

Psalm 127:3-5

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[0 : 00] This past couple of weeks have been a happy time for us as a congregation. Why is that?

Well, perhaps I can answer that question by paraphrasing, really more than paraphrasing, it's modifying words of the psalmist that we will be considering this evening.

Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children of reward from Him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. Happy is the congregation whose creche and pews are full of them. Well, I hope you don't mind me modifying this verse to celebrate the birth of children into our congregation, and we rejoice in their birth. And we also look forward with excitement to others that are on the way. Children are indeed a blessing, but they are also, in parallel or hand in hand, a serious responsibility for parents, but also for all who form part of the community of faith into which are born covenant children. The responsibilities lie not solely upon the parents, though particularly upon the parents, they also rest upon all of us. And we find that particularly symbolized and illustrated when we have a baptism. And the baptism is something that we perform in the context of the gathered congregation. And we do that, for one reason, certainly as an illustration of the responsibility that we all have in the care of the covenant children of our congregation. So, it is a serious responsibility to care for and to bring up our children. And given that it is a serious responsibility, we are grateful to God that we are not left in the dark concerning what our attitude should be to our children and what God requires of us in the matter of bringing up our children. And this evening we're going to be thinking about these things with the help of the verses in the second part of Psalm 127. This morning we thought largely of the first two verses. This evening we're going to be thinking about the second half of the psalm of this wisdom poem that speaks on this matter of our children. Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from Him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them.

They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate. Now, the subject that is addressed clearly is the subject of our children, but the language in which it is addressed is quite alien to us. The examples that are given seem so distant from our reality.

And so, maybe we read these verses and we say, well, what's that all about? What can I draw from this that's useful? Perhaps those of us who are parents. And we say, well, yes, we want to perform our duties as we ought, but what is there here that can help me? Well, what I want to do this evening is to identify in these verses, verses 3 to 5 of Psalm 127, five principles of biblical parenting.

[3 : 45] Five principles of biblical parenting. We're not suggesting for a moment that all the instruction that God gives us in this matter of bringing up our children is found in these verses. Evidently not.

This is not an exhaustive treatment of the subject. It's a poem. And as a poem, it has its limitations. It's not intended to be a systematic description of the duties and responsibilities of parents. But in the form that it takes as a poem, we can identify principles, principles of biblical parenting.

And there are five that I want to notice with you this evening. The first one that I think we can very clearly identify in these verses is that we are to recognize the one who generously gives us our children. The first thing, we are to recognize the one who generously gives us our children. Then in verse 3, we read, sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from Him. Very clearly, even though we are going to spend some time just thinking about what the language is actually saying, what is beyond doubt, what is evidently clear, is where our children come from. They come from God.

They are that which God gives to us. It is God who consciously and purposefully grants to us as parents our children. We don't believe in a God who created the world and then stood back and just let things take their course, let nature take its course, as some might say. No, the children that we have have been given to us have been given to us consciously and purposefully by God. Sometimes we hear, just in conversation we hear, or in news reports or documentaries, we hear of a planned or an unplanned pregnancy.

And obviously, depending on the context in which that language has been used, we understand what is being meant by that. But it is important for us to recognize, in the context certainly of our own children, we could extend it to all children, but especially in the context of our own children, that from God's perspective, every pregnancy is a planned pregnancy, planned by Him as the means whereby He gives us this very precious gift of children. Now, there is particular language that the psalmist uses. He speaks of sons as a heritage from the Lord. He speaks of children as a reward from Him.

[6 : 32] Now, we're going to comment on the word heritage and what it implies or might imply in a moment, and we'll come back to it. But for the moment, we want to think of the language of reward.

Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from Him. Now, that language, I would imagine, would immediately generate some questions. If we are to understand that children are a reward from God, does that imply merit on the part of the parents, of those who receive from God children? That's the language that is used, and that would appear to be what it implies.

