a watchman? Could we not simply leave the gates open and trust the Lord to watch out for us? If we put a watchman at the gate, does this show that we are not trusting the Lord?

What is interesting in this verse is that Solomon does not tell us that the watchman is unnecessary. He assumed that there would be a watchman at the gate. His expectation also was that the watchman would be alert, watching out for the enemy. What Solomon is saying, however, is that if the Lord was not watching over the city, then this watchman's efforts would be to no avail. If it was the will of the Lord to punish that city, that watchman would not be able

to keep the enemy away. God would overrule the efforts of the watchman to accomplish His purposes in that city.

On the other hand, if the favour of the Lord was on that city, He would use that watchman to warn the people of approaching danger. He would strengthen the watchman and give him the alertness he needed. While God used the watchman, ultimately the protection of the city had more to do with God than with the watchman.

This verse brings up a key point for consideration. What is the connection between our efforts and the purpose of God? Solomon reminds us here that if the Lord is not in what we are doing, our efforts are in vain. We have already spoken to some extent about this in chapters 3 and 4. Let me develop this thought further.

Sometime ago I was speaking to a church leader. As I spoke with him, I came away with the feeling that he was saying, "I really don't need to study; the Spirit of God will show me what He wants me to know." In many ways, this would be like the watchman saying, "I don't need to be watchful, scanning the horizon for signs of the enemy; the Lord will protect us." Or he might say: "I am free to sleep on the job because if God wants me to warn the people, He will wake me up." Solomon, who wrote this verse, would be the first person to post a watchman at the gate, even though he believed strongly that the city would be protected by God. He would also be the first to punish that watchman if he fell asleep on the job.

Listen to the advice of the apostle Paul to Timothy:

[15] Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2)

Paul encouraged Timothy to do his best to be approved by God. He challenged him to be worker who had nothing to be ashamed of before God. This would require discipline and hard work.

Eugene Myers Harrison, writing about William Carey, missionary to India, says this:

At a ministers' meeting he proposed that they consider "whether the command given to the Apostles to evangelize all nations is not binding on all succeeding ministers to the end of the world, seeing that the accompanying promise is of equal extent."

The command is, "Go and teach all nations."

The promise is, "Lo, I am with you." Has anyone the right to play leap-frog with the command and then hug the promise?

J. C. Ryland was merely expressing the universal attitude of the Church when he impatiently interrupted Carey and exclaimed, "Sit down, young man, sit down and be still.

When God wants to convert the heathen, He will do it without consulting either you or me." Carey sat down, but a vision of far-away lands and of multitudes in darkness haunted his soul, and he could not be still. (wholesome-words.org/missions/giants/biocarey2.html)

The words of that church leader to William Carey are striking: "Sit down, young man, sit down and be still. When God wants to convert the heathen, He will do it without consulting either you or me." While we know that God is under no obligation to use us or consult us, these words do not reflect the purpose of God in Scripture.

The apostle Paul addressed this issue when he spoke to the Roman believers:

[14] How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? [15] And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" - Romans 10:14

We cannot believe in someone we have never heard about. We cannot hear unless someone preaches to us and tells us about this person. We cannot preach unless God sends us.

Notice what Paul is telling us here. We are a vital part of the work God is doing on this earth. God uses us to preach and teach others. However, it is important that we be sent by God. There are many who believe they go in His name who are not sent.

Writing to the Corinthian church, the apostle Paul reminded them of how God give spiritual gifts to each of them so that they could use them for the good of the body of Christ:

[4] Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; [5] and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; [6] and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. [7] To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. [8] For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, [9] to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, [10] to

another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. [11] All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. -1 Corinthians 12:4

To accomplish His purpose in the church, God has placed His Spirit in every believer. The Holy Spirit enables each person to minister in a special way so that the kingdom of God will be expanded. He works through us to accomplish His purpose.

