

# FEARLESS MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN

## Psalm 127:1-5

### INTRODUCTION

This morning, as you can tell from my title, my primary audience is the moms who are among us. I've lived with a mother in my house for all but 6 years of my life; first with my own mother and then for the last 29 years with the mom who is my wife and the mother of my children. I also have a lot of friends who are mothers. In the course of my life and especially in our church I have rarely met a mother who is not serious about her work of being the mother of her children. For many, if not most mothers, this earnestness to do right by her children has a corresponding negative emotion and that is the emotion of fear. Mothers, in my experience, are tempted to be fearful and anxious in their work. There are many dangers which threaten the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of their children and thus many opportunities for worry and fear. So this morning I want to help the mothers who are among us to fulfill their God-given duties without fear.

However, lest the rest of you think that you can take a nap because you are not a mom, let me assure you that what I'm going to say will be of great help to you as well as you fulfill your own necessary work, no matter what it may be. The Psalm we are looking at this morning is not written specifically or exclusively to mothers. It is written to everyone who works at anything. Particularly this psalm is written to God's people who live in and work at building God's kingdom. Thus, while I aim to primarily address mothers it will not be difficult for anyone of us to see how the help this psalm provides to mothers can be also applied to you in your circumstances.

This psalm, like every part of the Scriptures, cannot be properly understood or applied without seeing what it meant in its original setting and then also seeing how it fits into the story that begins in Genesis and ends in Revelation of God's saving his people through the person and work of Jesus. The first thing we need to notice about this psalm is its title. Notice, first of all, that it is a "song of ascents." What does that mean? Psalms 120 through 134 share this same title. These fifteen psalms were sung by the people of Israel as they came from across the land to Jerusalem to the temple of God to worship him during each of the three mandatory festivals. Three times a year, every Israelite man was commanded to come to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices and join in the worship of God. Women and children were permitted to come but not commanded to do so. These were the songs that the pilgrim people of God sang on their way up to Jerusalem, as they ascended Mt. Zion.

The second thing to notice about this title is that the psalm is "of Solomon," in other words he is the author of the Psalm. There are only two psalms written by Solomon, the other one is Psalm 72. Solomon wrote this psalm for the tens of thousands of sons of Abraham to sing as they came to the city of Jerusalem where he, the son of David, had his throne and where he had built a house for God. What the Israelites observe as they come to Jerusalem is a magnificent temple built by human hands and a secure and powerful city ruled over by a great human king and a multitude of people who make a mighty nation. As they come they sing a song that tells them that the reason all of this exists is not due to human activity but due to God's building, watching and blessing. This song, written by the son of David, reminds these Israelites of God's promises to give to Abraham as many descendants as the stars in the heavens, of his promise to establish the throne of David's son forever and of how David's son would build him a house. Notice that three times in the first 2 verses God says that this human work and watching is not in vain or meaningless and useless work because God is the one who builds and watches. The Israelites were to learn from seeing these multitudes of people worshipping God in the temple, in a secure city that human work is not the most necessary thing but God's work is. This temple, this city and these people exist by the sovereign, gracious work of God and not man. It was a lesson they were to take home with them.

In living with mothers and talking with mothers for the past 53 years it seems to me that it is that word "in vain" that is the most fear inspiring word for them. The thought that strikes terror into the hearts of mothers is that after the pain of childbearing and the suffering of child raising that their child will fail to arrive at the goal for

which they have been aimed. In the case of Christian mothers the fear is that their child will fail to embrace Christ and a way of life that honors Christ. It is what they fear while raising children and to the degree that their child fails to attain to godliness it is the source of their greatest grief as Proverbs 17:25 says, “A foolish son brings grief to his father and bitterness to the one who bore him.” Fear and bitterness are disabling emotions. It is my desire this morning to look at what this psalm says to help the mothers among us to be fearless, no matter where they are at in the process of mothering.

