

Unless the Lord Builds the House

Psalm 127.1-2; 1 Samuel 1-3

Psalm 127 lays down a simple tenet: *Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.* The message is clear: If you want your home to be blessed, make God an integral part of it. The parallel stories of Hannah and Eli illustrate this truth. How will you apply it?

1. The Principle Stated: Psalm 127.1-2

- Without the Lord, home-building is an exercise in futility.
- Human effort is no substitute for the Lord at the center.

2. The Principle Illustrated: A Tale of Two Families (1 Sam. 1-3)

- Building with the Lord: Samuel's home
 - Human problems
 - Divine possibilities
- Building without the Lord: Eli's home
 - Divine possibilities
 - Human problems



Psalm 127

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

This morning, we conclude our summer series addressing issues pertaining to marriage, the home, and families. As we do so, I want us to 'step back' and grasp, I hope, fundamental truths that should guide us at every stage of life – from getting married, to raising children, to later years as you watch your grown children make their own way through life.

You see some interesting things in the church. Some things don't seem to make sense. Stan and his wife were as faithful as anyone in the church. Their kids weren't the most spiritual around, but they weren't the worst, either. Stan was a deacon, a hard worker, and always had a smile for you. No problems here. Then, little things began to happen. In their teen years, their son and daughter quit church. Then Stan's wife stopped coming. She said it was her back, but folks knew something was wrong. A year later, Dick and his wife were divorced.

About the same time, in the same church, there was another family. In this family, dad was missing in action. He wasn't a Christian, and never came to church. His wife brought the kids with her every Sunday. But with such a divided home, it was feared things would fall apart. But they didn't. In fact, the kids grew spiritually like weeds. They were models for others in the church. The marriage never faltered, and when the kids grew up, they married Christians. Their faith is strong today.

I tell you these two stories to underscore a fundamental truth: In the 'card game' of life, there is a 'trump card' without which an otherwise

good *hand* becomes a loser, and with which an otherwise rotten *hand* can be a winner. That ‘trump card’ is highlighted in Psalm 127.1-2:

Psalm 127.1-2

Unless the LORD builds the house, They labor in vain who build it;
Unless the LORD guards the city, The watchman keeps awake in vain. It
is vain for you to rise up early, To retire late, To eat the bread of painful
labors; For He gives to His beloved even in his sleep.

Let’s begin by stating the principle clearly: *Without the Lord, home-building is an exercise in futility*. The parallel truth is this: *Human effort (no matter how great) is no substitute for the Lord at the center*. To put it bluntly, unless the Lord is doing His spiritual construction in your home, it’s not going to get done!

Don’t take my word for it. Take God’s. The Hebrew word translated “vain” in v1 (שָׁוָי, *shav*) means useless, worthless, or futile. It often explicitly refers to something that seems to be useful to a person. It’s used to describe prayers to idols. People who pray to idols think that what they are doing is worthwhile, but it is worthless.

In the same way, Psalm 127 says that it may seem worthwhile for you to get up early, stay up late, and work your fingers to the bone, but you’re being deceived. It’s really worthless!

That almost sounds like heresy today. People run themselves down chasing success. *God helps those who help themselves* is unbiblical, but don’t tell that to most folks. At the expense of sounding overly simplistic, the lesson of Psalm 127 is this: In life, it’s not what you do; it’s who you know. *Really* know!

The sad part is this: Many Christians have swallowed worldly ways and means. Instead of trusting the Lord at the center of their lives, they’re trying to make it on their own. They give lip service to God, but when it comes to life, their song is more like Frank Sinatra’s famous refrain: *I did it my way*.

I submit today that God knows how to build a home. Whether you’re looking ahead to marriage, just getting started making a home, in the

middle of raising a family, or guiding grown children and grandchildren on the road of life, entrusting your building to God – putting Him at the center, is the way to go.

Scripture is full of examples, good and bad, and this morning we are going to look at a striking contrast. I call it “A Tale of Two Families.” Turn back in your Bibles to 1 Samuel 1-3.

