

**Songs of Ascents (Tracks 7, 8, 9)**  
**Psalms 126, 127, 128**

**Main Idea:** These three Songs of Ascents speak of our great need for God's blessing on our personal life, corporate life, and family life.

**I. The Pilgrims' Joy (Psalm 126)**

- A. The Memory of Renewal (126:1-3)
- B. The Means of Renewal (126:4-6)
  - i. Praying (4)
  - ii. Sowing (5-6)

**II. The Pilgrim's Dependence (Psalm 127)**

- A. Depend on the Lord in your working and watching (127:1)
- B. Depend the Lord instead of worrying and overworking (127:2)
- C. Depend on the Lord for blessing on your family (127:3-5)

**III. The Pilgrim's Family (Psalm 128)**

- A. The Blessing of a Godly Family (128:1-4)
- B. A Prayer for God's Blessing (128:5-6)

Psalm 126 is a community Psalm of thanksgiving that turns to a prayer for God's continued blessing. Psalm 127 and 128 are wisdom Psalms. Together, these Psalms teach us about our need for God in all areas of our lives. We need His favor, His blessing, and His grace in our personal life, in our corporate life with God's people, and in our families.

**The Pilgrims' Joy (Psalm 126)**

You can't miss the emphasis on *joy* in Psalm 126. The writer associates God-given "renewal" or "revival" (I use these terms interchangeably) with great joy. He reflects back on God's past work of renewal in verses 1-3, and then prays for God to do it again in verses 4-6:

A song of ascents.

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dream.  
Our mouths were filled with laughter then,  
and our tongues with shouts of joy.  
Then they said among the nations,  
"The LORD has done great things for them."  
The LORD had done great things for us;  
we were joyful.  
Restore our fortunes, LORD,  
like watercourses in the Negev.... (Ps 126:1-4)

The Psalm resembles Psalm 85. Observe a similar pattern, of remembering the past, and seeking God for a new work of revival:

Lord, you were favorable to your land;  
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

You forgave the iniquity of your people;  
you covered all their sin. Selah  
You withdrew all your wrath;  
you turned from your hot anger.  
*Restore us again*, O God of our salvation,  
and put away your indignation toward us!  
Will you be angry with us forever?  
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?  
Will you not revive *us again*,  
that your people may rejoice in you? (Ps 85:1-6, ESV, my emphasis)

As believers in Jesus Christ, we too have an amazing history of God's work in the world. But we shouldn't simply read history as admirers; we should read it, as prayer warriors and passionate missionaries. We should long for God to do it again!

Our church is currently supporting a German church planter named Stephan. He's planting a gospel-believing church in the heart of Frankfurt, Germany. Many consider this area as an unreached people group because it's less than 1% evangelical. He told our congregation that his prayer is that the Lord would send another reformation to Germany, as in the days of Martin Luther. He said, "God has done it in the past; He knows how to do it in Germany!" He added, "Sometimes I pray, 'God get the file out that says "Revival in Germany" and do a copy/paste!'" Then Stephan humbly said, "You know, there's no button we can push for God to send an awakening. We can just focus on the gospel (like Luther did), and pray for God to do it again. That's what we're doing."

Like Stephan, we can appreciate the former days of the Lord's work, but we shouldn't stop there. We should seek a gospel renewal in the present through prayer and gospel-centered labor. This Psalm points us in this direction.

***The Memory of Renewal (126:1-3)***. Many Bible teachers associate this Psalm with captivity and release, such as the post-exile restoration. Some point specifically to the revival in Nehemiah 8 as the context. But if we look at verses 1 and 4, we find that "fortunes" doesn't have to be limited to captivity and release (cf., Ps 14:7; 85:1; Job 42:10). Further, at the end of the Psalm, we read of toil and blessing, *not merely a homecoming* (Kidner, 439). So I don't think we can be so certain about the original context. The particular mercy that God displayed isn't mentioned, and the language fits a variety of situations. Whatever the context, the joyful restoration described was God-given (126:1a), remarkable (1b-2) and widely talked about (2b).

