

Psalm 112 celebrates all who fear the Lord by offering a beautiful portrait of true human flourishing. The last verse of Psalm 111 sets the agenda for Psalm 112. Like the description of wisdom in Proverbs 31, the psalmist sketches a personal profile rich in legacy, industry, justice, resilience, compassion, generosity, and perseverance. Psalm 112 is a direct counter-part to Psalm 111, matching not only its acrostic style, but reflecting its themes in the life of the person of God. Those who fear the Lord reflect the Lord's great works, his righteous deeds, his compassionate ways, and his faithfulness and justice. Side by side the two psalms praise the glory of God and the dignity of man.

Psalm 111

Praise the Lord.

I will extol the Lord with all my heart
 in the council of the upright and in the assembly
Great are the works of the Lord;
 they are pondered by all who *delight* in them.
Glorious and majestic are his deeds,
 and *his righteousness endures forever*.
 He has caused his wonders to be remembered;
 the Lord is *gracious and compassionate*.
 He provides food for those who fear him;
 he *remembers* his covenant forever.
 He has shown his people the power of his works,
 giving them the lands of other nations.
 The works of his hands are faithful and just;
 all his precepts are *trustworthy*.
 They are *established* for ever and ever,
 enacted in faithfulness and uprightness.
 He provided redemption for his people;
 he ordained his covenant *forever* –
 holy and awesome is his name.
 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
 all who follow his precepts have good understanding.
 To him belongs eternal praise.

Psalm 112

Praise the Lord.

Blessed are those who fear the Lord,
 who find *great delight* in his commands.
 Their children will be *mighty* in the land;
 the generation of the upright will be blessed.
Wealth and riches are in their houses,
 and *their righteousness endures forever*.
 Even in the darkness light dawns for the upright, for
 those who are *gracious and compassionate and righteous*.
 Good will come to those who are generous and lend freely
 who conduct their affairs with justice.
 Surely the righteous will never be shaken;
 they will be *remembered* forever.
 They will have no fear of bad news;
 their hearts are steadfast, *trusting* in the Lord.
 Their hearts are *secure*, they will have no fear;
 in the end they will look in triumph on their foes.
 They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor,
 their righteousness endures *forever*;
 their horn will be lifted high in honor.
 The wicked will see and be vexed,
 they will gnash their teeth and waste away;
 the longings of the wicked will come to nothing.

By comparing the two psalms line for line we see the symmetry of the Lord's character reflected in the character of the person of God. Looking up to extol the Lord corresponds with looking around at those who fear the Lord and delight in his commands. The Lord's great works in creation correspond to the blessing of a great legacy found in faithful children and an upright generation. God's enduring righteousness parallels man's enduring righteousness. God's works are remembered because he is gracious and righteous and man's uprightness survives the darkness because he is gracious, compassionate and righteous. The Lord provides food, a metaphor for all of God's gracious provision, and his counterpart, the person who fears the Lord, gives generously, lends freely, and acts justly. The gift of the promised land corresponds to the resilience of those who persevere in righteousness. Since the Lord is completely trustworthy those who fear the Lord trust in him. Their hearts are steadfast even when bad news comes. God's word is altogether faithful and upright and those who obey him will find their hearts

secure and their victory sure. The promise of God's eternal covenant and everlasting life gives the people of God the freedom to give to the poor generously and the dignity to live confidently. The antithesis of the person who fears of the Lord is found in the description of the vexed and despairing wicked.

Human Flourishing

Praise the Lord.

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Psalm 112:1-9

The link between the two psalms demonstrates the close working relationship between a robust theology of creation and redemption (Ps 111) and the meaning of the person. The human flourishing that is grounded in Psalm 111 and reflected in Psalm 112 is radically different from the secular notion of self-fulfillment. Each successive generation raised in a materialistic, naturalistic world-view is becoming tougher, more self-indulgent and more self-centered. The we-expect-more-of-everything outlook imposes a long list of expectations on the search for self-fulfillment. These intangibles include, "creativity, leisure, autonomy, pleasure, participation, community, adventure, vitality, stimulation, and tender loving care."¹ Social analyst Daniel Yankelovich writes, "Instead of a concern with moral obligations to others pursued at the cost of a personal desire, we have the concept of duty to self pursued at the cost of moral obligations to others. Personal desire achieves the status of an ethical norm."² Yankelovich observes, "By concentrating day and night on your feelings, potentials, needs, wants and desires, and by

¹ Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Bantam, 1981), 8.

² Yankelovich, 187.

learning to assert them more freely, you do not become a freer, more spontaneous, more creative self; you become a narrower, more self-centered, more isolated one. You do not grow you shrink.”³

The Seinfeld show remains a kind of parable of the secular age. The iconic sitcom featured four self-centered narcissists living in Manhattan’s Upper West Side in New York City whose lives were entirely focused on the mundane minutia of daily life. It has been characterized as a show about nothing. Underlying the comedy of George’s super-thick wallet, Kramer’s wild entrances, and Elaine’s choice of boy friends was the reality that life is the sum of daily trivialities, pet peeves and personal idiosyncrasies.

