

THE FAMILY

A SERMON BY REV. B. DAVID HOLM

“Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it” (Psalm 127:1).

In the literal sense, Psalms 127 and 128 describe the blessedness of genuine family life.

Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb is His reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one’s youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them.... (Psalm 127:3-5)

Blessed is every one that fears the Lord, who walks in His ways. When you eat the labor of your hands, you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you. Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the very heart of your house, your children like olive plants all around your table. Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord. The Lord bless you out of Zion, and may you see the good of Jerusalem all the days of your life. Yes, may you see your children’s children. Peace be upon Israel! (Psalm 128)

The beauty of these words causes us to reflect upon the wonderful blessings of marriage and home. But these blessings are said to be a reward limited to those who walk in the Lord’s ways. “Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.” It is true that there are people who try to walk in the Lord’s ways and yet, through no fault of their own, have not received the happy blessings of marriage and home. But these words still apply, for those people may prepare and look forward to these blessings in the other world. We may be sure that no one can enter truly into the uses and joys of home and family, either in this life or the next, unless they try to live in the holy sphere of love to the Lord—unless they strive for regeneration.

This is a most important point: unless people live spiritually active lives, they cannot hope to attain to the conjugal principle and establish a home based upon heavenly things. For marriage and home in themselves are spiritual things. Their uses—their joys—are the privileges of those who look to the Lord and who keep that spirit as their ruling love. Without the vital ingredient of mutual love to the Lord, marriage becomes merely an earthly union, and the home becomes merely a house. Truly, then, “Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.”

The importance of this acknowledgment, and the need for it to be revived and strengthened, can be seen from the general sphere of the world around us—the sphere of broken homes, easy divorce, an often flippant and even immoral attitude toward marriage. These degrade marriage and the home—degrade things which should be held sacred. Indeed, we live in an age where simple things are cast aside and things which glitter falsely are preferred.

There is real danger here. And we must face it if we are to preserve ourselves and our church from its effects. For, in a very real sense, the church depends upon its individual homes for survival. Insofar as these are strong, so far the church is strong. Insofar as they are weak, so far the church is weak. For the home is always the bulwark of the church.

It is our duty, then, to make our homes strong units of the church. And this does not happen by itself. It takes patient dedication, firm effort, and often sacrifices of worldly things. And it takes courage—courage to resist the current life-styles which make a mockery of marriage and home. But most importantly, we cannot establish a true home unless there is love—love of the Lord, love of the church and its teachings, and mutual love of family members for each other and for their spiritual welfare. This last, of course, depends upon the conjugal love between the husband and wife as its center. For how can there be mutual love and respect among the other members of the family if the husband and wife are not united by that tender and mutual love of the Lord and each other? Only this love can make husband and wife one in soul, mind and body. This in turn produces a sphere of unity, cooperation, order and tenderness, which can then enter the household and affect each of its members.

The quality of a home then depends directly upon the husband and wife and their attitude and efforts toward the conjugal. To build a home in the real sense, married partners must work together and individually toward this highest of human loves—work for it daily by resisting lasciviousness, strife, love of ruling, and all the other evils that weaken and destroy marriages.

While the chief responsibility for building and maintaining the sphere of family life depends upon the husband and wife, it is not limited to them. Other members of the household, especially those who have reached an age of responsibility, also have their part to play. For by their attitude toward the home they can either add to its sphere, its uses and joys, or take away from them. And if children learn early from parental instruction and example to put away selfish thoughts, to take delight in willing obedience and earnest cooperation, to shun those filthy things which are against chastity, then they will not only add to their home life, but will also prepare themselves to one day find their conjugal partners and establish their own homes as true units of the New Church.

We need to look for ways to establish our homes in the sphere of the church. And where could it be better to look for this knowledge than in the internal sense of those parts of the Word where blessings of family life are described?