I think we almost instinctively feel, well, that can't be right. Surely, receiving children is not something that we receive as some kind of payment or reward from God. So, how are we to understand the language that is used here? The Hebrew word that is translated reward does indeed mean that. Indeed, it would ordinarily be used to speak of something even more seemingly inappropriate. It would normally be used to mean wages. It is that which you receive in payment for services rendered. And I suppose, because wages just doesn't sound right at all, the alternative, a legitimate alternative of reward is the one that is used in our translation, generally in most of the translations.

But we still have this, I suppose, difficulty of saying, well, why is this language used, and does it imply some kind of merit on the part of the parents who are so blessed? Well, I think in this instance, the use of this word is not to be understood in that sense of a payment for services rendered, or even a reward for good behavior, or however you may wish to conceive of the idea of reward, but rather the language of reward and indeed the language of heritage is being used to emphasize the value of that which is being given. When we think of a reward, we think of something of great value. And this is the emphasis. This is what the psalmist is wishing to portray and to get across, that the children we receive are of great value. Now, in a moment, we're going to see that as one of the five principles, but simply in recognizing that the use of this word reward is not to be understood as being some indication that as parents we merit this gift or the receiving of our children. To give just one example of where the same word is used in that same sense of emphasizing the value of what we are granted, we can just notice very quickly in Genesis chapter 15 and verse 1. And we're going to read this verse because we'll find the same word reward in English. That's the word that is used, and it is translating the very same word that we find here in Psalm 127. And we'll read this verse, Genesis 15, verse 1. After this, the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision. Do not be afraid, Abraham.

I am your shield, your very great reward. This is God speaking to Abraham, and He speaks to Abraham, and He says, I am your shield and your very great reward. God is not saying that Abraham had done something to deserve God. But what He is saying is that God is to Abraham that which is of immense value, of immense help and value to Abraham. So, the word then is to be understood in that sense as a word that highlights the great value of that which is being spoken of. In the case of the Psalm, are children, the sons and daughters that God grants us. Children then are a gift from God, a gift of great value, as we'll develop a little more in a moment. And the truth that God gives children to parents tells us a great deal about God and about our responsibility toward God. It reveals a God who has determined that families lie at the heart of His purposes, indeed lie at the heart of the human society that He has established and designed. It reveals a God who has designed families in a manner that, in a measure, reflects Himself as the one who exists as a family, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It reveals a God who is generous and who gives good gifts. We know how we have this same truth expressed on different occasions in the Bible of God as the giver of good gifts to His children. Well, what greater gifts could we receive than the gift of children? And in the light of all this, in the light of this first principle that we're establishing or identifying, rather, that is found in this Psalm that we are to recognize, the One who generously gives us our children, in the light of this, our responsibility with regard to our children, and in the light of receiving children, our first responsibility is to give thanks to God as the giver of our children, a gratitude that, as we will see, we must find expression in the manner that we raise our children. So, that's the first principle that we can identify, that we are to recognize the One who generously gives us our children. Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from Him. The second principle that I think we can establish from these verses, it's certainly true, and we'll seek to show how in these verses it can be found. The second principle is this, that we are to acknowledge that our children belong to God.

[12 : 47] Yes, He gives them to us as a gift that we gratefully receive, but in parallel with that, there is this truth that we must acknowledge that our children ultimately belong to God. I mentioned a moment ago that we would come back to discuss a little or consider a little the implication of the word heritage in verse 3. Sons are a heritage from the Lord. Now, the English translations almost invariably understand the two statements they had in verse 3. Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from Him. They understand them to be parallel statements that are essentially indicating the same truth, that we receive our children from God, as a gift from God. And what you have is what is very common, as we've discovered on many occasions, very common in Hebrew poetry, this parallelism, where the same truth is expressed in slightly different ways. And so, generally, that is the way this is understood.

