Truth for Today
The Bible Explained

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Things to think about on your way to church
We're going to meet the God who is to be followed
Psalm 128

[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

A good guide is a great help. I know some people like to explore and find their own way when travelling in a new place. I'm not one of those people. I like to go with someone who already knows the place. They know where to go, and where to avoid. They know what's good, and what can be missed. They know the directions, and which turns to take. Being able to follow someone who knows the bigger picture is really useful when I go somewhere new.

I'm a bit the same when it comes to skills. Some people like to tinker and try new things until they figure something out. Not me. I like instructions. I like someone to show me what to do. Stuff that takes me hours when I have to figure it out on my own is simple when someone shows me how and I can follow. When I try to do DIY by myself, it never ends up looking like I'd like. But when I follow someone else who knows what they're doing, I can at least give a passible attempt at fixing things.

Having someone to follow and to guide is a really useful thing. Today, we're going to read Psalm 128 which presents the blessings of following God and walking in His ways. We're going to see that God's ways are worth following in all areas of life. That's not true of the kind of guides I've just been speaking about. A useful guide in one location may know nothing about the next place I visit. The person who teaches me to hang shelves may know nothing about plumbing. Most of our guides in life have some limited expertise in some particular area of life. But that's not true of the God of the Bible. He speaks into all areas of our lives. He knows what is best in everything that we do. And as we read Psalm 128 today, we'll see the blessing that it is to us to follow God's ways. So, let's read Psalm 128 together.

> Blessed is every one who fears the LORD, who walks in His ways. When you eat the labour of your hands, you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you. Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the very heart of your house, your children like olive plants all around your table. Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD. The LORD bless you out of Zion, and may you see the good of Jerusalem all the days of your life. Yes, may you see your children's children. Peace be upon Israel!

I'm sure that if you've listened to any of the previous talks in this series on Truth for Today, you'll know that Psalm 128 is one of a series of Psalms in the Bible called the Psalms of Ascents, or Psalms of degrees. The Psalms of Ascents run from Psalm 120 to Psalm 134, 15 psalms in total. Most people think that this series of Psalms were sung as the Israelites journeyed to Jerusalem for special feasts. The Jewish people were expected to leave their homes and travel to Jerusalem for three special occasions through the year: 1) the Passover, or the feast of unleavened bread; 2) the feast of weeks, called Pentecost in the New Testament; and 3) the Feast of tabernacles. You can

read more about these feasts in Exodus 23 and Leviticus 23. Maybe these were 15 songs that the people sang together on their way to Jerusalem to prepare them for worshipping God when they got there. Some people also wonder whether these Psalms were sung by the priests on the 15 steps of the temple from the court of the women to the court of the Israelites, but we don't really know that for certain.

We've called this series "Things to think about on your way to church", which might seem a little strange since the psalms weren't written about Christians going to church. The church didn't exist when these psalms were written. They were written for Israelites going up to Jerusalem to visit the house of God. But Paul tells Timothy that the church today is the "house of God", so we can learn from the kind of things the Israelites thought about on their way to the temple and learn something for us today. Whenever the local church gathers together, we are God's house. And so, things that the Israelites thought about on the way to the temple all those years ago, might teach us some lessons to consider as we gather together week by week.

So, let's think about Psalm 128 then. Verse 1 is a statement that forms the main point of the Psalm. "Blessed is every one who fears the LORD, who walks in His ways." It's a simple statement about a particular group of people, those who "fear the LORD." This group of people are described again, in the next part of the verse as those who walk in God's ways. I take it that these are basically two ways of saying the same thing. The Psalmist is not describing a group of people who fear God in the sense of fear that might leave us cowering behind a settee in fear from an armed robber. But rather, those who fear God are those who have such a reverential respect and awe for His authority that they know that He knows best and so walk in His ways and do as He says.

So, here's a challenge for us today. Do you walk in God's ways? Is your life characterised by a determination to find out what God wants you to do and to live it out in practice? Are you searching the Bible regularly to understand what God's ways are? And are you changing your life if you find that what you're doing is not what God says is good for you? I'm certain that we all fail and stumble more often than we'd like. That's true of all Christians. But I want to ask you this today whether your driving motivation or attitude for life is "If Christ says it, I'll do it?"

The psalmist says something in verse 1 about this group of people who walk in the Lord's ways. He says they are "blessed." This is a word that describes state of mind more than receipt of things. People who fear the Lord and walk in His ways are blessed, or happy, says the psalmist. The result of following the Lord's ways is a kind of happiness, beyond the exact circumstances. This word for blessed occurred at the end of the previous Psalm. Psalm 127 ends by saying that a man with lots of children is happy because they are a heritage from the Lord. That Psalm begins by stating how important it is for the Lord to build a household. In that sense Psalms 127 and 128 form a nice pair. Psalm 127 reminds us that it's important for the Lord to build our house, and our household. We should be clear that our house will be one that the Lord has ultimate say in. Then in Psalm 128, the psalmist describes the happy consequences of following God's ways in all of our family and work life.

