

Psalm 127:1-2

Pastor Pierre Cannings

4.29.2025

This pilgrim psalm is ascribed to Solomon. It records the blessing of the Lord in domestic life. The psalmist recognized that dependence on the providence of the Lord assures valuable domestic enterprises and safeguards

127:1–2. In words that reflect Ecclesiastes (a fitting relationship if Solomon was the psalmist), the author said that it is vain to attempt things without the Lord.

The will of God was ignored at humanity's peril, not only in the realms of military activity (2 Sam 2:1), national internal policy (Hos 8:4), and foreign policy (Isa 30:1), but also in the ordinary life of the individual believer

- I. Labor
 - a. Unless The Lord
 - i. Builds the House
 - 1. Build – to build a building
 - 2. The essential thing, the cooperation of Yahweh, remains lacking, which alone gives success and security
 - 3. Yahweh's smile of favor, or rather active involvement in the enterprise, is essential
 - b. Build
 - i. Who labor
 - 1. Labor – exert oneself
 - 2. mystery of divine providence the gap that so frequently yawns between human effort and achievement
 - ii. In Vain - worthless, meaning futile, in vain, then figuratively 'emptiness', 'uselessness'; so God the Lord regards the nations
 - 1. The triple repetition of *šāw* proves effective not only in its primary designation but also in its allusive power because *šāw*, "vanity," is a biblical term for useless pagan idols
- II. Protection
 - a. Unless the Lord
 - b. Guards the City
 - i. Guards- guard', 'watch' or 'guardhouse' in a camp

- ii. In the OT the word translates four Heb. terms. 1. *ṭabbāḥ*. The word originally signified royal 'slaughterers', but later came to mean guardsmen or bodyguard, being used of Pharaoh's bodyguard (Gn. 37:36; 39:1) and of Nebuchadrezzar's bodyguard (2 Ki. 25:8–10)
- iii. The secret of such security—or its negation—rests with God (cf. Ezek 28:26; Amos 3:6), over and above the sentry on the lookout for enemy attack

c. Watchmen

- i. Keeps Awake
- ii. In Vain

III. Even in Sleep

a. Rise and Retire

- i. Rise –
- ii. Retire- sit down, dwell

1. A constant motif of futility curses was derived from the area of agriculture or viniculture (see Job 31:8; Hos 4:10; Amos 5:11; Mic 6:14). The damning of human efforts in the fields from dawn to dusk by attack (Lev 26:16) or drought (Lev 26:19–20) or pestilence (Deut 28:38) haunted the farmer. It was blessing indeed to eat the fruit of one's labors instead of laboring in vain. It was sure evidence of Yahweh's love for that person (cf. Ps 60:7 [5]) that such an honor was bestowed upon him. The verb *נָשַׁבַּת*, rendered "rest," probably signifies arriving home after the day's work: one may compare 2 Sam 7:1, where it is contrasted with military activity. The pair *קוּם*, "rise," and *יָשַׁב*, "sit," is used in place of the common *יֵצֵא*, "go out," and *בֹּא*, "come in." *עֲצָבִים*, "labors," is to be taken not negatively like the toiling of v 1, but in a positive sense, as in Prov 14:23 (NKJV), "In all labor (*עֲצָב*) there is profit" (cf. Prov 5:10).

b. Eat of Painful Labors

- i. Eat - Gen 3:17, 19

1. *Eat the bread of toil*], emphasizing the intensity of the hard labour during the lengthened time. All this extra hard toil is vain, unless Yahweh shares in it
2. The sentiment is nicely matched in Ps 128:2. כֵּן, "this is how," refers to God's enabling farmers to eat the fruit of their labors.

