

The Lord Bless You

Psalms 127 and 128

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Please turn with me in your Bibles to the Psalms. We are continuing our series this month looking at various Songs of Ascent. This morning, we're going to look at Psalm 127 and 128 together.

Of course, it's an age-old conundrum. What makes a person happy? As pilgrims going up to the house of the Lord, what these psalms of ascent represent is families. It's communities and whole villages going up to Jerusalem to praise God in His dwelling place, to praise Him in the presence of the city of David at the temple, and they are going to rejoice in all the Lord has given. As we as pilgrims today go to seek the Lord, may we be mindful of Psalms 127 and 128 and consider the Lord's blessing. Follow along as I read.

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep. Behold, 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! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

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. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord. The Lord bless you from Zion! May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life! May you see your children's children! Peace be upon Israel! [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray.

Father, bless us in the reading. Bless us as I seek to declare what is true from your word as we seek to be encouraged in our faith as we see Christ and as we see your abundance. Help us to receive your blessing. We pray these things in Jesus's name. Amen.

There was a man with a big house. He had an important job, and he had a good reputation. Is he blessed? Another man recently received news that he will be let go from his job at the end of this quarter. Is he blessed? There is a child who lost her parents this year to COVID-19. These aren't anybody you know, but it's a glimpse of what's happening in our nation. Is she blessed? A young couple welcomes their third child while another couple grieves their third miscarriage. Who is blessed?

Blessings are a topic found throughout the Bible. And like the people in the Bible, we can easily reduce blessings to our circumstances. And this is kind of how our logic works. If my life is going well, then I'm blessed. But if I experience affliction or some form of lacking or failing, then I might begin to wonder. Even if I don't say it, then I might begin to wonder it in my head. Am I blessed? I think we naturally long to receive blessing. We look for it. We look for it from our parents. We look for it from our communities. We look for it in the things we give our time and attention to, the things we value. We want to be blessed back.

But as we can easily misplace our desires for our blessings in our circumstances, such as our family, our possessions, our security, we can also easily confuse our striving for the Lord's blessing. And we can easily neglect the purpose that blessings serve. And in a time where it seems like curses are more prevalent in our own homes, in our communities, on the television, in our nation and world, Psalms 127

and 128 remind us that the Lord is blessing. And it's a pointer to how the Lord's blessing is more powerful than any curse.

Today, as we look at these two psalms, I want us to recognize how they fit so nicely side by side, and really, together they fit with Psalm 126 which was preached last week by pastor Randy. The three of these psalms form a triad. As the people of God would journey to Jerusalem, they would tell stories of the Lord's salvation in the face of their enemies. They might confess their worry and anxiety about life's precarious nature all the while renewing their hope and trust in the Lord who provides. And this triad of psalms walks them from their sorrows and sins to their happiness, their happiness that is ultimately fulfilled in the Lord Himself.

This morning, I'll comment on parts of these psalms, but I want them mostly to be our doorway into the broader topic of blessing. We'll look at three main themes. We'll see first how the Lord is the source of blessing. Next, we'll discuss the Lord provides flourishing as blessing. And then lastly, the Lord gives purpose for blessing.

Let's look at the first point together. The Lord is the source of blessing. Now, we see this in both psalms all over the place. First off, the idea of even being blessed is a passive experience. You're receiving blessing which implies that there is a giver. There is someone who is bestowing blessing, and that is found throughout these two psalms.

One of the many reasons that I enjoy backpacking so much is that it simulates an experience of a pilgrimage, walking mile after mile, hour upon hour, it really makes me aware of my thoughts. It makes me very attuned with my surroundings. And I'm drawn forward by my goal. My overarching goal is to walk the Appalachian Trail section by section, and each one of my trips represent my steps, one foot in front of the other toward the summit in Maine. I'll probably get there in, like, 15 years. But in these trips, I'm keenly aware of my knees. I pay attention to how much water I'm carrying. I map out the next available opportunity for that fresh flowing water. I pay attention to the sky. I'm estimating how much time is remaining in the day, how much daylight is left. I'm watching for the weather trying to anticipate what might be coming around the corner. I look for a good place for shelter that provides adequate protection from the elements but also a place that gives rest and peace for my body.

