

# Not So Radical

## Psalm 128

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Psalm 128 is the ninth of fifteen psalms grouped together in the biblical canon, all labeled "A Song of Ascents." (So we are not quite 2/3 of the way through this series.) These 15 psalms constituted a portable songbook within the larger book of psalms. Of course, if you grew up in Israel, you wouldn't need the songbook. These 15 psalms are all short enough for a child to memorize easily. Only one of them is longer than 9 verses. (Psalm 132 is 18 verses long.) And three of the last four songs in the collection are only three verses long.

Again, all 15 psalms start with that inscription ("A Song of degrees.") These are the only psalms in the entire canon labeled that way. The inscriptions are part of the inspired text, so it's clear that these psalms were grouped together by God's design. In the King James Version the inscription is translated "A Song of degrees." The actual Hebrew text uses a word that signifies steps going upward. An uphill journey. Stepping heavenward. That's what a trip to Jerusalem is like if your starting point is anywhere else. Jerusalem was built on and around mount Zion, and no matter where you were coming from, you had to go up. If you came from Galilee, for example, you would start uphill just after you passed Jericho, and the rest of the journey was a long, hard uphill trek--about two full days' journey by foot, all uphill. From Jericho to Jerusalem was about 45 miles via a winding road that ascends some 3400 feet. Your legs would hurt when you got there. Grandma would have to be carried in a wagon pulled by an ox.

Large groups of pilgrims would make that trip three times a year to observe the Jewish feast days at the Temple. And they would sing these fifteen psalms on the way up. These are songs for pilgrims. Climbing choruses. "Psalms of ascent."

No doubt you have noticed as we have worked our way through the series that the theme of *worship* is prominent in each of these psalms. There's a distinct focus on the Lord. In

fact, some kind of praise or thanksgiving to God is the starting point for each one of these psalms.

Turn back to Psalm 120, and let's review this. There's a worshipful acknowledgement of or word of praise to YHWH at the start of each psalm. Psalm 120: "I called to the LORD, and he answered me." Psalm 121: "I lift up my eyes . . . My help comes from the LORD." Psalm 122: "Let us go to the house of the LORD!" Psalm 123: "To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!" Psalm 124: "If it had not been the LORD who was on our side . . . then [our enemies] would have swallowed us up alive." Psalm 125: "Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion." Psalm 126: "When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream . . . The LORD has done great things for us." Psalm 127: "Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." Psalm 128 likewise starts with a worshipful reference to the Lord: "Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD." Worship is the singular thread that ties these Pilgrim Psalms together. They are traveling praise choruses.

Another theme that runs throughout is Zion--Jerusalem--the place of worship. It was the destination of thousands of Pilgrims at each major annual feast, and these songs kept them focused on the goal. Of the fifteen psalms labeled "A Song of Ascents," only four (psalms 120, 123, 127, and 130) contain no explicit reference to the Holy City or the nation of Israel. So these psalms were intended to arouse a sense of patriotism as they summoned pilgrims to worship.

The theme of Psalm 128 is *blessing*, and specifically, it describes what God's blessings look like in the context of domestic life. It shows what a God-blessed home-life looks like. It speaks to fathers in particular. This would be a great Father's-Day text. But the central principle here is applicable to everyone.

Psalm 127 introduced the motif of fatherhood and home life. "Children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them!" The setting there was a warning against presumption. Those were words of caution for those who are overconfident. Don't forget God or

leave Him out of your home life: "Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." Psalm 128 stays with the theme of domestic blessing, but it's an encouragement against depression. These are words of reassurance for those who feel their own insufficiency.

Again, the theme of Psalm 128 is divine blessing. Here is what a God-blessed family looks like. The word *ble* appears (in various forms) 4 times: in verses 1, 2, 4, and 5. There's not a single verse in the psalm that doesn't include some promise or description or invocation of God's blessing.

Zion is mentioned in verse 5; Jerusalem is likewise named in that same verse; and the psalm closes with an invocation of peace on the whole nation of Israel. So there's that theme of national identity and patriotism. But the actual focal point of the psalm is the blessedness of a holy home life, with a particular focus on the father as the spiritual head. Here's what the blessing of God looks like in the context of a holy home.

