

# Psalm Sundays

Text  
Psalm 127

Topic  
The psalmist describes our efforts  
without the Lord's leading & enabling  
as "eat[ing] the bread of sorrows"

Title  
**"Teardrops Keep Fallin' on My Bread"**

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Three bird species, two frogs, a shark, and one of the world's largest freshwater fish were among those declared extinct in 2019.

The last known female Yangtze Giant Softshell Turtle died in China a year ago April during an artificial insemination procedure, making the species effectively extinct.

You may as well cancel your trip to Oahu. The last *Achatinella apexfulva* (*Uh-K-tinella Apex-full-va*) died in captivity on New Year's Day. His name was Lonesome George. This was his obituary:

George, a Hawaiian tree snail - also a 14-year-old local celebrity and the last known snail of his kind - will no longer be able to entertain school children, or

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eat tree fungus. He died on New Year's Day, according to the Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR). George the snail, named after the Pinta Island tortoise Lonesome George, never lived in a forest, being born in captivity and growing up in a lab. As it happens, George was a hermaphrodite, but it seems that two snails are required to produce offspring.

The other species lost in 2019 included Boulenger's Speckled Skink, the Corquin Robber Frog, and the Victorian Grasslands Earless Dragon.

In 2013, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, told a conference in Shropshire that more must be done to attract young people into the Church. He warned that the Church of England was, "One generation away from extinction."

I've heard that line many times over the years; it isn't original to Lord Carey. I couldn't find an original attribution.

Is it true? It's only true if we leave God out of the picture. Or maybe it would be better to say that it's ultimately *not* true because the Lord is the One building His church, and He promised it would not fail.

The quote is intended to spur slumbering, apathetic, Christians to action. The best way to do that, however, isn't to guilt us, but to glorify God.

Psalm 127 does just that, in its opening words. "Unless the LORD builds the house, They labor in vain who build it; Unless the LORD guards the city, The watchman stays awake in vain."

Believers are "builders" and "watchmen," for sure. We have a big part to play. It is a cooperative effort. But we remain dependent upon the Lord, and trust Him to complete His work both *in* us and *through* us.

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I'll organize my comments around two rather simple questions: **#1 Is Your Labor For The Lord More Exertion Than Enabling?**, and **#2 Is Your Life In The Lord More Earthly Than Eternal?**

### **#1 - Is Your Labor For The Lord More Exertion Than Enabling? (v1-2)**

To paraphrase Celine Dion, "The church will go on."

One verse will suffice as proof. Writing to the church in Ephesus, the apostle Paul declared that Jesus will "present [the church] to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish" (5:27).

Here is some math to encourage you. Let's say you lead one person to Christ every year, and he or she does the same, and so on.

- 👤 After one year, there are only 2 disciples.
- 👤 At the end of the second year, 4.
- 👤 Third year, there are 8 followers of Jesus.
- 👤 Fourth year, 16.

**By year 33, you will have more than 8.5 billion Christians. There would be 34 billion Christians as the 10 year mark.**

We've read the last chapters of the book. The church will be resurrected or raptured to Heaven, then returning from Heaven to the earth with Jesus in His Second Coming. We then reign on the earth with Him for one thousand years. After that we live-on for eternity with "no more tears."

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Psa 127:1 A Song of Ascents. Of Solomon. Unless the LORD builds the house, They labor in vain who build it; Unless the LORD guards the city, The watchman stays awake in vain.

Every week I remind us that psalms 120-134 were gathered together in a playlist to be sung by travelers on their pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem for one of the annual Jewish feasts.

It's super important to keep that in mind for Psalm 127. Here's why. When we see the word "house," and then hear talk of children in verses three through five, we immediately begin to read this psalm as a stand-alone psalm that exalts individual home life. Sort of a marriage and family study. We forget its context as a Song of Ascent.

While it will have application to our homes in a limited way, *it is not about **your** house*. It is about God's 'house,' the Temple, and it is about the "house of Israel."

"Solomon" is credited as the author. His dad, King David, wanted to build the Temple. God said to David, "You are not the one to build me a **house** to dwell in" (First Chronicles 7:4). Instead, God promised to build David a "**house**" - a spiritual house (Second Samuel 7:11).

I submit that this is the first, main context of Psalm 127.

The backstory is a great example of what is meant by "building in vain." David's desire to build a house for God was good. When he shared his plans to build a house for God, Nathan the prophet immediately encouraged David. To quote Debby Boone, "It can't be wrong When it feels so right."

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God intervened, spoke to Nathan, and sent him back to the king to stop him from building. God's plan was for Solomon to build the house.

THAT must have been hard:

- 👤 For one thing, building for God - wasn't that a good thing?
- 👤 For another thing: How hard must it have been to confront a king like David - so close to God's heart - with a halt work order?
- 👤 For a third thing: David could be a little crabby at times.