Garrison Keillor in *Wobegon Boy* has his main character contemplate a marriage proposal to his girl friend: “My darling Alida, you are the love of my life, and now all I need is a life to go with you. What I have, my darling, is a lifestyle, the life of people in commercials. I have a nice house and nice things, and every couple of weeks I have you, the goddess Aphrodite, but I have no coherent story of my life. I am part of no struggle, have nothing at stake. I’m a fussy man in a blue suit who consumes fine wines. . . .I need passion, blood, magnificence. You are the only magnificence I know. Marry me.”⁴

If the secular age has “lowered the bar” on the requirements of a life well lived, the psalmist has not.⁵ His description of the good life begins with a key word, “blessed,” which means more than happiness. To be “blessed” is to experience the inner joy of a person who is right with God (Ps 1:1).⁶ Jesus began his Sermon on the Mount by using this word “blessed” nine times. The Hebrew word for “blessed” is “ashr” which means “to find the right path” (Prov 3:13, 17). Jesus’ theory of real happiness can be summed up in the Beattitudes as eight fundamental emotional attitudes, eight convictions of the soul, eight character qualities of the inner person (Matthew 5:3-12). Jesus paints a portrait of the person who fears the Lord from the inside out, just as the psalmist did. And like the psalmist, Jesus emphasized that such a person finds “great delight” in the commands of God. Jesus came not to abolish the law but to fulfill the law, and he promised that “whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19).

This legacy of faithful obedience is passed on to successive generations who fear the Lord and delight in his commands. Their faithful presence is reflected in their integrity and in their commitment to hard work. The psalmist’s reference to the blessing of “wealth” and “riches,” should not be twisted to defend a “prosperity gospel” or a worldly success ethic. Ross suggests that these two words can be translated as “honor” and “sufficiency” which is to say that God’s blessings are material as well as physical, emotional, and spiritual.⁷ The blessing of physical provision is coupled with the believer’s enduring righteousness and tempered with the reminder that we live in a fallen and broken world that is dark with sin and suffering. But the psalmist

³ Yankelovich, p. 239.

⁴ Garrison Keillor, *Wobegon Boy*, (New York: Viking, 1997), 36.

⁵ James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular*, 31.

⁶ Ross, *Psalms*, 377.

⁷ Ross, *Psalms*, 378.

insists that “even in darkness light dawns for the upright, for those who are gracious and compassionate and righteous” (Ps 112:4). The psalmist affirms the physical side of spirituality and the spiritual side of physicality. Devotion and work, family life and doctor’s appointments, educating the young and caring for the old, all form an integrated whole with the fear of the Lord centering every ambition, desire, commitment, action, and effort.

The psalmist’s description of the good life is hardly a recipe for the selfish accumulation of possessions and experiences. On the contrary, the blessings of God increase our responsibility to meet the needs of others with graciousness, generosity, compassion, and liberality. The emphasis on justice and giving generously pervades the psalm. The psalmist pictures those who fear the Lord giving to their children (Ps 112:2), righteously compensating their employees (Ps 112:3,5), being generous with others, lending freely (Ps 112:5), and gifting the poor (Ps 112:9). This spiritual direction corresponds well with James’ admonition: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27). The apostle Paul quoted verse nine when he encouraged the believers at Corinth to be generous: “They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever” (2 Cor 9:9).

The person who fears the Lord is not only generous and just, but resilient. The psalmist draws out this truth in three ways. “Even in darkness” the upright expect the light to dawn. Sickness, betrayal, opposition, disaster, and death itself are not the final word. There is a hint here of the statement in the Gospel prologue, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5). Even when “bad news” comes – a distraught phone call from a loved one, an unsettling medical diagnosis, a termination notice from an employer, an angry email from a colleague, there remains a sense of peace (Phil 4:7) and resolve. “Their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the Lord” (Ps 112:7). Even when it looks like the enemy is winning and justice is losing, the righteous are not shaken and their hearts are secure. There is a “no fear” response by those who fear the Lord.

Human Grief

*The wicked will see and be vexed,
they will gnash their teeth and waste away;
the longings of the wicked will come to nothing.*
Psalm 112:10

The alternative to “fear-of-the-Lord” human flourishing is the way of the wicked, but that path can only end in grief. Psalm 1 develops the contrast between the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked, likening the wicked to chaff that the wind blows away. Here, the psalmist describes the inevitable reaction of the wicked to those blessed by the Lord. They will see and be vexed, not only on the day of judgment, but even now. The vexing clash within themselves as they persist in living against the will of God will take its toll. They may have happiness without joy and success without peace. They may be everyone’s envy, but no one’s friend. Their desires and ambitions, their longings and dreams, will come to nothing. Their covetousness has led them astray and they know it in their heart. And they have no one to blame but themselves. Jesus

picked up on the language of Psalm 112 when he warned of the final judgment, when it will be too late to respond to the gospel, “There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, you yourselves thrown out” (Luke 13:28).