And I want you to notice something very carefully: The description of a godly home is anything but radical.

People in our culture today have an unusual fascination with all things radical. If you want to sell a product or an idea or a fad to students these days, market your concept as something *radical*.

Even among Christian young people nowadays, there's an unusual fascination with the idea of being radical. I've lost count of how many books aimed at Young-and-Restless evangelicals have the word *radical* featured prominently in the title or the cover copy. *Radical Reformation*. *Radical Grace*. *Radical Restoration*. *Radical Christianity*. And my favorite: *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*. Suddenly that makes perfect sense. Anything radical is now ordinary. It's not really radical to want to be radical anymore. The average evangelical today seems to think that if you don't live a lifestyle that is spiritually and politically unorthodox, unconventional, eccentric, conspicuously radical, then you're not really following Jesus like you should.

It has also become popular among radical evangelicals to make a totally artificial distinction between the word *Christian* and the expression "Christ follower." I first saw this almost a

decade ago, when a popular blog featured an article in which the author said, "I don't like to refer to myself as a Christian. I'm a Christ follower, but not a Christian." Nowadays that is a fairly common cliché. Just two days ago I came across an article at one of the biggest religious websites on the Internet, titled, "Why I Quit Being a Christian (in order to better follow Jesus)." *The author says he gave up being a Christian so that he could be a true Christ follower.* An article in *Christianity Today* reported on this fad and compared it to saying, "I'm with Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, and Mother Teresa, but not the Southern Baptists."

A large part of the idea here is that Christians are too conventional and evangelicals in particular are too strait-laced. To be a *real* Christ follower you need to be radical in your lifestyle and your doctrine--even in your politics. (If you want to be "radical" by the current definition, it helps if you're an environmentally conscious pacifist who thinks justice entails government-mandated redistribution of wealth.)

Let me give you one typical example. Shane Claiborne is a 38-year-old author who has gained a great deal of fame in the evangelical community for his promotion of radical living. He says he is interested in helping the poor. He always dresses in a kind of burlap-looking hoodie that he made himself. In fact, the publicity about him always stresses that his clothes are homemade. He makes his whole wardrobe for the entire year every Christmas. (He claims he sews liturgically, whatever that is supposed to mean.) But the whole wardrobe seems to consist of those sackcloth hoodies.

Every time I have ever heard Shane Claiborne mention any point of doctrine, he always takes an unorthodox position. For example, he calls himself a "Red Letter Christian," meaning he doesn't regard all Scripture as equally authoritative. He wants to reinvent our understanding of atonement, redefine our attitude toward gender, and change or tone down all the classic biblical doctrines that don't fit well with postmodern political correctness.

But Shane Claiborne appeals to young evangelicals on the fringe, and many see his self-styled radicalism as a kind of advanced sanctification. He himself says he learned to live this

way by spending time in Calcutta with Mother Teresa. That's the kind of thing evangelicals typically have in mind when they talk about being "radical."

Then there was that well-known pastor here in Southern California who shocked his congregation and got the evangelical world talking in 2010 when he announced he was resigning his 5,000-member church and thinking of going to Asia where he could better minister among the poor and fight human trafficking. I think he actually ended up moving to San Francisco, and he is currently traveling around the country to speak at all kinds of conferences. But he talks a lot about being radical and promotes radical ideas and doctrines--so I guess he still qualifies as sufficiently "radical" in the minds of his followers.

The cover article for the March 2013 issue of *Christianity Today* highlighted this whole trend with an article titled, "Here Come the Radicals!" in which they profiled Shane Claiborne and several others who teach that the key to genuine Christlikeness is a radical lifestyle.

There's something that greatly troubles me about that whole mentality. To call something "radical" is to say that it is extreme, or that it's a significant departure from everything ordinary, customary, or conventional. And to be fair, there *is* a true sense in which the life and teachings of Christ were a deliberate rebuke to the legalistic and extrabiblical traditions of the Pharisees. He was radical, in that sense.

Jesus also made many demands on his disciples that have a distinctly radical sound and feel to them. Luke 14:26: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." Matthew 10:35-38: "I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. . . . Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." Or Jesus to the Rich Young Ruler (Mark 10:21): "Sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." That's definitely radical.

