

HAPPINESS**Psalm 128****August 16, 2009 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church**

In God's wonderful providence we have Psalms 127 and 128 together in the Scriptures. What they provide for us is a snapshot of God's blessings in our lives. Both refer to our work, our homes, and the Church. We find, then, an important balance between these psalms. In Psalm 127 the psalmist wanted to show that all blessings are attributable to God alone. Unless God is working in us and with us, then all is vanity. So Psalm 127 demonstrates that all of our efforts are grounded in His sovereignty and providence. Apart from Him, we can do nothing profitable. However, Psalm 128 serves as a reminder that while all is of God and from God we nevertheless have responsibilities to work and live for His glory. While God must be at work in us before we ever do any good, apart from Him we can do nothing, we are still called to do good. A view of God's sovereignty that leads to passivity is not a biblical view of the Christian life. We are to be actively engaged in living for Him and serving Him in all areas of our lives, and that is what this psalm sets forth. Psalms 127 and 128 then provide the delicate balance for the Christian we find in Philippians 2:12-13, "*Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; (this reflects Psalm 128)* ¹³ *for it is God who is at work in you (this reflects Psalm 127), both to will and to work for His good pleasure*" (this reflects both).

I. The Requirements for Happiness (128:1)

Since this Psalm has so much to say about blessings, it is fitting that it begins in v. 1 as the psalms themselves begin. Psalm 1:1-3 echo this verse:

Psalm 1:1-3 – ¹ How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! ² But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. ³ He will be like a tree *firmly* planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers.

Here we see that blessing awaits those who do not follow the counsel of the wicked or the worldly but their delight (happiness) is found and experienced in the counsel of God.

We find a similar teaching in Christ's beatitudes that open the Sermon on the Mount that I read from earlier. There Jesus pronounces blessings or happiness on the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness (Mt. 5:3-10).

In the first verse of this Psalm we find these things boiled down to what I consider to be the essence of the Christian life. It has been said that the two most important things in the life of the believer is to know God's will and then to do it. That is what we see in this verse where true happiness, blessing, satisfaction, or a fulfilled life is promised to the child of God when all of his life is given to two requirements.

1. The requirement to fear of the Lord (v. 1a)

At the very heart of God's covenantal relations with His chosen people is this requirement to *fear Him*. So important is this requirement to fear Him that at the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai the people at a distance saw the thunder and the lightning and

they were afraid. Do you recall Moses counsel on that occasion? Exodus 20:20, “*Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin.*” We will see this clearly as we begin our study in Deuteronomy in Sunday School in a few weeks where “the fear of the LORD” is a central theme as found in Deuteronomy 6:13, “*You shall fear only the LORD your God; and you shall worship Him and swear by His name*” and Moses goes on to expand on what that means.

So one of if not the identifying marks that one is a child of God is that he fears God. By contrast, the Apostle Paul concludes his description of the wicked in Romans 3:10-18 quoting Psalm 36:1, “*There is no fear of God before his eyes.*” Those words describe a man without God and with no thought of God. But it is also true of those who know God and approach God in a wrong manner, who are flattered with themselves rather than by God.

Given the fact that *the fear of the LORD* is absolutely necessary for one to have a relationship with God should cause one to ponder, “What does it mean to fear of the LORD?” It does not mean that we are to be afraid of or frightened by God. In Exodus 20:20, Moses makes a distinction between being *afraid* of God and the *fear* of God. A proper fear of God was to keep them from sinning. In his excellent book *The Joy of Fearing God*, Jerry Bridges notes, “Simply being afraid of God will lead to distrust and disobedience of Him. But fearing God will keep us from sinning.”¹ When the Apostle Paul wrote as we saw earlier that we are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, he did not mean that we were to be scared or afraid to work it out. So this fear does not mean being afraid.