This divine blessing is implicitly contrasted with the futility curse of another's eating what one has sown

3. contrasts the precariousness of relying on capricious gods against the dependability of the Reliable One of Israel. Of course, the traditional version "the bread of toil" would still be suggested by the word *ha 'aṣabbīm*, "idols."
- ii. Painful Labors - bread acquired with pain, or bread of anxious toil Ps 127:2
 1. The **toiling** (127:2) should not be taken to mean that people need not be diligent, for the Scriptures elsewhere say they should. Rather, that verse stresses that to work long days without divine providence and support is futile
 2. Hebrew word - connected to pain of child birth
- c. He Gives
 - i. To the Beloved
 1. Other Heb. words are *dôḏ* and *ra'yâ* (respectively of passionate love and its female object, especially in Ct.), *yāḏaḏ* (e.g. Ps. 127:2)
 - ii. Even in His sleep
 1. When he sleeps quietly in his bed, without thinking of anything needed, or making any effort to gain it
 2. The point is that work done independently of God will be futile. But a person who trusts in the Lord will find rest. Without the Lord, all domestic work is in vain.
 3. Here the explicit contrast is with long, unfruitful hours of toil; instead, there is not only a good harvest but full nights of sleep, blessing upon blessing for those favored by God. Only divine and human interaction produces success in both the first two lines and the third one.

WORK A term referring either to God's activity or to people's regular occupation or employment.

The Value of Work The Bible's positive outlook on work is rooted in its teaching about God. Unlike other ancient religious writings, which regarded creation as something beneath the dignity of the Supreme Being, Scripture unashamedly describes God as a worker. Like a manual laborer, he made the universe as "the work of his fingers" (Ps 8:3). He worked with his raw material just as a potter works with the clay (Is 45:9). The intricate development of the unborn child in the womb and the vast, magnificent spread of the sky both display his supreme craftsmanship (Pss 139:13–16; 19:1). In fact, all creation bears witness to his wisdom and skill (104:24). The almighty Creator even had his rest day (Gn 2:2–3) and enjoyed job satisfaction when surveying his achievements at the end of the week (1:31).

This vivid biblical description of a working God reaches its climax with the incarnation of Jesus. The "work" that Jesus was given to do (Jn 4:34) was, of course, the unique task of redemption. But he was also a worker in the ordinary sense. His contemporaries knew him as "a carpenter" (Mk 6:3). In NT times carpentry and joinery were muscle-building trades. So the Jesus who stormed through the temple, overturning tables and driving out the men and animals (Jn 2:14–16), was no pale weakling but a workingman whose hands had been hardened by years of toil with the ax, saw, and hammer. Hard, physical labor was not beneath the dignity of the Son of God.

If the Bible's teaching about God enhances work's dignity, its account of mankind's creation gives all human labor the mark of normality. God "took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it" (Gn 2:15). And God's first command, to "fill the earth and subdue it" (1:28), implied a great deal of work for both man and woman. In an important sense, people today are obeying that command of their Creator when they do their daily work, whether they acknowledge him or not. Work did not, therefore, arrive in the world as a direct result of the fall into sin (though sin did spoil working conditions, 3:17–19). Work was planned by God from the dawn of history for mankind's good—as natural to men and women as sunset is to day (Ps 104:19–23).

With this firm emphasis on the dignity and normality of labor, it is no surprise to find that Scripture strongly condemns idleness. "Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise" (Prv 6:6, ^{RSV}). Paul is equally blunt: "If any one will not work, let him not eat" (2 Thes 3:10, ^{RSV}). He set a good example (Acts 20:33–35; 1 Thes 2:9). Those who refuse to work, he insists, even for spiritual reasons, earn no respect from non-Christian onlookers by depending on others to pay their bills (1 Thes 4:11–12). Wage earners, on the other hand, have the material resources of Christian service (Eph 4:28).

Vocations In biblical times the Greeks and Romans catalogued jobs according to importance or desirability. Routine manual labor, for example, was considered inferior to work involving mental activity.

¹RSV Revised Standard Version

Jewish teaching contrasts strongly with this attitude. “Hate not laborious work,” taught the rabbis (Ecclus 7:15). Even the scholar had to spend some time in manual work. A few trades, like that of the tanner, were regarded as undesirable (a taboo broken very quickly by the early church—see Acts 9:43), but there is no indication in the Bible that some jobs are more worthwhile than others in God’s sight. The Lord calls craftsmen into his service (Ex 31:1–11), just as much as prophets (Is 6:8–9). So Amos was summoned from his fruit-picking to prophesy (Am 7:14–15), but with no suggestion that he was being promoted to a superior role. The important thing was not the nature of the occupation but the readiness to obey God’s call and to witness faithfully to him, whatever the job.

