

## How to Pray for Your Family

### Psalm 127

My parent's generation became very familiar with the names of tiny, out of the way places in the South Pacific like Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, and Midway because during WWII, major battles were fought over these otherwise insignificant pieces of real estate. I always think of those islands when I read the book of Job because even though it is a story about one man, it is the site of one of the biggest battles between good and evil in the Bible. The story of Job opens with a wager between God and the devil. *"Now there was a day when the sons of God (angels) came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. The LORD said to Satan, "From where do you come?" Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "From roaming about on the earth and walking around on it." The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil."* (In light of what follows, it is interesting that God calls the devil's attention to Job. Job is one of God's guys, a noble and righteous man who loves God; a human Satan has been unable to influence.) *Then Satan answered the LORD, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth Your hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face."* (Job 1:6-11) Satan replies, "Of course Job seems to love You. You bless everything he does. It is to Job's advantage to love You, but his love isn't real. Stop blessing Job and You'll see that he is just as self-serving as anybody else in the world." And so begins the story of Job. Does Job really love God or does Job only love what God does for him? You'll have to read the book to find the answer. What I want you to notice is that up to this point, God had put a hedge around Job and his family, protecting them and blessing all of Job's labor in their behalf. Why? Why were Job and his family blessed so greatly by God? Job 1:5 tells us. Job had seven sons and three daughters as well as immense herds and possessions. He was a very wealthy man. Each of his seven adult sons hosted a family feast each week. They ate at the first son's home on the first day of the week, at the second son's home on the second day of the week and so on. And vs. 5 says, *"When the days of feasting had completed their cycle, (which would be each week) Job would send and consecrate them, rising up early in the morning and offering burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, "Perhaps my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." Thus Job did continually."* Every week, Job offered a sacrifice to God for each of his children and prayed for each of them continually so that they would not stray from God. Why had God put a hedge around Job and his family? Why did God bless everything that Job owned? Because Job asked Him to; Job continually prayed for his family, never assuming that their prosperity and safety was a given; knowing always that it is the blessing of the Lord that makes rich and how much his family needed God's blessing and protection. Job is a very unique guy in the Bible. Normally, the wealthier person becomes, the more self-reliant they become and the less they seem to realize how much they need God. Not so with Job. He is continually praying for his family and that is why Satan says to God, *"You have put a hedge around Job and all that he has; and You have blessed the work of his hand and his possessions keep increasing in the land."*

This summer we're looking at the Psalms, the prayer book of the Bible; which contains prayers for every occasion, situation and need we'll ever find ourselves in; to learn how to connect better with God through being honest about who He is and who we are and the place where we find ourselves. This morning I want to talk to you who are parents as we look at the 127<sup>th</sup> psalm and at how to pray for your family. I believe that there is nothing we can do that will affect our family more powerfully than praying regularly for them. If there is a secret to parenting, this is it. I have seen more of my prayers answered with regard to my family than in any other area of my life; and if I could only give you one piece of parenting advice, it would be to imitate Job and to pray regularly for your kids – provided we pray the way the Bible teaches us to pray. Mechanically rattling off prayers to God accomplishes very little because according to the Bible, it is what we believe about God that make our prayers effective. Psalm 127 reveals the two crucial convictions we must be convinced of before we will pray powerfully and persistently for our children. First, I value the blessing of God. Second, I must value my children. This psalm is attributed to Solomon

and it was most likely written for people who are just starting their family; people who are asking, “How can I have a successful family? A successful marriage? Successful children?” As such, psalm 127 addresses two of the big issues in most of our lives: our daily work and our family. Let’s look at what the world’s wisest man has to say.