Sons are a heritage from the Lord is just another way of saying that sons are a reward from Him, that we receive our children from God. Now, that may well be what the psalmist has in mind, but it is possible, and I share this possibility with you for you to make of it as you will. It is possible that what the poem is actually expressing are complementary truths in these two statements in verse 3, rather than the same truth expressed in different ways. What the psalmist literally says in the first statement in verse 3 is as follows, heritage of the Lord, or heritage of Yahweh, sons, and implied are. Heritage of Yahweh, our sons. Now, clearly, you need to say, well, what exactly is being said there? And it's possible that what is being said is that they are a heritage from the Lord towards us. But it's also possible, and certainly the language allows this understanding, that what is being said is that our children are a heritage for the Lord. Yes, they come from the Lord, but there is a sense in which they are the heritage of or for the Lord. Now, what would that imply if we are to understand it in this way? Well, if this is the way we can understand it, then the implication is that our children belong to God in the sense of our children being that which we hand over to God as His inheritance from us as parents.

I hope it's clear what I'm trying to get across. You see, our lives of service to God will come to an end. We'll have our three score years and ten, or maybe a few extra ones if God is pleased to grant us a few extra years. And our time of service will come to an end, certainly our service to God in this world. And what will we leave behind? Well, not only that which we have been able to do, that which God has graciously enabled us to do in the service of Himself, but we will also leave behind our children, children who can continue to serve God. Now, if this is the way that we are to understand what is being said here, then it's a sobering but also an exciting thought that ties in with what we are going to say concerning our responsibility to raise our children in the faith. So, I leave that possibility with you that here in verse 3, there is the possibility at any rate. I wouldn't want to say it more strongly than that, that we are not to understand it as being an expression of what God gives to us, but of the heritage that we leave to God in the manner that we raise our children in the faith and in the service of God. Now, what I would say is that regardless of how you translate verse 3, and even if you were to perhaps prudently take the view that the manner in which it is generally understood is the right way to understand it, regardless of that, it remains the case that our children do belong to God. Whether that is expressed here or not is another matter, but it is simply the case that our children belong to God in the same way that everything that we are and have belongs to God. So, a second principle that we can identify or at least suggest is found in these verses. Not only what we've already commented that we are to recognize the one who generously gives us our children, but we are to acknowledge that our children belong to God. The third principle that I want to note is this, that we are to appreciate the great value of the children we are given. Now, that's something we've already touched on, and it is a principle that we find in this same verse 3. Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from Him. The language clearly and unmistakably and intentionally points to the great value of our children. The language of heritage, the language of reward, highlights and accentuates how precious our children are. Now, this, of course, only serves to emphasize the importance of heartfelt gratitude to God for such valuable gifts. But it also carries implications in regard to the care and protection that we will afford our children. You see, in the measure that we appreciate how precious they are, in the measure that we appreciate of what great value they are, in that measure, we will provide for them and care for them and protect them as we would do for anything that we consider to be of great value. We think perhaps in the context of our homes, if there's a family heirloom that is of great value, with what care that is protected. Why? Because it is so precious, because it is of such great value that it is of great value that it is of great concern that it's not harmed in any way, that it's looked after in the best possible way. Well, how much more? If we appreciate how precious our children are, then that will have implications concerning the care that we provide for them.

And, of course, we must care for our children. We care for them from conception through birth and infancy, childhood and adolescence and beyond, as required as those who are precious. One of the great tragedies of our generation, and of course it's not only of our generation, but one of the great tragedies of our generation is the reality of unwanted pregnancies and unwanted children. That which is precious, yet unwanted and unloved, and even more tragically, consequently, because of that, deemed to be disposable. Just on that point, it is interesting to note the language of the psalmist in verse 3.

