

Blessed- Psalm 128

The words “blessed” or “bless” are used four times in this short Psalm of Ascents. If you search #blessed on Instagram, you will find more than 100 million posts. The pictures found with this hashtag are almost always depictions of desirable experiences, happy relationships and material success. Psalm 128 is generally consistent with this view of what it means to be blessed by God, but it must be interpreted in light of its genre and be understood in light of the big story of the Bible.

The first verse, this Song tells us of the source of God’s blessing. According to what we read here, reverence and obedience to God is the source of blessing from God. “The fear of the LORD” is at the heart of being blessed and it is demonstrated in walking in his ways. Many wrestle with the idea of fearing the LORD. It is important to understand what it isn’t in order to understand what it is. Imagine a child who has an abusive father. This child fears displeasing his father because he is abusive. Imagine a child with a father that is admired by his child and affectionate with his child. This child fears displeasing his father for a completely different reason and in a completely different way. The abused child fears the violence of his father, but the admiring child fears the disappointment of her father. Those who fear the LORD fear his discipline, but first and most they fear his displeasure. They dread the thought of him being grieved by their disobedience. So, they walk in his ways, not to earn God’s acceptance because they are already sure of his unconditional acceptance. Fearing the LORD and walking in his ways is the definition of true holiness and this is the source of true happiness.

The rest of this Psalm gives us examples of how and where those who fear the LORD often experience being blessed by God. The first sphere within which God’s blessing is often enjoyed by those who walk in God’s ways is work, “You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands”. This points to vocational productivity and the pleasure of being productive and providing for oneself and others despite the difficulty that sin created in the area of work.

The second sphere within which God’s people frequently experience God’s blessing is in the home. Here we are given the picture of a man with his wife, compared to a fruitful vine, and children, who are described as being like olive shoots. As we come to this sphere, we must remember that this Psalm is Biblical Wisdom literature, like the book of Proverbs. A real danger here is to read what we see in this genre as promises. Wisdom literature is not to be understood as promises in every case, but principles that make a significant difference. If a person read this section as a promise for all who fear God and walk in his ways, a man who remained unmarried would be considered to be someone who doesn’t fear God and walk in his ways, because if he did he would have a wife, as described here, as well as multiple children. This is the wrong way to think about this Biblical genre. What is suggested here, is that often a man who fears the LORD experiences God’ blessing in this realm in this way. A wife who is like a fruitful vine: attractive to him for her charm, character and children and children who are like olive shoots: with potential for fruit with the needed cultivation. Olives were considered a blessing to Israelites, the olives themselves as well as the oil made from them. This image points to children who have the potential to become valued blessings to others.

The final sphere in which God’s blessing is experienced is in and through the church. Often God’s people experience God’s blessing by being a part of and assembling with others who are his people. At the time of this Psalm Israel would have consisted of those who were the children of Abraham through birth. Now, the church is the people of God who are the children of Abraham through faith in Christ. Jerusalem was the center and source of blessings for God’s people. They were blessed from Zion. Today, those who trust in Christ are blessed from coming to Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, in coming to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant through the sprinkling of blood. (Heb. 12:22) The blessing of salvation by grace through faith finds its source in the sprinkling of Jesus’ blood on the cross, in proximity to Jerusalem, to atone for sin. The cross is the center of the gospel and as gospel churches are prosperous, God’s blessings come to believers through a healthy and strong church.