Often in the Book of Acts, the Lord sent His servant away from a successful ministry. Or He hindered a missionary from going where he desired, opening a door somewhere else.

It is so important - *especially when the desire seems good* - to hear from the Lord. Too many things get greenlighted that do not have God's blessing.

From the Temple, the psalm moves out to the wall surrounding Jerusalem. Perhaps the pilgrims would recall how that the wall lay in ruins for so long until God raised up Nehemiah. Then, contrary to everything we believe about contractors, Nehemiah brought the wall in (1)Under budget, and (2)In a record time of only 52 days.

It was the LORD. He did it. He did it through Nehemiah and the returnees throwing themselves into the work; but it was understood by Israel and her enemies that God enabled them. Humans did what was humanly impossible, and God got the glory.

The wall was necessary for protection. The watchmen were critical for warning. But no city was safe unless the LORD was in the hearts of the people. Israel's

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history is full of examples of impenetrable defenses being penetrated; and of improbable victories.

Psa 127:2 *It is vain for you to rise up early, To sit up late, To eat the bread of sorrows; For so He gives His beloved sleep.*

Solomon was not encouraging laziness. Keeping with the same theme as verse one, he was saying that it is futile to labor without the Lord's leading and enabling. The "bread of sorrows" was a poetic way of describing someone working their fingers to the bone. We *should* "rise up early, and sit up late," serving the Lord. But without His leading, then His enabling, we're working our fingers to the bone for nothing.

Thinking again of Nehemiah and the wall-builders. They certainly were not lazy:

Neh 4:15 And it happened, when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and *that* God had brought their plot to nothing, that all of us returned to the wall, everyone to his work.

Neh 4:16 So it was, from that time on, *that* half of my servants worked at construction, while the other half held the spears, the shields, the bows, and wore armor; and the leaders *were* behind all the house of Judah.

Neh 4:17 Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon.

Neh 4:18 Every one of the builders had his sword girded at his side as he built. And the one who sounded the trumpet *was* beside me.

Neh 4:19 Then I said to the nobles, the rulers, and the rest of the people, "The work *is* great and extensive, and we are separated far from one another on the wall.

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Neh 4:20 Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us."

Neh 4:21 So we labored in the work, and half of *the men* held the spears from daybreak until the stars appeared.

Neh 4:22 At the same time I also said to the people, "Let each man and his servant stay at night in Jerusalem, that they may be our guard by night and a working party by day."

Neh 4:23 So neither I, my brethren, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me took off our clothes, *except* that everyone took them off for washing.

They worked hard is an understatement. But it was *with* the Lord, in His will. "He gives His beloved sleep." Your labor in the Lord should be spiritually restful. It shouldn't be anxious, worrisome, or depressing. There will be plenty of discouragements, but even these are to be cast upon the Lord. After all, you are His "beloved."

Everything we are saying can be summed-up by this quote from A.W. Tozer:

If the Holy Spirit was withdrawn from the church today, 95% of what we do would go on and no one would know the difference. If the Holy Spirit had been withdrawn from the New Testament church, 95% of what they did would stop, and everybody would know the difference.

That is obviously the worst-case scenario. We would do well, however, to always check our desires to see if the labor is from the Lord, and therefore enabled by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

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I have to conclude that a lot of what today is labeled as “spiritual burnout” is the direct result of our *exertion* rather than His *enabling*. It’s something you ought to explore in conversation with Jesus.

## #2 - Is Your Life In The Lord More Earthly Than Eternal? (v3-5)

In 2019, there was an average of 1.93 children under 18 per family in the United States. This is a decrease from 2.33 children under 18 per family in 1960.

Two-parent households in the US are declining, and the number of families with no children are increasing.

Should we be having more children? Isn’t that what the rest of this psalm exhorts us to?

There may be application in these verses to the modern tendency to have fewer children. But it is *not* a command; and, in context, we are looking at the house of Israel - *not* our homes.

Psa 127:3 Behold, children *are* a heritage from the LORD, The fruit of the womb *is* a reward.

Seems straightforward enough. If you want to be blessed, have lots of kids.

Solomon's intent is not a command, but a promised gift from God. He promised Abraham when He told him, "and I will make you a great nation" (Genesis 12:2), and "you will be the father of a multitude of nations" (Genesis 17:9). Later the Lord promises the children of Israel in the wilderness that "He will love you and bless you and multiply you; He will also bless the fruit of your womb" (Deuteronomy 7:13).

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These are not commands from God for them to reproduce, but God's sovereign promise to reward His people, to multiply them for His purpose, their security, and inheritance.

We tend to read everything in God's Word as a command. We want so desperately to be able to quantify our relationship with Jesus. We make checklists to be sure we are on-track spiritually. We chastise ourselves, or others, for missing one day of devotions.

The one commandment is this: "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND," and "YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF" (Luke 10:27).

