

HIGH VOLTAGE MARRIAGE

In this second study on marriage, our focus is on 'fulfilment'. This topic is closely linked with 'expectations'. Relationships take a lot of hard work. In last week's study we looked at behaviours and attitudes that contribute to healthy relationships. At the same time, we can sometimes have expectations that other people in our lives, including spouses and children, will make our lives more fulfilling. But these relationships can be blighted by life circumstances, health issues, conflict, financial stress or mundane routine. When expectations aren't verbalised and/ or met, resentment, discontent and conflict can result.

ICEBREAKER: When a family or a group of friends plans a holiday, it requires people to verbalise their preferences and priorities around itinerary, specific activities, rest days, mode of travel, accommodation and food. There's negotiation required between all parties, but not everyone gets what they want.

"Contemporary culture is often pegged as self-indulgent: We live in a have-it-now world, and we don't always think about the repercussions of our actions."¹

What tends to happen on holidays, if someone doesn't get their wishes fulfilled?

READ: Psalm 127 and 128

- What thoughts do you have about these two Psalms? Specifically:
 - What do you think these Psalms are saying about faith and life?
 - What are the ways in which they could be misinterpreted?
 - In what ways have you seen people apply the verses here?

Today's study focusses on Ps 128, but the content is closely tied to the Psalm 127. A number of commentators believe that these two Psalms were written in the years after the Jews returned from exile in Babylon and Assyria, to a homeland that had been decimated and ravaged by occupying armies. Wilcock suggests Neh 6:15–7:5 as the context.² The exiles were confronted with the formidable task of rebuilding the city, their homes and the temple, as well as taming and recultivating the land.

- In Ps 128, we could read it, that 'blessing' and 'prosperity' are a direct result, or even as a reward, for reverencing/ fearing God and being obedient/ walking in his ways. Does this mean that Godly living inevitably leads to prosperity? Is faithful obedience an insurance policy that life will always go well for godly people?

When the Jews returned from exile, they were jubilant about being free, but quickly became discouraged and disillusioned about the magnitude of the task of rebuilding and replanting. Farming land was covered in weeds. Food was scarce. Neighbouring people were aggressive and critical. The everlasting joy they were supposed to feel (Is 51:11) was now a dim reality. These Psalms were written to be read in worship, to encourage the people. The blessings of a faithful life were listed as: rest/ adequate sleep (Ps 127:2), children – especially sons – to help bear the load (Ps 127:3-5), work that provides food to eat (Ps 128:2), family relationships, including marital sex and birth of children (Ps 128:3), security for the city of Jerusalem/ Zion (Ps 128:5) as well as continuity of the family line and peace on the land/ nation. (Ps 128:6)

- These blessings seem pretty basic. In our culture, we use different criteria to measure prosperity. What does it mean to be prosperous in Australian society? In what ways do these things contribute to our well-being? In what ways do they inhibit our well-being?

"Ps 128 is generally classified as a wisdom psalm."³ It provides advice to be able "to think and act in such a way that common sense prevails and choices are beneficial and productive."⁴ Wilcock notes:

"By this point in the Psalter, and (if the Nehemiah connection is right) by the time of the return from exile, the composers and singers of these songs had long since lost any naïvety they may once have had. Experience had taught them that Psalm 1 often seemed wrong; deeper experience had taught them that it was always right in the end. If they had been disoriented, they had also been reoriented. There really would be blessing for God-fearers (vv. 1 and 4) and peace upon Israel (v. 6); but such grace does not come cheap."⁵

- In Ps 1, the Psalmist wrote that godly people would prosper in all they do, and like trees will, without fail, bear fruit in season. If obedience doesn't ensure prosperity, why bother obeying God/ his word?

¹ Barry, J. D., & Kruyswijk, R. (2012). *Connect the Testaments: A One-Year Daily Devotional with Bible Reading Plan*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

² Wilcock, M. (2001). *The Message of Psalms: Songs for the People of God*. (J. A. Motyer, Ed.) (Vol. 2). Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press. p234.

