



Firwood Church

These are the notes of a sermon preached at Firwood Church by Phill Marsh on the morning of the 29 March 2009; these notes are, therefore, intended to be read in conjunction with the sermon. To download sermons and other free resources, visit www.firwoodchurch.com or subscribe through iTunes.

SONGS OF ASCENT - PART 9, THE LORD MY BLESSING

Psalm 128

A song of ascents.

**1Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD,
who walks in his ways!**

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

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

**4Behold, thus shall the man be blessed
who fears the LORD.**

**5The LORD bless you from Zion!
May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life!**

**6May you see your children's children!
Peace be upon Israel!**

1. INTRODUCTION

The Songs of Ascent are a series of fifteen Psalms (120 through to 134) that were sung by pilgrims as they went up to the temple in Jerusalem to observe the major festivals and to worship the living God.

Psalms 128 and 129 are the two Wisdom Psalms in the Songs of Ascent (see the sermon notes for week 8 for more on this), and can be seen as an expansion of the thoughts Solomon expressed in the previous Psalm. Here the Psalmist will go on to announce more of the Lord's blessing and present the character of the man who should expect to receive them. Again, the Psalm should be seen as 'practical praise' for Israel.

2. THE BLESSINGS OF GOD

In verses 2 and 3, the psalmist creates a picture of 'the blessed man', focussing upon three aspects of that blessing for the individual,

- i) The blessing of labour
- ii) The blessing of a wife
- iii) The blessing of children

i) The Blessing of Labour

The Psalmist begins with a response to the futility curse presented in the previous Psalm which said,

Psalm 127

**1Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labour in vain.
Unless the LORD watches over the city,
the watchman stays awake in vain.
2It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for he gives to his beloved sleep.**

Instead of labour without reward, or indeed labour for someone else's reward, the Psalmist speaks of the blessed of being experiencing the rewards of labour,

Psalm 128

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

Note that the blessing is not that work will be easier or diminish. As was discussed regarding the previous Psalm, working hard is championed throughout Scripture as a godly response to life.

The blessing offered here then is not a ceasing of work, but an assurance that the work is not in vain and that its fruit, its rewards, will be experienced by the labourer.

ii) The Blessing of a Wife

The Psalmist moves on to continue to describe the blessings of the Lord, using metaphor to create powerful images and associations within the mind of the Israelite hearer. He announces that the blessed man's wife will be,

Psalm 128

**3... like a fruitful vine
within your house;**

Here, the imagery has a two-fold meaning. The first and most obvious refers to fertility and harkens back to the idea of Psalm 127 that children are a gift given by the Lord. The Lord will continue to bless the blessed man and his wife with children.

However, the Psalmist is also pointing to the joy the blessed man will receive from his wife. Throughout Scripture, wine (the product of the vine) is often associated with joy and gladness. Alongside warnings that too much wine (or any alcohol) is clearly ungodly and foolish,

Proverbs 20:1

**1Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler,
and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.**

We find verses that speak of the gladdening effect of wine,

Psalm 104

**14You cause the grass to grow for the livestock
and plants for man to cultivate,
that he may bring forth food from the earth
15and wine to gladden the heart of man,
oil to make his face shine
and bread to strengthen man's heart.**

Clearly these verses should be taken alongside the many warnings given against drunkenness and foolish behaviour. Indeed, it may be most beneficial for someone never to drink if their drinking leads them to sin.

However, scripture still often associates wine with the idea of joy and gladness and here we see the Psalmist likening the blessed man's wife to that wine; the wife of the blessed man will bring him joy.

It should be noted that this is true of the husband's effect upon the blessed woman. A godly husband, living out the biblical plan of husbandhood, will most certainly bring joy to his wife and gladden her heart.

iii) The Blessing of Children

The Psalmist goes on to speak of the blessing of Children. Here he describes them as,

Psalm 128

**3... like olive shoots
around your table.**

Here the Psalmist pictures the young shoots that can often be seen growing up from the roots surrounding the older parent olive tree. The promise is much akin to that of Psalm 127; the blessed man's offspring will surround him into old age.