## MAIN POINT

**Mothers can do their work fearlessly because...**

### **I. God is always working**

The underlying assumption, contained in the word, “unless”, is that God is working in his world. He may or may not be building what you are building and he may or may not be keeping watch where you are keeping watch but the basic assumption is that God works and watches. He builds houses and he keeps watch over cities. This is a unique feature of the God of the Bible in contrast to the false gods of other religions. The Bible begins not with a statement of God’s majestic being but by telling us, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The opening words of God’s story show God to be at work. The God who exists is a God who works. He makes things. He establishes things. He sustains things. He redeems things and people. He is always at work. There is a key word in v. 2 that is intended to draw our attention back to Genesis 3. The phrase, “toiling for food to eat”, literally says, “eating the bread of pain.” That word “pain” is the word that God used to tell both Eve and Adam what was going to happen to them and the world they live in as a result of their sin. In pain the woman will bring forth children and live with her husband and in pain the man will bring forth food to eat from the ground. This is the word describing the world as it exists under God’s curse. This is a pain filled world, even as we talked about in the children’s message. There is no part of life that is not subject to the pain and misery caused by God’s curse on sin.

However, notice that in the midst of this vain work that yields the “bread of pain” God gives to his loved ones sleep. God is at work building, watching, and giving sleep in his sin cursed world in spite of the reality of the pain that is caused by his curse on the world. You’ve probably never thought about this but the gift of sleep is daily evidence that God is at work in his world. While you sleep the world does not fall apart. The world keeps going even while you have no part in it. Also, God’s gift of sleep shows you that you can spend at least a third of every day doing nothing at all and still have food to eat and a place to live. Finally, sleep reminds you that you are not God. You are not omnipotent. If you do not sleep, you will die. Sleep gives evidence every day that you are a creature who must be cared for by his or her creator and that the world does not need you to keep on functioning.

But notice that the main evidence of God’s ongoing work in the world is God’s giving children to us. The birth of children is ongoing evidence that God is still at work in his world. Every child is God’s inheritance, his reward of grace. You don’t earn an inheritance. You receive an inheritance as a gift. The idea of reward in this verse is not the idea of payment for something that has been done. Children are not God’s wages for work well done. Rather, just as God gave Abraham and Sarah in their old age, Isaac as an act of his grace, so the birth of every child is an expression of God’s grace to undeserving people. God does not give children to people because we have earned the right to have children but because of his commitment to the world that he has made.

When you watch a temple being used for the worship of God and a city not being overrun by its enemies or wiped out in a plague but ruled over by a human king and women giving birth to and raising children it does not, on the surface look like God is working. What you observe is human activity. This psalm pulls back the veil of what is seen and tells us about what we cannot see except with the eyes of faith. God is at work. So if you are working as a mother you need to know that God is at work in your children’s lives. You are not working alone. God is building your home. God is watching over your children. God is blessing your efforts. Indeed, God is not merely helping you work. He is not an assistant. Rather he is doing all the building and all

the watching and all the blessing. You must work, but it is not your mothering that is determinative, rather it is his work that is determinative. If God were not building and watching all of your building and watching would be a complete waste of time. It would accomplish nothing. Therefore, we must do all of our work prayerfully, asking God to work while we work. It really is true we can do nothing; but God can do everything. So do not fear because God is working.

*Mothers can do their work fearlessly because...*

- *God is always working*
- *And because...*

## **II. God provides for those he loves**

In v. 2, while you toil away in this sin cursed world, struggling to parent these children you need to know that God is providing for you. The first thing he is providing is sleep. The argument of this verse is so important for us to hear. Because God's work is what matters, when you feverishly get up early and go to bed late, frantically trying to do everything, you are wasting your time. No matter how hard you work or how little sleep you get, you cannot do the work that really matters. You cannot build a home. You cannot keep the city safe. You cannot give life to children. There is a kind of working that is born out of fear or pride or unbelief or greed or some combination of these that accomplishes nothing. It is work arising from a desire for security and success in this world. It is work aimed only at obtaining the bread that can be had in this sin-cursed world. It is not work to build a house for God or to keep a city safe for God's people or to give life to God's people but work that aims to have the life that this world offers. It's the kind of anxiety laced living that Jesus describes in Matthew 6:31-32, "So do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat? Or what will we drink? Or what will we wear?'" For the pagans run after all these things and your heavenly Father knows that you need them." There is a kind of feverish, anxiety-laden mothering that is completely a waste of time because it is aimed at having the best dressed kids, the most successful children, the most popular children, in other words it is only aimed at gaining the bread of this sin-cursed world.

