

Praying Your Work

Psalms 127

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Sunday, April 1, 2001

When I was a child we used to take road trips as a family, not necessarily long trips but outings. All four kids, Dad and Mom would pile into the station wagon and head off for an excursion. I remember numerous trips driving into the Great Smoky Mountain National Park to go swimming in one of the cold mountain streams. Inevitably on the way home we would sing songs. Either Mom or Dad would begin one, most probably to distract us four kids from smacking each other. We sang such memorable tunes as:

She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain; Found a Peanut; Goin' Down the Road Feelin' Bad; Do Lord; You Are My Sunshine.

These songs and family singing still give me a sense of family character. They tell me something about my identity. Do you have such experiences in your family background that give you a sense of family identity?

Israel did. Psalm 127, which we heard a few moments ago, is part of a group of Road Songs collected for the family of God to sing on the way to pilgrimage festivals. If we listen to these songs carefully we can discern a bit of the family character.

Psalms 120-134 form a group entitled "Psalms of Ascent." You can read the superscript above each one and see the word "ascent." The entire Book of Psalms is a collection of collections that Israel put together over about 1,000 years. In this collection is the smaller "Road Songs" group. This group Israel used when they would ascend, go up, to Jerusalem three times a year for the festivals. It is as if people would carry this little booklet containing 15 songs; and when they all piled into the station wagon, Dad or Mom would say, "OK, get out the song book and let's sing number two."

The reason I bring this to you is that these songs are meant to be read together. They form a unit characterizing the family of God on the road to Jerusalem. If you look at the Road Songs you will notice a few key things: -They are short, so everyone could memorize them. -They are about household stuff, everyday life (Ps 133 sung at family gatherings). -They have individual parts and chorus parts ("Daddy sing bass, Mama sing tenor, me and little brother would join right in there").

-They share similar themes: -house (122:1) -blessing (129:8, 133-4) -sleep (121:4, 127) -kids (131:2, 127) -building (122:3, 127) -warriors (120:4, 123, 127) -Yahweh keeping watch (121:8, 127) -The central song is Psalm 132, which mentions the festival, the city, and all the themes. -Certain psalms are linked, e.g. Pss 127-128.

With these things in mind, take a look at Psalm 128. It is the mirror image of Psalm 127.

READ Ps 128 Antiphonally

Psalm 127 says in a negative fashion what Psalm 128 asserts in positive fashion. They are a book-matched pair.

Psalm 127 tells us that one's life's work must correspond to Yahweh's work or it is vanity (Hebrew shavah).

Psalm 128 tells us that when one's life's work corresponds to Yahweh's work, it is blessed/happy (Hebrew baruk/ashre).

These two songs reveal the family character of God's people on the road. What does this mean for our group identity and for our individual family identity?

First, everything the group has or we have comes from Yahweh. The Psalms teach this everywhere. Let me give you an example. Turn with me to Psalm 104:27-29 (READ). Now I want you to take a breath and hold it for a second. OK, let it out. You just breathed because God breathed into you. All you have comes from God. This is family characteristic number one.

All your life is a gift from God--the house, the city, and the family according to Psalm 127; your breath, your food, even the grass you are waiting to cut this Spring according to Psalm 104. Everything you own is from God - car, kids, job, health, possessions. The direct response to this is to give thanks for the things God gives us collectively and me particularly.

E.g., Cultivate Thanks in your life: My prayer time begins with thanks vs. lament (most prevalent kind of psalm)

E.g., Cultivate Giving, Stewardship: guitars for me (my most precious possessions)

Second, everything the group does or I do, all our life's work, must begin with Yahweh's work. What does this mean?

E.g., Friend who thought in order to do God's work, he must do more church work. I told him that he needed to plan better highways as a part of God's work.

We live in a country where the perception is that there are the sacred realms and there are the secular realms. Regardless of what exactly the non-establishment clause of the first amendment means, in popular parlance, we think of sacred stuff as what we do at

church and secular stuff as what we do the rest of the week. The Bible doesn't reason this way. In fact the categories of sacred and secular don't appear in the pages of Scripture. The Bible recognizes only the holy and the profane, meaning the places where God is acknowledged and the places where God is ignored. If I read my Bible and the Psalms aright, then all life is sacred, and there is no place where God isn't. This has enormous implications for the way you and I think about our work.

God's presence in life sacralizes all of life's activities, even the places where we think God could not be. If I read this psalm correctly then:

An auto mechanic can insert a holy spark plug. A lawyer can file a sacred brief. A homemaker can drive a godly carpool. A soccer player can kick a divine goal. A student can solve a theological algebra problem. A retired person can serve as a religious museum guide.

Get the picture? Everything you do stems from God. The question is whether you recognize God in the process. When you don't, vanity-shaveh. When you do, blessed-baruk. Jesus puts it this way, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matt 6:33).

Here's a little exercise to help you. When you plan your day, run through your Palm Pilot, or jot down on a piece of paper what you are going to do, and think to yourself, "How is God present in this?" "Where am I going to meet God as I work?"

The Psalms of Ascent were meant to give the family of God a sense of their identity when they went up to the three yearly festivals: Booths, Passover, and Weeks. By singing these songs, they learned who they were and how God was involved in their life. They memorized these short songs such that they became a part of their family fabric.

We do the same as we walk through the liturgy every Sunday - call, confession, pardon, creed, hymn. This is good. The process makes us think about who we are in the sanctuary. But one more thing is needed; we must carry this identity outside these walls onto the road, the true sanctuary of our God. It is there where we truly minister. Amen.