In the NIV, in the second part of the verse, we have the expression, given children a reward from Him. I think I'm right in saying in the older versions, the language that is used is a more literal translation, and it is the language, the fruit of the womb. That is what is said in the Hebrew in verse 3 in the second part, the word translated children. In Hebrew, it is literally the fruit of the womb, a reward from Him. Now, if we just think of this language of children as the fruit of the womb, and thinking especially in the context of the tragedy of children in the womb not being afforded the care and the protection that they merit as those who are precious, well, if we think of this language of children as the fruit of the womb, we think of a fruit as it is hanging from a tree. Think of an apple tree. You have an apple hanging from the tree. At some point, that apple is harvested. Now, imagine if somebody were to suggest, well, it only becomes an apple once it's been harvested. When it's on the tree, it's not really an apple. It's not really an apple when it's on the tree, but once it's harvested, it becomes an apple.

[21 : 45] We would say, well, that's just ridiculous. That's just a piece of nonsense. And yet, is that not the way? So, tragically, our society would seek to justify the lack of care and protection granted to those within the womb. Oh, it's only when the baby's born. It's really a baby. Well, it is, of course, nonsense. And the language here used in Hebrew emphasizes that. Children, the fruit of the womb.

Our children are precious, and so we are to care for them and protect them and provide for them as the most precious gifts that God has given us. The psalm speaks of building houses and of projects of that kind, and that has its place. But it moves on to speak of that which is much more precious than any house we can build or job we can secure or success that we can achieve, and that is the children that God generously gives us. So, that's the third principle that we can find in these verses, that we are to appreciate the great value of the children we are given.

The fourth principle that I think we find in these verses is as follows. We are to enjoy the happiness that children bring. Notice in verse 5, we'll come back to verses 4 and 5 together in the final principle, but for the purposes of this principle that we're noticing, we're really just interested in the first word of verse 5, blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. Blessed. The psalmist declares the blessedness of the man who is given children. He is blessed, though the idea could be expressed quite accurately in the language of, oh, the happiness of. That would be a perfectly reasonable and accurate translation of what the psalmist is saying. Oh, the happiness of the man whose quiver is full of them, whose house, whose home is full of children. Oh, the happiness of such a man.

Now, some of us as parents or as fathers maybe struggle to look after one or two, and the thought of having a quiver full, whatever that is, maybe doesn't fill us with great joy. But this is the language of the psalmist inspired by God. Oh, the happiness of the man whose quiver is full of them.

Children are, of course, we know, and should be a source of happiness and joy. That is God's intention. He gives us children as a good gift that would bring to our lives and to our families and to our homes and our extended families and our church family that they would bring joy and happiness. Our God is a happy God who desires happiness for His children. This happiness or blessedness has certain characteristics. It is to be present even when our children are, as they often can be, a source of frustration and exhaustion and worry. But we are still blessed to have them even when these things are true. It is a happiness also that is shared with the wider family and that I just mentioned a moment ago, the family of faith. We don't selfishly keep the happiness of our children to ourselves, but we are glad that others can enjoy them and rejoice with us in this gift that God has given to us.

[25 : 17] It's also a happiness, and we'll develop this a little in the final principle that we note. It's a happiness that is certainly in a measure contingent on the manner in which we care for and raise our children. We are conscious that children can be a source of sadness and grief, and the manner in which we raise them will, to some extent, determine the extent to which they are a continuing source of happiness or perhaps a source of sadness. Of course, they can be both things in parallel as well.

Now, before we do pass on to that final principle that is concerning our responsibility to raise our children in the faith, I don't think we can move on too swiftly without noticing the implication of verse 5a, where we've just thought of, blessed is the man, but we notice that it goes on to say, blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. And that is following on from the picture that's being used of the arrows in the hands of a warrior, and the picture is carried on to the following verse, and the picture being of the quiver or the container for the arrows being full of arrows, illustrating a household full of children. And the implication being that there is particular blessing or happiness in the receiving of many children. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. What do we make of that? Well, one thing we would say is, well, or one question we could pose is, who's to say how many arrows fill a quiver? You can have small quivers, and you can have large quivers. So, that may be one way of getting around this. But there is no doubt that the point that clearly is being made by the psalmist, and what the psalmist clearly is celebrating is the gift of many children. And what do we make of that? We live in a day when large families are deemed at best something peculiar. Maybe we ourselves think it a bit peculiar when we hear of a very large family. Certainly, that's the general view, I think it's fair to say, in our society. At best, they're viewed as peculiar, and at worst, just plain strange or weird. Some would go further and tut-tut and say, well, how irresponsible, you know, having such large families.

