



Psalm 128 - The Happy Home of the Faithful

A Song of Ascents.

Introduction

This wisdom psalm expands some of the topics in Psalm 127. Psalm 127 ended with the blessed or happy man and Psalm 128 gives a further description of this man's blessedness: in the context of ancient Israel, it consisted of a productive farm, and a faithful wife and children around the table together. The ending of the psalm shows that neither wisdom nor blessedness are individualistic; both relate to the larger reality of the wellbeing of God's people. It is another of the 15 songs sung by travellers on their way to Jerusalem, usually for one of the three yearly festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles.

Psalm 128:1-4 - The Godly Enjoy Blessedness in Their Homes.

The opening section gives an attractive picture of how the faithful person, one who fears the Lord, i.e. who walks in his ways, sees blessedness or true happiness in his home: he is able to work his farm and to eat the fruit of the labour of his hands, a covenant blessing from Deuteronomy 28:1-6 but contrast Deuteronomy 28:33; he has a wife who is like a fruitful vine, i.e. a bringer of joy like wine and the mother of children, children like olive shoots around the table, i.e. full of energy and promise. Nothing suggests that such happiness is automatic; the rest of the Wisdom Literature fills out how those who fear the Lord work diligently, love their spouses well, and faithfully train their children in godliness. The focus of this psalm is the aura of divine blessing that surrounds such a family.

- ¹ Happy is everyone who fears the Lord,
who walks in his ways.

Psalm 128:1

Happy is everyone who fears the Lord. The proper honour and respect the creature owes to the creator is described as the beginning of wisdom in many places; refer to Job 28:28, Psalm 111:10, Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10, and Ecclesiastes 12:13. It is to be expected that such wise living brings a blessing. This blessing is universal. All who will honour and respect God receive this. It is not dependent on race, class, education, or even intelligence.

Happy or, more commonly, **blessed** translates the Hebrew word *esher* meaning also contentment. The truly happy person is happy because God showers him with favour and blessing. Jesus uses the Greek equivalent in Matthew 5:3-11; as confirmed by: <<***Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him***>> (James 1:12).

Who walks in his ways. This explains what the psalmist meant by the fear of the Lord: <<***Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord. Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways***>> (Psalm 119:1-3). It was not fundamentally a matter of having certain feelings toward God, but of a life of obedience. Charles Spurgeon commented, “It is idle to talk of fearing the Lord if we act like those who have no care whether there be a God or no. God’s ways will be our ways if we have a sincere reverence for him: if the heart is joined unto God, the feet will follow hard after him.”

² You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands;
you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you.

Psalm 128:2

You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands; you shall be happy. The psalmist had in mind the hard working farmer who is fed and who enjoys the fruit of his own work: <<***Tell the innocent how fortunate they are, for they shall eat the fruit of their labours***>> (Isaiah 3:10). Although an element of work is cursed since Adam’s time: <<***And to the man he said, ‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, “You shall not eat of it”, cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return’***>> (Genesis 3:17-19), at least a portion of this curse is taken away for the one who fears the Lord.

And it shall go well with you. This promise of wellbeing is similar to the first commandment with a promise: <<*Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you*>> (Exodus 20:12). Again, the Lord places emphasis on the family unit.

³ Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
within your house;
your children will be like olive shoots
around your table.

Psalm 128:3

Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house. The one who fears the Lord may be blessed with a large, happy home. The home is happy at its very heart and the children flourish because of it. As they gather around your table there is a sense of community and happiness. Derek Kidner commented, “The vine was a symbol not only of fruitfulness (here explicitly so) but of sexual charm (Song 7:8ff.) and of festivity (Judges 9:13).”

Although the idea of bearing children is found in the figure of the fruitful vine, it goes far beyond it, as Spurgeon noted, “Good wives are also fruitful in kindness, thrift, helpfulness, and affection: if they bear no children, they are by no means barren if they yield us the wine of consolation and the clusters of comfort.”

Christianity brought in the idea that singleness is also a calling of God, a requirement for Roman Catholic priests especially, and that in some cases it was held to be preferred over being married. Jesus was single as was Paul, but generally God believes in marriage: <<*Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner’*>> (Genesis 2:18).