In the book of Esther, we read how Haman plotted the destruction of the Jewish nation. Esther was the Jewish wife of the Persian King Ahasuerus and was in a place of tremendous influence. When the order of Haman was sent out to the inhabitants of the lands of King Ahasuerus, Esther's uncle spoke to her and asked her to go to the king to seek a solution to save her people. When Esther hesitated, her uncle Mordecai told her:

[14] For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4)

God placed Esther in the place she needed to be to accomplish His purpose. She was an instrument in the hands of God to bring about the salvation of the nation.

There is a very intimate connection between God and His people. This is best illustrated in the words of Jesus in John 15:

[4] Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. [5] I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. [6] If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. (John 15)

Jesus describes such a deep connection between the vine and the branches that they are one in their effort. The branch receives the strength from the vine and acts on its behalf to produce fruit. The branch could not survive apart from the vine. The branch is designed to serve the purpose of the vine and cannot act independently of that vine. This is the kind of relationship the Lord wants to have with us.

The watchman is the instrument of God to protect the city. The watchman stays alert because he is the instrument of God. He accomplishes the purpose of God for the protection of the city. In the same way, we, too, are His instruments. He empowers and leads us into His purposes, enabling us to do what He has chosen us to do.

The apostle Paul disciplined himself because he represented God in this world.

[27] But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. (1 Corinthians 9)

Knowing that he was a servant of God made Paul wanted to discipline himself. He wanted to be a good representative. He did not want to be found sleeping on the job. He was proud to be called by God to serve in this way, and he

wanted to live in such a way that God would be honoured in his life.

There is no contradiction between God watching over the city and the watchman keeping alert. The apostle Peter challenged his readers to watchfulness:

[8] Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. [9] Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. (1 Peter 5)

If we are to be useful instruments in the hands of the Lord, we will need to be watchful. We have an enemy who is seeking to destroy us. He will stop at nothing to penetrate our ranks and devour us. Peter calls us to watch out for the enemy and to resist his efforts. We do this so that we will not be “disqualified” in the path set out for us (see 1 Corinthians 9:27).

What a privilege it is to be an instrument in the hands of God. What a blessing it is to know His power and leading. Those who know that they have been called and equipped to serve will be watchful and alert. It is their greatest desire to honour their master and accomplish His purpose. Because He is leading and protecting, they will step out boldly in faithful service.

For Consideration:

If the Lord is watching over the city, why do we need a watchman?

What does Scripture teach us about the importance of being alert and disciplined?

Will people hear the gospel if someone does not tell them?
Will they truly believe if God is not empowering our words?

Why does God give spiritual gifts?

What does the illustration of Jesus about the vine and the branches teach us about how God wants to use us to accomplish His purposes?

For Prayer:

Thank the Lord that He uses us as His instruments to accomplish His purpose.

Thank the Lord that when He calls us, He also enables us to do what He has called us to do.

Ask the Lord to give you a greater boldness to step out into His purpose for your life.

Ask God to help you realize that unless He is in what you do, your efforts are in vain. Ask God to help you to know His leading and purpose for your life.

Chapter 8 - Rising Early and Staying up Late

*[2] It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,*

Solomon has been reminding us that the Lord builds the city and watches over it. In verse 2 he applies this truth to life. What should be our response, knowing that God is building the house and watching over the city? Solomon tells us first that if God is building the house and watching over the city, then it is vain to get up early and go to bed late. Let's take a moment to consider what Solomon is telling us here.

What causes us to get up early and stay up late into the night? There may be many reasons for this but the context of verse two indicates that it relates to anxiety. Solomon speaks in this context about those who have taken on great responsibilities and feel that they must work very hard and long because everything depends on their efforts. We will examine this anxious toil in the next chapter.

It would be quite easy for us to assume that if God is building the house and watching over the city then we have nothing to do but rest and reap the benefits of what God is doing. In recent years, we have seen a shift from a

sacrificial faith to a self-centred faith. Sometimes we tell people that if they come to Christ all their troubles will be gone. The people of Jesus' day came to Him for healing and food. When He was crucified, they turned their backs on Him. Many came to Jesus for what they could get out of Him. There are still people coming to Christ only for what they can get out of Him. When they discover that there are struggles along the way, they seem to abandon Him.