This verse isn't telling you "to let go and let God." It is not a command to not work or to live as if your work does not matter at all. The Bible clearly commands all of us to work faithfully and diligently. The psalm assumes human labor in building, watching and contending with enemies. Paul condemns those in the church in Thessalonica who piously argued that because God had done everything in Christ and that we can add nothing to it then they were not going to work but simply wait for God to take care of them. Thus they lived off of the generosity of their Christian friends and neighbors. Paul uses very strong language in condemning that way of thinking and living. He says, (2 Thessalonians 3:6-12) "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'If a man will not work, he shall not eat.'" It is clear that hard work is part of Christian living.

So it is not hard work that is being condemned in this verse but rather that kind of work that is motivated by fear or greed or pride or self-sufficiency. This sleep that God gives is the sleep of contentment. I have done the work God has required of me and I know that he is at work and so I will not fear, I will not frantically work to get more or to have more or to gain more security. While I will not be lazy, yet I will not work to excess because I know that God is at work in building my home and my children. This means then that I stop working and receive the gift of sleep that God gives to me each day. I recognize my limitations. I don't complain that I have too much to do and not enough time to do it. I will invest my energy in the building, watching and life giving activities that God calls me to engage in trusting in his work, not my own and thus receiving the gift of sleep at the end of each day.

It is not only frantic physical labor aimed at gaining the bread of this sin-cursed world that is a waste of time. But also, working to obtain the favor of God is vain. The daily sleep God gives is a symbol of the rest which Christ gives to his people. We rest from our work and rest in the work of Christ who will one day bring us into the Promised Land, the land of Sabbath rest. Mothers and fathers are to parent their children in hope, resting in God's promises to save our children by his word. We don't panic and become harsh and demanding when our children give evidence that they are sinners. We exercise just discipline out of loving hearts in dependence upon the gracious Holy Spirit to make our discipline effective. We harm our children when we make our parenting decisions out of fear of their sin and the sin that is in the world. I have done the most harm to my children when I have panicked upon discovering some sinful act of theirs and have become angry with them out of fear that they will ruin their lives and mine. But also, the greatest good has come to my children when Jane and I, confronted with their sin have rested in the power of Christ to forgive and change sinners and so have brought the gospel to bear upon our children's sin while we discipline them. When we have not depended upon our work but upon the work of Christ, while we work, then we have seen the greatest progress in our children's faith. Mothers can work without fear because God works even when we are not working. We can rest in him and his power as he graciously gives to us and our children the salvation, the rest in Christ that we cannot by any means produce in them or in us.

*Mothers can do their work fearlessly because...*

- *God is always working*
- *God provides for those he loves*
- *And because...*

### **III. God does miracle work through our work**

Verses 3-5 have been very important verses in the life of our family. We have viewed our children as blessings and gifts from God because of these verses. I have used this passage on a number of occasions when speaking with parents who are complaining about their children or others who are talking negative about children. We have viewed our work as parents as that of a warrior preparing his arrows to shoot in a battle. Using this passage in this way is appropriate but as I have reflected on this passage this past week I have been struck by how it fits into the broader biblical story of God's saving a people for himself.

The emphasis of vv. 3-4 is that children come from God. God is the one who gives life in the womb. Now, obviously, we participate in this act of procreation but our part is small compared to God's part. It is not without reason that the birth of a child is often described as a miracle. Eugene Peterson captures the point of these verses so well in his book, "A Long Obedience in the Same Direction." He says, "Opposed to the strenuous efforts of persons who, in doubt of God's providence and mistrust of man's love, seek their own gain by godless struggles is the gift of children, born not through human effort, but through the miraculous processes of reproduction which God has created among us. The example couldn't have been better chosen. What do we do to get sons? Very little. The entire miracle of procreation and reproduction requires our participation, but hardly in the form of what we call work. We did not make these marvelous creatures that walk and talk and grow among us. We participated in an act of love which was provided for us in the structure of God's creation."