The Psalmist says, "*the LORD* restored the fortunes of Zion" (1a, my emphasis). God's people couldn't manufacture renewal and restoration. The Lord sent it. He delivers. He blesses. He restores.

Next, the restoration was remarkable. The writer says the people "were like those who *dream*" (Ps 126:1, my emphasis). In other words, they were so filled with joy and blessing that they had to pinch themselves to make sure it was real! The blessing was like a dream – but it was indeed a reality. It was a radical restoration; their mouths were "filled with laughter" and their "tongues filled with shouts of joy" (2b; cf., Isa 44:23; 48:20; 49:13).

The *unexpectedness* of the Lord's grace produces joy and laughter. This was the case in the book of Acts. After rising from the dead, and pouring out His Spirit, many in Jerusalem who denied Jesus previously, became His followers, and were filled with great joy (cf., Acts 2:46). No one expected the resurrection it seems. But when the Christ events unfolded it produced a dynamic sense of gladness. The seed – Christ – went into the ground and died, but then

produced great fruit (Jn 12:24; Ps 126:5-6). That fruit involved a group of glad followers, who could have sung, “The Lord has done great things for us, and we are glad.” (Ps 126:3, ESV). I can’t help but think of some of the videos of tribal peoples who watch the Jesus film. They often weep when Christ dies, but then after the resurrection explode with joy, and with mouths filled with laughter. Resurrection joy is the best joy.

So then, one of the fruits of a revival is renewed *joy* (cf., Jer 31:4), even *laughter*. This shouldn’t be news to us since the fruit of the Spirit involves *joy* (Gal 5:22). However, some straight-laced religious people insist, “Christianity is no laughing matter.” It’s true that being a Christian is a serious matter. But as Sinclair Ferguson says, “Sometimes it jolly-well ought to be a laughing matter. If Christians have nothing to laugh about, then nobody has anything to laugh about.” (Ferguson, “Do Dreams Come True”). When the Lord restores a person, or a people, then such experiences of joy are good and right. When you realize what God has done for you, you will sometimes feel deep humility and sometimes you feel great happiness; and often times a blending of both. The gospel both humbles us and cheers us.

The writer adds a third note saying that the Lord’s gracious activity was talked about “among the nations” (2b). The Lord’s activity served as a witness to the nations (cf., Ex 15:14-15). We read of this dynamic elsewhere in Scripture, like Psalm 98:

Oh sing to the LORD a new song,  
for he has done marvelous things!  
His right hand and his holy arm  
have worked salvation for him.  
The LORD has made known his salvation;  
*he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.*  
He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness  
to the house of Israel.  
*All the ends of the earth have seen  
the salvation of our God.* (Ps 98:1-3, my emphasis)

May we long for Lord’s grace to be made known among the nations through our ministries today (cf., Is 52:7-10; Ps 96:3). One of the ways we will impact the nations is by displaying a satisfaction and delight in God, as we minister the gospel. Our joy in the Savior impacts our neighbors.

Verse 3 is still reflecting on the past, and could be rendered “The Lord did great things for us; we were overjoyed” (Kidner, 439). This memory of renewal provides hope for the present.

***The Means of Renewal (126:4-6).*** A reflection on the past inspires hope for new mercies today. The writer calls our attention to two means of renewal: (1) praying, and (2) sowing.

*Praying for Renewal.* The writer turns the past work of God in verse 1 into a prayer in verse 4: *Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negeb!*” (ESV, my emphasis). The writer uses a word picture to express the people’s need for God to send renewal. Streams in the Negeb would have been a dramatic transformation. This area was usually dry, but on rare occasions when it rained, the water would run down the streams with great rapidity (Van Gemeren, 791). That’s a great picture of God’s blessing. We may indeed want to pray something like this: “We’re dry, Oh Lord, like a desert, please send the rain and cause us to flourish again!” If the Lord sends the rain, the desert can be transformed into a place of grass, flowers and fruit overnight (Kidner, 440).