Principle Illustrated: A Tale of Two Families (1 Sam. 1-3)

I wish I could read these chapters in their entirety. They’re the work of a master story-teller. He intertwines two stories: One is of Hannah and her family. The other is of Eli and his family. One is an example of what can happen when you build with the Lord; the other is an example of what can happen when you build without the Lord. Let’s start with what happens when you build with the Lord.

- Building with the Lord: Samuel’s home

Human Problems

The story of Hannah opens abruptly in 1 Sam. 1.1. We’re introduced to Elkanah, a rough mountain man from the hills of Ephraim. But no sooner are we introduced to him than we discover that his home life is far from desirable. First off, he is a bigamist. His first wife, Hannah, was barren, so he took a second wife, Peninnah, who has given him four children. In a culture where children were understood to be a blessing from God, barrenness was considered a curse. Elkanah went out of his way to affirm his love for Hannah – giving her twice as many gifts as he gave Peninnah, but this just made things worse. In vv6-7 we read that Peninnah constantly ridiculed Hannah. You can imagine her taunts: *Sure, he loves you, but what can you give him? Nothing! When he’s gone, my kids will own everything!* The words cut deep.

So Hannah wept and stopped eating. She may have wished for the escape of death. In the midst of her despair, Elkanah wins the award for most insensitive husband of the year when he responds to her grief over being barren with these priceless words: “Am I not better to you than ten sons?” Ugh!

In desperation, Hannah goes to the tabernacle in Shiloh to pray. Holy Land travelers love visiting the site. There is a marker honoring the place where Hannah may have prayed.

But even here, things go wrong. As Hannah prayed, crying out from her heart, she was mouthing words but making no sound. The high priest, Eli, is sitting by the door watching her. If you're looking for evidence of spiritual leaders being idiots, Eli is a great example! He accuses her of being drunk!

What good can come out of this situation?! There are troubles on every side. But there were also possibilities.

Divine possibilities

Two seemingly minor details make all the difference. The first is found in v3: Elkanah went to Shiloh every year to worship and sacrifice to the Lord. Mark it well: Despite his other shortcomings, Elkanah made worship of the Lord a priority in his home.

The second thing to notice is that Hannah was a woman of prayer. She had hopes and dreams for her marriage and her home. Nothing had worked out, but she continued to put her faith in God. She prayed, and made a promise to God. And God began to turn her situation full of human problems into divine possibilities. In 1 Sam. 1.19-20 we read this:

Then they arose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD, and returned again to their house in Ramah. And Elkanah had relations with Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her. It came about in due time, after Hannah had conceived, that she gave birth to a son; and she named him Samuel, saying, "Because I have asked him of the LORD."

Hannah named her son Samuel, which means "name of God." It was her way of telling the world that he belonged to the Lord. And she meant that literally. She promised the Lord that she would give Him her son, and she did – presenting him to the same priest, Eli, who had accused

her of being drunk! This was not a loss for her; her words are full of gratitude to God (vv27-28):

"For this boy I prayed, and the LORD has given me my petition which I asked of Him. "So I have also dedicated him to the LORD; as long as he lives he is dedicated to the LORD."

This illustrates what happens when the Lord builds the house. The author tells us that Hannah had five more children, and as anyone who has read the Bible knows, Samuel became one of the greatest leaders in Israel's history.

- Building without the Lord: Eli's home

Divine possibilities

In contrast to the story of Hannah and Samuel, Eli's home had everything going for it. The biblical narrator has intentionally intertwined the two stories so that we cannot miss the point. Eli was the high priest, and his sons Hophni and Phinehas were also priests. That meant they had a place of high honor and prestige in the nation. They had grown up being taught God's Law, quoting it, learning all about it. They were the theological scholars of their day. Hophni and Phinehas knew all about God. But despite all this religious grounding, all this spiritual privilege, something was very wrong in Eli's home.

Human problems

The biblical declaration is blunt. In 2.12 we read, *Now the sons of Eli were worthless men; they did not know the Lord.*

Understand what this verse is saying: It does *not* say that Eli's sons didn't know *about* the Lord. They knew all about Him, His Law, about the sacrifices. But they didn't *know Him*! And in 1 Sam. 2, the ugly truth comes spilling out:

2.17 – They took sacrifices given to God for themselves

2.22 – They were sexually immoral

2.25 – They didn't respect authority – their father's, or God's

2.29 – Eli spoiled his sons, and dishonored God

We don't know how old Eli's sons were when this started, but the failure came from the home. *It's been said that children are like wet cement: Be sure to make your impressions early!* Parents, if your children don't observe your faith in God while they are young, they won't listen to you when they are older.