But you understand, I hope, that when Jesus says we need to hate our parents, forsake everything, take up our cross, and

follow him, he is speaking figuratively. *Literally* hating your parents would be a violation of the fifth commandment, "Honor your father and your mother." *Literally* carrying a cross around would be an impediment to most callings. Jesus was not advocating a freak lifestyle; he was instructing his followers on how their affections were to be ordered. He was demanding to be first in our love and loyalty. He was not saying that if you don't literally abandon all your possessions and live like a homeless person you're not being radical enough.

So let me be clear: It's quite true that the gospel makes some shocking and unsettling demands on us, and that the faithful Christian needs to think in a markedly different way and live in a way that sets us far apart from the way the typical worldling lives. There is a true sense in which Christianity itself is *radical* in its repudiation of worldly and self-centered values. (I should also mention here that David Platt wrote a book titled *Radical* that I think is quite good, and well worth reading. I might quibble with a point here or there, but I think he succeeds in making the point that) Christ's true disciples are not supposed to float along with the current of worldly culture, and in that sense we are called to a radically different lifestyle.

But if you take your notion of what "radical living" is supposed to look like from certain irresponsible teachers; if you think you have to grow dreadlocks or get tattoos and live in utter poverty in order to be truly pious, you have a severely skewed view of what faithfulness to Christ entails.

Can I say it like this? *It is our worldview, values, and affections that are supposed to be radical, not simply the way we dress and behave.* According to this psalm, the labor and the home-life of the ordinary believer is simply not all that radical. And while the blessings God promises are *extraordinary* in the joy and pleasure they bring, God's most sublime blessings are anything but "radical."

The fact is, some of the best, most faithful, God-blessed Christians are simple lay-people who live quiet lives, glorify God in the home and in the workplace, and consistently keep the faith over a whole lifetime of unpretentious, often unnoticed faithfulness. They "do justice, and . . . love kindness, and . . . walk

humbly with . . . God." That's what true piety *ordinarily* looks like. And don't let anyone disparage or depreciate that truth.

That kind of simple, ordinary piety is precisely what Psalm 128 celebrates. This is the Old Testament description of someone who loses his life in order to find it.

Luther loved this psalm because it proved that fruitful marriage, not mandatory celibacy, is what Scripture points to as the epitome of divine blessing. I love it for a similar reason: it debunks the silly, quasi-monastical notion that living weird is the only way to obtain the blessing of God on your life.

So here's the psalm:

A Song of Ascents. Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD,  
who walks in his ways!

2 You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall  
be blessed, and it shall be 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 Behold, 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!

Now before we get into the meat of the text, notice a few facts on the face of this passage:

The first thing that jumps out at me is a paradox. The opening note is *fear* and the final note is *peace*. In fact, this psalm full of surprises and paradoxes like that. Fear is what begets true happiness; specifically, fear of the Lord. *Fear*: sounds negative, but fear of God is the beginning of wisdom and the very essence of faith. And it turns out that God's blessing looks nothing at all like the world's notion of happiness and self-fulfillment. To the typical worldling, happiness consists of a life full of leisure, material riches, power, honor, and fame. It's a very self-centered, self-indulgent idea.

Scripture gives a completely different view of the blessed life. Life's greatest blessings are simpler, more ordinary than fame and fabulous wealth. Furthermore, real blessedness will focus our hearts on others, not self. "It is more blessed to give than to receive." And the kind of blessedness Scripture describes is actually a richer, fuller, happier, and generally longer life.

Pay attention to the key words, especially the very first word of the psalm proper: "Blessed." "Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD."

That word "blessed" is used in at least four ways in the Old Testament. Sometimes it's used to describe the verbal pronouncement of a blessing. All of Deuteronomy 33 is the record of Moses' final words to the nation of Israel before he died, and it is a formal proclamation of blessing. Deuteronomy 33:1: "This is the blessing with which Moses the man of God *blessed* the people of Israel before his death." And the rest of the chapter is a record of specific blessings that Moses pronounced on the people. We use the word in this sense when we refer to the prayer before a meal as "the blessing." Scripture uses the expression in that sense, too. Luke 24:30: "He took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them."

