

PSALM 127

A Song of Ascents. Of Solomon.

¹ Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labour in vain.

Unless the LORD guards the city,
the guard keeps watch 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 sleep to his beloved.

³ Sons are indeed a heritage from the LORD,
the fruit of the womb a reward.

⁴ Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the sons of one's youth.

⁵ Happy is the man who has
his quiver full of them.

He shall not be put to shame
when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

There are very few psalms attributed to Solomon, and this is one of them. Solomon was the son of King David and the successor to the throne. Solomon was also the one who was able, finally, to build a temple in Jerusalem. But the way the story is told, God had to authorize the construction. "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain." We may build all kinds of places and spaces for people and for special purposes, but if those people do not claim it as their own and if those purposes are not fulfilled in that space, whatever quality and care has gone into the building will have been in vain.

Have you ever felt you had maybe built something in vain? Think about something you've put a lot into doing – a relationship, a vocation, a career, an education, raising children, caring for a parent or friend, nurturing your health, supporting an organization or cause or a community of faith. Has "the Lord" been in it to bless, or does it sometimes feel like it has been in vain? Have you felt unappreciated or under-appreciated, taken for granted, pushed away, or have you lost your passion or purpose or fulfillment in it all?... Have you been hurt by those who should have treasured your contribution and cared for your well-being? Have you felt like all the effort and care has been in vain?...

But then, the psalm moves into protection and care of “the city” and all the stress and worry about its welfare. No doubt, any responsible ruler would be so concerned much of the time. And one of the concerns is this: who can you trust? The best hope of any ruler is the birth of many children. This psalm refers to “sons” because sons could grow to become warriors and, all being well, provide trusted protection to support the efforts of the ruler.

Throughout history, though, psalms like this have also been read spiritually to great benefit. Think about the house of the Lord or the city as metaphors for your heart, your soul or your spirit (these words are often interchangeable). What kinds of supports, practices and people do you fill your “quiver” with (like arrows or sons) so that you are prepared for the vicissitudes of life? What spiritual resources may fortify you so that you find a light to walk through the dark valley you are passing through at this time of life? What companions on the journey are there for you to help protect you from falling into the pit of mental and spiritual distress? How do you find the spiritual empowerment and energy to climb the ascent into the presence of God where you find your inner home and rest amidst the ongoing swirl of life? Psalms like 127 offer rich metaphorical possibilities if they are read, prayed and internalized in this way.

May our quiver fill up with the kind of spiritual arrows that will protect us from our worst temptations... But should we fall (and realistically, we all do at some point), may we have the resources above and around us to heal and renew, and perhaps even grow from what we’ve been through. Even as enemies may break through the gate that is the city of our being (body, mind and soul), may we discover anew the divine flow of God’s love as our inner temple and empowering foundation.

PRAYER: You are the temple at the heart of our being, O God... But sometimes, we forget you are there. Sometimes we have trouble entering the holy of holies within us to find you... Sometimes we feel overwhelmed by the worry and stress. There is way too much we cannot control, O God, and because we care and we feel we are vulnerable. There are people we care about and people who cause us worry. There are situations difficult to resolve and tensions difficult to untangle... May your protection surround, and may you come to our aid when we find ourselves struck down... May you open the gates to let us in and may you open the gates of our hearts to let your love in so that its fire may be lit in us anew... In Jesus’ name; Amen.