First, before I can pray effectively for my family, I value God’s blessing. Let’s read vs. 1-2. *“Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it. Unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman keeps awake in vain. It is vain for you to rise up early, to retire late, to eat the bread of painful labors; for He gives His beloved sleep.”* Let me ask you a question. Do you think Solomon is addressing people who work too much or who work too little? Solomon is addressing the workaholic, the person who has to outwork everybody else. This is a psalm for Americans. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Americans work more than anyone in the industrialized world: more than the English or French, or the Germans or even the Japanese. Americans take less vacation time, work longer days, and retire later than any other nation on earth. That may be why so many people today feel like they’re too busy, too stressed, and too tired to do much of anything else but just get through another day. Solomon isn’t against hard work. Just read what he wrote in the proverbs about the blessings which come from diligence and industriousness. His point in Psalm 127 is that if we leave God out of the equation, we’ll find that all that work will be wasted. Three times Solomon repeats the word, *vain*; which means ineffective and incapable of producing the desired effect. *“Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.”* No matter how hard I work at being a good dad and providing for my family, unless God builds my house, all my effort will be in vain. *“Unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman keeps awake in vain.”* No matter how vigilant and careful I am; no matter how much I worry and plan ahead and try to anticipate every contingency, unless the Lord guards my family, my health, my career or my community, all my effort will be in vain. Solomon’s point is that all human effort is useless apart from God’s involvement; and now he gets personal. *“It is vain for you to rise up early, to retire late, to eat the bread of painful labors; for He gives to His beloved in his sleep.”* No matter how hard I work or how long I work, it is God’s blessing that makes rich. Sure, God gives us responsibilities but He does the heavy lifting; and that is why Solomon says that it is useless to kill yourself working and neglect God; because He works even when we sleep. He can accomplish things I could never dream of accomplishing. Solomon isn’t warning against hard work. He’s warning against living independently of God because unless God builds my family, unless God blesses my labor, unless God protects and shields, anything I do on my own is worthless and short-lived. That’s why Job prayed every day. Prayer is the result of knowing our limitations; and until I see what I cannot do on my own, prayer will either be non-existent or just a ritual I mechanically go through and not the single most important thing I can do for my family’s prosperity and protection.

My children are now in their 30s with children of their own; and I’ve been praying for them since they were born because I need God’s blessing on my family and work. I can’t change their hearts and I can’t protect them 24 hours a day. Only God can do that and He says, *“You have not because you ask not.”* (James 4:2) He says *“For the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His.”* (2 Chron. 16:9) He says, *“From Me comes your fruit.”* (Hosea 14:8) He says *“I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.”* (John 15:5) Yet He also says, *“I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”* (Philip. 4:13) He promises, *“It is the blessing of the Lord which makes rich.”* (Proverbs 10:22) *“A man can receive nothing unless it is given to him from heaven.”* (John 3:27) He says, *“Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.”* (James 1:17) That’s why Solomon writes, *“Commit your works to the Lord and your plans will be established.”* (Prov. 16:3) and *“In all your ways, acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight.”* (Prov. 3:6) Do you believe those promises? If you do, prayer will be as natural as breathing; because you know how much you need God’s involvement in every area of your life. Let’s be honest. Most Christians don’t pray very much because we aren’t yet convinced that we need God’s blessing – which we

would expect since the essence of sin is independence. Because of the sin which dwells in me, I don't want to depend on God; I want to depend on myself or on other people or institutions or something I can see. So we depend on the schools or the church or our friends or our family doctor to grow our kids up right and we wonder why we're often so disappointed with the result. It's because of where we placed our faith. Until I value God's blessing above everything else; until I'm convinced that *"Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build labor in vain."* Until I'm convinced that, *"Unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman keeps awake in vain."* Until I'm convinced that, *"It is vain for you to rise early, to retire late and to eat the bread of painful labors for the Lord gives to His beloved in his sleep,"* I won't pray for my family like Job prayed.

That's the first requirement for praying effectively for my family and here's the second. Not only must I value God's blessing, I must value my children. Look at what the world's wisest man writes about kids in vs. 3-5. *"Behold, children are a gift of the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be ashamed when they speak with their enemies in the gates."* Solomon's perspective on children is very different than the perspective of our culture. Many people today view children as a liability rather than an asset; as a distraction from the important issues of life rather than the continuation of life itself. In Europe and in this country, educated people are waiting longer and longer to have children if they have them at all; and if they do, they are having fewer of them. And more and more people are unwilling to raise the children they do have, paying others to do the job. Less educated people are still producing children but – especially in the case of fathers – refusing to take any responsibility for the children they produce. Large portions of Western society no longer value children and dismiss those who do as "breeders." By contrast, Solomon tells us two things about children. Children are a blessing to be enjoyed and children as an asset to be developed.

