

"EXCEPT THE LORD KEEP THE CITY"

Psalm 127:1

Intro: I have not finished the series of messages I have been bringing on the glory of Christ, but in view of the tragic event in Oklahoma City this past week, I want to speak today especially on the first verse of Psalm 127.

Back in the mid 1800's a man by the name of J. J. Stewart Perowne published a commentary on the Psalms. To my knowledge he also issued three later editions. He was recognized as a scholar and an authority in the Hebrew language, and like so many scholars in his day, was a devout Christian. It seems that he was a professor at several colleges in England during his lifetime.

I am indebted to him for pointing out to me in his commentary that there is a close connection between Psalm 127 and Psalm 128. This is what he wrote at the beginning of his comments on Psalm 127:

This and the next Psalm form two bright companion pictures of social and domestic life, and of the happiness of a household which, trained in the fear of God, is blessed by His providence (Vol. II, p. 393).

We don't know when these Psalms were written, but that does not keep us from profiting from the message they contain. They tell the story of a house, and then a city made up of similar houses, or homes, in which the prevailing characteristic was that they were people who feared the Lord. As a result there was happiness and there were many blessings which the Lord in His providence poured out upon the people.

However, the picture we get is not one of idleness and slothfulness, but of work in the fields, and watchfulness against one's enemies. The city we might guess to be Jerusalem, and that is made certain in Psa. 128:5. The Lord is recognized as the One Who built their homes, Who kept watch over their cities, Who gave them their children, who blessed their labors, Who crowned them with good and with peace. It is reasonable that Solomon's name should be attached to the first of these two Psalms because the life described in them is the very kind of a life which Solomon sought for his people when he prayed for them at the dedication of the Temple, and, in fact, the kind of a life the Lord promised to give to His people through Moses' message to the Israelites shortly before he died.

The two verses which seem to show us why there was such blessings are verses 1 and 4 of Psalm 128. (Read.) Notice in both of these verses blessing is pronounced upon every one

who fears the Lord.

That expression having to do with the fear of the Lord runs all through the OT and into the NT. It speaks of a person who knows the Lord, loves the Lord, one who seeks to please the Lord, and who is fearful of displeasing Him in any way. When a person fears the Lord, the Lord is not just Someone we call upon when we get into trouble, but He is the One around Whom our whole life resolves. We recognize His hand in every detail of our lives. He gives us life. He provides for us every day. We see His hand in our marriages. When we build a home, we gratefully acknowledge that He built it; He made it all possible. When we say that the Lord is the One Who gave us our children, this is the language of one who fears the Lord. A man who fears the Lord will give Him the glory for his salvation, and declare that it all because of God's grace. The man who fears God thanks Him for the forgiveness of his sins through Christ. The man who fears the Lord thanks the Lord for keeping him day by day from many dangers and evils that he often is not even aware of. The man who fears the Lord knows that it is God Who restrains him from sin, and He gives him victory in times of temptation. The man who fears the Lord makes the Lord a part of everything in His life. To sum it up, the man (or woman, or young person, or child) who fears the Lord, wants to walk in the Lord's ways. He will not only keep the Word of God by his side, but in his heart. To fear the Lord is to live in daily fellowship with the Lord. The man who fears the Lord is happy in the Lord and happy with the Lord's providential dealings with him.

The only person who has ever feared the Lord perfectly was our Lord Jesus Christ. Those of us who know God as our heavenly Father because the Lord Jesus Christ is our Savior, want to please, or fear, the Lord in all things, but we haven't arrived there yet—and won't get there until we are with the Lord. But we are on our way! This is what we want to do. We want to be numbered with those who fear the Lord.

But we all know that as I have been trying to describe the person who fears the Lord, I have not been describing America in these closing years of the twentieth century. In fact, a life which could be described as fearing the Lord is what most Americans don't want! In the hours following the great tragedy which took place in Oklahoma City this week, how many times have you heard people mention the Lord? People talk about prayer, but they consider prayer as something people can do when they are in trouble, but otherwise most people don't pray—at least with any idea of being in fellowship with the living God. And when they do pray they don't know that they can't approach God except through the Lord Jesus

Christ. A lot of heroic things are done, and people are drawn together by tragedies such as we have seen, but God is not a part of the picture. We have been told that there are more good people in the world than there are bad people, but we are not told that the only reason we are safe at all is because God has His hand on men and nations. What worries me is that this week we may have seen only the beginning of what will happen when God withdraws His hand and for a time people are allowed to manifest the terrible wickedness that is in the human heart. We all have been horrified with the death and destruction brought upon people like you and I are. It is not because the people who were in that building when the bomb went off were worse than we are. What we witnessed in Oklahoma City this week was a message, loud and clear, from God Himself--a message for all America, A WARNING. And if we don't listen, and repent of our sins, that message is going to get louder and louder until people in American will begin to say what Pharaoh's men in Egypt said to him long ago after the plagues fell on that country, "Knowest thou not yet that Egypt is destroyed?" (Ex. 10:7).