We can’t cause the rain and we can’t manufacture revival. God sends it. This is the first lesson for spiritual renewal: we are desperate for the Lord’s blessing.

*Sowing for Renewal.* The next picture involves sowing, and serves as a complimentary idea to prayer. While we can't manufacture revival, we can labor. If we may applying this picture to the Christian mission, we must sow the gospel seeds, as we do good works, with heart-felt passion and persistence, and pray for God to send the rain.

Unlike the unpredictable nature of literal farming, here the Psalmist promises us a spiritual harvest to faithful sowers:

Those who sow in tears  
    *shall reap* with shouts of joy!  
He who goes out weeping,  
    bearing the seed for sowing,  
*shall come* home with shouts of joy,  
    bringing his sheaves with him. (5-6, ESV, my emphasis)

The farming metaphor is used throughout Scripture. Christ used it of his death and resurrection (Jn 12:24). It's also used as an illustration of Christian ministry. Like farming, most ministry joys are experienced through much toil, and faithful, persistent, broken-hearted labor. (Gal 6:7-10; Jam 5:7ff, 2 Cor 9:6). I often tell seminary students, "When you think church planter, don't think rock star; think farmer." Most of ministry isn't glamorous. Like farming, it's laborious. But overtime, by God's grace, we can see fruit and experience renewed joy. But tears and labor precedes the joy.

Tim Keller points out that the *recovery of the gospel* itself (along with prayer) is present in seasons of revival, illustrated with the ministries of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield's preaching of salvation by grace, not human effort. Keller adds that *gospel application* and *gospel innovation* are the ways in which the true gospel is brought home to people. Gospel application involves preaching, personal evangelism, small groups, informal conversations about the gospel, and pastoral counseling. Gospel innovation involves the creative and missionally appropriate ways we do gospel application (Keller, *Center Church*, 73-76). In other words, in seasons of revival, the gospel seed is sown faithfully, widely, constantly, and effectively.

We should never imagine a revival apart from desperate prayer. And we should never imagine a revival apart from faithful sowing of the gospel seed. Throughout history, both of these dynamics were present in seasons of renewal, a recovery and proclamation of the gospel seed, and dependent prayer (look at the book of Acts for this combination of prayer and gospel proclamation). It seems that different tribes of believers favors one of these means of renewal over the other. One group prays but never labors. That's laziness and presumption. Another group labors but never prays. That's pride and self-righteousness. Let's do both: pray and sow. God has sent renewal on the past; He can do it again!

### The Pilgrims' Dependence (Psalm 127)

Psalm 127 speaks about three basic interests of people: creating, conserving, and raising a family. King Solomon, who was a builder, a king, and a father, penned this particular Psalm, as the heading indicates (sadly, Solomon often wrote better than he lived!). The Psalm is closely tied to Psalm 128 in theme, as Psalm 128 focuses on the family.

In these pilgrimages to Jerusalem, a man didn't travel alone normally. His family went with him. So these Psalms reflecting on the family are quite fitting. In Jewish tradition, Psalm 127 is recited as part of thanksgiving service after childbirth (Van Gemeren, 793).

While building, securing, and raising family are the main topics of the Psalm, a dominant theme running through the entire Psalm (especially verse 1) is the idea of *dependence on God*. We read in verse 1, “Unless the LORD builds a house, its builders labor over it in vain; unless the LORD watches over a city, the watchman stays alert in vain” (127:1). Clearly, the key to building a house and securing a city is having the Lord build it and watch over it. Solomon then touches on the Lord’s provision of sleep in verse 2, and the Lord’s blessing on the family in verses 3-5. On the whole, he says that a godly home and significant work cannot occur apart from God’s blessing. Consider three important lessons from this wisdom Psalm.