Solomon told his readers in Proverbs 6:

*[6] Go to the ant, O sluggard;
consider her ways, and be wise.*

*[7] Without having any chief,
officer, or ruler,*

*[8] she prepares her bread in summer
and gathers her food in harvest.*

*[9] How long will you lie there, O sluggard?
When will you arise from your sleep?*

*[10] A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest,*

*[11] and poverty will come upon you like a robber,
and want like an armed man. (Proverbs 6)*

Solomon challenged the lazy person to consider the hard-working ant gathering food during the summer for the time of winter need. He challenged him to get out of bed and work lest poverty overwhelm him and his family.

In Proverbs 31, King Lemuel speaks about the qualities of an excellent wife. Notice what he says about her:

*[11] The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.*

*[12] She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.*

*[13] She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands.
[14] She is like the ships of the merchant;
she brings her food from afar.
[15] She rises while it is yet night
and provides food for her household
and portions for her maidens. (Proverbs 31)*

Notice verse 15 which speaks about this hard-working wife getting up before dawn to prepare food for the family.

The gospel Jesus preached was not always easy for people of His day to accept. Listen to His words as recorded in Luke 14:

[26] "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. [27] Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. [28] For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? [29] Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, [30] saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' (Luke 14)

The gospel Jesus preached was a message of sacrifice and surrender. Those who followed Him needed to count the cost of being a disciple. When Jesus called His first disciples, they left their nets and their families to follow Him. The apostle Paul described his life and ministry to the Corinthians when he said this:

[23] Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near

death. [24] Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. [25] Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; [26] on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; [27] in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. (2 Corinthians 11)

For Paul, the Christian life was not an easy life. He served the Lord "in toil and hardship. Paul warned other believers against idleness, encouraging each person to work to earn their own living:

[10] For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. [11] For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. [12] Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. (2 Thessalonians 3)

Paul would go as far as to say that the person who was able to work for his own living but didn't, did not deserve to eat. This implication here was that the church was not to provide for this person because it was his laziness that put him in this place of need. In fact, the church was to keep away from a brother who would not work to provide for his family.

[6] Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother

who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. (2 Thessalonians 3)

It was a sin not to work hard and provide for one's family. Those who refused to work out of laziness were to be disciplined, lest their influence spread to the rest of the church.

Having seen what Scripture teaches about working hard and serving sacrificially, how are we to understand what Solomon writes in Psalm 127:2 about getting up early and staying up late? How are we to balance what Solomon says considering the teaching in the rest of Scripture? Let me say a few things about this by way of clarification.

UNDERSTANDING OUR LIMITATIONS

Solomon has been telling us in this context that unless God builds the house our efforts are in vain. He has been teaching that unless God watches over the city we stay awake in vain. We are not God. There are things we simply cannot do. Those who get up early and go to bed late believing that everything depends on their effort are deceiving themselves and do not understand their limitations. I admit that I have often lost sleep over things that I could not control or resolve. This brings us to the second point.

TRUSTING GOD

The second point we need to see is that Solomon is calling us to learn to trust God. We certainly need to work hard, but that hard work can lead us to believe that everything depends on us. This is simply not the case. Unless God is leading us in our work, our labour is in vain. Our confidence must be in Him.

God wants us to learn to trust Him in our daily routines. To reinforce this principle of trusting God, He instituted the Sabbatical law of the Old Testament. Every week, for an entire day, He demanded that His people stop working and look to Him. This meant that there was one less day to accomplish what needed to be accomplished done in the week.