And with each step, my whole self becomes more and more synchronized with my aspirations but also my limitations and time. The barrier between the mundane and the glorious thins in these moments. My human experience is in relationship to the divine, and it expands. Maybe this happens with a glorious vista overlooking a valley or when being on a peak, seeing wildlife, hearing the noise of the breeze, hearing a stream flow. All of these things are moments that converge where I am acutely aware that the Lord is the source of all blessing.

The Irish poet John O'Donohue has written a little book called *To Bless the Space Between Us*. And in that book, he writes many things that I'm going to reference today throughout this sermon. But this first quote describes what a blessing is. He writes this. "A blessing evokes a privileged intimacy. It touches that tender membrane where the human heart cries out to its divine ground. A blessing is not a sentiment or a question. It is a gracious invocation where the human heart pleads with the divine heart."

Now, humans have pondered these spaces forever. And I think that to be human is to be familiar with that gracious invocation, that pulling of our heart as it pleads. But how we define the source of the blessing becomes a very significant mystery, a very significant follow-up question. Some people find a cold cosmic mystery beautiful. They find it to be something that can be sensed with their experiences, their eyes, their touch. Those things can be sensed, but yet it's unattainable. It can be experienced but unknowable. And for some, that's comforting. But I find that so unsatisfying.

Thanks be to God that in His transcendence, He comes close. He draws near, and He discloses Himself personally. And He says this all over scripture, something to this affect. "I will be your God, and you will be my people." He discloses who He is, and He welcomes, and He invites us into covenant

relationship. We experience the infinite and the eternal as it enters into space and time and reveals that He is the source of such gracious invocation where we truly find intimacy.

Now, people in all societies have their own words, their own vocabulary, their own experiences that describe experiences of blessing. People also have thresholds, which is a term that O'Donohue uses in his book, that serve as cues to navigate those spaces in our lives where we experience blessing. It might be a transition of some kind, and blessing becomes a doorway where we can walk through that space between us, between the Lord, between one another.

And although I believe ultimately all blessings are from the Lord, all people experience them by His common grace. But Psalms 127 and 128, we see the attention of the singer is drawn to find his heart fulfilled by a particular divinity, a particular divine heart named the Lord, the Lord his God who is the source of blessing. And as the Lord is the source, we see that what is provided is flourishing. And it's all over both of these psalms. The image includes familial language. There is a sense of fruitfulness, of growth and expanse and multiplication. And all of a sudden, you're captivated, and your mind is pulled back to the story that the Lord is telling from the beginning.

My family and I recently visited the Baltimore Zoo. I love the zoo. My girls love the zoo. One of the reasons why I love it is because it's a microcosm of various kingdoms and kinds of animals that are all placed together in these small versions of their habitat. And we, the visitors, get to witness amazing beauty and variety. That is, of course, if we see them if they're not out of their cage or if that exhibit is not under construction or something like that. But we get to see beauty and variety from all over the world all across various ecosystems right here in our own backyard. And we get to see these snapshots of their behaviors, the things they may eat, how they might interact with each other if there's multiple kinds in the same exhibit. But we also witness fellow humans behind the scenes laboring to care for these animals, laboring to work together for their conservation.

And it's like this in the psalm. It's not explicit, but it's in the background. It's in the soil, if you will, of these things, of Genesis 1 and 2. Put your mind in the place of a pilgrim somewhere in Israel traveling to Jerusalem. A pilgrim would very naturally recall their vocation. And what I mean by that is to be an image bearer, to be made in the likeness of the creator, to be called a co-creator, to be called as a steward of the Lord's creation. And likewise, these pilgrims would be mindful that not only is this their vocation, but they're part of a calling to be a part of a people, the children of Abraham, the children of Isaac, the children of Jacob, the Lord's heritage where He tasks them to be fruitful and multiply, to be rooted and planted in the land He gave them. And this story is certainly beginning from Genesis 1 through 2, but it is the bedrock of what captivates the imagination of the people of God understanding who they are as a people in a place in relationship with the Lord.

And the flourishing that's presented in these psalms as well as throughout scripture is both personal and communal. It involves the overlapping spheres of life. We see pictures of a house, a home. We see a city and a place. We were caught up into the idea of what our labor might be and our securities in which we place our hope and trust. When home and city are challenged or our labor comes across as fruitless, or when our security is threatened, we tend to shrink away from the Lord's flourishing and pursue our own happiness on our own terms so that we may still pursue stability or still pursue our version of heritage at the expense of our covenantal relationship with the Lord and the communal belonging we have to one another.