Other times the word *blessed* is used with regard to God. First Samuel 25:32: "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel." That's an expression of praise, and it means "*Let God be glorified.*" To bless God is to exalt Him; extol and magnify His name; *honor* Him with praise. Psalm 41:13: "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! Amen and Amen."

A third way the word *blessed* is used is in reference to sacred things. Genesis 2:3: "God blessed the seventh day and made it holy." In that sense, the word denotes something that is hallowed, consecrated, set apart as holy, and shown some kind of special honor or favor. In Deuteronomy 33:13, where Moses is blessing the nation, we read this: "Of Joseph [Moses] said, 'Blessed by the LORD be his land.'" Not only did that signify the abundant fruitfulness of the land, it made Joseph's portion a kind of hallowed ground.

But the word *blessed* in its common usage, and in the way we see here in this psalm, blessedness is practically a synonym for happiness and good fortune. It refers to the joyous and favored state of a person whose sin has been forgiven and to whom Christ's righteousness is imputed by faith. In the words of Psalm 32:1-2, "Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity." Such a person is at peace. He has peace with God. All things work together for his good. He is truly blessed.



This psalm celebrates three specific blessings that belong to the person who fears God: One, we'll call *productivity*. His life and labors are fruitful. Verse 2, he eats of the labors of his hands. Verse 3, his wife is fruitful. Verse 5 speaks of prosperity. That's one of God's blessings on his life: Productivity.

A second blessing is his *progeny*. Verse 3: his children are like olive shoots. That signifies that his offspring are not only numerous but also full of life and potential. Verse 6 mentions his grandchildren, the best of all blessings.

Blessing number three is *peace*. There's a calm and a deep tranquility that permeates every line of the psalm. Verse 2, "You shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you." And the psalm closes with a pronouncement of the blessing of peace: "Peace be upon Israel!" Three distinct blessings. Keep them in mind because we'll come back to them.

Now consider the structure of the psalm. There are two stanzas, and each stanza celebrates those same three blessings from a different perspective. Stanza one consists of verses 1-3, and stanza 2 comprises verses 4-6. So the stanzas are roughly equal in both length and logic. They highlight the same types of blessings. And they follow a similar pattern.

Notice the pattern: the opening line states a truth in third person. Stanza one opens with, "Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways!" The first line of stanza two (verse 4) is, "Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD." Parallel statements, both speaking in third person. (If you have forgotten your basic grammar, first person is *me*; second person is *you*; third person is *him or her*.) Each stanza starts with a line spoken in third person and immediately shifts to second person.

Verses 1-2: "Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways! You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you."--and the rest of the stanza is entirely in the second person. Stanza two starts with verse 4, which goes back to third person: "Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD. [but then, shifting to second person:] The LORD bless you from Zion!" And the remainder of stanza 2 stays in second person.

This makes the psalm intensely personal. It states the truism in third person, emphasizing the widespread application of the

principle. Then it shifts to second person so that you can't hear the psalm without examining yourself, and you can't sing it without pronouncing a blessing on your immediate neighbor.

Notice, I called the principle of this psalm a "truism," not a *promise*. It's obvious (isn't it?) that the blessings described in the psalm are not universal absolutes. There are God-blessed people who never marry and have children. The apostle Paul was an example of one such saint. If he had ever been married, he was a widower by the time we meet him in Scripture. And the only children he had were true sons and daughters in the faith, like Timothy and Titus, and the believers in Thessalonica, and Philippi and other churches to whom he was a spiritual father.

It's also not universally true that godly living always results in a long life or material prosperity. Hebrews 11 celebrates the faith and the blessedness of countless known and unknown saints in the Old Testament who "suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated--of whom the world was not worthy."

God could call any one of us to that kind of martyrdom, and we need to be prepared to give our lives for Christ if called upon to do that. We're supposed to rejoice when we suffer for Christ's sake. Matthew 5:11, Jesus said, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." But we are never instructed to *seek* martyrdom or persecution. Quite the opposite. We're told in 1 Timothy 2 to pray "for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way." Martyrdom is certainly a *possibility*, and some degree of persecution is a *certainty*. "Indeed, [as we are told in 2 Timothy 3:12] all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." But the ideal we are supposed to pray for, and the normal way God blesses faithful people, is in "a peaceful and quiet life." This psalm is celebrating that reality and stating a truism, not making an absolute and universal promise.