The Sabbatical law did not stop with one day in seven, however. Every seven years, Israel was forbidden to plant their fields. For that entire year the fields were to lie fallow. For that year the people of God were to trust Him for the provision of their needs. In cultures where there are very few needs, it is often difficult for us to understand the miraculous provision of God. When medical care is provided freely, free education is mandatory for our children and even when we lose our job, the government provides for us, it is easy to miss the fact that God is a wonderful Provider. At times our confidence can be in our government to provide for us and we fail to see the provision of the Lord. This, in part, was the purpose of this Sabbatical law. God wanted His people to have the experience of trusting in Him and in His provision. He did not want them to lose sight of the source of their blessings.

God demanded that Israel take a break from their labours on these days and remember who was really in control. This rest was a reminder to the people that the Lord God was their Provider. When the work of the day is over, can you rest in the Lord? Can you trust that what you have not been able to accomplish is in His hands? Can you lay down in your bed confidently knowing that the sovereign Lord will provide a way for you to do all He has called you to do? Can you sleep peacefully, knowing this?

Can you trust in God's purpose each day? We have all had days that just did not go as we expected. Can you trust that even though you are not in control of these events, the Lord will work out the details? Can you rest at night with confidence in God to give you grace and wisdom to deal with these situations or will you be forced to wake up early to take these matters into your own hands again? Solomon calls us to rest in God's ability. He calls us to trust God in all the labours of our hands.

BEING CONTENT IN GOD'S PUPOSE

Finally, Solomon challenges us in this phrase to be content in God's purpose. As we commit ourselves to God's leading and direction each day, we must leave the results to Him. All too often we have our own idea of what we want to accomplish and how we want to complete our projects. We set our goals and when we do not reach these goals we become frustrated. That frustration can lead us to push harder to make things happen. If what we are trying to accomplish is not in the purpose of God, we are pushing in vain.

Several years ago, I was sitting in a coffee shop working on a chapter in a book I was writing. I worked all morning and was just finishing up when my computer unexplainably shut down. When I turned it back on I discovered that I had lost the whole morning's work. I was frustrated and immediately prayed: "Lord, why did this happen. I am serving You but now I will return home with nothing to show for a full morning's work." The Lord spoke to my heart that morning. I felt him asking: "Have you been obedient?" I thought about this for a moment and realized that I had been called to write and that is exactly what I had done that morning. As I reflected on that thought, it changed my whole attitude. I had done what God had asked me to do.

Yes, I would return home with nothing to show for it, but I had been faithful. The anxiety and stress were released. I went home that day with nothing but the knowledge that I had been faithful, and an important lesson burnt into my heart—God is looking for obedience more than results. I was able to rest peacefully that night because I was able to accept what God had allowed to happen, knowing that I had been faithful.

Psalm 127:2 is not about staying in bed all day and doing nothing. It is about our attitude and confidence in God and His purpose. Will we be anxious, or will we trust God? Will we rest well at night knowing that we have been faithful, trusting that God is ultimately in control. Will I go to bed at night believing that everything depends on me or will I rest confidently in God and His purpose?

For Consideration:

If God builds the house, do we have any responsibilities?

What does the Bible teach about the importance of hard work and willing sacrifice?

What does Paul have to say about those who are lazy and unwilling to work?

If rest is not the absence of work, what is it?

Have you ever had times when your efforts reflected that you were not trusting God or surrendering to His purpose but pushing ahead with your own plan?

For Prayer:

Ask God to give you the discipline to work hard in His purpose?

Ask God to help you to trust in Him and His purpose. Ask Him to forgive you for the times when you believed in your heart that everything depended on you.

Thank God that He is in control of your situation. Ask Him to help you to understand your limitations. Commit the things you cannot do into His hands.

Ask God to give you rest in your work as you rely on Him and trust in His purpose.

Chapter 9 - The Bread of Anxious Toil

*[2] It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil; (Psalms 127)*

In the first part of verse two Solomon told his readers that getting up early and staying up late was of no benefit to them if they were not trusting God. The context of the verse indicates that the reason for rising early and going to bed late is because of “anxious toil.” In this chapter I would like to examine this anxious toil.

