

Psalm 128

Life as It Is Meant to Be

1. Background

This delightful little Psalm describes life as it is meant to be: satisfying work, stable home life, all under the blessing of God enjoyed by the whole of the wider community of God's people.

However, it is obvious that this is not how life actually is. So we need to notice that this Psalm has some of the characteristics of wisdom literature, e.g. the opening declaration ("O how happy!") and the emphasis on "the fear of the LORD." As wisdom literature it provokes us to stop and think about what it's describing and in what ways and why its description fits and/or jars with our experience. What sort of behaviour, expectation and hope does the Psalm ask of me?

"Psalm 127 implicitly warned about the possibility of working too hard to make sure that the family had enough to eat. That is unwise because it presupposes that everything depends on us; it is acting as if God did not exist. Psalm 128 has started from reverence for the LORD, which is a very different starting point from that confronted by Ps. 127. It now begins to spell out the implications of the declaration in v. 1 by making the converse point to the one Ps. 127 made. We can have confidence about eating the fruit of our labours...if we revere the LORD rather than assuming everything depends on us. This attitude means the LORD gets involved with us" (Goldingay).

"Psalm 128 articulates a theology of blessing as it celebrates the daily realms of work and family as gifts of God" (Clinton McCann). It thus resists "our persistent tendency to view the world purely in secular terms" (Goldingay).

"The psalm also speaks to modern Western attitudes by inviting men and women to value what happens inside the house and not to think that value attaches only to what happens outside, in the community, business, society, and politics" (Goldingay).

The Psalm's "modest, unsophisticated wish list is a challenge to the glossy materialism that beckons to modern believers, as their eyes and ears are bombarded by blatant advertising that portrays luxuries as necessities and trivialities as priorities... Things that for us may be ordinary and taken for granted are...turned [by the Psalm] into treasures to be richly enjoyed." (Leslie Allen).

2. Structure

Like Psalms 126 and 127, Psalm 128 comprises two well-balanced panels (vv. 1-3 and vv. 4-6). The first panel describes the happy man; the second panel prays for the blessed man.

Michael Wilcock has helpfully outlined the way in which these panels match one another, as follows:

Panel 1 (vv. 1-3)

Happy the one who fears the LORD!
Happy are you:
like a fruitful vine your wife,
like olive shoots
your sons.

Panel 2 (vv. 4-6)

Blessed the one who fears the LORD!
Blessed are you:
see Jerusalem's prosperity,
see in your lifetime
your grandsons.

There are multiple connections between the two panels, e.g.:

- They both speak about the person who fears the LORD (v. 1 and v. 4);
- Happiness and blessedness (both repeated) are related ideas;
- The personal well-being (v. 2) is like the prosperity of Jerusalem (v. 5);
- The wife (v. 3) is parallel to Jerusalem (v. 5);
- Children (v. 3) are parallel to grandchildren (v. 6).

3. Notes

(a) The fear of the LORD

The word "fear" connotes awe and reverence – even to the point of terror (e.g. the dreadful darkness that fell on Abram when God made covenant with him; Isaiah overwhelmed by the glorious majesty of the Lord). But as well as this visceral "fear" reaction, the Bible highlights three aspects the fear of God:

- **Relationship** Paradoxically this fear draws us to God, and he welcomes us into his inner counsel and the experience of his covenant (Ps. 25:14).
- **Dependence** God-fearers express their reverence of God by depending on him – and God doesn't disappoint (Psalm 31:19).
- **Obedience** To fear God is to obey him, him with pleasure (Psalm 112:1), and without hypocrisy (Psalm 86:11).

(b) Happiness

The opening declaration ("O how happy!") is drawn from a word-group about walking straight. Leah used the word to announce her happiness in achieving her goal in life (which in her case was to give Jacob sons, Genesis 30:13). It's a theologically rich word which opens Book 1 of the Psalter and closes Book 2.

The happy man engages successfully in the creation mandate to have children and to exercise dominion over the earth (Genesis 1:28).

(c) Blessing

If happiness is the enjoyment of life as it is meant to be, then blessing of God is the source of life as it is meant to be.

Verse 5 opens with the opening words of the Aaronic blessing (Num. 6:24), and v. 6 closes with the closing benediction of the Aaronic blessing (Num. 6:26). Thus, vv. 5-6 evoke the whole of the Aaronic blessing, which placed God's name upon the people, so that God himself would bless them (Num. 6:27).

Verses 5-6 evoke the idea of blessing flowing out from God to the whole community. It is reminiscent of Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14-19.