It's just like the famous proverb, "Train up a child in the way he should go [and] when he is old he will not depart from it." That's a general truism, not an iron-clad guarantee. Or the fifth

commandment: "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long." The point that verse makes is that the lifestyle of a rebellious young person is not conducive to long life. But it's also true that godly people and obedient children do sometimes die young. So bear in mind, these are guiding principles, not guaranteed promises.

One important corollary of that is: *you can't judge a person's character by his circumstances*. Don't mistake the appearance of worldly health or material prosperity as signs of God's blessing. And conversely, don't imagine that infirmity, or adversity, or material disadvantage signifies the Lord's displeasure. That was the mistake of Job's counsellors, right? They thought his sufferings were proof that God was displeased with him, even though the truth was the exact opposite.

So now that we are well into the hour, let's look at these two stanzas one at a time.

STANZA ONE GIVES US A PERSPECTIVE FROM CLOSE UP.

Remember the three kinds of blessing this psalm celebrates: the godly person's *productivity*; his *progeny*; and the *peace* that envelops and shelters him. The focus here is on one very specific scene in the domestic environment. We're given a picture from the present, centered on the family table. The food on the table (verse 2) is the fruit of his labors. The people around the table are his wife and children. And the atmosphere is one of peace (verse 2). It is well with this family.

Why is this home so blessed? Verse 1. This is a man "who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways!" He has a healthy reverence for God--and a holy fear of God's displeasure--and that fear is reflected in his daily walk. This tells us he has tapped into biblical wisdom, because (as Psalm 111:10 and Proverbs 9:10 say) "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." Proverbs 15:33 says, "The fear of the LORD is instruction in wisdom." And in the words of Job 28:28, "the fear of the Lord, that *is* wisdom."

We don't hear enough about holy fear these days. Modern preachers like to encourage familiarity rather than fear, and that's why so much of today's worship is casual, flippant, man-centered. But Scripture is full of admonitions to *fear* the Lord. For many today, that is an unfamiliar concept. I spent the larger

portion of my childhood in Sunday school classes where we were encouraged to think of God as a benign buddy who winks at sin rather than demanding righteous retribution. And I remember as a child being shocked the first time I heard someone described as a God-fearing person. (As I recall, I read that phrase in an issue of Mad Magazine when I was about eleven years old. And I thought it had a really bad sound to it.) I remember thinking, "*God is not to be feared!*" That's what I had always learned in Sunday school. Of course, that contradicts what the Bible actually says. Hebrews 10:31: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" Thankfully, when I was 17, while reading Scripture for myself, the Holy Spirit convicted me of my own guilt, and awakened the fear of God in my soul. That was the beginning of wisdom for me.

The psalms are full of verses like this that speak of the necessary link between blessedness and the fear of God. Psalm 112 starts off with this: "Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who greatly delights in his commandments!" Psalm 115:13: "[The Lord] will bless those who fear [him], both the small and the great." Psalm 147:11: "The LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love."

This man's fear of God sets the example for the whole family. He has his household in order. From the description of his home-life, it's clear that his wife likewise honors the Lord in her life, and because their children are such a blessing, it's clear that they are being raised in the nurture and admonition of the Lord as well.

That certainly describes a lifestyle that is counter-cultural in our generation (and sadly families like that were pretty rare even throughout much of the Old Testament.) But again: this is not describing a "radical lifestyle" in the sense of being marked with any of the emblems of rebellion.

However, this is what God's ordinary blessings look like. Some of the most basic and yet finest earthly blessings of all are the fruits of our own labor (verse 2): "You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands." Notice: that presupposes *labor* on the part of the one receiving the Lord's blessing. If you're able but not working, you don't really fear the Lord, and you can't expect God's blessing on your life. Second Thessalonians 3:10: "If

anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat." Proverbs 23:24 says if you're a sluggard, "poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man." *Productivity* is a blessing of God reserved for "everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways." And that means work, not idleness.