The Bible has some poignant things to say about the relationship between employer and employee. The OT prophets voice the strongest criticism. God is especially concerned to see that the weak get justice (Is 1:17; Mi 6:8). So, naturally, his spokesmen declare his anger when employers exploit their laborers and cheat them of their wages (Jer 22:13; Mal 3:5; cf. Jas 5:4). A person who wants to please God must “stop oppressing those who work for [him] and treat them fairly and give them what they earn” (Is 58:6, TL²B).

In Bible times, the scales were weighted heavily in favor of the employer. But Scripture is not blind to the existence of selfish, greedy employees. Every worker deserves a just wage (Lk 10:7), but those with special power must not try to increase their pay by threats and violence (3:14).³

Divine providence in human affairs (127:1aβ–2). The wisdom ideology of ancient Israel traced to the **mystery of divine providence the gap that so frequently yawns between human effort and achievement**: “man proposes, but God disposes” runs the old saying. Earthly life was regarded as essentially the arena of divine salvation and judgment, blessing and curse. **The will of God was ignored at humanity’s peril, not only in the realms of military activity (2 Sam 2:1), national internal policy (Hos 8:4), and foreign policy (Isa 30:1), but also in the ordinary life of the individual believer.** Futility curses in common use, which the prophets exploited to express divine judgment, dwelt on the grim possibility of labor in vain. To build a house was no guarantee of prolonged habitation: another might live in it (Isa 65:22–23; Amos 5:11; cf. Deut 28:33). Such a futility curse is here angled in a Godward direction. **Yahweh’s smile of favor, or rather active involvement in the enterprise, is essential.** Both the prophets and the covenant sanctions of Deut 28 associated futility sayings with hostile invasion. Whether independently or not, the same aura of meaning lies implicitly over the first line, in view of the continuation in terms of a threat to communal security. **The secret of such security—or its negation—rests with God (cf. Ezek 28:26; Amos 3:6), over and above the sentry on the lookout for enemy attack.**

²TLB The Living Bible

³ Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, [*Tyndale Bible Dictionary*](#), Tyndale Reference Library (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 1310.

A constant motif of futility curses was derived from the area of agriculture or viniculture (see Job 31:8; Hos 4:10; Amos 5:11; Mic 6:14). The damning of human efforts in the fields from dawn to dusk by attack (Lev 26:16) or drought (Lev 26:19–20) or pestilence (Deut 28:38) haunted the farmer. It was blessing indeed to eat the fruit of one's labors instead of laboring in vain. It was sure evidence of Yahweh's love for that person (cf. Ps 60:7 [5]) that such an honor was bestowed upon him. The verb שבת, rendered "rest," probably signifies arriving home after the day's work: one may compare 2 Sam 7:1, where it is contrasted with military activity. The pair קום, "rise," and ישב, "sit," is used in place of the common יצא, "go out," and בוא, "come in." עצבים, "labors," is to be taken not negatively like the toiling of v 1, but in a positive sense, as in Prov 14:23 (NKJV), "In all labor (עצב) there is profit" (cf. Prov 5:10). The sentiment is nicely matched in Ps 128:2. כן, "this is how," refers to God's enabling farmers to eat the fruit of their labors (cf. Daiches, *ExpTim* 45 [1933] 25). This divine blessing is implicitly contrasted with the futility curse of another's eating what one has sown (Job 31:8; see *Form/Structure/Setting*). Here the explicit contrast is with long, unfruitful hours of toil; instead, there is not only a good harvest but full nights of sleep, blessing upon blessing for those favored by God. Only divine and human interaction produces success in both the first two lines and the third one.

