

Blessing and benediction frame the pilgrim's arrival in Jerusalem. The relational blessings of the previous psalm carry over into Psalm 128, the third psalm of the third triad. The psalmist celebrates the meaning of the good life by using vivid metaphors. He pictures an abundant harvest, a loving wife, and healthy children. The psalmist is skilled in painting a remarkable inscape of the abundant life and in the process offers a radical counter-cultural picture of the family.<sup>1</sup> His praying imagination is filled with organic images of fruitful vines and olive trees. He pictures children around the kitchen table and grandparents rejoicing over their children's children.

Psalm 128 reveals an extraordinarily satisfying liturgy of the ordinary by redefining prosperity and perfection according to the word of God. The psalmist's arrival in Zion celebrates the beauty of the ordinary. This psalm bears witness to the down-to-earth joys of walking in the Spirit and delighting in the word of God. The daily blessings of meaningful work, good friends, a loving marriage, and maturing children is a great gift. "Holy things are ordinary things perceived in their true light, that is, as bearers of the divine mysteries and glory to us."<sup>2</sup>

Vivid biblical word pictures help us visualize the truth of God. Psalm 128 is a classic example of truth pictured rather than lectured. Wisdom is described in real-world earth tones rather than defined in idealistic platitudes. It is not a still life portrait of prosperity, but a series of action pictures that captures the essence of the good life. Faithfulness, fellowship, fidelity, and friendship can be seen in a real life scene set to a human scale.

### *Blessing*

*Blessed are all who fear the Lord,  
who walk in obedience to him.  
You will eat the fruit of your labor;  
blessings and prosperity will be yours.  
Your wife will be like a fruitful vine  
within your house;  
your children will be like olive shoots  
around your table.  
Yes, this will be the blessing  
for the man who fears the Lord.*

Psalm 128:1-4

Words like "blessing," "fear," and "prosperity" may trigger in the mind of the reader ideas unintended by the psalmist. The poetry and imagery of the psalms is vulnerable to the reader's free association and flight of imagination. This is why it is important to read the Psalms on their own terms and allow the psalmist to shape our interpretation. The opening line of the psalm,

<sup>1</sup> Poet Gerard Manley Hopkins coined the term "inscape" to describe the unique character of an object or subject as it relates to its environment. Landscapes give us the horizon. Inscapes give us the essence.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Howard, *Splendor in the Ordinary: Your Home as a Holy Place* (Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophie Institute Press, 2000), 19.

“Blessed are all who fear the Lord, who walk in obedience to him,” has deep roots in the wisdom tradition of the Psalms and Proverbs. Psalm 1 comes to mind, “Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked . . .” The bound phrase, the-fear-of-the-Lord, invokes the theme of Proverbs: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov 1:7; see 9:10). Meaning builds as we define blessing as the fear of the Lord and obedient living. This fear does not imply dread or terror. Those who fear the Lord are not living scared, afraid of what God might do to them. Nor is walking in obedience a moralistic regimen of self-justifying works. The fear of the Lord is reverential fear inspired by a true recognition of the majesty and glory of God. Instead of dread, there is delight. Instead of anxiety, there is awe. Instead of fear, there is faith.

The psalmist’s understanding of blessing leads us to Jesus’ Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. They both belong to the same redemptive trajectory. In the quest for the good life we look to God to fulfill our deepest longings, calm our fears, inspire our hope, and lead us along a path we never would have taken on our own. The pursuit of happiness guided by Jesus and the pursuit of happiness inspired by our culture are two radically different journeys. In the Beatitudes Jesus repeats the word “blessed” nine times, signaling an amazing reversal of human values. According to Jesus the American Beatitudes got it wrong: put yourself first and you will come in last, give yourself to hedonism and you will rape your soul, strive to be envied and you will end up lonely. If you hunger and thirst for the good life as it is popularly perceived you will come away empty. Apart from the grace of Christ and Jesus’ atoning work on the cross it would be impossible to live the good life. But have discovered the blessing of God’s forgiveness, mercy, and peace, who in their right mind would go back to the gods of Self, Money, Lust and Power? The psalmist’s blessing and Jesus’ beatitudes are rooted in the same theology of grace and covenant love.

To walk in obedience to the Lord takes the reader back to the message of Psalm 1 and then forward to the prophet Micah: “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). We find echoes of Psalm 128 in the apostle Paul’s admonition to “walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Eph 5:2 ESV). His counsel was clear, “So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. . . . Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal 5:16, 25).

The picture of family blessing celebrated in Psalm 128 corresponds to the picture of loving obedience described in Deuteronomy 6. Parents are instructed in how to impress their children with the commands of God. The well-known counsel given by Moses describes just how simple, good, and solid parental spiritual direction can be. According to Moses there is no “secret” to becoming an effective mother or father. It doesn’t take much to figure out what to do, but it does take humility, integrity, patience, love, and submission to the word of God to be the kind of parent Moses pictured: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deut 6:5-7).