***First, depend on the Lord in your working and watching (127:1).*** Verse 1 is straightforward, and contains a simple Hebrew parallelism. Unless the Lord *builds*, we labor in vain; unless the Lord *guards*, we stay awake in vain. The Psalm, then, warns against the danger of *overconfidence*. Solomon’s ruined the kingdom through his pride, self-reliance, and rebellion. We must be on guard against such sins.

It’s important to note that the Psalm isn’t teaching that those who fail to depend on the Lord will fail to put bread on the table (for millions of godless workers testify that one can work and provide without depending on God). The emphasis isn’t on temporal results, but the eternal, kingdom value of one’s labor. If you don’t depend on the Lord, and order your life around His word, then you can live a very insignificant life. Kidner asks, “the house and the city may survive, but were they worth building?” (441). You may build “a monument of futility” (Piper, “Don’t Eat the Bread of Anxious Toil”). You play the fool if you try to build a home or guard a city apart from the Lord.

So what are you building and what are you protecting? In these efforts, realize your need for the Lord for your work to be significant and fruitful. We may apply this idea in a variety of ways:

- Unless the Lord add to the church, we evangelize in vain
- Unless the Lord teach the class, we prepare in vain
- Unless the Lord guide the ministry, we minister in vain
- Unless the Lord restore the family, we counsel in vain
- Unless the Lord bless the writing project, we write in vain
- Unless the Lord expand the business, we market in vain
- Unless the Lord protect us the mission field, we travel in vain
- Unless the Lord guard us in the urban centers, we secure ourselves vain
- Unless the Lord watch over our children, we watch them in vain
- Unless the Lord look after the church, we pastor in vain

Don’t live an overconfident life. It will be disastrous. Instead, live with constantly reliance on the Father. And enjoy the fact that He’s with you. Everyday we get to like a kid with His Father at take-your-kid-to-work day! Everyday we get to labor in view of God, by the power of God, for the glory of God. That’s what makes our work meaningful and significant.

***Second, depend the Lord instead of worrying and overworking (127:2).*** While verse 1 warns against overconfidence, verse 2 warns against being *overworked*; that is, working without resting physically and spiritually in the Lord. One way we can express a failure to depend on the Lord is by working in our own strength, and working slavishly – with anguish and anxiety. The Psalmist is teaching us to find a healthy rhythm between hard work and grateful rest:

In vain you get up early and stay up late,

working hard to have enough food—  
yes, He gives sleep to the one He loves. (127:2)

Some people play the sluggard – failing to work hard. That’s unacceptable. The Psalmist isn’t speaking against getting up early and working hard. He’s address the problem of being enslaved to one’s work, and working without a proper trust in the Lord, and a proper goal of glorifying the Lord.

The person who never sleeps but is a slave to work is a candidate for great anxiety, ulcers and panic attacks. These are some of the many results of a failure to rest in God. Worry involves a lack of faith, a lack of dependence on God. So remember this, every night you have an opportunity to rest (after a good day’s work), you have the opportunity to express your trust in God. He continues to work while we rest.

Believers should remind themselves of three truths when they go to bed: (1) we aren’t God (cf., Ps 121:4); (2) we need God; and (3) we are loved by God. Regarding the third lesson, the text tells us, “He gives sleep to the one He loves.” Everyday you have the opportunity of laboring for God’s glory, by God’s power, and then resting in God’s love when the day is done – all of this through Jesus Christ.

Or, as verses 1-2 together teach, you can play the fool, build futile monuments, become a slave to work and wealth, experiencing constant unrest, and end up saying like Solomon, “Vanity, vanity, all is vanity.” The words of Ecclesiastes 5 reminds us working for God’s glory and resting in God’s love is better: “Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep” (Eccl 5:12, ESV).

**Finally, depend on the Lord for blessing on your family (127:3-5).** Solomon goes on to affirm that children are gifts (“heritage”) from God:

Sons are indeed a heritage from the LORD,  
children, a reward.  
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior  
are the sons born in one’s youth.  
Happy is the man who has filled his quiver with them.  
Such men will never be put to shame  
when they speak with their enemies at the city gate (Ps 127:3-5).