As far as I'm concerned, the most amazing fact of all human history is the patience, the forbearance of God. We of all nations are the most inexcusable. God has given us the light of His Word, and we have done everything possible to put the light out. The only reason we still have the light in any place in our country is because God is in charge; man is not. It is evidence of His mercy upon us. But what are we to do?

I don't need to rehearse the flagrant way we as a nation have given ourselves to sin. Even people who don't know the Lord are worried because the moral standards of the past are almost gone. We legalize and defend things which God has declared to be abominable in His Word, but that doesn't bother most Americans. However, it may some day when some of these things begin to hit closer home. And so I ask again, what are we to do? What can we do?

One thing seems to be clear from Scripture and that is that in times past when God has threatened judgment, He has always sought to start works of renewal and revival in the hearts of His people. And the testimony of Scripture also is clear that it is possible for us as the Lord's people to be living in such fellowship with the Lord that people will start to ask us a reason for the hope that we have. They will start to ask why we are different. But I heard of a man, evidently not a Christian, who said just recently that just at the time when the world needs the church, the church has become like the world. Our Lord Himself said when He was here on earth that when iniquity abounds (and it is surely abounding today), the love of many will grow cold. He was speaking of

the love of those who professed to love Him.

Let me take you now to the first verse of Psalm 127, the foundational verse not only for Psalm 127, but also for Psalm 128.

We are met with a statement at the beginning which has to do with:

I. THE BUILDING OF A HOUSE.

Some expositors take the word "house" as a reference to the house of the Lord, that is, the temple. But I agree with Perowne who said in his commentary that it can't be a reference to the Temple because, as he said, "the whole Psalm is a picture of daily life, social and domestic" (p. 394). That is true of Psalm 127; it is also true of Psalm 128. You have references to children, to a wife, and the happy man of 127:5 is clearly a husband and a father.

So the Psalmist was speaking of a house where a family lives. But I think that he was speaking of more than just the building of a house. He was speaking of making a home out of the house. The house is made in our day of wood and plumbing and wiring and sheetrock and bricks and shingles and everything else that a family needs, but it doesn't become a home until the family moves in. And then it is only a home depending upon how things go with the family. We sometimes say of a family that they don't have much of a home life. A family lives in the house, but the house had never become a home.

Now let's take our verse from the beginning of the home. The house has to be built first. A location has to be selected. The amount of money the family has available determines the size and quality of the house. The contractor must be chosen. The work begins, and finally the house is ready. The family moves in. And it becomes a home, a place which day by day is being filled with memories which makes the place priceless in the estimation of the parents. I remember what a good feeling it was to have everybody at home at night. When our children were young, the last thing Lucille and I did before we went to bed was to go from room to room to make sure each of our four was OK and properly covered up for the night.

But what did the Psalmist mean when he said, "Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it"? Did He mean that the Lord was going to appear and become the general contractor? Obviously that is not the meaning. No, this is what He meant: He meant that from the beginning of the plans to the raising of the children, and even after the children

are grown and have homes of their own, the Lord must be involved in everything that has to do with making that house the home that He wants it to be. The Psalmist was not speaking so much about the house as a structure, but of what takes place in the lives of those who are living there. He was saying that if you have six in your family as we did, you must always recognize that the Lord is a part of that family, too--the main part! And it must be true that every day the Lord is working through us, the parents, and oftentimes directly with us and with our children individually, building our house, making it a home.

The Lord led Solomon to tell us that the Lord is to be involved in every part of our individual lives, and in every part of our family life. Didn't the Lord Jesus say when He was here on earth, "Without me ye can do nothing"? So the Lord is not just someone we call upon when we have a special need, but we walk with Him, we talk to Him in prayer, He talks to us through His Word, and we seek by His grace to run our lives and guide our children with Him as the Lord of our home. Our homes need to be built by and on the Rock, our Lord Jesus Christ. All other ground is sinking sand.