Just in this past week, there's been a debate that has been generated by Ian Duncan Smith, the working pension secretary, floating the idea that child benefit would only be for the first two children in a given home. And the purpose being to discourage families from having many children, and the consequent burden on the exchequer of many children, especially families that live largely on welfare. Now, I'm not going to enter into the discussion and the opinions that there might be on the matter of our welfare system, but I think it is concerning to see a view emerging that large families are somehow a suspect phenomenon. Certainly, a very different view to the view of the psalmist, blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. Now, I am not advocating that we all have large families, but what I am saying is that if we are able to do so, and if we are able to responsibly provide for them, and God grants us many children, then that is a blessing, and that is a source of particular happiness. Certainly, that is the view of the psalmist, and we see no reason why we cannot share that view.

Equally, if God chooses to give us one or two or three, or indeed, if God in His providence chooses to withhold from us the gift of children, we are still to acknowledge His gracious hand upon us.

But of course, leaving aside the matter of how many children we have, the basic and fundamental principle that we are wanting to identify is that we are to enjoy the happiness that children bring, which takes us to the final or the fifth principle that we find in these verses, and it is this.

[29 : 44] We are to take responsibility for raising our children in the faith. Verses 4 and 5 present a picture and what we could call an envisaged scenario. Both of them are very much a product of the day in which the psalm was written and relate to activities and circumstances that are very alien to us, and so we read these verses, and we have some difficulty in establishing what is being said. So, in order for us to see how it is that in these verses there is this principle that we are to take responsibility for raising our children in the faith, we need to think about these two pictures briefly. Well, really one is a picture, the other is more of an envisaged situation or scenario. First of all, the picture. The picture that is used is this picture of children being like arrows, like arrows in the hands of a warrior, our sons born in one's youth, and then that picture is carried through into the next verse, blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. What's the basic picture that is being presented, or what's the core lesson that is being identified by the use of this picture? Well,

I think that the fundamental thing is that children are to be useful. Arrows are useful to a warrior. If a warrior is to be a warrior and have success as a warrior, then he needs arrows. He needs good arrows. He needs high-quality arrows, and in the measure that he has enough arrows and high-quality arrows, then he'll be able to be a good warrior. And so, what is being said is that our children are certainly in time to be useful to us as a family, to us as a parents, that there will come a time when our children no longer are entirely dependent on us, but there will come a time when they can contribute to the life of the family and to the welfare, indeed, of their own appearance.

Like arrows would be of use to a warrior. That's the first picture. What we also have in these verses is this scenario, or this envisaged circumstance, and this is even more difficult for us to work out what is going on. They are right at the end of the psalm where we read, they will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate.

The they, I think, is referring to the parents in the context in which the psalm was written, I suppose, particularly in mind were the fathers, and the picture is of a father not being ashamed when he contends at the gate. Well, what is being envisaged by the psalmist in using this language?

Well, the city gate, as we come across on other occasions in the Bible, was that place where disputes were brought and resolved. Maybe not necessarily a formal judicial setting, but a setting where, maybe in an informal way, disputes that arose could be settled at the city gates, and the men of the community would gather and resolve the issues that had arisen. And what the psalmist seems to be envisaging here is a father who is in dispute with his adversaries of some description for whatever reason, and he appears at the city gates for this discussion that there is going to be, seeking a resolution. He appears there surrounded by his sons, adult sons, young men of strength and reputation. Such a father is blessed and protected, not just by the physical strength of his sons, but by the manner in which their reputation as young men of integrity grants to the father authority and credibility. He gathers surrounded by his sons, and people look on and say, well, this is a man of integrity. Look at the sons that he has raised. Look at what fine young men they are.