The intent of the word is reverence, awe, respect. It suggests a proper God-directed attitude wrought from an understanding, flawed though it is by our sin-stained minds, that He is God. That is why Solomon wrote in Proverbs 1:7, “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge*” and the counterpart in Proverbs 9:10, “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.*” This fear is to be in awe of Him simply because He is Who He is. And I would suggest that when we revere God in this way, we will know it because to fear Him is to know Him! When we consider the numerous encounters that men in Scripture had with the living God, we see how to a man, those who knew Him were awed. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Gideon, Job, Isaiah, Elijah, Peter, Paul and the Apostle John all were men who were awestruck in the presence of God. We fear Him because He is great and infinite, beyond measure or comparison; we fear Him because He is holy, His majesty is transcendent and He is absolutely glorious in all His perfections; we fear Him because He is wise as demonstrated by His works of Creation and Providence and in His further recreating all things new; we fear Him because He is love and because He is Father we do not experience His wrath; we fear Him because He is Lord and all of life is under His authority.

Dear friends, God must be taken seriously—He will not be trifled with. A right fear of Him places Him at the center of everything we are, think, or aspire to accomplish. As James Montgomery Boice stated, “He must be our starting point for every project, the strength we seek for every valuable endeavor, the one we earnestly desire to please and honor as our goal. *There is no point at which the profound difference between the world and those who are truly God’s people is more radical than this.*”² So to fear God and experience the deepest of blessings starts with Him, continues with Him, and ends with Him, with every part of our life. Psalm 34:9, “*O fear the LORD, you His saints; for to those who fear Him there is no want.*”

¹ Jerry Bridges, *The Joy of Fearing God*, 32.

² James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms*, vol. 3, 1125.

2. The requirement to walk with the Lord (v. 1b)

Thinking rightly about God is only the beginning. Almost every instance in Scripture where God approaches His people with the requirement to fear Him we see a necessary or corollary requirement, that being that the one who truly fears Him will joyfully obey Him:

Deuteronomy 10:12-13 – ¹² “Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ *and* to keep the LORD’S commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good?”

Hence the tension we find in the title of Bridges book, *The Joy of Fearing God*. What kind of relationship can you have with someone you fear? When we have a proper understanding of the fear of God, we will desire to serve Him with gladness, or, as the Catechism puts it, *glorify Him and enjoy Him forever*. Right thinking about God leads to right living for God. We must think and act biblically. The psalmist wrote in our text, **“How blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, Who walks in His ways.”**

One cannot think about walking with God without thinking upon a man named Enoch. In Genesis 5 we are told twice in a span of a few verses that Enoch “walked with God”:

Genesis 5:21-24 – ²¹ Enoch lived sixty-five years, and became the father of Methuselah. ²² Then Enoch *walked with God* three hundred years after he became the father of Methuselah, and he had *other* sons and daughters. ²³ So all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. ²⁴ Enoch *walked with God*; and he was not, for God took him.

Three hundred years! Are you kidding me? We struggle mightily to walk with God for 300 seconds (that’s five minutes if you’re counting). And yet we have the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God that remembers Enoch in this way. He is given early on as an example of one who was blessed for walking with God, not even experiencing the pains of death, for God took him.

While there is not much more we can glean from Scripture as a commentary on Enoch’s life, what we do know is revealing. Jude 14-16 tells us what Enoch did during those 300 years:

Jude 1:14-16 – ¹⁴ *It was* also about these men *that* Enoch, *in* the seventh *generation* from Adam, prophesied, saying, “Behold, the Lord came with many thousands of His holy ones, ¹⁵ to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him.” ¹⁶ These are grumblers, finding fault, following after their *own* lusts; they speak arrogantly, flattering people for the sake of *gaining an* advantage.