The Hebrew word translated “anxious” in the English Standard Version of the Bible occurs several times in the Old Testament. We read in Genesis 3:16 for example:

*[16] To the woman he said,
“I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children...” (Genesis 3)*

The phrase significant to us here is “in pain you shall bring forth children.” The word “pain” is the same Hebrew word, translated by “anxious toil” in Psalm 127:2. In this case the word speaks about the physical and emotional strain a woman goes through in giving birth to a child.

Speaking to Adam in Genesis 3:17, the Lord said:

*[17] And to Adam he said,
“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife
and have eaten of the tree
of which I commanded you,
‘You shall not eat of it,’
cursed is the ground because of you;
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; (Genesis
3)*

The Lord told Adam that he would have to till the ground in pain all the days of his life. The word translated “pain” is again related to the Hebrew word translated “anxious toil” in Psalm 127:2. The ground Adam cultivated was cursed by God. Adam would have to work hard to bring fruit out of that ground and his efforts would be frustrated by weeds, predators, weather and depleting soil conditions.

Solomon uses this same Hebrew word in Proverbs 15:1 when he says:

*[15:1] A soft answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger. (Proverbs 15)*

In this verse Solomon tells us that “harsh” words stir up anger. The Hebrew word translated “harsh” in this verse is the word translated by “anxious toil” in Psalm 127:2.

From these uses of the word, we understand that the anxious toil Solomon speaks of in Psalm 127:2 is a toil that that can cause physical and emotional strain. We need to be careful not to confuse suffering for the Lord and the anxious toil that Solomon speaks of here. As believers we will be called on to suffer for the sake of the Lord. The apostle Peter tell us that we should not be surprised when we face fiery trials for our Lord.

[12] Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. [13] But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. (1 Peter 4)

Writing to Timothy, the apostle Paul said:

[12] Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (2 Timothy 3)

Our service for God will cause us physical and emotional strain. In fact, some people will suffer great physical and emotional strain in their service of God. This type of suffering for Christ is not, however, what Solomon is referring to in this passage.

Solomon speaks in Psalm 127:2 about an "anxious toil". This kind of toil can also cause physical and emotional strain, but it is not the result of being persecuted for our faith. Consider the example of Martha in the New Testament.

[38] Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. [39] And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. [40] But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." [41] But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, [42] but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10)

Notice how Jesus told Martha that she was “anxious and troubled about many things.” There was deep anxious pain in her efforts for the Lord, causing her both physical and emotional pain. Luke 10:40 tells us that Martha was being “distracted with much serving.” In other words, the obligations before her were demanding so much of her attention that she was losing focus.

Martha became annoyed at her sister Mary who had drawn close to the Lord and sat at His feet listening to Him. While Martha should have been happy for her sister, she now became very jealous and angry with her. Mary was peacefully listening to the Lord, but Martha was rushing from one thing to another. She began to resent the fact that Mary was peacefully resting at Jesus feet.

It is important that we note here that the service Martha offered to the Lord could also have been peaceful, but it wasn't. Often, I have been extremely busy, but had deep peace in my heart through the entire process. Martha's problem was that she had let her responsibilities distract her from the Lord. She was no longer sensing His presence in the work she was doing. Her goal was not the Lord, but the accomplishment of the task before her. You see, she could have experienced the deep presence of the Lord in her service just as Mary experienced in quietly sitting at Jesus' feet but her “anxious toil” stripped that privilege from her.

Martha also began to sense betrayal. Listen to what she told the Lord that day: “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone?” (Luke 10:40). She had expected that Mary would help with the preparations, and when this did not happen, she felt betrayed by her sister. She also questioned the Lord's concern for her when she says: “Lord, do you not care...” She had lost all sense of

the Lord's presence and concern here. If the job was going to get done it was going to have to be her who did it. Her anxiety led her to doubt her Heavenly Father's concern and assistance.