The end result for Eli? It's tragic. Any Sunday School scholar knows the story. Little Samuel hears a voice calling his name in the night, and runs to Eli. Eli tells him he didn't call him. It happens again, then a third time. That's when Eli realized that God was talking to Samuel, not him. God tells Samuel that He is going to judge Eli and his family. And He did. On the same day, Hophni and Phinehas were killed in battle. When they told Eli the news, he fell over and died.

God is painting a picture of truth in vivid contrast:

A polygamous husband, a dysfunctional family situation, an abused and barren wife, plus God, results in Samuel, a man of God, and many more blessings.

An ideal home, a religious heritage, a family with spiritual privilege, minus God, resulted in Hophni and Phinehas, two worthless men, and finally death.

God wants to be the center. Not a cursory part of your home. He wants to be an intentional part of your home. He wants to build the house. Unless the Lord builds the house, your labor is in vain.

Where are you in your home-building experience? Jen and I are in stage where we pray for our grown kids and model Christ to our grandkids. Some of you are looking forward to marriage. Some of you are in the middle of raising your kids.

A few weeks ago, in Africa, Jen and I celebrated our 41st wedding anniversary. At our wedding, a couple sang a song they had written. It was taken from Ecclesiastes 4.12, which says, "A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." The lyrics of that song go like this:

God blesses the house that begins with prayer
And blessed are the people who dwell in there
Glad are the days they all shall see
And when days are dark a light there will be.

God blesses the family found in His love
A mirror of all He's created above
So set your will strong to shine back His grace
We need one another to finish the race.

For a three-fold cord will take the strain
Though one may fall they shall all remain
Blessed is the home that begins with prayer
Blessed are the lovers of God in there.

Is God building your house? Is He the third "cord" making your home one that will bear the strains of life? I invite you this morning, as we pray, to sincerely ask God to take over the building of your house. Invite Him to have a seat at your dinner table, to come alongside as you do daily chores, and to join you as you read the Bible and pray together as a family.

You know the kind of house you want. Only God can build it. Start letting Him do it, today.

Digging Deeper

1. Psalms 127.1-2 declares unequivocally the critical role the Lord plays in the establishment of a home. There's a virtually endless supply of books telling us how to have a successful home life, but the psalmist (Solomon, who sadly did *not* follow his own advice!) distills it down to its most basic truth: *Unless the Lord builds the house*. In practical terms, what does this entail in your thinking? What kinds of things will a parent do who is entrusting the 'building of his or her home' to the Lord? What 'building materials' would God use? What would He avoid? What does verse 2 indicate is the prognosis for those who 'work their butts off' trying to be good marriage partners or parents, but ignore the Lord in the process?
2. Two stories are intertwined in 1 Sam. 1-3: One tells of Hannah (and her husband Elkanah), and their son Samuel. The other is of Eli and his sons Hophni and Phinehas. The juxtapositioning of these stories is intentional (the author develops the two narratives in a back-and-forth pattern). Read 1 Samuel 1-3, and answer these questions:

What very real impediments did Hannah face in life? How did those who should have been 'in her corner' (her husband and the priest of the Lord) fail her? She could have become angry with God and man. What did she do instead? What was her response? How did the Lord show His approval of her? What was the end result for her family?

What very real blessings did Eli and his family have (see 2.27-28)? What subtle failings show Eli's lack of spiritual alertness (1.12-15; 3.1-18)? What does Eli's response to his son's sins reveal about his character (2.22-25)? What does 2.29 infer about Eli's participation in the sins of his sons? What was the end of Eli's family (4.10-18)?

3. Like most of the principles found in Scripture, the lesson of Psalm 127.1-2 is left 'wide open' for a godly individual to apply to his or her own life. All our circumstances are different! How would you apply these verses in your home? your marriage? your parenting? Whether or not you take it seriously is entirely up to you!