What was Enoch doing in those 300 years that he walked with God? He was preaching and prophesying judgment towards the wicked that lived on the earth prior to the Flood. We find the Lord’s summary of the wickedness of these men in Genesis 6:5-6, ⁵ “Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. ⁶ The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.” As an aside, this does not mean that there was a time when God did not see all of the actions of man, nor does this mean that in His sorrow and grief He was admitting

that He made a mistake. That is a sermon for another time. What is important here is the Lord's diagnosis of mankind in continual wickedness. To those men Enoch faithfully proclaimed God's judgment. This is what walking with God meant for Enoch. And the writer of Hebrews suggests that in doing so, Enoch pleased God (Heb. 11:5).

The same is true for us today. We are called to live in obedience daily to the Word and the will of God, to walk in His way and to perform His work in the world. Our walk and obedience is demonstrated in two ways. First, it is an expression of our love for God and Christ. According to Jesus in John 14:21, "*He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me.*" Second, our walk is seen in our relationship to others. That is why the series we are completing on the "One Another's in the New Testament" is so important. Walking in His ways, then, is a reflection of the Ten Commandments, to love the Lord with all our heart and others as well. In other words, we do not walk with God in a vacuum. Our walk is never a purely private matter, though it does have a private side, but it always involves how we act towards and what we say to other people.³ This is how Jesus summarizes the Law near the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount in what we have come to know as the Golden Rule, Matthew 7:12, "In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets."

These things were evidenced in the early church in a time when what it meant to serve Him was often fraught with uncertainty:

Acts 9:31 – So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and *going on in the fear of the Lord* and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.

Acts 10:34-35 – ³⁴ Opening his mouth, Peter said: "I most certainly understand *now* that God is not one to show partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation *the man who fears Him and does what is right* is welcome to Him."

II. The Realms for Happiness (128:2-6)

Given that fearing God and walking in His ways is not merely personal, the psalmist describes in the remainder of the psalm the realms or areas where we spend most of our time. The person who says that he fears God but doesn't walk in the ways of God is deceived, a liar and a hypocrite. Fearing God means revering Him sufficiently, that I want to conform my lifestyle to His lifestyle, and to do that in the sphere of work, and in the sphere of my home, and in the sphere of worship.⁴

1. Happiness in your work (v. 2)

"When you shall eat of the fruit of your hands, you will be happy and it will be well with you." This sounds a little bit like the "health, wealth and prosperity" gospel, especially in the NIV, which actually uses the word *prosperity*. This leads people into all kinds of areas and avenues that actually deny fundamental principles of Scripture with respect to what we can actually expect as the children of God. This heresy has swept Brazil. That is why I was so

³ Boice, 1126.

⁴ Derek Thomas,

http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/sermons/Derek%27s_SERMONS/Psalms%20of%20Ascent/psalm_128.htm, accessed 08/29/2009.

encouraged to preach in an Assembly of God church to a group of AOG pastors who are serious about fearing God and walking in His ways and have seen the danger of the prosperity movement.

What the psalmist says here is that when one fears God in the workplace, when he earns an honest dollar, he will be blessed. So how do we demonstrate a fear of God at work? First, you recognize that your job itself is a blessing from God and find enjoyment and contentment in what God has given you to do in the deployment of your skills and abilities. And when success comes, or when you prosper, you can and should be thankful—not in *your* achievement, but you celebrate in the fact that you see it as something which God in His mercy and grace has given to you.

But it also means that the man or woman who walks in God's ways at work walks in integrity and in uprightness. Happiness from God comes not in cheating on your contracts or hoodwinking your contacts. Happiness is found in being a man of your word. Happiness does not come from cutting corners and doing just enough to get by, knowing that your work is really sub-standard. The fruit of blessing comes from working and laboring with a good conscience towards God. It demonstrates the belief that God really does provide for His own and that you will never see a righteous man begging for bread. Don't we believe, "Give us this day our daily bread?" Do you believe that God will bless you as you rightly revere Him in the workplace? Hear Derek Thomas:

It's not, you see, that if you're a Christian you will be rich. That's a travesty of exegesis! That's a travesty of understanding the life of Joseph, or the life of the Apostle Paul; or, for that matter, the life of Jesus Himself! But God provides, and He provides so plentifully. And all of us here, every single one of us here, can say that: that God has provided in far greater measure than we ever deserve. "It will be well with you" even if all hell is breaking out around you; you will find that pleasure, that blessing, in the work which God has given you to do.⁵

2. Happiness in your home (v. 3)

I have often said that our children are a means of our sanctification. Anyone who is married and tried to rear a family knows that there are times of frustration. God's promise of blessing does not imply that there will never be difficulties or even failures on the job or in the home. Psalm 128 is not promising utopia. Families are made up of people and all people are sinners; and sin disrupts even the best relationships in the home. But when a man fears and obeys God, the psalmist says that man will find happiness in the home.

He uses two images to describe a fruitful family. First, he describes the wife as "**a fruitful vine.**" The God-fearing man will have a child-bearing wife as was suggested in Psalm 127:3, "*The fruit of the womb is a reward.*" There we saw that it is God's prerogative to bless with children. He alone brings life into the womb. But here the image does not mean simply that the wife will produce lots of children, though children are a blessing. In the Bible the vine with its grapes and the wine that is produced from them is often a symbol of the refreshment and enjoyment to be gained from an abundant harvest at the end of a long, dry summer. Psalm 104:15 states that wine makes a man's heart glad. That is the picture of the wife that Psalm 128 portrays. However hard the day's work is to a laboring man, to come home to a good wife is like

⁵ Ibid.

coming home to a bountiful harvest at the end of a long summer. He finds satisfaction in his wife!

He then describes children **“like olive plants around your table.”** Olive trees take a long time to mature and become profitable. When cultivated patiently, and the key here is *patiently*, they become valuable and continue to produce a profitable crop for many years. When one’s children are rightly nurtured over time, they will become productive as well and experience the blessing of God. This does not mean that no properly reared child will ever rebel against their upbringing. The children of godly parents have and often do rebel. But as a rule godly training produces godly lives by the grace of God. An apple does not fall far from the tree.

3. Happiness in your church (vv. 4-6)

After repeating the promise of happiness in v. 4 the psalmist expands his view to embrace the larger people of God and even the city where they live. It is a reminder that just as we do not live our lives personally in a vacuum, nor do we work or live in our homes in a vacuum. God’s people are a covenantal community and the blessing is always incomplete unless it embraces others in the community. So the psalmist asks God’s blessing on individuals and families as part of his overall blessing on the people.

What it is saying is that the blessing actually derives from Zion and Jerusalem. And Zion and Jerusalem in the Old Testament are covenantal words for where the people of God gathered together to worship Him. This suggests that all true blessing comes from the means of grace... that true blessing comes from the gathering of God’s people covenantally together. So don’t expect God to bless your work if you work seven days a week and only attend church occasionally. Don’t expect God to bless that work. And don’t expect God to bless those grades if you’ve had to work on Sunday and miss church in order to obtain them. And don’t expect God to bless your families if you neglect to gather them together with the people of God. True blessing comes from Zion and from Jerusalem and the gathering of God’s people together.

He then concludes, **“May you see your children’s children. Peace be upon Israel!”** It is a prayer that God would grant physical health and long days on this earth so that they might live out their callings in the world to fear God and obey Him for the good of His church.

Conclusion

No one can be truly happy, experiencing all that God has for them, while living in disobedience to the Word and the will of God. Wherever people live, whether they be in the middle of Manhattan or the middle of a desert, they are seeking to experience the happiness that this psalm offers. There is a universal cry from every human heart, longing to be fulfilled, satisfied, and content. But the people of the world never find this happiness because they look for it in all the wrong places. True happiness is found in fearing God and consequently joyfully obeying Him. This begins and ends with our satisfaction in Christ. The key to having a happy life is a right relationship to God and that comes only in being reconciled to Him through Christ. **“How blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in His ways.”**