The anxiety she experienced was the fruit of being distracted from the Lord. It was the result of her loss of focus on Christ and allowing responsibilities to take His place. She could no longer see the Lord but only her efforts, and the result was anxious thoughts and attitudes that began to take over her heart, drawing her away from Christ.

Jesus did not tell Martha that she should not have been offering hospitality to Him and His disciples. He does not rebuke her efforts. What He did rebuke, however, was the anxiety that had taken control of her thoughts, causing her to lash out in bitterness toward Him and her sister Mary.

We engage in anxious toil when we are distracted from the Lord and His purpose. This causes emotional and physical strain and keeps us from seeing Christ and His control over our situation.

There is one final detail I would like to point out in this passage. Notice that Solomon spoke about "eating the bread of anxious toil." What is this bread of anxious toil? It is the bread of distrust. It is the bread distraction. It is the bread that feeds our anxieties and leads to questions about the purpose of God and His presence. If you continue to feast on this bread by feeding your anxiety, there can be no peace and rest. It must be stricken from our spiritual diet. Instead, we must replace it with the bread of confidence and trust. We must feast on the bread of faith and obedience. Only this bread will feed our soul and open our eyes to the presence and control of God in our efforts and circumstances. May God give us peace as we turn our

anxieties over to Him to serve with hearts being fed by confident trust in Him and His purpose. May we lay down at night with confidence in our hearts that God is in control and He is watching over His house.

Consideration:

What is anxious toil?

What makes our toil anxious?

Is it possible for good works to become anxious toil? What was the solution Jesus offered to Martha?

What is the difference between suffering for the Lord and anxious toil?

Why is it hard to rest when we are eating the bread of anxious toil?

How do we keep our ministries and personal efforts from becoming anxious toil?

For Prayer:

Ask the Lord to help you to trust Him when things are becoming overwhelming.

Have you found yourself experiencing anxious toil? Ask the Lord to reveal His presence and purpose. Ask Him to give you rest.

Thank the Lord that you can count on Him and His purpose for your life. Thank Him that you can know His presence even in tremendous struggle and conflict.

Chapter 10 - Rest to His Beloved

... for he gives his beloved sleep – Psalm 127:2

In this study of Psalm 127:1-2 we have seen that God is in the process of building His kingdom. We have also seen that God watches over the work of His hands to protect and keep it. God does not abandon what He invests in. Those in whom He has begun a work can be sure that He will protect and keep that work (see Philippians 1:6). The apostle Paul told the Ephesians:

[13] In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, [14] who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1)

The Holy Spirit guarantees our inheritance until we acquired possession of it. He will not leave or forsake us until we have obtained what God has destined for us.

In the last part of verse 2, we see that not only is God working for us and watching over us, but He also loves us. Notice the reference to “His beloved.” This is the motivation behind the work of God on our behalf. He works for us and watches over us because of His great love for us. Listen to

the words of the Lord through Moses to the people of Israel:

[6] "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. [7] It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, [8] but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. [9] Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations (Deuteronomy 7)

It was because the Lord loved Israel that He redeemed them from slavery and led them through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Israel could be assured of this tender love of God for thousands of generations. It was this same love that caused the Lord Jesus to lay down His life for us on the cross:

[16] "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3)

Consider what Solomon is telling his readers in this verse. The great Creator God is calling them His "beloved". He is working on their behalf and watching over them as a demonstration of that wonderful love. Writing to the Romans, the apostle Paul would say:

[31] What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? [32] He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? [33] Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. [34] Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised— who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. [35] Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? [36] As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." [37] No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. (Romans 8)

"If God is for us, who can be against us?" If God sent His Son to die for us, what can any human being do to us? If God is working for us, our victory is secure. In fact, we are "more than conquerors through Him who loves us.

What is the natural result of knowing this kind of security? Those who know that they are secure can rest in peace. Solomon tells us in verse 2 to tell us that the Lord gives those He loves sleep.

