

PSALM 128

A Song of Ascents.

- ¹ Happy is everyone who fears the LORD,
who walks in God's ways.
- ² You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands;
you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you.
- ³ Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
within your house;
your children will be like olive shoots
around your table.
- ⁴ Thus shall the man be blessed
who fears the LORD.
- ⁵ The LORD bless you from Zion.
May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life.
- ⁶ May you see your children's children.
Peace be upon Israel!

What does it mean to “fear” the Lord? It means having reverence and respect, seeking the favour and goodwill of the one feared. To fear the Lord is to reverence and respect God, seeking God's favour and goodwill on all one thinks and does. It is also seeking to discern God's will and follow it, basing one's life upon it. This psalm begins by stating that all who fear the Lord are “happy” (the word may be better translated as “blessed”).

And how is such happiness or blessing evinced? Your planting and harvesting will produce a wonderful yield (v.2), you will have many children who will support you (v.3), and you will live a long and healthy life (v.6). And one more thing. Your personal prosperity and flourishing will be mirrored in the prosperity and flourishing of “Zion” (which is the spiritual name for Jerusalem the capital city with the temple at its centre).

OK, this is a wonderful vision, is it not? This is the way things should work out, for anyone decent, hardworking and faithful to higher values (fearing the Lord is about that). But what if it doesn't work out well (which is, sadly, too often the case)? Is this psalm of any benefit to those who are struggling with failure, misfortune and grief? Is it salt on the wounds of the broken or laughable pie-in-the-sky dreaming for those who live in the real world? And pondering the fate of so many Hebrews and the nation as a whole invaded and overrun by empire after empire... Why is this psalm in the collection at all?

Well, perhaps it is like the north star, the reset button, the rudder on a ship that has been tossed to and fro in a stormy sea but is now trying to find its direction again... Perhaps we all

need to find our ground and direction at many points in life, and especially when we have come through situations that have left us anything but happy or blessed, prosperous or healthy... Whether life has worked out well or not so well, to fear the Lord has to be the foundation of one's inner house.

This psalm encourages us to step out for a moment from whatever negativity we are feeling and whatever bad situation we are contending with, to ponder what blessing may come when we offer the kind of respect and reverence that God, who is the foundation of life, deserves from us. If our relationship with God is tit for tat, how deep can it go? If our "fear" is simply utilitarian and contingent on the tangible blessings we get back in life, how far can that take us before the party ends abruptly? Should not faith, hope and the flow of love grow strong in bad times as much as the good ones? And if it is growing strong, may it not position us much better spiritually to see and feel the blessings even when they are invisible for many others who are completely swallowed up in their negativity and despair?

Perhaps this psalm is a little too dreamy for some of us. Perhaps it is a little too pie-in-the-sky. Perhaps it is hard to swallow the promise that fearing the Lord will also lead to prosperity, good health and lots of children to care for us in our old age. Perhaps it can feel like salt on the wounds of failure and disappointment. And perhaps it can feel like a judgement upon us for not receiving what the psalm promises, because maybe we have not practiced sufficient fear of the Lord.

But maybe, this can also be a way of challenging us spiritually to go further. If we do make fear and reverence of the Lord our inner foundation regardless of what external blessings come to us, does that not make us even stronger and richer than what the psalm promises? If we are able to grow our faith, hope and love despite hardships and challenges are we not even more grounded and better able to pass through the vicissitudes of life? Certainly the ancient Hebrews must have read a psalm like this that way. Otherwise how could they appreciate it given the fate of so many of them in their times?

Thank you, dear psalmist, for challenging us to dig deeper with this psalm, to find more solid reasons within us to fear and reverence the Lord than the mere promise of external blessings.

PRAYER: Thank you, O God, for your goodness. You awaken us to higher values, of love and respect for people and for the earth that sustains and nourishes us. You remind us of those good things in our lives when we can easily obsess over the bad things. There are people who care for us, people who will be there for us. There is family, and community, friendship, food, clothing and shelter... Even as we are so vulnerable to the vicissitudes of life, may we ground ourselves in your unending and steadfast love for us, and may your love flow in and through us bringing into our lives greater healing and flourishing despite the challenges... In Jesus' name; Amen.