The story of God's miraculous provision of children is a central feature of God's story of redemption; beginning with the birth of Isaac to 100 year old Abram and 90 year old Sarah all the way to the virgin birth of the Son of God. Accompanying these individual miraculous births is the ongoing promise that one day the descendants of Abraham, through one of his miraculously born descendants, will be as numerous as the stars in the sky; a very large quiver full indeed! So it is not surprising when we get to the NT to discover that God uses the birth metaphor and the father/child metaphor repeatedly to describe the salvation of his people and his relationship to them. Consider again just these two verses from John 1:12-13, "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God-- children born not of natural descent, nor of

human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.” God creates his children by a gracious, sovereign, supernatural, life-giving act. This spiritual birth, while an act of God, just as is every natural birth, comes about by a seed, just as does every natural birth. 1 Peter 1:23-25 says, “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For, "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever." And this is the word that was preached to you.” What is the seed that God uses to bring about spiritual birth? It is the seed of his word preached by the lips of human mothers and fathers and pastors and friends and co-workers.

Your work as a mother is very simple: preach the word of the gospel to your children. The promise is that God will use that “seed” to cause your children to be born again. God does the greatest miracle in the universe, turning a hell deserving sinner into a forgiven, justified, beloved child of God. So do not be afraid but preach the gospel to your children. Don’t let your time with your children be consumed with entertainment or with developing them to their maximum potential athletically or musically or intellectually. Make sure that you are doing your small work of preaching the gospel so that God can do his miracle work of giving them spiritual life by the seed of his word.

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#### **IV. God is making a house, a city and a family for our children and us to live in**

Again, as I’ve indicated, while it is not wrong to see in this psalm instructions for how we work and live out our individual Christian lives and how we view the giving of children, yet I cannot escape the fact that this psalm is about so much more than that. What is the house that God is building through the labor of men? What is the city God is keeping watch over through the watching of men? What is the family of arrows that God is creating that will answer the accusations of his enemies in the gate? Who is the man to whom God has given the inheritance of children? Who is the man to whom God has given as a reward the fruit of the womb? Who is the man blessed by God with a quiver full of arrows? This psalm gathers together three of the most common metaphors used in the Bible for the church, the company of those redeemed by Christ: The church is the assembly of the children created by God and given to Christ. The church is the temple of God which he has built by the Spirit through the work of Christ. The church is Mt. Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem that God watches over. Jesus is the man whom God has rewarded with a quiver full of children. This is a very important thing to recognize in our parenting. Building your family is only significant in light of your family being part of God's eternal family. The church does not exist to support the family as much as the family exists to support the church in the sense that it is through the family that God adds to his family and brings his family to maturity. Our first loyalty as Jesus made so clear is not to our biological family but to our spiritual family, the church.

Jesus is building his church and mothers are on the front lines of that building process. There is no reason for you to fear or to be bitter. If your children are still alive then God intends to use you to build his church through your preaching of the gospel to your children. There is no cause to lose hope. God sent his son into the world in order to save sinners. He has come to rescue his lost sheep and he has sent you as his ambassador to bring back his lost sheep through your faithfully proclaiming the message of Christ to your children, no matter their age. He has given you the love and esteem of your children so that you can bring them to him, not so you can get mushy, sentimental Mother's Day cards, though it is good to give your mother a mushy mother's day card.

It is also, not without reason that the apostle Paul, in his work of proclaiming the gospel and leading the people of God compares himself to a mother. In Galatians 4:19 Paul says to the deceived Christians in Galatia, “My

dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you...” Or again in 1 Thessalonians 2:7, “...but we were gentle among you, as a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.” Every person sitting in this room can be a mother to another human being. You can be the “womb” through which God gives life to a dead sinner. You can be a partner in the building of God’s house, in the watching over of God’s city and an agent of God’s life-giving blessing to another dead sinner. We live in the day of salvation, in the day when God is building his church and so mothers do not despair but be fearless as you preach Christ to your children and so become God’s fellow workers in spreading the gospel of his son to your children.

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