This man's wife is likewise fruitful. That's not primarily a reference to childbearing, though you can't exclude that. But it likens her to a vine--which is an image that evokes beauty and shelter as well as abundant fruit. And her fruitfulness is reflected not only (and not even primarily) in childbearing, but in everything she does. She is a Proverbs 31 woman. She is a worker at home. Verse 3: She is "like a fruitful vine *within* your house." Vines don't move about and meander from place to place. They are permanently rooted. The place where this woman set down her roots is her own home. She's not a gadabout. And like a well-cultivated grapevine, she makes the home a place of beauty and shelter.

And the blessings of such a life are only *multiplied* with children. This carries on a theme that we encountered in Psalm 127: "Children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward." Our psalm expands on that thought and expands it a bit. Children not an *earned* reward given in return for some meritorious works we do. They are a divinely-bestowed, gracious blessing, above and beyond what we really deserve. Children are never portrayed in Scripture as an unwanted inconvenience or interruption that disrupts our personal plans or our professional careers--the way selfish people today often suggest. Children are tokens of God's blessing--something of great value and a source of immense joy.

If you see your children in any other light, you're probably going to be a bad parent.

Verse 3: "Your children will be like olive shoots around your table." Just as the grapevine is an analogy for the wife, olive shoots are the illustration of children. They are young, full of life and potential, needing only the right care and cultivation in order to become fruitful. And an olive tree is a *valuable* commodity. Its oil was one of the staples of life in biblical cultures.

We used to have an olive tree in our backyard. I love olives, and that tree had a spectacular trunk, but I am terribly allergic

to olive blossoms, so I would always prune the olive tree severely about the time it began to bud. Olive trees are amazingly hardy, and when you prune the top branches, dozens of little shoots would come up from the base around the trunk. They were fast-growing, instantly green and leafy, tied into the same root system as that main trunk.

That's how olive trees refresh and perpetuate their own vitality, and because that's how they grow, they live for ages. I've visited Gethsemane, and there is an olive grove there that dates back to the time of Christ. There are great, ancient tree trunks, some of which were just shoots when Jesus was praying in that garden. The underlying root system is even older than that.

And that's the idea of the text here. This man's *progeny* signify that his name and influence will endure long after his earthly life has ended. They are full of promise and potential--a living reason to bless God and thank Him for his abundant blessings.

The picture of this man's blessedness is not "radical" in the sense that word is being used today, but it is singular, and all too unusual, and profoundly exalted in the sight of God--endowed with the kind of good fortune this world values far too little.

That kind of domestic happiness is the very focal point of the whole psalm. It's the very picture of peace (v. 2): "You shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you."

So there you have the short-range, close-up, present-tense perspective of a God-blessed life. This man's *productivity*, his *progeny*, and his *peace* are blessings that money cannot buy. They are unique blessings from the hand of God, singularly reserved for those who fear the Lord and walk in His ways.

Now, someone might ask, *Don't unbelievers sometimes share in these blessings? Couldn't this same description apply to a Mormon family, or even some Hindu households?*

In a superficial way, perhaps. Tables filled with food, surrounded by children and graced with domestic happiness are true gifts from God. These things are common-grace gifts in the sense that they are sometimes even enjoyed by the wicked. But here's the difference: Unredeemed people typically see such gifts

as symbols of their own noble majesty. The blessings even become a temptation to pride.

But to the righteous person blessings such as these represent tokens of God's eternal grace. They are not rewards we have earned, but superabundant blessings that remind us God's favor is totally undeserved but freely given to repentant sinners. In Genesis 33:5, when Esau encountered Jacob after years of living in exile, Esau said, "Who are these with you?" And Jacob answered, "[They are] the children whom God has graciously given your servant." *Gracious gifts*. Tokens of grace. Not emblems of my own goodness and greatness, but visible proof of *God's* glorious grace.

Now look at the second stanza. Remember, stanza one gave us a perspective from close up.

STANZA TWO GIVES US A WIDE-ANGLE, LONG RANGE PERSPECTIVE.

The second stanza starts with verse 4, and it goes right back to the thought of verse 1. It's a pronouncement of blessing on the God-fearing man in the third person: "Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD."

Now it shifts into second person: "The LORD bless *you* from Zion!" Zion was the destination of the pilgrims who sang this chorus. They aren't there yet, while they are singing, but this stanza invokes future blessings. "May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life!"