*See children as a blessing (3).* God graciously gives children, and they should be viewed as a blessing, not a burden. The text is clear that children come “from the Lord” (127:3). They are expressions of favor, “a reward” (3). While we must not make an idol out of our children, we most certainly should treasure them, and thank God for them. They are visible reminders of God’s love and mercy toward us.

Our culture doesn’t have a high view of children, and so this Psalm is very important. It reminds us of God’s perspective on kids.

*See children as a source of protection (4-5).* Solomon goes on to say in verses 4-5 that children also serve to provide protection to the family (especially “sons” in this context). Like “arrows” (weapons), they defend the family (127:4). Solomon essentially says, “Godly sons will watch your back when you get older.” This is especially true if the kids are born when the parents are young. When the parents are middle-aged, the kids will be old enough to provide support.

Therefore, parents are “happy” or “blessed” if they have a “quiver” full of children (5). The more kids, the more likely the *physical protection*. Children may also provide parents *emotional protection* from the threats of like loneliness and abandonment (Van Gemeren, 795). Further, in

verse 5, Solomon adds that because there is strength in numbers, the father will also be able to confront his “enemies at the city gate,” where justice is carried out (5). He can triumph without “shame” (5). The once small boys, will grow up to become strong men, and will provide *legal or social protection*. Having children to bless you in these ways is certainly a great gift from the Lord.

Older people around the world are often very vulnerable. For example, violent men prey on widows regularly in impoverished, unjust societies. They physically assault the defenseless widow, and seize her property. Other aging men and women, suffer from loneliness and abandonment, having no children to visit them. One of the responsibilities given to the church is to care for widows (and more generally, for all the vulnerable of society), especially those in our local churches. We must honor the elderly as if they were our mothers and fathers, and ourselves their sons or daughters, providing the protection and care they need (cf., 1 Tim 5:1-ff).

### The Pilgrim’s Family (Psalm 128)

Like Psalm 127, this wisdom Psalm also emphasizes the family. It begins with a *blessing* (128:1), reflecting an application of the priestly blessing (cf., Num 6:24-26, Van Gemeren, 795), and ends with a *benediction* (5-6).

***The Blessing of a Godly Family (128:1-4)***. The writer begins with the words “happy” or “blessed” denoting a sense of satisfaction and fullness for the person who fears God. It may come as a surprise to some people, but fearing God leads to real happiness. The writer says:

A song of ascents.

How happy [or blessed] is everyone who fears the LORD,  
who walks in His ways!  
You will surely eat  
what your hands have worked for.  
You will be happy [or blessed],  
and it will go well for you.  
Your wife will be like a fruitful vine  
within your house,  
your sons, like young olive trees  
around your table.  
In this very way  
the man who fears the LORD  
will be blessed. (Ps 128:1-4)

Notice the condition for blessing, and the context of blessing on the family.

*The condition for blessing (128:1)*. To know true happiness is an important goal in the Psalter (see Ps 1:1; 94:12; 112:1; 119:1-2). How does one come to know this happiness? One must “fear the LORD” (128:1a) in order to experience this wellness and blessing. Throughout the Scriptures we see this central command (cf., Ps 111:10; Prov 1:7, 9:10; Ec 12:13). To fear the Lord means to revere Him. It means to hold Him in the highest esteem. It means to submit to Him, or to “walk in His ways” (128:1b). It means to live a life of integrity before God (cf., Prov 26:1).

Those who fear the Lord will learn wisdom and experience blessing. Those who refuse to fear God will live a life of folly and experience heartache.

*The context for blessing (128:2-4)*. The writer adds that the godly man will be blessed in all of his endeavors, and in his family. Regarding the former, the blessed man will “eat what [his] hands

have worked for” (128:2a). God’s favor will rest on the God-fearing man, as he labors. This man will enjoy his work and find satisfaction in his work.