³ Allen, L. C. (2002). *Psalms 101–150 (Revised)* (Vol. 21). Dallas: Word, Incorporated. p242.

⁴ Wellman, J. (May 22, 2015) "What Is The Bible Definition Of Wisdom? How Are We Wise In God's Eyes?" <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christiancrier/2015/05/22/what-is-the-bible-definition-of-wisdom-how-are-we-wise-in-gods-eyes/>

⁵ Wilcock, M. (2001). *The Message of Psalms: Songs for the People of God*. (J. A. Motyer, Ed.) (Vol. 2). Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press. p235.

In Ps 128:1, the Psalmist talks about fearing the Lord (reverence) and “walking in his ways” (obedience). The word ‘labour’ in Ps 128:2 assumes ‘hard work’. Writing on Ps 127, Michael Wilcock comments:

“All the honest hard work in the world is *in vain*, says the psalmist, *unless the LORD* rather than you yourself is the person you rely on. ... The singers take up the theme: *Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labour in vain*, and similarly, *Sons are a heritage from the LORD* - without him there is neither place nor people. ... the house is the house - your house, my house. We are concerned with the homes of the city. And about jobs, about going to work and coming home, about food, about sleep. [Ps 127] Verses 1-2 are the psalmist’s version of Christ’s words about anxiety over the practical necessities of life: ‘Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.’ (Matt 6:31-33)”⁶

- The Psalmist was a real person and he knew that homes, work and families are important. In his time, people who didn’t work, didn’t eat. But the people of his day faced similar challenges to us. It’s easy for life to be consumed by the demands of homes, work and families. What practical things do you do, to prioritise God’s kingdom and his righteousness, in your home, work and family life?

In Ps 128, the Psalmist writes that a godly life, including hard work and healthy relationships, has benefits for the city and the nation.

“The quiet blessings of an ordered life are traced from the centre outwards in this psalm, as the eye travels from the godly man to his family and finally to Israel. Here is simple piety with its proper fruit of stability and peace.”⁷

- Read Gen 12:2. God told Abraham that he would be blessed and, in turn, would be a blessing. Think about your home, your family and your work situation. How do you and your family consciously act to bless others in each of these situations?

Read Jer 29:10-14 (below):

“For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon’s seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.”

- What do these verses teach us about:
 - the attributes and character of God?
 - what God expects of us and our relationship with Him?
 - what God did to bring the Jews back into relationship with Him?
 - the life that God wants for us.

In the book of Job, a godly man lost everything that he had, including his home, family and wealth. In the process, he lost his social status and all but a couple of well-meaning, but not particularly helpful, friends. They counselled him about possible reasons for his plight, including making comments about him having unconfessed sin in his life, etc. These guys provide a good list of ‘what not to say when your friend is going through a life crisis’.

- Read Hab 3:17-19. How did Habakkuk relate to God when life when life got tough? What can we learn from his example?

“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Saviour. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.” (Hab 3:17-19)

PUT IT INTO ACTION: In Ps 128, two of the blessings mentioned relate to having children and having work that provides the means to meet the needs of a family. In reality, Christian families face the same issues as other families in the community – including infertility, pregnancy loss, death of a grown child, family sickness, job loss and/or loss of a business. Our Life Groups and Connect Groups provide us with the opportunity to be ‘family’ to each other and extend God’s love in times of short-term and long-term need. However, we sometimes don’t know how to respond nor what expectations may exist in our group.

- Pick a life scenario (eg a group member or a family member has a motor vehicle accident and is hospitalised). What are the main needs that would need to be met? How would you like to be supported (or not want) in this sort of situation? What things are you available to do for others?

⁶ Wilcock, M. (2001). *The Message of Psalms: Songs for the People of God*. (J. A. Motyer, Ed.) (Vol. 2). Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press. p234.

⁷ Kidner, D. (1975). *Psalms 73–150: An Introduction and Commentary* (Vol. 16, p. 479). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. p479.