We need to pause here and think about what this blessedness means. I've said that these were songs that the people of Israel sang each year on their way to the temple. I suspect that as families met friends and neighbours on the road to Jerusalem for these special events, it wouldn't be too long before they met a family that had fallen on hardship over the past year. Maybe work had been hard to find, the crops had failed and they had financial difficulty. Maybe husband and wife were arguing more than they had been a year ago. Maybe a child had died, or had gone off in rebellion and dishonoured the family somehow. It surely can't have been too long before they spotted someone that made them stop and think about the words they were singing in Psalm 128. Happy eating the fruit of labour in verse 2 might ring hollow for the man whose business had failed that year. Wives like a fruitful vine in verse 3 might feel like a pipe dream for the arguing couple. Children like olive plants around the family table in the second half of verse 3 might be a painful

blow to the family with an estranged son. Some blessing, they might have thought as they reached verse 4: “Thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD.” Hadn’t those struggling Israelites feared the Lord over the last year?

As with so much of Scripture, Psalm 128 is not a promise that following God’s ways will always lead to things going well for us. That is a promise that is never given in the Bible. In fact, Paul says the exact opposite in 2 Timothy 3:12, “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” Living faithfully for God may well lead to difficulties for us. But Psalm 128 is still true. There is a blessedness, an inner happiness and joy in following the Lord. And it is true in general terms that God’s ways are wise and healthy for us. The all-wise God would not ask us to do harmful and wrong things in our families or in our work. So, it is true that, in general, following God’s instructions will be good for us. Not a promise that everything will go well for us all the time. But working God’s way should in general help us keep our jobs most of the time. Following God’s instructions for marriage should lead to happy marriages most of the time. Parenting according to God’s instructions will be good for our children. It’s in that sense that we should read Psalm 128. Psalm 128 presents a general principle and not a guarantee. There is a kind of happiness and satisfaction in doing things God’s way, even if there are some tough experiences along the way. We spoke about guides at the start of this message. Psalm 128 reminds us that God is the best of guides. Following His ways will guide us to the kind of life that is pleasing to God and is good for us.

Let’s spend the rest of our time today working through the different spheres of life mentioned in the Psalm and see how following God’s ways in these areas is a positive thing. As you read the Psalm and see the happiness or blessing that comes from following the Lord’s ways, you’ll see that it applies to all areas of life. Verse 2 speaks about the “labour of your hands” and it’s a reminder that blessing comes in working the way God tells us to work. In verse 3, the family comes in to focus, and there is a happiness in marriage and in raising children if we follow God’s ways. Finally, in verses 5 and 6 the psalmist writes about “the good of Jerusalem” and we’re reminded that there is a blessedness or happiness about our circumstances.

Let’s think about blessing in work life. Verse 2 of Psalm 128 says,

> When you eat the labour of your hands, you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you.

The general principle of the Scripture is that work is good and honourable. It’s a way of providing for yourself and your family. If you labour with your hands, says the psalmist, then you will be able to eat, either the crops you grow, or the food purchased with the money earned by your labour. If you have enough money to eat, then you’re in a happy position the psalmist says.

Paul reminded the Thessalonian Christians of the value and dignity of work. In 1 Thessalonians 4:11 Paul urged the Christians to “aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you.” God was pleased when the believers worked and minded their own work (or business). In 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12, Paul takes up the issue of work again saying,

> For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread.

Some of the Christians in Thessalonica had stopped working. And in all the time they now had they became busybodies. Perhaps they went round gossiping and interfering in the busy lives of other Christians. Paul had to remind them that they should do their own work. If they didn't work, they wouldn't be able to eat. They wouldn't know the blessedness that the writer of Psalm 128 wrote about. They couldn't "be happy" or "know that is shall be well with you" whilst they were being lazy and not working.

Work is a good way to provide for our families. Paul told Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:8,

> But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Work is also a good way of enabling us to provide for other people we know who are in need. Paul reminded the Ephesian Christians in Ephesians 4:28,

> Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labour, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.

Work is honouring to God. Now, the Lord understands that sometimes people lose their jobs. He knows that some are too ill to work. He knows all those things. And the Lord knows that many listeners to this talk will experience difficulties at work. It won't always be easy. It won't always be enjoyable. We perhaps might not always feel like that Psalmist that it's a blessing to eat from the labour of our hands. But let's remember the words of Psalm 128:2 and remind ourselves that walking in the Lord's ways is a blessing to us. It is good for us to work when we can.

Let's move on to verse 3, where the family comes into view, first with the man's wife, and then his children. It is good for a believer to walk in God's ways when it comes to our marriages and our children. Again, whilst not a promise that all Christians will have happy marriages nor that all the children of believers will turn out the way we want, it's clear again that there is a wisdom to God's instructions for marriage, which should normally lead to happy marriages. It's clear that God's instructions for parenting are good and should usually help raising children.

Let's consider some of the New Testament's instructions for husbands. I'm going to focus on that since Psalm 128 is framed as a man who is blessed by his wife when he walks in God's ways. But it's equally true that the instructions for wives in the New Testament are good for women who seek to follow God.