The Psalmist then adds, “you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you” (128:2b, ESV). This general statement assures the godly man that fearing God always involves reward and blessing. Kidner’s words about the whole Psalm are appropriate here, “Here is simple piety with its proper fruit of stability and peace” (443). Indeed, to know stability and peace, fear the Lord, ordering your life according to His Word.

Next, the writer says that God’s blessing will rest on the godly man’s family. He begins with the wife saying, “Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house” (Ps 128:3a). The vine represented fruitfulness (in Ps 128 explicitly), sexual charm (Songs 7:7-8), peace (1 Kin 4:25) and festivity (Jdg 9:13; *Ibid.*). A godly wife certainly blesses the husband in many ways. She stands in contrast to the rebellious woman in Proverbs 7. She only destroys and dishonors God; the godly wife blesses the husband in many ways (Prov 31:10-31) and honors God.

Regarding the children, the writer uses another word picture common in David’s time to convey blessing (also associated with the Messianic era, cf., Mic 4:4; Zech 3:10); that is, *the olive tree* (128:3b). Children are like olive shoots, representing hope and promise for the future. The olive tree is a symbol of longevity and productivity. So it is, children who have been nurtured and cultivated patiently will flourish and bring joy and honor to the family eventually (cf., Ps 52:8; Jer 11:16; Hos 14:6). The blessedness of a godly man extends beyond his lifetime. Here, many children are viewed as a rich blessing, giving emotional satisfaction and protection (cf., Ps 127).

In verse 4, the writer summarizes the godly man’s blessedness. He reemphasizes the fact that the man who reveres the Lord will experience God’s blessing. We should note here how God restores the most basic aspects of life that were damaged by the fall: work, marriage, sexuality, and family. In the new covenant in Christ, we find creation restored even more fully. New Testament writers affirm this same type of blessing upon our work, marriage, sexuality, and family (cf., Eph 4-5; Donald Williams, *The Preacher’s Commentary*, *kindle*). Therefore, to truly fear the Lord, and experience God’s blessing in these realms of life, look to Jesus. He redeems and restores our lives, and heals broken relationships.

***A Prayer for God’s Blessing (128:5-6).*** The Psalmist now actually pronounces a blessing upon God’s people:

May the LORD bless you from Zion,  
so that you will see the prosperity of Jerusalem  
all the days of your life  
and will see your children’s children!  
Peace be with Israel. (Ps 128:5-6)

Since a fruitful and fulfilled life comes from God, the Psalmist asks God to bless His people. He asks for God to also bless the nation, and for God to bless one’s family line. The prayer is then concluded with a pray for “peace” or “total wholeness” upon God’s people.

It’s good for us to pray in the same spirit today. We should pray for God to bless parents, children, cities, churches, nations, kingdom work around the world, and the coming generations.

As we look at the whole Psalm, we see again the value of both *God-fearing labor* and *God-centered prayer*. We should seek to serve faithfully in our homes, our churches, and in our world. And, as we serve, we should pray for God to bless our efforts and the efforts of others in these particular areas of life. Here is a healthy vision of simple piety with the fruit of stability and peace.



## Reflect and Discuss

1. How should we reflect back on what God has done in history based on Psalm 126?
2. Explain the relationship between spiritual *joy* and spiritual *renewal*?
3. How does Psalm 126 instruct us about seeking spiritual renewal?
4. Will you pray for the Lord to “do it again” (bring renewal) in your life and church.
5. What does Psalm 127 teach us about our *dependence* on God?
6. Why are we *overconfident* at times? How does Psalm 127:1 rebuke us for overconfidence?
7. What does Psalm 127:2 say about being *overworked* and *worried*?
8. What does Psalm 127:2 teach us about *sleep*? How does this verse challenge you or encourage you?
9. What does Psalm 127:3-5 teach us about children?
10. How would you summarize Psalm 128? How does this Psalm challenge or encourage you?