The Irish poet O'Donohue writes this.

"While our culture is all gloss and paste on the outside, within it is too often haunted and lost. The commercial edge of so-called progress has cut away a huge region of human tissue and webbing that held us in communion with one another. We have fallen out of belonging. Consequently, when we stand before a crucial threshold in our lives, we have no rituals to protect, to encourage and guide us as we cross over into the unknown."

The people of God, by the very disclosure of who God is, the very revelation of His word, have these markers, these guideposts as the people of God. And they then, as we do now, sometimes carried out their vocation quite well. But, similarly to them as we do now, we don't always carry out that vocation. We can fear, and we can selfishly undermine flourishing of the whole because we are actually seeking the thriving of the self. And in the economy and the ecosystem of what God is doing in His blessing, it's reversed. It is that we see Him pouring out blessing upon His people, upon His creation, and it involves and welcomes people to see themselves as recipients of that blessing, people who are participating in what God is doing in the world.

And so we see how the blessed person, the happy person here is the one who desires the Lord's flourishing. The happy person is the one who wants to be in that relationship with the Lord, to receive the blessing not because it's just the blessing but because it's wanting to be close and intimate with the one who is doing the blessing. In that relationship, the happy person is the one who walks in His ways.

As we think about the blessing that God provides, the flourishing that exists as His blessing in our lives, our families, our communities, that vision of what flourishing is meant to be, we come to the final section today which is that the Lord gives purpose for blessing. This is something that can be lost in these two psalms because these are well-known psalms, especially if you've come to these psalms to think about children, to think about children that you want to have, to think about children that you may have, to even grieve children that you don't have. Maybe you avoid this psalm all together because it's painful. If the Lord's overflowing provision of blessing for the personal and the communal flourishing was an article of clothing, the threads that stitch together those seams would be the Lord's creational intentions while His redemptive purposes would be the embroidery that gives finer detail and fuller beauty to the fabric.

The book *Mission of God* by Christopher Wright is a thick book, and it is transformative, and it's foundational. I haven't even finished it. It's been ten years. But I come back to that book again and again. The thesis for this big, fat book is simple. "God's mission is the blessing of the nations." And we see this in Genesis. We see His creational intentions, the flourishing of His creation, a people who get to be co-heirs of the cosmos with Him, but we see that crumbling and challenged and cursed in Genesis 3 and Genesis 4 and a people trying to pursue what it means to be created, having these seeds of the promise of what God is going to do to bring about His redemption, the reversal of the fall, the reversal of curses, but actually to pour out blessing.

And we come to this interesting contrast. In Genesis 11, we see a people seeking to gather in a city of their own making to build a tower that reflects their own self-importance and self-sufficiency. And in the end, their toil is fruitless because they were not seeking the source of blessing. They were seeking a name for themselves and a sense of self-blessing.

Contrast that with what comes next in Genesis 12. And this really becomes the fulcrum that we see of God working in a particular way. He calls a man. He calls Abram. And after He scatters the people in their city, the Lord calls out a people in a nation. And in Genesis 12, we see Abram is called to go from his country to go to a land that the Lord would show Him. The Lord would provide a heritage to Abraham that would carry on this covenant relationship through His offspring. And that was challenged. But yet Abraham believed. He had faith that God would keep His covenant promise, and we see that being carried out through Isaac and Jacob all the way through a people that build the house of David, and the Lord would pour out His blessings upon the nations. In Genesis 12:1-3, Abraham is blessed so that the nations would be blessed. This is the heart of God. This is the mission of God, the purpose of His blessing.

Now, we see a people in covenant relationship with the Lord around Sinai, they are delivered out of their bondage, and they are given God's gracious law. And, again, we hear those echoes of, "I am your God, and you will be my people." Here is how you are to live. This is how you are to walk in my ways. There are questions like how can an unholy people live in the presence of a holy God? Well, again, God makes it possible by pouring out blessing, showing His grace, and making it possible.