This, again, is the blessing of *productivity*, but this time what the psalmist has in view is not the productivity of a single family, but the prosperity of an entire nation.

The word *prosperity* here in our text speaks of the biblical concept of divine blessing, *spiritual* affluence, and material sufficiency. This kind of prosperity has nothing whatsoever to do with the worldly idea of mammon. The *world's* idea of prosperity is overabundance, opulence, luxury, self-indulgence--all dependent on material wealth. The *Lord's* definition of prosperity (by contrast) is full forgiveness, the imputation of perfect righteousness, and "grace to help in time of need"--all blessings of eternal value.

Sometimes the Lord's supply seems meager, but it is always *sufficient*. He measures his blessings carefully, so that a glut of

earthly prosperity doesn't extinguish our hope of heaven. And even that is a great blessing. Don't be envious of the wealthy wicked. Earthly wealth is the only kind of prosperity they will ever know--and that is an eternal tragedy.

What's expressed in that final phrase of verse 5 is a wish to see the Lord's goodness as a covering over all Jerusalem. And what would that chiefly look like? It's the same blessings we were singing about in verses 1-3. Domestic happiness; the prospect of a bright future, embodied in our children, and sufficient food and shelter for each day. Again, none of that is anything we think of as "radical."

And still taking the long look, verse 6: "May you see your children's children!" As great a blessing as children are, grandchildren are even better. These are the third generation of one's progeny, and the fact to be able to see them signifies the blessing of a long life. To live long enough to see your grandchildren is the very pinnacle of earthly blessing.

I love that, because it perfectly describes my own experience. Nothing in all my life brings me more joy and pure delight than my grandchildren. I get to enjoy them and be entertained by them, and delight them with grandfatherly love. I can say yes to them all the time, and if they need to be told no or disciplined for misbehavior, I can hand them back to their parents. Again, grandchildren are the very best of all earthly blessings. Proverbs 17:6 says, "Grandchildren are the crown of the aged." Savor them.

So again, the psalmist celebrates the productivity of the righteous, their progeny, and then he closes with a pronouncement of peace upon them. "Peace be upon Israel!" That was also the closing line of Psalm 125. It's the perfect final note for a pilgrim psalm.

Let me close with two practical observations that come straight from the theme of this psalm.

Notice, first of all, that the biblical description of divine blessing and true prosperity focuses on people, not property. This man's *best* riches are his wife, his children, and his children's children. They are worth more to him than all the material wealth in the world, and he enjoys them in that light. That's an important perspective, especially if you're feeling the pinch of scarce financial resources.



Second, don't miss the big-picture lesson of this psalm. If you want to have a God-blessed life, fear Him. Repent of your sin and trust in his grace. That, and that alone, will insure God's blessing on your life.

One of Satan's favorite lies is the falsehood that sin will make our lives easier. You know: *Stealing is a shortcut to prosperity. Lasciviousness is more pleasing than marital fidelity. The way of righteousness is arduous and severe, but the path of sin is relaxed and easy. Obedience is burdensome and demanding; sin offers a simple shortcut to the easy life. Forbidden fruit is an unfair and unloving restriction, and it will keep you in a cloud of ignorance; eat the forbidden fruit and your eyes will be truly opened.*

Those are all lies. Sin is what makes life hard, not faithfulness. Evil is always full of cruelty. Sin enslaves the sinner and exacts a price no one could ever pay in full. Romans 6:23: "The wages of sin is death." There is no more difficult way to live than constantly going against the grain of divine righteousness.

But God is gracious. He himself paid the price of sin in the person of Jesus Christ, and He will forgive the sins of those who turn to him in repentant faith; he will raise them up; he will set their feet upon a rock; he will cover their guilt with the perfect righteousness of Christ; he will grant them eternal life freely; and from the very moment they believe, he will bless their lives with these gracious gifts that surpass all the material riches of the universe.

That's what this psalm celebrates, and it is the birthright and everlasting privilege of everyone who trusts Christ. In the words of Jesus himself, "Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" "I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness." And "Whoever comes to me I will never cast out."

Let's pray.

Father, so many of your best blessings are unappreciated by us. Help us to see our lives and your grace in a more biblical light. Satisfy us with your goodness in whatever form the blessings come, and keep us longing for the perfect bliss of heaven.