Family bliss is the psalmist's defining image for the good life. Three crucial factors are poetically sketched: a prosperous work ethic, a loving wife, and the joy of children. The fear of the Lord inspires a sustainable work ethic that rewards "the labor of our hands." The simple line, "You will eat the fruit of your labor," represents a complex promise. Because of the curse of the fall, labor has a weighty measure of disappointment and drudgery, but because of God's grace it is possible to rise above the curse and enjoy our labor and reap its benefits. To be able to eat and drink and find satisfaction in our "toilsome labor under the sun" is a "gift from God." When God keeps us "occupied with gladness of heart" we are defended against discouragement and depression (Ecclesiastes 5:18-20).

The second image of blessing alludes to the shared work of marriage: "Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the innermost chambers of your house."<sup>3</sup> This simple line speaks volumes. She is a picture of grace and beauty and human flourishing. Everything positive is included here: tenderness, respect, praise, good sex, and the blessing of children. The meaning behind this description corresponds to the apostle Paul's admonition to husbands "to love their wives as their own bodies," to love her "as he loves himself" (Eph 5:28,33). Mutual submission "out of reverence for Christ," which is another way of saying the fear of the Lord, applies the principle of the cross, my life for yours, to every facet of the marriage relationship. The contrast between a marriage shaped by the realities of God's choosing, purifying and loving, and a marriage that is a self-made relational arrangement, are profound. The blessing of God brings a married couple into a large world of immense realities that are completely unknown to a self-centered couple.<sup>4</sup>

Children at the family table make up the third image of blessing. They are likened to olive shoots. "The picture is of young olive trees springing up from the parent stem, fresh, vibrant, and full of promise."<sup>5</sup> The psalmist uses vital organic imagery to underscore the meaning of human flourishing and to emphasize the down-to-earth reality of true spirituality. We often squeeze spirituality into a corner of life reserved for pious devotions and church services, but God intended spirituality to be at the center of our ordinary, every-day life together. Table fellowship here and elsewhere in the Bible stands for food for the body, mind, and soul. It is a metaphor for nourishing physical strength, nurturing communion with God, and developing spiritual maturity. Eating is serious business, but in a well-defined way.<sup>6</sup> Table fellowship is a metaphor for where life makes up its mind, where the basic skills of worship and prayer, comfort and caring are meant to be modeled and taught. Edith Schaeffer observed, "The family is the place where loyalty, dependability, trustworthiness, compassion, sensitivity to others, thoughtfulness, and unselfishness are supposed to have their roots. Someone must take the initiative and use imagination to intentionally teach these things."<sup>7</sup>

We don't have to look far for sacred space. The kitchen table will do. Jesus said, "For where two

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<sup>3</sup> Ross, Psalms, 695.

<sup>4</sup> Webster, Soulcraft, 154-155.

<sup>5</sup> Ross, Psalms, 695. Ross continues, "The olive tree was an emblem of vigor and vitality in the Old Testament, and naturally a symbol of long endurance since they last for such a long time. They also were very productive, the oil being used for many important things."

<sup>6</sup> Webster, Table Grace, 18.

<sup>7</sup> Edith Schaeffer, What Is a Family?. Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1975, 83.

or three gather in my name, there I am with them” (Matthew 18:20). We are tempted to spend considerable energy trying to win the favor of people in general, rather than the people we know. Fame is name recognition by the nameless masses. It does not compare to the blessing of family. Family is life together. It is knowing we are loved by those closest to us. For those who feel it is more important to love and to be loved, the measure of life is not in what is achieved, but in what is received. They value blessing over success and know that popularity never substitutes for the intimacy of two or three gathered in the name of Christ.

*Benediction*

*May the Lord bless you from Zion;  
may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem  
all the days of your life.  
May you live to see your children’s children –  
peace be on Israel.*

Psalm 128:5-6

Psalm 128 beautifully portrays the prosperity gospel, not the gospel that confuses American materialism and hedonism with spirituality, but the gospel of grace that sanctifies the ordinary and reveals the glory of God in every aspect of life. True prosperity is found close to home in the blessing of meaningful and rewarding work, the love of family and friends, and in the joys and challenges of nurturing sons and daughters and grandchildren in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is also obvious that Psalm 128 cannot be confused with the modern American disorder of perfectionism. The conception of family life sketched here has nothing to a compulsive self-preoccupied performance. But it has everything to do with the perfection Jesus had in mind when he admonished, “Be perfect. . .as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). This is the perfection of organic spiritual growth and maturity. As Kathleen Norris writes, “To ‘be perfect,’ in the sense that Jesus means it, is to make room for growth, for the changes that bring us to maturity, to ripeness. To mature is to lose adolescent self-consciousness so as to be able to make a gift of oneself, as a parent, as teacher, friend, spouse.”<sup>8</sup> Cultural perfectionism triggers envy, but the picture of perfection in Psalm 128 inspires growth. The image painted by the psalmist is inviting, not intimidating. If one of our goals in Christ is to live to be a grandparent and to see the faith take root in the next generation we will know the difference between the blessing that comes from the fear of the Lord and the success that comes from self-service.

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<sup>8</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*. New York: Riverhead, 1998. 55.