When we look into the spiritual meaning of Psalms 127 and 128, it might at first seem as if there is little or no connection with family life, for the psalms deal chiefly with each individual's regeneration. Within the literal description of the blessings of home there is an internal account of a person who receives and applies all the blessings of heaven because of love and worship toward the Lord. A household or family in the Word is a direct correspondent for the internal things of a person—his or her mind. Thus any description of home and family is in reality a description of the household of a person's mind (see *Arcana Coelestia* 917, 3020). And the reason for this is that all things in a mind are related, united and ordered, even as a family is. Thus "husband" signifies the ruling affections for good, and "wife" the affections for truth, while children signify goods and truths themselves, which are the offspring of the mind. And a person whose mind is one united household—worshiping the Lord and doing His will—is someone who can best establish a genuine home upon earth, a home that is a church in smaller form. Let us then see what the spiritual sense of these psalms tell us concerning the mind.

Briefly, this is what is taught: All good and truth are from the Lord and not from a person himself, for if a person strives for what is good and true from his own power alone, he has no hope of attaining them. This is because all good and truth are gifts from the Lord, and He bestows these, together with tranquility and rest, upon those who love Him and do His will. Such people are given truths in abundance—from which they have intelligence—and many goods—from which they have happiness. Their truths are truths of innocence (that is, love to the Lord) and so they have power over what is evil and false. Therefore people who have derived such truths from the Word are called happy, for they have no fear of the evils which arise from hell. Such people are in blessedness of life, for they both love the commandments of the Lord and do them. Thus they worship the Lord in their lives. Such people have an affection for spiritual truth which pervades all that they think and do, and from this affection they are able to learn new truths, and from these new truths to see new goods, which are then able to be lived. Truly, such people receive the blessings of heaven, for they dwell in the truths of doctrine and make them their own to the fullest extent. Thus they are receptive of all the peace and security of the Lord's kingdom in heaven and on earth (see *Apocalypse Explained* 340:13, 357:10).

From this we can see that the man or woman who wants to establish a real home and be a suitable parent must enter into regeneration. Only as people order the things of their minds can they order the things of their households. Only as they derive the benefits of regeneration—the blessings of peace and joy that stem from worship and dedication to use—can these things enter into the sphere of the home and affect it. Indeed, the home serves as a stage upon which the results of our regeneration (or their lack) can be seen most clearly. For where does our true character show itself more openly than in the home? For there we feel free to act as we please.

In the picture of the regenerate person given in these psalms, there is a continual emphasis upon love and worship of the Lord. “Blessed is every one that fears the Lord, who walks in His ways.” Such love and worship is an essential of family life. But it can come in the various forms of church support, family worship and doctrinal discussion only if it has been established in the hearts of those who are the heads of the home.

It is clear, then, that true homes can be established only by those who seek after the Lord. And yet they themselves do not build the house, for all of the perception and wisdom they receive in forming the home is not their own but a free gift from the Lord. So the heartfelt desire to form a home and the joy they perceive in doing it are all gifts from the Lord. From first to last it is the Lord who builds a home.

Society of the present day sees the dangers confronting the homes of the world, but it labors in vain to repair the damage, for it does not seek the Lord in the truths of His Word. The New Church holds the answer to this present danger of family disintegration. For it is the New Church, with its Divinely rational, understandable truths that can cause religion to again become a family matter. With its emphasis upon individual regeneration—upon the spiritual combat against evils—it can form the true principles and genuine ideals which must rule in the home and protect and nourish the offspring of that home.

This is not easy, but these are goals for which we must work. Our homes must be centers of active striving for conjugal love. How else can our children appreciate the quality and nature of

conjugal love if they do not live in its sphere? How can we expect our children to remain pure if we do not strive for purity in our marriages? And our homes must be centers of the church, where a love of spiritual things exists. This includes worship and instruction and mutual discussion. If our homes are centers of conjugal love and centers of the church, then they will also be centers of love, delight, warmth, happiness, and use. They will be places where their members *prefer* to be, not merely houses to eat and sleep in. In true homes the problems and fears accompanying the raising of families will be greatly lessened, for they will be homes that are protected by the sphere of the Lord and the church. They will be New Church homes—homes built by the Lord.

Let this be our goal and our prayer and our earnest effort. *Amen.*

Lessons: Psalms 127, 128; *Apocalypse Explained* 340:13