To read Psalm 127:3 as a command misses the blessing. He was telling the house of Israel, the twelve tribes, what He was going to do for them - not telling them what they must do for Him.

Never in the Old Testament does anyone need to be exhorted to have more kids. Quite the opposite. It was always a shame to remain barren. It was considered a shame precisely because God had promised to bless them with kids. Thus a Jew would not have understood this as a command, but as a reward.

Under the Law, God promised to bless the godly with children (Deuteronomy 28:4). He has given no such promise to Christians. We would say that having 1.9 kids or 2.3 kids is up to you.

BUT consider this: Is your numerical goal godly? Are your reasons for your decision earthly, selfish? Or are they eternal?

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If someone were to ask you, "Why did you have X-number of kids?, would your answer be based on *earthly* priorities, or on *eternal* promises?

Psa 127:4 Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, So *are* the children of one's youth.

Psa 127:5 Happy *is* the man who has his quiver full of them; They shall not be ashamed, But shall speak with their enemies in the gate.

Unusual wording - to us, that is, but not to a Jew. "In the gate" is where an ancient Israeli city did business. It's where you would go with your complaint, or to settle an issue, or to transfer title, *etc., etc.* Think of it as the City Council, or the Board of Supervisors.

There is a passage in the Book of Ruth (4:1-12) that describes in some detail a meeting in the gates during which Boaz redeems Ruth to marry her.

The "enemies" referred to here are "in the gates." They not foreign armies, but fellow citizens.

The picture being drawn here is of the elderly having children to defend them against those who would take advantage of them. **It is a warning against elder abuse.**

Elder abuse was a big problem in ancient Israel, along with taking advantage of widows, orphans, and the poor. If you had kids to care for you, you'd be protected. They were to take care of you as warriors in a battle. Their "weapons" were the words they "[spoke] with their enemies in the gate."

FYI - Approximately 1 in 10 Americans aged 60+ have experienced some form of elder abuse. Estimates range as high as 5 million elders who are abused

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each year. One study estimated that only 1 in 14 cases of abuse are reported to authorities. In almost 60% of elder abuse and neglect incidents, the perpetrator is a family member. Two thirds of perpetrators are adult children or spouses.

Concluding his comments on Psalm 127, William MacDonald writes,

This psalm is a tremendous unfolding of the word of the Lord through Zechariah, "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of hosts" (4:6). There is such a danger that we depend on the power of the dollar or on human ingenuity. But the Lord's will is not accomplished in that way. It is by His Spirit that we build for eternity. It is not what we do for God through our own resources, but what He does through us by His mighty power. All we can produce is wood, hay, stubble. He can use us to produce gold, silver, precious stones. When we act in our own strength, we are spinning our wheels. When we bring God into everything, our lives become truly efficient. Carnal weapons produce carnal results. Spiritual weapons produce spiritual results.

The apostle Paul captured this same thought when he wrote to the churches in the region of Galatia. He wrote, "Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?" (3:3).

How do you know if your priorities are eternal? Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, saying, "The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (First Corinthians 1:25).

One gauge to identify whether your priorities are earthly or eternal is to review your life in Christ thus far, looking for decisions that were absolutely foolish from an earthly perspective, but in fact revealed God's wisdom.

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Finances can sometimes reveal Christ-led foolishness. There are a few Christian ministries that teach you about godly use of your resources. That's great - as long as you understand that there needs to be wiggle room for God to lead you foolishly so that you can reveal His wisdom.

We had a couple in our fellowship, married, who were both Navy doctors. When their time in the service was over, they went immediately into missionary medicine. I remember them being told by believers to first establish a practice, earn money, so they'd be able to have it in the bank. Wait ten years.

They followed God's leading, and it seemed foolishness even to believers.

I've known lots of believers over the years who put-off doing certain spiritual things for a future time that never came.

Anytime you hear the story of the Rich Young Ruler, whom Jesus told to divest Himself of his worldly possessions, you're told it was a suggestion unique to him. You're told it doesn't apply universally.

*But could it apply to you?* That's the question to ask.

There used to be a Christian bumper sticker that showed believers going against the flow of the world. With spiritual priorities, that's bound to be the case. So gauge yourself.

**C** OVID19 is going to be held responsible for 20% of the churches in America closing their doors; to become extinct. Churches are losing court cases regarding our constitutional right to meet. Huge fines are being levied against churches who meet indoors.

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There is in-fighting among believers about whether churches should follow exactly government mandates or not.

The church will go on. *Then we'll go up!* Jesus' coming to resurrect the dead in Christ, then catch-away living believers, is imminent.

Meanwhile, we are essential because we have the Gospel, the power of God unto salvation.

All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God; none of us is righteous enough to deserve Heaven.

What we deserve for sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

The Gospel is a universal call to every heart to believe God and be saved by grace and not by works.

If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

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