In 1 Corinthians 7:3, Paul writes,

> Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband.

Paul is perhaps primarily talking about sexual affection in this verse, but we could apply this more widely and say that husbands should always be affectionate to their wives. This will be good for their marriages and pleasing to God.

In Ephesians 5:25 Paul writes,

> Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her.

God expects husbands to love their wives and use Christ's example of sacrificial love for the church as their example. Just reflect on that for a moment. How much did Christ love the church?

Even to death. He gave Himself for her. Aren't we so glad that's true. Don't we marvel that the Lord Jesus could love us that much? Well, Paul says I'm to love my wife with that kind of a love. Peter writes to Christian husbands in 1 Peter 3:7,

> Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honour to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered.

Christian husband listening today, how understanding are you being to your wife? Have you remembered that if your wife is a believer, you are heirs together of the grace of life? God expects you to honour your wife and be understanding towards her.

Paul wrote to the Colossian Christians in Colossians 3:19,

> Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them.

God didn't give you a wife to spoil your fun nor to make your life harder. Nor to act as a burden, stopping you do the things you want. He gave you a wife to bless you, and to give you a partner to serve Him together with. Don't ever forget that and become bitter towards your wife.

Maybe some are listening today and your marriage has been a bit tough recently. You don't see your wife like the "fruitful vine" of Psalm 128:3. There are no easy and quick fixes in the Scriptures, but let me ask you whether you're being affectionate to your wife? Are you loving your wife sacrificially? Are you honouring and understanding your wife? Are you avoiding being bitter towards her? Before you respond, "Yes but you don't know what my wife is doing to me", just pause and ask yourself how many of the verses we've been challenging husbands with only apply if the wife is doing what she's supposed to do? None! Before complaining about your wife, make a renewed effort to do your part. Psalm 128 says that there is a blessedness to walking in God's ways. So, Christian husband, I want to urge you to walk in God's ways in your marriage. I'm convinced you will see that it is good for you, and for your marriage, and is honouring to God.

The second part of verse 3 of Psalm 128 mentions "your children like olive plants all around your table." The man who walked in the Lord's ways would have children who enjoyed being part of the family in this happy scene of a family table. Walking in God's ways with respect to parenting children is the path of blessing for Christian parents. As I've said already, sometimes the children of faithful Christians depart from the faith and have real difficulties in their lives. And that's sad, so we keep those children and parents in our prayers. And yet, as in earlier examples, it's still good for us to parent God's way.

Paul says to Christian fathers in Ephesus in Ephesians 6:4,

> Fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.

He says something similar to Christian fathers in Colosse in Colossians 3:21,

> Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

Christian fathers should be careful not to discourage their children. It's possible to set such impossibly high standards that our children never feel they can please us nor earn our approval. And that discourages them. Paul says don't do that.

Lest we swing to far the other way in discipline, Hebrews 12:9 says

> We have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect.

Fathers have a responsibility to correct their children when they do wrong. Proverbs 22:6 says,

> Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.

It's not always a parent's job to be their children's best friend. They have a God-given responsibility to train them in what is right and what is wrong.

Christian parents should teach their children about God and His ways. This was the instruction in Deuteronomy 6:6-7:

> And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.

I know family life is busy. You have so many calls on your time. But Christian parents should be careful not to be so busy with clubs, school, work, and whatever other social activities you enjoy that you've left no time to talk about the Lord's things with your children each day. Who else are they going to learn God's ways from?

Christian parents set the example for their homes. Your children will see what is important to you. Is it more money? Or career recognition? Or the right possessions? Joshua made the right determination in Joshua 24:15,

> As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.

So, Christian parents listening today, I know there are thing about raising children that are hard. But I want you to see the wisdom of following God's ways. Remember that He is the best of guides. And there is blessing to following Him.

We've not really touched on the second half of the Psalm, which reiterates the blessing of fearing the Lord and walking in His ways. Verses 5 and 6 are a benediction to those Israelites who walked in God's ways. But, as we finish, let's come back to thinking about those Israelite families on their way to Jerusalem for the feasts. Maybe their work hadn't been perfect that year. Maybe their marriages were okay, but could have been better. Maybe they hadn't parented as well as they could have. But as they sang Psalm 128, they were reminded again that God's ways were good. His instructions for work were wise. His guidance for husbands and wives was positive and right. And His instructions for parents were good. And they would acknowledge that God did know what He was talking about. There was blessing to fearing the Lord and walking in His ways. And they would be reset in their determination to walk in God's ways until the next time they went up to the temple and sang Psalm 128 all over again.

As you travel to church this coming weekend, would you spend a moment thinking about God's instructions for you, for your marriage, and for your family? And would you thank God for help so far, and ask Him for help to walk in His ways and follow Him in the week ahead. May you know the Lord's blessing as you do so.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on "Psalm 128; We're going to meet the God who is to be followed," talk T1477 in the series "Things to think about on your way to church."

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