3. A NOTE OF CAUTION REGARDING 'PROSPERITY'

The end of verse 2 is translated by the ESV as,

Psalm 128

2... you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you.

Other translations, such as the NIV, give,

Psalm 128 (NIV)

2... blessings and prosperity will be yours.

The misunderstanding of verses regarding prosperity in the Bible has given rise to the health, wealth and prosperity gospel which is utterly opposed to the gospel of Christ. We would do well to take time to clearly understand what such verses speak of.

This is a vast subject into which we shall only dip our toe as we consider the place of the term 'prosperity' in this Psalm. There are two points to consider here,

- i) Prosperity as defined by the psalmist.
- ii) The general principles of Wisdom Literature

i) Prosperity as Defined by the Psalmist

Prosperity gospel would have us believe that those who are faithful should expect to see God's blessing in the form of financial increase, perhaps a new car or house. The picture of God's blessing given by the Psalmist here however presents a much simpler, less materialistic idea of blessing, not so tied to financial gain.

Paul speaks of contentment with these 'simpler' things and warns Timothy of the dangers of the desire for wealth in his first letter,

1 Timothy 6

6Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, 7for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. 8But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. 9But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. 10For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

However, the Psalmist is not here making a cast iron promise of the simpler things in life either.

ii) The General Principles of Wisdom Literature

In Psalm 128, we see the Psalmists lay out the blessings of God. How are we to respond then if as Christians we do not receive them? It is here that we see that Wisdom Literature in the Bible lays out general principles, not guarantees. The Psalmist is not laying out a plan saying 'press the button for a gift'. Rather, he lays out general principles for life; the Lord blesses, and this is how it generally works.

It can be viewed in the same way that many of our sayings are not concrete descriptions of how life works, rather they are general principles. We may say that 'cheats never prosper'. In fact, some cheats do. The general principle remains, however.

We must be clear on this matter. The Lord does bless, and loves to bless.

Our health, wealth and prosperity are not however guaranteed because of this. The faithful may expect to have it rough. We see examples of this throughout scripture, perhaps the most well known example being found in the book of Job, or alternatively in Habakkuk where we see the prophet rejoicing in the Lord in the most difficult of times,

Habakkuk 3

**17Though the fig tree should not blossom,
nor fruit be on the vines,
the produce of the olive fail
and the fields yield no food,
the flock be cut off from the fold
and there be no herd in the stalls,
18 yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
I will take joy in the God of my salvation.**

The Lord may bless you financially. He may not. The crucial fact is that it is the Lord who blesses,

Psalm 128

5The LORD bless you from Zion!

He is the source of all our blessings. All good things that come to us are at the behest of the Lord. When we work and receive the benefit, the blessing is as a result of the Lord, not our own hard labour, as we discovered in Psalm 127,

Psalm 127

**1Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labour in vain.**

4. THE FEAR OF THE LORD

The psalmists bookends his declarations of individual blessings with the proper attitude of the blessed man,

Psalm 128

**1Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD,
who walks in his ways!**

and,

Psalm 128

**4Behold, thus shall the man be blessed
who fears the LORD.**

Believers are expected to walk in God's ways and to fear the Lord. At first, this idea may seem unattractive and even strange as a desired attitude. Why would a person want to live a life of fear?

The fear of the Lord mentioned in scripture is a world apart from the fears that we may hold regarding other issues. Fear of terrorism, fear of spiders, fear of violence – all these fears are not the fear that believers are supposed to have concerning the Lord.

The fear of the Lord is based on the knowledge of the awesome power, might and holiness of God. These attributes of God are constantly displayed in Scripture. Indeed, Scripture begins with the awesome opening phrase,

Genesis 1

1 In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Without effort or fanfare, the Lord creates everything we see in existence today. He holds the power of creation and destruction in His hands. Our very existence depends on God. Knowledge of this fact should bring godly fear.