But the law in the land that is particular to the people of Israel through the covenant of Moses was meant always to be temporary. It's why Paul doesn't go to Moses in Galatians. Who does he go to? He goes to Abraham. He goes back to an older covenant, a more foundational covenant where it begins with a call of belonging and of vocation. And those things still stand. And in that blessing of Abraham, we see the fulfillment of God's redemptive purposes that ultimately are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. As you are walking up the road to Jerusalem, our hope is still in Jerusalem but not because of its city or place, but now the dwelling place of God is in His people, the living stones, the living temple not made by human hands as we see the city of David being reoriented, restructured, included between those who are of the covenant and those who are brought into the covenant, where in Christ we are Jew and Gentile in one family, one household.

At one point in the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye and Golde are husband and wife. And there's a wonderful powerful scene where they are celebrating the Sabbath, this picture of working six days and resting one, to come to the end of your labor, to seek rest and to seek peace. But it's always fragile because when you consider their context of where they were considering the plot of the musical, the challenges that God's people had faced for a millennia was always fragile. How do you carve out that space between us to experience God's blessing? And so there's a powerful song where Tevye and Golde sing a Sabbath prayer. And it's similar in tone and substance to the psalmist in these psalms of ascent. I'll just read a few parts of it. They sing,

"May the Lord protect and defend you. May he always shield you from shame. May you come to be in Israel a shiny name. May you be like Ruth and like Esther. May you be deserving of praise. Strengthen them, O Lord, and keep them from the stranger's ways. May God bless you and grant you long lives. May God make you good mothers and wives. May the Lord protect and defend you. May the Lord preserve you from pain. Favor them, O Lord, with happiness and peace. O hear our Sabbath prayer."

The psalmist going up to Jerusalem is acutely aware of the similar fragility of that space of blessing and the precarious nature of life all the while placing trust and faith in the Lord who blesses. And what's powerful about the musical is the fiddler, the fiddler on the roof. It's a metaphor for the whole musical. The fiddler represents survival in a life of uncertainty, precarious just like a fiddler on the roof, Tevye says, "Trying to scratch out a pleasant simple tune without breaking his neck."

So how do you go about your life? It's easy to reduce blessing to just your circumstances, like if I'm okay and things are going well, then I'm blessed. But the blessing the Lord bestows, the blessing that the Lord gives is so much bigger, so much more powerful. It gets us beyond our current circumstances. You might come to this psalm and say, yeah, this is me. I'm blessed. Or you come to this psalm and you say, I don't think this will ever be me. Will I be blessed? The psalmist is a personal vignette into experiencing good circumstances. Don't get me wrong. But he even draws us out broader as he concludes Psalm 128. "The Lord bless you from Zion," the city of David, an old term for Jerusalem. "The Lord bless you from Zion! May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life! May you see your children's children! Peace be upon Israel!"

In the place of the precarious nature of life, the fragility of life, we see the Lord's blessing overflow. And there is hope. And so here when we come to the end of these two particular psalms, but really any of these psalms, we, the singers, are welcomed into a story where we are invited to receive blessing, to live and thrive in what God bestows, to desire and dream in all that He accomplishes through His redemption, bringing His people together in a reconciled relationship to Himself, to experience deep bonds of belonging and abundant hands of hospitality that welcome you and show you the way to live, the way to work, the way to rest and enjoy the peace of God's covenantal blessing.

I will leave you with this final quote from O'Donohue. He says, "It would be lovely if we could rediscover the power to bless one another." The blessings from the Lord are from Him to you. The

blessing involves a flourishing that may involve your circumstances right now, but it includes you in the abundance of what He's doing to His people and in the world. And it certainly is always in the backdrop that we see the purpose of blessing, how the Lord is blessing the nations through His covenant, this invitation to be His people, and for Him to be your God.

In a final passing thought, when you come to the end of these two psalms, I ask you, what changes in your life knowing the Lord blesses you? What would it look like upon receiving His blessing to bless others? The Lord bless you. Let us pray.

Father in heaven, we give you thanks and praise for all that you provide, all that you show, all that you reveal about who you are. And we are eternally grateful for that covenant that is rooted in your word and the very disclosure of who you are, but it is perfectly fulfilled in your Son Jesus, the Son of David, as you are building a nation, a people unto yourself that where we might labor and fail, you are building a house and a city to your glory. And we are blessed by you. In Jesus's name. Amen.