Like a fruitful vine, like olive shoots. These were two important crops in ancient Israel. The grapes and wine from the fruitful vine and the oil from the olive plants were not necessities for survival, but they made life so much better. A happy marriage and flourishing children are not essential for survival, but greatly enrich life in their own way.

A dying Jacob described the descendants of his son Joseph in a similar way: <<*Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine near a spring, whose branches climb over a wall*>> (Genesis 49:22). The tribe of Manasseh, descended from Joseph, grew to be one of the strongest tribes in all Israel. Because of its size and influence Manasseh was a name often given to describe all ten northern tribes of Israel.

4 Thus shall the man be blessed
who fears the Lord.

Psalm 128:4

Thus shall the man be blessed. As stated before in v.1, there is assurance of blessing for all who honour and respect God the way that they should. It is recognised that some people have genuinely feared the Lord, yet have not enjoyed all of the specific blessings described in vv.2-3:

- This is because the psalmist wrote this as his desired blessing for those who fear the Lord.
- It is because these are general descriptions of the blessed life in ancient Israel, and not universal promises to the people of God.
- It is because these are not the only blessings of life, and God may give other blessings in compensation to those who fear the Lord.
- It is because no one perfectly fears the Lord.

Who fears the Lord. This is a further condition upon these general promises. The honour and respect that the creature owes the creator is essential. Those who do will be blessed: <<***Praise the Lord! Happy are those who fear the Lord, who greatly delight in his commandments***>> (Psalm 112:1).

Psalm 128:5-6 - May the Lord Allow You to See Such Happiness.

This section prays that each member of God's people might know such a condition of blessedness – a condition that will benefit the whole of God's people named here as Jerusalem.

5 The Lord bless you from Zion.
May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life.

Psalm 128:5

The Lord bless you from Zion. As another of the Songs of Ascents, it is natural for the singers of Psalm 128 to think about the connection of blessing with Jerusalem. God has good for his people that will come out of Zion:

- When it is considered that much of the teaching and ministry of Jesus did was in Jerusalem, Christians see that they are blessed out of Zion.
- When it is considered that Jesus died as a sacrifice and a substitute for all sins in Jerusalem, Christians see that they are blessed out of Zion.
- When it is considered that Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven from Jerusalem, Christians see that they are blessed out of Zion.

- When it is considered that the Gospel was first preached out of Jerusalem and the church was birthed there, Christians see that they are blessed out of Zion.

May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem. For the one who fears the Lord, it is a blessing for them to see the good of Jerusalem: <<*For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your prosperity*>> (Psalm 122:9 NIV). It shows that there is a sense in which a happy home is not enough; Christians must also have care for their community and nation. Kidner commented, “If piety can be too individualistic, and a family too self-contained, the final strophe takes care of both these dangers.”

⁶ May you see your children’s children.

Peace be upon Israel!

Psalm 128:6

May you see your children’s children. The blessing to the one who fears the Lord goes beyond the holy city and impacts the holy family. The psalmist sees the blessing as enjoying grandchildren, which by most every account are more enjoyable than one’s actual children: <<*Grandchildren are the crown of the aged, and the glory of children is their parents*>> (Proverbs 17:6). Within the people of God it includes the prospect of a faithful family line: <<*But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments*>> (Psalm 103:17-18). With such faithfulness and blessedness, peace would indeed be upon Israel. Since the pilgrim journeys to Israel were often made as families, it made sense for there to be much attention given to family relationships in the Songs of Ascents.

Peace be upon Israel! Psalm 128 ends with a prayer pronouncing *shalom* upon Israel: <<*As for those who will follow this rule – peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God*>> (Galatians 6:16); essentially, that they would be the good that enjoy blessing and not be the wicked who suffer exile.

The expression peace, the Hebrew word *shalom*, has a much richer connotation than the English word does, since it conveys, not merely the absence of conflict and turmoil, but also the notion of positive blessing, especially in terms of a right relationship with God, and, as a result, the idea that ‘all is well’ in one’s life. This may be manifested most clearly amid persecution and tribulation. It is a gift given by Jesus to his followers: <<*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid*>> (John 14:27).