In Exodus, we see the holiness of the Lord displayed. God meets with Moses but warns of the consequences of anyone approaching Him on terms other than His own,

Exodus 19

21 And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the LORD to look and many of them perish. 22 Also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, lest the LORD break out against them."

Here we see that the holiness of God is such that anyone unholy coming into His presence faces the terrifying prospect of the Lord 'breaking out against them'. Again, this should bring us to godly fear.

This idea of fearing God is not confined to the Old Testament, as some would think. Indeed, it is a mistake to think that the Old and New Testaments speak of two different Gods, or even a changed God. There is one God, the same yesterday, today and forever.

Jesus speaks of this fear in Matthew,

Matthew 10

28 And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

And James reiterates,

James 4

12 There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy.

Again we see the power of God over all things. Existence, life and death, eternal life and hell; all these depend on the Lord.

The Lord is Holy and stands against sin and rebellion,

Acts 5

1But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, **2**and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. **3**But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? **4**While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."**5**When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it.

In perhaps one of the most shocking passages of the New Testament outside the crucifixion, we see in Acts the results of lying to a Holy God.

Believers should possess a fear of the Lord. However, we also know that as Christians, we will stand before God holy and blameless. With confidence we can approach the Lord,

Hebrews 4

14Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. **15**For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. **16** Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

So what does this 'fear' look like in a believer? It is not a fear of judgement, as Christ has dealt with our sin at the cross. It is a fear that leads to the recognition of the absolute horror of our sin (to be clear on how horrifying our sin is, we need only look to the only solution that God found for it; the death of His Son), and the real desire not to revisit that sin, to not want to bring that into the Lord's presence in light of the knowledge of how it offends Him.

Godly fear does not paralyse or burden. Godly fear activates godly living. Notice verse one of the psalm,

Psalm 128

**1 Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD,
who walks in his ways!**

What may seem like two statements of blessing is actually one. The fear of the Lord and walking in His ways are inextricably linked in the life of the believer. Without one the other too is absent.

Those that do not fear the Lord will find themselves wandering away from His path. Those that wander away from His path will find that they do not really fear the Lord.

5. THE WIDER BLESSINGS

As has already been discussed, the Lord chooses to individually bless those that fear Him and walk in His ways in work, marriage and family, but the Psalmist has his eye on something more than just individual blessings in this psalm.

Psalm 128

**5 The LORD bless you from Zion!
May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life!
6May you see your children's children!
Peace be upon Israel!**

Here the Psalmist talks of the blessing of Jerusalem and Israel and links individual blessings with blessings in the wider community of God's people. The believer's blessedness and the Church's blessedness go together. Part of God's blessing for the individual is to see the Church being blessed by God.

For example, note the blessing that Paul received in witnessing the growth of his brothers and sisters in Philippi,

Philippians 1

3 I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, 4always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, 5because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. 6And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. 7It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel.

The absurdity of those that feel that a Christian can live apart from the Church is here witnessed. God chooses to bless us individually, yet also by sharing in the blessings of the body of Christ, the Church. God does not have in mind a Kingdom of solitary individuals.

6. APPLICATION

The Psalmists ends the psalm with a subtle call for change,

Psalm 128

**5 The LORD bless you from Zion!
May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life!
6 May you see your children's children!
Peace be upon Israel!**

'*May you*' is the call. With this phrase, the Psalmist implies that it is possible that the hearer may *not* receive the blessings spoken of previously. How might one exclude themselves from these blessings? Through walking his own way, lacking the fear of the Lord.

The Psalmist urges the listener to examine himself, to be aligned with the will of the God, and to walk in His way with a full understanding of the power, might and holiness of the God we serve.

Walking in the fear of the Lord, we look to the hope of His blessings. First, in our families; that we might see loved ones turn to God and witness families being made complete. Second, that we might look to the Church and take joy in seeing God's blessings there.

As we receive His blessing and take part in the blessing of the Church, we become a living testimony of the goodness of God to those around.

In all this, we hold to this one fact: The Lord is our blessing.

