

## The Key to Blessedness

### Psalm 128

#### **A Song of Ascents.**

<sup>1</sup> *Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD,  
who walks in his ways!*

<sup>2</sup> *You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands;  
you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you.*

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

<sup>4</sup> *Behold, thus shall the man be blessed  
who fears the LORD.*

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

<sup>6</sup> *May you see your children's children!  
Peace be upon Israel!*

#### **Introduction: Psalms 127 & 128 – A Paired Set**

When I was a kid, one of my favorite shows was “The A-Team.” The shows all basically followed the same plot, which was also pretty similar to another of my favorite childhood shows, MacGuyver. In both of these shows, the heroes would have to work against impossible odds to come up with some amazing contraption to defeat the enemy. At the end of the A-Team episodes, Colonel Hannibal Smith would often chomp his cigar and say, “I love it when a plan comes together!”

Someone asked me recently if I believed that the arrangement of the psalms was inspired by God, and I told him that I do. Sometimes it can seem like the psalms are not organized in any particular way, but at other times, the arrangement is so wonderful, it’s hard not to see that it was guided by the hand of God. We can see that today in how perfectly Psalms 127 & 128 fit together as a paired set within the Songs of Ascents.

Last week, we looked at Psalm 127, the central psalm of the Songs of Ascents and we saw why it was centrally important, even its central line, “He gives His beloved sleep.” Psalm 127, written either by or for Solomon, tells us of the vanity of life apart from the LORD and of the blessing of life, especially children, with the LORD. Yet at the end of Psalm 127, you may have been left with two key questions:

1. How do I get the blessing of God on my life?
2. What does a life blessed by God look like, beyond the blessing of having children?

Psalm 127 described three areas of life that are in vain without the LORD: building a house, keeping watch, and working hard. So, construction, security and work all need the blessing of the LORD, both in the church and in the world.

Now, Psalm 128 describes three areas of a life blessed by God, the opposite of a vain life – blessed work, a blessed marriage, and blessed children. And it tells us the one key to having a life blessed by God: the fear of the LORD.

This is unexpected and seems like a contradiction on the surface of it: How happy is the man who is afraid! What? But that is the key – the fear of the LORD.

You can see that the ESV has divided this short psalm of 6 verses into 3 stanzas. The first two verses focus on the blessed man himself, the second two focus on his family, while the third set focuses on the church, or the community of the blessed man. We're going to look at it a bit differently, but also in three steps –

First, the foundation of blessedness, or What does it take to be blessed by the LORD?

Second, the fruit of blessedness, or What are the benefits and blessing the blessed man sees in his life?

Third, the focus of blessedness, or Where does the blessed man look to see the impact of his blessing.

We could also title these: The key to blessedness, the enjoyment of blessedness, and the legacy of blessedness, but those headings wouldn't be alliterative, and that would really upset Matt Miller, so we won't do that.

## I. The Foundation of Blessedness (vv. 1-2)

Many books have been written on the keys to happiness or the keys to the good life. Last week, we saw that the blessing of the LORD is the single thing that makes the difference between a good life and a vain life, a full life and an empty life. But what do we need to do to get the LORD to bless our life? Do we need to follow five pillars or go on a great pilgrimage or give lots of money away or keep a long list of rules? What does it take to get the LORD to make our lives full and escape the trap of vanity?

Psalm 128 makes it very clear:

*<sup>1</sup>Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD,  
who walks in his ways!*

*<sup>2</sup>You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands;  
you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you.*

### a. Fear the Lord

The single key to true blessedness is this: Fear the LORD. “Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD.” Psalm 128 actually uses two different words for “blessed.” In verses 1-2, it's the word “*esher*” which means happy, well off, fortunate. This is the same word that opens the whole book of Psalms in Psalm 1 –

*Blessed is the man  
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor stands in the way of sinners,  
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;*

*<sup>2</sup>but his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and on his law he meditates day and night.*

I'm using the word "blessedness" to convey this meaning, combining two definitions of blessedness – "divinely or supremely favored; fortunate" and "blissfully happy or contented."

Then, in verses 4-5, Psalm 128 uses the word "*barak*," which comes from the root for "to kneel" and specifically means to be blessed by God, to receive God's good pronouncement of blessing on your life and soul. To convey something of the meaning of these words, we could translate the first "blessed" in verses 1-2 as "Oh, how happy" or "*Oh, the blessedness of everyone who fears the LORD!*" and then verse 4 as "*Behold, thus shall the man be blessed of God who fears the LORD.*"

The point is this: if you fear the LORD, God both smiles on your life and speaks His blessing over you and He also blesses your life with happiness and contentment. The key is "everyone who fears the LORD."