[33 : 53] And that grants him an element of credibility, authority, and protection in the context of some dispute. And as I say, not simply in the matter of physical protection, though no doubt that is also true. Well, that seems to be the picture that is being painted, or the situation that is being envisaged by the psalmist. Well, what are the implications of the picture and of this envisaged circumstance? Well, we've already said something of the matter of the arrows.

But the implications of it relate to the manner in which we raise our children, which brings us to the principle that we're suggesting we find here, our responsibility to raise our children in the faith.

If our children are to be men and women of integrity, upright, useful, then that will be determined by the manner in which we raise them in great measure. If we use the picture of arrows, if arrows are to be useful, they must have finely sharpened points and straight shafts. On this, we can just listen to what Spurgeon has to say as he waxes lyrical on this picture of arrows in a quiver. And I quote, we must point them and strengthen them so as to make arrows of them in their youth, lest they should prove crooked and unserviceable in later life. And so, he speaks of the parents' responsibility to ensure that their children become like these quality arrows that are useful to the warrior, children that in due course will be useful to their parents and to their families and to their communities. And of course, for ourselves, we think especially of their usefulness in the service of God. How are we to do that? How are we to raise our children that that would be the outcome?

Well, there's so much that could be said, but we do so by our instruction. We do so by our example. We do so by the exercise of loving discipline and correction. We do so also by introducing to them or introducing them to the matter of being useful at an early age. We shouldn't make the mistake of saying, well, once they're grownups, they'll be useful. If we haven't taught them to be useful when they're small, then it's unlikely that when they grow older, they'll suddenly, as if by magic, become useful. And so, at an early age, we seek to inculcate in them that they not only are those who receive from their parents and from others, but that they can contribute and help their parents and others.

Well, that could be developed and examples could be made, but I leave that to your own wisdom and creativity to think of how that would play out in your own homes. What of the city gate, this scenario, this circumstance that the psalmist is envisaging of the father surrounded by his sons?

[36 : 56] Well, the sons in question would serve no useful purpose to the father if they were known to be lazy or dishonest or godless men. They would be of no value to him at the city gate. He would be embarrassed that they were accompanying him. He would prefer that they stayed at home.

To be accompanied by such sons, of what value would that be to his father? No doubt the father would still love them and care for them and seek that they would change, but at the city gate, such sons would be of little value to him. And there is, of course, also there an implication for those of us who are seeking to raise our children that they would be with God's help and perhaps despite our many limitations and the many mistakes and failings that we have, that they would become men and women of integrity and faith. Now, in this matter, of course, there is also an implication for those who are sons and daughters. Now, all of us here are not parents, but all of us here are sons and daughters, and perhaps many of us, not all of us, but many of us have the privilege of still having our parents alive. And, of course, there are implications here for us as sons and daughters. Are we sons and daughters as described or anticipated by this psalm? Are we useful to our parents as we have received from them? Do we now take on the responsibility to care for them and provide for them in the measure that that is required and necessary? It may not be their financial needs. It may not be their physical needs. It may be their emotional needs and the need of time and conversation. The implication here is that we also must assume these responsibilities that we have as sons and daughters, especially as we reach adulthood. Are we a source of joy to our parents, or are we rather a source of concern and maybe disappointment, even though they wouldn't express it to us? Well, in conclusion, we rejoice as we ought in the gift of children, and especially of those children God has given us as a congregation in these past days. But as we rejoice, we also would listen to the giver as He instructs us in the matter of how we are to receive and care for the gift that He has given us. And as we listen, let us recognize the One who generously gives us our children. Let's acknowledge that our children belong to God. Let's appreciate the great value of the children we are given. Let's enjoy the happiness that children bring. But let us also take responsibility for raising our children in the faith. Let us pray. Heavenly Father,