Listen to the words of Solomon's father David, who knew his share of troubles in life:

*[8] In peace I will both lie down and sleep;
for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety. -
Psalms 4:8 (ESV)*

Despite his many responsibilities and the enemies who sought his life, David was able to lay down at night in the security of God's wonderful love. He knew that God would

keep and protect Him. This is a blessing for those who are loved by God –they can rest confidently in His care.

In Exodus 33 the Lord told Moses that He had decided to send Israel to the Promised Land and although His angel would go before them to guide them, His personal presence would not go with them. He told Moses that because the people were so sinful, He might consume them on the way. This news grieved Moses, who went to God and pleaded with Him to go personally with them.

[12] Moses said to the LORD, "See, you say to me, 'Bring up this people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' [13] Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." (Exodus 33)

Notice the concern of Moses here. He did not want to lead the people into the Promised Land by Himself. He needed the favour of God and His blessing on the journey. In fact, Moses could not imagine leading the people to the Promised Land if God's presence was not with them. This caused tremendous concern for Moses. God listened to the prayer of His servant Moses and responded:

[14] And he said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." (Exodus 33)

Notice particularly that God told Moses that He would give him rest. This rest would ultimately be for the people when they arrived in their own land. Moses, however, would never enter the Promised Land. The rest that God gave to Moses was a rest for his weary mind and soul. God

provided rest for Moses by assuring Him of His presence and direction all the way to the Promised Land.

Listen to the invitation of Jesus in Matthew 11:

[28] Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11)

Jesus promises rest to all who will come to Him. This rest is a relief from the burden of sin. It is a rest for the soul. It is a rest that comes from understanding what Paul said in Romans 8:

[28] And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8)

It is a rest that comes from declaring with Jeremiah:

[17] 'Ah, Lord GOD! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you. (Jeremiah 32)

In 2 Kings 6 we read how the king of Syria was at war with Israel. The Syrian king, however, became very troubled in his efforts to defeat Israel because it seemed that every time he made a plan, Israel escaped his grasp. In fact, he came to believe that someone was spying on him and leaking information to Israel. When he asked his people about this, they told him that the problem was with the prophet Elisha who was hearing from God and passing the information on to the king of Israel. When the king of Syria heard about Elisha the prophet, he issued a command that he be seized.

Early in the morning the Syrians approached the place where Elisha and his servant were sleeping. When Elisha's servant rose in the morning, he went outside and saw a great army with chariots surrounding the city. He was afraid and returned to tell Elisha what he had seen. Listen to the exchange between Elisha and his servant in 2 Kings 6:

[15] When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. And the servant said, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" [16] He said, "Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." [17] Then Elisha prayed and said, "O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see." So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. (2 Kings 6)

Elisha saw what his servant could not see. He saw the mountain filled with the army of the Lord, watching out for them. Elisha slept that night in the confidence that God was watching out for them. Elisha demonstrates an incredible peace and confidence in God. His soul was at rest even though they were surrounded by the Syria army. His God was watching over the city.

The apostle John reminded his readers that there would be many deceivers in the end times seeking to mislead the people of God. He assured his readers, however, that the one who was in them was greater than the one who is in the world.

[4] Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. (1 John 4)

When Solomon told his readers that God gives His beloved sleep, he spoke about the security they have in Him. The conclusion Solomon makes here is that those who know God's work, protection, and love, can rest in peace knowing His wonderful care.

In the Old Testament, God commanded His people to rest from their work on the Sabbath day. God also commanded that the fields rest fallow every seventh year. For that entire year, Israel was to let God provide all their needs. In part, this was designed to remind people that God was their caregiver.

In Canada, where I live, we have many privileges. My children are guaranteed an education. If I become sick, I have a free medical system to care for my needs. If I lose my job, the government pays for me to live through an employment insurance plan. It is very easy for people who live in this kind of environment to take their eyes away from God and trust their government instead. Imagine what it would be like if every seven years the government ceased to provide any assistance and required a full year of trusting God alone. This is what is happening in these Sabbatical laws. God required that His people cease trusting in their work and their fields and look directly to Him as their provider.