So, what does it mean to fear the LORD? So often, Bible teachers who explain the fear of the LORD are in a hurry to explain that it doesn't mean simply being afraid of God, but rather than it means a reverent trust and holy awe of the LORD, a loving reverence. This is true, but if we jump to this conclusion too quickly, we can miss something: to fear the LORD does, in fact, mean that we should fear the LORD.

God is absolutely perfect and unchanging in His holiness, His justice and His power. If you even begin to comprehend this at all, it should strike you with terror. God will never be anything less than fully and perfectly holy, fully and perfectly just, and fully and perfectly powerful. When Isaiah saw the LORD in His glory, high and lifted up, the train of His robe filling the Temple, he was terrified and cried out, "Woe is me! I am undone." When Peter caught a glimpse of the divine power of Jesus after the miraculous catch of fish, he fell at Jesus' feet and said, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" When John the Apostle saw a vision of the glory of Christ in Revelation 1, he fell at His feet like a dead man.

Jesus Himself said in 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.*" If we would be blessed by God, we must fear the LORD. We must tremble before Him when we realize how holy He is, what His perfect justice demands, and how perfectly powerful He is. God has every right to destroy us forever in hell, He has all power to destroy us forever in hell, and He has more than enough reason to destroy us forever in hell. "*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.*" Start there and you'll make some progress. If you rush past it, you'll never know God and His blessing as you should.

Once we realize how much God loves us and how much He has sacrificed for us and for our salvation, the fear of the LORD becomes loving trust. The Holy, Holy, Holy God who is perfectly just and can destroy us eternally in hell has instead given His Son for us, who willingly bore our sins, satisfied the demands of justice against us, endured the hell we deserve on the cross, and then rose again to conquer death forever for us. When we know what we deserve and what God has given us instead, and what it cost Him to save us instead of condemning us, we should absolutely tremble in fear and lovingly trust God with everything we are.

### **b. Walk in His Ways**

The fear of the LORD leads us to walk in His ways. Not only is God perfect in holiness, justice and power, but He is also perfect and unchanging in His wisdom and goodness. Thus, we have every reason to trust Him fully by walking in His ways. True fear of the LORD will always be manifest in walking in His ways. Thus, we have only one real key to blessedness: the fear of the LORD. We need nothing else and can settle for nothing less.

Out of the fear of the LORD, we walk in His ways. This means we meditate on His word, follow His commands, turn our backs on the foolish and destructive ways of the world and our flesh, and live for His glory in all we do.

### c. Work Hard

One of the things that characterizes the life of the man who fears the LORD and walks in His ways is a strong work ethic. “*You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands*” tells us that the man who fears the LORD works hard and enjoys the rewards of his labor.

## 2. The Fruit of Blessedness (vv. 2-4)

### a. Eating the Fruit of Your Labor

This is a stark contrast to the description of work in Psalm 127 –

*It 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.*

What would you rather eat, “*the fruit of the labor of your hands*” or “*the bread of anxious toil*”? I picture in my mind the difference between biting into a fresh, juicy peach and eating a stale, hard, dry piece of bread.

What makes the real difference is working in the fear of the LORD according to His ways for the glory of God vs. working out of anxiety driven by fear, desirous only of selfish gain. A self-oriented life can never lead to true satisfaction. Only a Godward life enjoys His blessing and is truly and satisfyingly fruitful.

### b. Enjoying a Fruitful Marriage

The fruitfulness of the blessedness of the man who fears the LORD extends beyond himself and his own labor –

*Your wife will be like a fruitful vine  
within your house;  
your children will be like olive shoots  
around your table.  
Behold, thus shall the man be blessed  
who fears the LORD.*

The first person who benefits from the blessedness of the man who fears the LORD is his wife. Now, the focus of Psalm 128 is on the enjoyment the blessed man receives from his wife, but this comes because his wife is blessed. She is depicted as a fruitful vine within the house. This may not seem like the most flattering image, but it’s a wonderful picture of both abundance and delight. The two most obvious benefits the man receives from a

blessed wife is the fruitfulness of children and the delight of pleasure in intimacy, and these are the two most common things the Old Testament depicts with this image of a fruitful vine.

However, the picture here is bigger and more rich than simply – a man who fears the LORD will have a wife who has lots of children and who brings him delightful pleasure in marital intimacy. The wife of the blessed man is herself richly blessed and abundantly fruitful in all areas of life. She is blessed because of her husband and she, in turn, is a blessing to her husband.