First, children are not a liability or a distraction from the important things of life. They are a blessing from God. *"Behold, children are a gift of the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward."* I know what some of you are thinking. "My kid...a blessing...a reward? Are you kidding me? My kid is an 18 year sentence to hard labor!" No, you're wrong. Your kid is a 50 year sentence to hard labor. Last week, our grandchildren came over and we've got a very old pair of black, ceramic panthers which my parents had and which are quite a bit older than me so we should probably have them carbon dated. They might be valuable historical artifacts for all we know. Anyway, our two year old grandson, Jake, wanted to play with one of the panthers and because he has a grandfather who is incapable of saying no, Jake was soon pushing the panther around the carpet and growling. I was sitting beside him, trying to guard my panther and keep my grandson happy at the same time, but all of a sudden, Jake lifts the panther into the air, loses control and drops it, breaking off one of its feet. Jake starts crying, my son Jeff, who watched the whole thing and I'm sure is embarrassed, says, "Jake, Gaga told you not to pick the panther up." (My grandkids call me Gaga – after Lady Gaga I guess) and I know in my heart that this is all my fault. Jake is a normal, lovable, rambunctious two year old – and does what normal, lovable, rambunctious two year olds do. And with any two year old – or 22 year old, there are times its easy to forget that this child is God's gift and reward to you. But that's the way Solomon says wise people look at their children. If God has blessed you with a child, that child belongs to God, is valuable to God and has been entrusted to you by God to train and prepare for adulthood. That child is one of the most important assignments God will give you in this life. She is not a distraction nor an interruption nor a burden which prevents you from getting on with life – she is God's great blessing on your life. But until we see our children as blessings and rewards from God, we will not be able to pray for them as we ought.

Children are a blessing to be enjoyed and children are an asset to be developed. Solomon writes, *"Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be ashamed when they speak with their enemies in the gates."* What are arrows to a warrior? Arrows are the tools of his trade; what makes a warrior effective. Arrows are the warrior's assets and the more he has of

them, the more deadly and effective he becomes...if he can shoot straight. Solomon says what arrows are to a warrior, children are to a parent. But notice, Solomon is talking about the children of one's youth; the children you had when you were young. He's not talking about your toddler; he's talking about your adult son or daughter. If you raise them properly, your children will be your greatest asset and advantage. That's why Solomon adds, *"How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be ashamed when they speak with their enemies in the gates."* The gates of the city were the city's courts, the place where justice was dispensed and disagreements settled. So what is Solomon saying? When you meet your enemies – and that day always comes, whether your enemies are human or biological or circumstantial – on the day you face your enemies, how blessed is the man or woman who is surrounded by their adult children. They will be your arrows, your assets, your protectors. One of my greatest blessings and joys has been to be able to work with my kids on the Creekside staff. I didn't hire them – our entire membership hired them – and we are so fortunate to have them. They have been such a strength and an encouragement to me; and God has blessed me through them many times over the investment Laurie and I made in them. They along with their mom are my greatest assets. The people of Solomon's time saw the continuity between the generations. That child whose hand we held and whose heart we encouraged will one day hold our hand and encourage our heart. One generation will take the place of the other. And the investment we make in our children is paid back to us many times as they become adults. God doesn't give us children either to ruin our life nor to fulfill us; but as assets to be developed. And it is only as I have this future orientation toward my kids and a commitment to seeing them grow up to assume their role as productive adults and servants of Christ that I will be able to pray effectively for them.

How do you pray for your family? Here's how to get started. Luke 2:52 tells us how Jesus grew up. *"And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men."* Pray that your children and spouse will grow in wisdom and for their intellectual development. Pray for their physical development and safety; that God will protect them from accidents and illness. Pray for their relationship with God; that God will open their eyes to their need for Him and give them faith in Christ. Pray for their social development, that God will bless them with good friends who will encourage their walk with Him. I prayed for these things for years for my kids and He answered. I know that many of you have children who are far from the Lord today but don't stop praying for them. God is the perfect parent and He has prodigals; just look at us. But He patiently brought us to Himself and He can bring our kids back as well. My brother was hopelessly addicted to drugs and to alcohol well into his late 40's, spent time in prison and from all appearances, looked like he would be a junkie until he died. Yet he came to Christ and today is active in his little church in Taft, leads a Narcotics Anonymous group and has been clean and sober for six years. If God can save my brother, He can save anybody. God answers prayer. Sometimes I hear people say, "Well, all we can do now is pray." If there is a God who answers prayer, then praying is the single most powerful thing we can do.

Now some of you may think you don't have a family to pray for, but that's not true. If you belong to Christ, you are surrounded by family. Jesus died in our place to make us children of God and when you ask Him to be your Lord and Savior, He comes into your life and you become part of the family of God; the forever family. I'm going to ask our elders and Council members to join me up front now and if you would like someone to pray with you, your brothers and sisters would count it an honor. We won't give you advice or counsel; but we'll listen and pray for you.