

PSALM 128 YOU SHALL BE CONTENT

This psalm is a companion to 127. Contentment, work and family are all continuing themes as the worshippers pay attention to daily life. Perhaps this psalm was given as a blessing by priests on the pilgrims as they attend one of the three great festivals in Jerusalem.

The fear of God is the beginning of happiness (1)

We are in the same space as Ps 1 and Ps 112.1. To fear God means to trust God enough to put one's life one's future in God's control. It is to orient our way to God's way. It is to pick up God's agenda and run with that; to fear God is to fill human life with a trusting relationship with the God of mercy and blessing.

Blessing is not mechanistic: If I do this I will get that from God. It is not a matter of ritual of place and ceremony. That is the view of much psychobabble self-help that many folk turn to, even some Christian authors. Happiness is relational; it is the connecting of one's life to God's life and trusting that.

That happiness transforms the mundane activities of life.

Happiness in the mundane (2-4)

Work and family consume most of us; even from time to time perhaps overwhelm us. In the Bible there is no right to work or family bliss or children. They are seen as blessings gifts of grace. And many can have them and not feel blessed. There is no manipulation of God to get these things. There is no formula here or elsewhere in Scripture.

Blessing is relational. Committing ourselves to God's rule mean that we see things differently. If we have work and family and children, in that context, they are not burdens but sources of God's pleasure.

They are grace given. Even when things go bad, as they often do and they become sources of pain it is our relationship with God, the presence journeying with us, that allows us to find a new orientation, a new space and place for blessing. So the images of vines and olive shoots point to productivity and fruitfulness in life producing a richness of joy and contentment.

God's blessing is the enhancement of everyday life that brings it to fulfilment. Mortals work but God's blessing brings that work to fruition. Mortals marry but God's blessing makes it good. Whatever makes life good is the effect of blessing. Without blessing, life is incomplete, frustrated.

Domestic life is central to God's rule in the world. It is where God's rubber hits the road in the midst of normal chaotic human life. We think that we may find happiness in all sorts of places but not here. We may even think that in the big scheme of things the mundane is not very important. That is not God's view of things. The ordinary, the mundane is the centrepiece of God's rule and human happiness.

Why? Because here the battle for God's rule is played out as much as it is in politics and economics. The desire for autonomy, self-directedness has its most basic form in the family. Parents and children contest and contend to answer the question who rules? And where is true happiness?

The happiness of peace (5-6)

Zion and Jerusalem are imaginative triggers for the recollection and experience of the Presence; the sacraments of God's life constantly with them. It is the ongoing reminder of God's reign, God's kingdom at work. That kingdom is the source of blessing and prosperity.

The place of peace in God's reign has been addressed several times already in these studies. Peace is the wholeness and fruitfulness of life lived under God's rule and is the future even if it is not the present. And the everyday receives the most extraordinary blessing: Flowing from the joy of the mundane is prosperity and peace.

God declares a blessing on all this mundane homely activity of work and family because here the peace and prosperity of Israel will be won or lost. No wonder we Christians ought to contend for both in the public arena.

Further Reflections

This psalm points to the desire that God has for the blessing of the human race. Many forces contest that desire; economic, political and social. So it is rare that we see such contentment.

Sometimes we lose the joy of God's ongoing provision and blessing in everyday life. This psalm presses us to resist the tendency to view daily life in purely secular terms.

One danger is the temptation to turn blessing into some mechanistic system of rewards and punishment or ritual. Blessing is God's gift arising from a trusting relationship.

Peace and blessing always exist amidst the chaos, hostility and derision of those who reject the rule of God (see Psalm 129). So we live looking forward to a time when blessing promised will be unleashed. Christians believe that has begun in Christ and the Spirit.

God's peace and blessing is always a matter of grace for it is not as the world gives (Phil 4.7; John 14.27). Happiness is not the cause for self-congratulation but worship.

Questions

This psalm suggests that well-doing and doing well are interdependent. What do you think?

As the lives of ancient Jewish people were tied up with the good of Jerusalem so in Christ the lives of Christians are bound up in Christ through whom God bestows all his blessings (Ephesians 1.3). Do you look at life through this lens? What do you see?

How can we be receptive to the blessing of God? (See Pss 125.4; 115.13; 24.5; I Peter .8-12).