How many homes are there like that, or homes where the parents seek to have their homes that way, in America? Or how many Christian families really are trusting the Lord to work through them in building their homes. One of the saddest and most alarming things about our country is the pitiful condition of our homes. We as Christians need to seek the guidance of the Lord and the blessing of the Lord upon our homes every day that we live.

But now let us go on to the second part of Psalm 127, verse 1: "Except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain."

II. THE KEEPING OF A CITY.

The word "keep" means to guard, to protect, to preserve, to save. I don't know how many times this past week I heard officials say, "There is nothing we can do to guarantee that this won't happen again." But neither did I hear anybody say that we are utterly dependent upon the Lord to protect us from such fiends who blew up the building and killed all of the people who died in that disaster. Isn't it a shame that it takes a tragedy like they had in Oklahoma City for all of us to learn how helpless we are? It is small comfort for us that there might be more humane people in the world than inhumane because according to what we know now only a few men were responsible for the death and suffering that took place this week.

Now let me point out something from my text which we all know, but we need to see it again, and how important it is. It is this: Cities are made up of people who live in houses. And so if our homes are bad and displeasing to the Lord, the same has to be true of our cities. If our homes are not God-centered and Christ-centered, our cities will show the effect of trouble in our homes.

Let me repeat: I don't think for a moment that this tragedy took place in Oklahoma City because it was worse than any other city in our country. With all of our crime and wickedness in Portland, we can't point a finger at any other city. We could be next. Cities need to be guarded. Cities need to be protected. Cities need to be preserved. But with the best police and firemen, with all of our security gadgets, we are utterly helpless if the Lord is not our Keeper. If the Lord is not our Keeper, "the watchman waketh but in vain." It is important to have a strong military. It is important to have a good police force. Firemen are indispensable. And I wouldn't want to live in a house that didn't have a burglar alarm. But with all of these capable people, and with all of these safety measures, they amount to nothing if the Lord is not keeping our cities.

The Lord has been graciously keeping our cities for a long time. We had a warning at the New York Trade Center not long ago. This past week we had another warning in Oklahoma City. God is speaking. God is not going to continue with His blessing upon our country when we continue on in our sin. We act like He doesn't care what we do. We act like He isn't paying any attention to the wickedness that is going on in our country. But He does care. He does know. One of our memory verses this week was Proverbs 15:3,

The eyes of the LORD are in every place, beholding the evil and the good.

People would learn a lot if they would only read the Bible. They may be able to put things over with other people, but they cannot hide anything from God. What we in Portland ought to be concerned about (and the same is true of people in every other city in our country), is not why this happened in Oklahoma City. What we need to be concerned about is what we are doing that has displeased God to such an extent that He withdrew His keeping on Oklahoma City to wake them up, and to wake up all of the rest of us as well.

By way of contrast to what has happened, let me ask you to turn back six Psalms to 121, and follow in your Bible as I read to you about how the Lord keeps us. (Read.)

Concl: What can we learn from what we have seen in the Scriptures today?

We learn that our cities need to be kept. We need protection in our cities. We live in a wicked world, and only God can preserve us from the wickedness of our own hearts, and from the wicked plans of evil men. If we displease God, He may be patient with us for a long time, but ultimately there is a price to pay--a terrible price. What we need to be asking ourselves in America is, how can we once more get the blessing of God upon our nation. He has sent earthquakes and floods, but very few seem to get the message. We are a nation under judgment. We are displeasing God every day with our sins. We need to repent, and turn to God through the Lord Jesus Christ, and ask the Lord to enable us to get our lives in agreement with His will. This is a time for all of us as the Lord's people to search our own hearts, and to turn from our wicked way, getting our homes in order that once again we might see God's blessing as we have had it in the past. And let us not hesitate to tell people that our sin is that we are grieving God, and we can't expect anything but greater judgment if we continue on as we are presently living.

May the Lord have mercy upon us, and let us remember that:
Except the LORD build the house, they labour in
vain that build it: except the LORD keep the
city, the watchman waketh but in vain.

God speaks through His Word. He has spoken also in what has happened in Oklahoma City this week. Let us ask Him for ears to hear, and eyes to see, and hearts to understand. Only the Lord can change the course of our lives, and the way our country is rushing down the path to eternal destruction.