### **c. Raising Fruitful Children**

A blessed marriage has blessed children. The children are depicted as “*like olive shoots around your table.*” Olive shoots are tender and beautiful, but they require much care and attention, and when tended properly, they bring great fruit. Olives were the key cash crop in the ancient world, so children are here being pictured as being of great value but also needing tender care and attention.

Think about how different this picture of blessedness is from the world’s ideals of money, power and fame! And yet, as simple as these things are – rewarding work, a blessed wife, and cherished children – aren’t these the things that really do make for a good life? Money is quickly spent. Most professional athletes are bankrupt within five years of the time they stop playing professional sports. How many beautiful people whose faces grace the covers of magazines make millions of dollars but are hooked on drugs and will die young and tragically, probably alone or almost alone? The blessedness the world offers is a trick, a hollow shell, a deceit. God alone blesses us in a way that matters, that satisfies.

So many people who know the truth of Christianity put off confessing faith in Jesus and following the ways of the LORD because they’re convinced that the world’s promises and treasures are worth pursuing. But they’re postponing true blessedness in pursuit of a lie. They wrongly think that believing in Jesus only makes for a good afterlife, is just a good ticket to get into heaven before they die. But that assumes that the LORD is wrong about what makes for a good life, that the guidance of God cannot lead to real satisfaction, that the promises of the world are more reliable than the promises of God. Such an attitude is not evidence of saving faith. Head knowledge that Jesus died for our sins and rose again from the dead and that we can only go to heaven by believing in Him is NOT the same thing as saving faith. Saving faith receives and rests on Christ alone for salvation in this life as well as for the life to come. Saving faith trusts God to be true and knows the world, the flesh, and the devil to be enemies and liars. Saving faith is marked by the fear of the LORD and bears the fruit of walking in His ways, leading to true and soul-satisfying blessedness.

I do have to say that Psalm 128 is painting a generalized picture of blessedness that is true for most of those who fear the LORD. ALL of those who fear the LORD enjoy true blessedness as they walk in His ways. Yet not all enjoy this kind of home and family life. The Apostle Paul never married and never had children. Most of the Apostles were martyred for their testimony of faith in Jesus. Many God-fearing, hard-working people remain poor and are unable to have children or never get married. The guarantee of Psalm 128 is that everyone who fears the LORD will know true blessedness. This may look different in different people’s lives, but it is always real.

### 3. The Focus of Blessedness (vv.5-6)

Finally, as we move into the third section of Psalm 128, notice the focus of the blessedness of the man who fears the LORD:

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

These final lines of Psalm 128 are a benediction, a blessing probably pronounced by the priest over each father of each family as they came to Jerusalem on pilgrimage. In fact, this whole psalm can be divided into two sections, verses 1-4 and then verses 5-6. In this division, verses 1-4 are a homily, a short sermon or exhortation on the blessing of fearing the LORD. Then, verses 5-6 are the pronouncement of the benediction after the homily.

The blessing is “The LORD bless you from Zion” – The source of our blessing is Zion, the mountain of God, home of the Temple of God, where God is enthroned in heaven.

#### a. The People of God

And then the blessing is “*May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life!*” This shows us that the blessed man is concerned about much more than just himself and his own family. He cares about the whole people of God. The man who fears the LORD is focused not on his own well-being but on the well-being of God’s people. Thus, the blessing he longs to receive is not just his own happy home and family but to see the prosperity of the people of God all the days of his life.

When God blesses us, it is so that we will be a blessing to others. Just as a good church will be a blessing to the families who gather to worship with that church, so also blessed families will strengthen and bless and pray for a serve the church. It’s a mutual blessing, just as the blessed man blesses his wife and is, in turn, blessed by her, so also the blessed family blesses the church and is blessed by the prosperity of the church.

#### b. The Future

The final line of the benediction is this: “*May you see your children's children! Peace be upon Israel!*”

Grandchildren are certainly a blessing, but this benediction is more than just wishing someone the joy and blessing of seeing their own grandchildren. It shows us that the focus of the blessed man is more long term and more broad than that of a self-centered life. Not only is the blessed man enjoying the blessing of his children and longing to see the good of his church family all the days of his life, but he also has an eye on the longer term future. He wants to see the heritage of godliness passed down to multiple generations, to his children’s children, as he prays for and works to see the peace of God for all of God’s people.

Do you have a generational and a global perspective? Are you looking for the hand of God and His blessing for the long term and for the whole world-wide church? Ultimately, if we fear the LORD and are walking in His ways, we long to see His kingdom come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven, and this means throughout all the earth and for generations to come. We want all of God's people throughout the world and throughout the years to know the blessing of God in the gift of His peace.