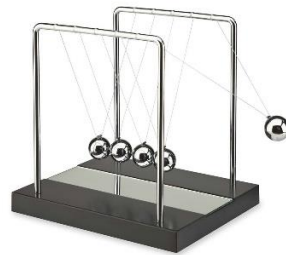


Thought for the Week 2nd August 2020

Psalm 127 A song of ascents. Of Solomon.

- ¹ Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labour in vain.
Unless the LORD watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain.
- ² In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat –
for he grants sleep to^[a] those he loves.
- ³ Children are a heritage from the LORD, offspring a reward from him.
- ⁴ Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one's youth.
- ⁵ Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them.
They will not be put to shame when they contend with their opponents in court.

Last weekend I was saying to the young people in the Kids' Video that I thought you were never too old to play with toys, as I showed them my Jacob's Ladder. I have to confess that I'm a sucker for gadgets and toys. I've always fancied having a Newton's Cradle - and now I have a small one.



It is named after the famous mathematician, physicist, astronomer, theologian, and author, Sir Isaac Newton, because it illustrates his Third Law of Motion. Put in its simplest form, this law says that to every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. If you set the ball at one end of a Newton's Cradle in motion it causes the one at the opposite end to move. It's related to the principle of balance which is one of those laws upon which God established the universe. For example, the earth is perfectly balanced in its orbit around the sun. If it were tilted a little bit differently, or if the earth was a metre closer to or further away from the sun, then we would either be burnt to a crisp, or a frozen icicle.

Nature is a system of eco-systems that live in balance. We're discovering more and more that even small variations to the ecosystem can have a devastating effect on the life on our planet. Nature is, by God's design perfectly balanced. The way we plan, and build buildings is based on this principle of balance as well, especially modern high-rise buildings. They must be built with stress points and stress loads so that they can stand tall.

Similarly, if our physical lives are not in balance, they will likewise experience a collapse. God created the human body on this principle of balance. Our body has all different

systems that work in harmony with each other - the Circulatory, Digestive, Muscular, Nervous, Reproductive, Respiratory, Skeletal, and Urinary systems all work together so that we can function, because when any one of them gets out of balance, it is what we call disease. Balance is then a basic principle of the universe, and since God created the universe, God loves balance, and as such He desires for us to live a balanced life.

Psalms 127 is really all about balance. The title says, "of Solomon" but most commentators agree that it is more likely that it was written about 400 years after Solomon at the time the exiles had returned from captivity and were engaged in rebuilding the temple and the city of Jerusalem. The title may simply mean, "in the style of Solomon."

The opening verse - "*Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain*" is a well-known quotation. It is often inscribed on the foundation stone of a building. The city of Edinburgh's motto is "Nisi Dominus Frustra" - usually translated "Without the Lord, everything is in vain." Or perhaps we could say, without the Lord, everything is out of balance.

The world in which we live is out of balance - indeed it might be fair to say, it is becoming more and more unbalanced. The results of a recent (but before Covid-19) survey are alarming:

74% of UK adults have felt so stressed at some point over the last year they felt overwhelmed or unable to cope.

32% of adults said they had experienced suicidal feelings as a result of stress

16% of adults said they had self-harmed as a result of stress.

In another survey 69% said they'd like to slow down, and Harris pole said that we are spending $8\frac{1}{2}$ hours less per week at leisure. We're spending less time relaxing than we use to. But God never made us to handle this amount of stress successfully. We were not created to live fast-paced frantic lives. That's why we need to look at Psalm 127 (and really Psalm 128 which naturally follows on from it) to show us how to restore balance.

Looking at verse 1 & 2 you can see why many believe this psalm to date from the time the exiles returned from Babylon to Jerusalem and were engaged in rebuilding the city and the temple. In Nehemiah 4 we read how the workmen held a weapon in one hand and a tool in the other as they built because of opposition and hostile attacks and how watchmen had to be posted at night.

The point here is that all the building and all the guarding were useless unless the Lord was behind it. The exiles had to be constantly reminded that they were not doing it so that Jerusalem could be a great fortified city for them or that it would have a magnificent temple that was bigger and grander and better than anything else in its day - they were doing it for the glory of God.

But hasn't that always been the problem? Go back to the earliest days in Genesis chapter 11 where you find the people building a very high tower at Babel, not to glorify God, but to

glorify themselves, and the end result was disaster. Since then many different empires have been built up, usually only to sow the seeds of their own destruction. Isn't that still the problem today, increasingly so? Society is out of balance because God is not part of everything we do, indeed he is completely out of the picture as far as the majority of people are concerned. It has even happened in the church - people have built up little empires that glorify themselves - maybe even a particular leader - instead of glorifying God. We must be always on our guard against this, for if God is not building through us then we labour in vain.

Verse 2 further warns that just because we work all the hours we can, it will not always bring glory to God, or even to ourselves. "Burnout" is not just something that can happen in the workplace, it can happen in the church - we can never be "workaholics to the glory of God."

When we come to verses 3-5, it almost seems that they are unconnected to verse 1 & 2. However, it may be that the psalmist is using a Hebrew pun here - which of course does not translate into English. In the original Hebrew, the words "builders" in verse 1 and "sons" in verse 3 have the same letters just in a different order. Building with bricks and mortar is important, but building a family is also vitally important. In 2 Samuel 7 the Lord tells David that he will not be the one to build a physical temple but that through him he will build a family dynasty. And ultimately God fulfilled this promise when he sent his Son the Lord Jesus who was born into "the house and lineage of David."

Although the New International Translation omits it, verse 3 begins with an emphatic "Behold!" -telling us that something very important is about to be said. Where do children come from? The psalmist's answer is that they are "from the Lord." The family unit is God's ideal for balance in the human race and, going back to verse 1, unless the Lord builds the family, we simply produce children in an often quarrelling and rebellious group of individuals. The creation of the happy family is God's will for mankind, and this is achieved when the family unit is built upon a Christian foundation with biblical values. But, of course, we have to remember that we live in a fallen, sinful world that is out of balance with God's ideal, and that human families are often imperfect and fractured.

Notice that the final verse of the psalm talks of contending with enemies at the gate. In the ancient world the city gate is where the justice of the peace sat to settle disputes and where important community decisions were made. We also have enemies who contend with us today. Among them are those who have rejected the significance of Christian marriage and the traditional nuclear family, together with those who regard sex as merely a source of individual pleasure to be indulged in at will.

A family is built in vain if it contains only tension, fear, jealousy, greed and above all selfishness. But those who do build a family with the Lord, do so to his glory and for the good of society. The real lesson in the clever little psalm is that the health of the Church and of the community depends on the family life practised within them. Read Psalm 128 which follows to see the biblical vision of a happy and blessed family and society.