I observed in the *Notes* the crux posed by v 2b. It remains to investigate further whether and how שנה in the sense of "sleep" can be accommodated. Certainly the vocabulary of being awake (v 1) and rising (v 2a) would combine well with "sleep" in producing a unified semantic field (cf. the lists in T. H. McAlpine, *Sleep*, 43, 209–13), while the line v 2aα–γ alludes to a wakefulness related to anxious toil. So a reference to sleep is contextually fitting. Moreover, the ineffectual toil and wakefulness in the two cases of v 1—both evidence of divine lack of aid—find a parallel in the single case of v 2aα–γ and then in v 2aδb, a positive contrast of activity that is blessed by God with fruitfulness and satisfying sleep. One may compare with this last line Eccl 5:11 (12), "Sweet is the sleep of a worker, whether he eats a little or a lot" (author's translation), which likewise combines the three elements of sleep, work, and eating, though with a different nuance. The sense of "this is how he grants sleep" is that a harvest commensurate with daily labors is the result of divine blessing, which produces in turn the benison of regularly enjoying a full night's sleep, uncurtailed at either end by extra hours of work.

The first strophe teaches the lesson of divine sovereignty over human enterprise by way of warning against self-sufficiency. It pursues a negative course, reaching a rhetorical climax of exclamatory direct address in v 2aα–γ, which Irslinger (*B⁵N* 37 [1987] 55) compared with a threatening "woe" (אוי, הוי) clause. The strophe ends on a positive note, which will be developed in the second strophe in terms of praise of God and commendation of being the object of God's blessing.⁶

⁴*ExpTim The Expository Times*

⁵*BN Biblische Notizen*

⁶ Leslie C. Allen, [*Psalms 101–150 \(Revised\)*](#), vol. 21, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 238–239.

Syn⁷. and synth⁸. couplets.—**1.** *Except*], conditional clause, repeated in |⁹|.—*Yahweh build the house*], not the temple, but any house whatever, |¹⁰| *keep the city*], from falling into the hands of the enemy.—*in vain*], repeated for emphasis.—*the builders labour* |¹¹| *the keeper waketh*].
The essential thing, the coöperation of Yahweh, remains lacking, which alone gives success and security.—**2.** *It is vain for you*], change of the order of the sentence, with the personal address for the previous, more objective third person.—*who rise up early*], to go forth to labour earlier than usual.—*sit down late*], after an unusually prolonged day of work.—and so: **Eat the bread of toil**], emphasizing the intensity of the hard labour during the lengthened time. **All this extra hard toil is vain, unless Yahweh shares in it.**—Indeed *He* (Yahweh) *giveth*], without any kind of toil; *to His beloved*], the one who is dear to Him; *in sleep*], even when he sleeps quietly in his bed, without thinking of anything needed, or making any effort to gain it.¹²

Psalm 127

This pilgrim psalm is ascribed to Solomon. It records the blessing of the Lord in domestic life. The psalmist recognized that dependence on the providence of the Lord assures valuable domestic enterprises and safeguards. The writer then epitomized that bounty in the reward of children, who in those days helped defend a family.

A. *Labor is vain without God's providence (127:1–2)*

⁷Syn. synonymous.

⁸synth. synthetic.

⁹|| parallel, of words or clauses chiefly synonymous.

¹⁰|| parallel, of words or clauses chiefly synonymous.

¹¹// parallel, of words or clauses chiefly synonymous.

¹² Charles A. Briggs and Emilie Grace Briggs, [*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms*](#), International Critical Commentary (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1906–1907), 458.

127:1–2. In words that reflect Ecclesiastes (a fitting relationship if Solomon was the psalmist), the author said that it is vain to attempt things without the Lord. **Builders** work on a **house ... in vain** unless **the LORD builds** it, **watchmen ... guard in vain** unless **the LORD watches**, and being anxious over one's labor **for food** and working long hours is **in vain** (cf. 128:2). The point is that work done independently of God will be futile. But a person who trusts in the Lord will find rest. Without the Lord, all domestic work is in vain.

The **toiling** (127:2) should not be taken to mean that people need not be diligent, for the Scriptures elsewhere say they should. Rather, that verse stresses that to work long days without divine providence and support is futile. The thought continues from verse 1.¹³

¹³ Allen P. Ross, "[Psalms](#)," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 885.