How easy it is to say we believe what Solomon tells us about God building the house and watching over the city. What happens, however, when there is no money to pay our bills and no food on the table? What happens when we are no longer able to work and trust in our own resources and skills? Can you lay down in peaceful sleep when you no longer have any earthly security left?

Several years ago, I was on my way to have coffee with my wife. I was driving to the coffee shop when for some reason I blacked out. My car left the road and ended up upside down a few metres from a pond. Had I gone off the road a few seconds later, I may very well have ended up in the pond, upside down, unconscious. Doctors investigated this incident but were never able to determine why I passed out in such a way. My family, doctor, however, was required by law to suspend my drivers' license for a year until he could be satisfied that this would not happen again.

At that time, I was very busy with a variety of ministries. Because I had lost my drivers' license and there was no public transportation to the regions where I was ministering, I lost about 75% of my ministry. I had always taken my health for granted. I had been strong and healthy until that time. That incident, however, changed my perspective on life. I remember standing at the top of the stairs in my house thinking, what would happen if I started down these stairs and I blacked out? The simple things that I took for granted were placed in question. I began to realize that I was not in control. I needed the Lord's protection on my life. I was dependant on Him for every breath. I would have an entire year to reflect on this before I would be released back into ministry full time. This was God's way of reminding me that I needed to trust in Him for even the very basics of life. It was His way of stripping away my confidence in the flesh and placing it on Him.

It is easy for us to place our confidence in the flesh. There are those who sleep peacefully because they have a large bank account and full health. They are not worried about life because they have everything covered. This, however, is not the kind of rest Solomon speaks of here. He speaks of a rest that comes from knowing that God is building the house and watching over the city.

Notice the word “he” in the phrase “for he gives his beloved sleep.” The importance of this word is clear. The sleep that the beloved receive is from God and is a result of knowing His care over them. It is not just a sleep that comes when we know that we have money in the bank but one that comes even when we don’t. It is a sleep that comes when everything around us is in turmoil and chaos. This sleep is the sleep of those who know that they are the beloved of God and that He cares for them.

For Consideration:

What does it mean to be the beloved of God? How does God demonstrate His love for us?

How does the knowledge of God’s control enable us to rest?

Does rest mean that we will not have trouble in this life? How can we rest when we seem to be surrounded by trouble? Consider the example of Elisha in 2 Kings 6.

Why is it important for us to rest? Why did God command a Sabbath rest? Why did He require that the land remain unsown every seventh year?

Take a moment to examine your life. Is there evidence that you are living with the knowledge that God is in control?

For Prayer:

Thank the Lord for the demonstration of His love for you.

Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you failed to see that he cared for you and was watching over you.

Ask the Lord to help you to be more conscious of His care and provision. Ask Him to help you to rest in His purpose and trust what He is doing. Ask Him for faith to know that He will complete the work He has begun in you and through you.

Take a moment to seek the Lord's forgiveness for the times you have placed your confidence in other things and not in the Lord. Ask God to show you that all that you have is from Him and could be taken from you.

Ask the Lord to give you a restful soul, confident in what He is doing and resting in His purpose.

Light To My Path Book Distribution

Light To My Path (LTMP) is a book writing and distribution ministry reaching out to needy Christian workers in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Many Christian workers in developing countries do not have the resources necessary to obtain Bible training or purchase Bible study materials for their ministries and personal encouragement. F. Wayne Mac Leod is a member of Action International Ministries and has been writing these books with a goal to distribute them to needy pastors and Christian workers around the world.

To date tens of thousands of books are being used in preaching, teaching, evangelism and encouragement of local believers in over sixty countries. Books have now been translated into a number of languages. The goal is to make them available to as many believers as possible.

The ministry of LTMP is a faith-based ministry and we trust the Lord for the resources necessary to distribute the books for the encouragement and strengthening of believers around the world. Would you pray that the Lord would open doors for the translation and further distribution of these books?

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