

Songs for the Journey

Blessing

Psalm 128, Ephesians 1:3-8

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Our sermon today is all about blessing, and what it means to be blessed.

I think blessing is one of those topics we can be confused about as Christians, especially when we read one part of the Bible without about what the whole Bible says about it.

So last week in Psalm 127, I pretty much skipped over the whole second half of the Psalm. They were verses about the blessing of having lots of children...

³ Children are a heritage from the Lord,
offspring a reward from him.

⁴ Like arrows in the hands of a warrior
are children born in one's youth.

⁵ Blessed is the man
whose quiver is full of them. (Psalm 127:3-5)

In our Psalm today, we see another picture of family and children and grandchildren as a portrait of God's blessings...

These are beautiful pictures, and certainly families are blessings from God.

But is that the primary way that God blesses his people?

You can buy a tee-shirt on the internet that says: *Mom, Wife, Blessed Life*. They have one for dads too – *One Blessed Daddy*.

As Christians is that as good as it gets? Is our blessing from God bound up in family? And is that the way that God expresses his blessings to us? Or is there more?

So as always, we look to the Bible for our wisdom. So why don't we pray that God will teach us about **blessing**, what it means to be blessed, and the one who blessed us so richly.

Our heavenly Father, teach us today what it means to be blessed by you. Show us all the ways you have blessed us already, and the blessings we can look forward to in the future. We thank

you now for the blessing of the Bible and the Holy Spirit who helps us read and understand. And so we ask you to speak to us now, in Jesus name. Amen

Well, all summer we've been working our way through the Psalms of Ascent, Psalms 120-134. These were Psalms that Jewish pilgrims would sing together on their way up to Jerusalem for the festivals two or three times a year. For the Jewish pilgrims, these songs were the soundtrack for the journey up to the temple. And for us, they're the soundtrack for our journey through life with Christ, songs that remind us about God's goodness and his faithfulness and his promises to us...

And today's song is all about blessing, and the **abundant fruitfulness** that God promises for those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways...

Listen again to the words. Verse 1:

¹ Blessed are all who fear the Lord,
 who walk in obedience to him.
² You will eat the fruit of your labor;
 blessings and prosperity will be yours.

The first image of fruitful blessing is literally fruit. Or the fruit of your labour, anyway (v2). God promises that those who walk in obedience to him will enjoy the fruit of their labor. That is, God will provide for his people when they follow his ways. God will bless their work so that they can feed their families – and this is *blessing and prosperity* (v2) – or as the NRSV puts it – *you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you*. (You can perhaps hear echoes of the covenant in Deuteronomy 28... we'll come back to that in a minute.)

So God promises fruitfulness in work for his people.

The blessing of *fruitfulness* also extends to the family... Verse 3.

³ Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
 within your house;
your children will be like olive shoots
 around your table.

The picture of blessing here is a family. A fruitful wife – like a grape vine that bears fruit and produces good wine. It's harvest here in the Napa Valley right now, so we are very familiar with that image of fruitful vines. We're also familiar with the image that the psalmist uses for children in the next line - children that sprout up like olive shoots off the old stump. Both the vine and the olive tree are images of abundant fruitfulness, a picture of a growing and happy family. And so the psalmist concludes in v4:

⁴ Yes, this will be the blessing
for the man who fears the Lord.

And in the Psalm this is not just a blessing for today, it's the promise of blessing into your old age. Verse 5:

⁵ May the Lord bless you from Zion;
may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life.
⁶ May you live to see your children's children—
peace be on Israel.

This Psalm paints a picture of living to a ripe old age, seeing your grandchildren grow. A picture of peace, and prosperity, both in the family, and in the whole nation of Israel. Blessed by the Lord all the days of your life.

Who wouldn't want to be part of that blessing? It sounds like the American dream. The good life, with family gathered around you.

For lots of us here, we're living that dream. And the gift of family, and a home, and a job that provides are all good gifts from our Father above. They're blessings, and we should be thankful for them.

But here's the danger. I think some people read a psalm like this and think it's a formula for receiving blessing from the Lord. If you want a job, if you want a wife, if you want a husband, if you want a family, then all you have to do is fear the Lord and walk in his ways! And he'll give them to you! Psalm 128 says so!

There are preachers who will preach this Psalm just like that – as a magic formula for prosperity. They take this psalm out of the context of where it originally fitted in the Bible, and then they apply it to every situation. But the Bible doesn't work like that.

You see, I think Psalm 128 fits into the story of the Bible like a snapshot from the past.

A Snapshot from the Past

I have a snapshot from the past here. It's my family from back in January 2008, back in Australia. It was the summer before I started studying at Bible College. We took a long vacation with the kids on the Gold Coast of Australia. It's probably when we fell in love with theme parks as a family – this was at Movie World. I love this photo especially because Jamie was so excited to see Batman that he jumped up for a cuddle (with Robin...) but still.

It's a snapshot of family happiness from the past.

And Psalm 128 is a snapshot from the past too.

A snapshot from Israel's history. A snapshot of the kind of blessing God promised to his people when they were finally brought into the Promised Land.

The kind of blessing that would fulfil God's covenant with Abraham: God's people in God's place under God's rule, receiving God's blessing and bringing blessing to the whole world!

But the funny thing about snapshots is that they only capture **one moment in time**.

Sometimes it's a moment of happiness, like my family photo. What the photo doesn't show is the tantrum 10 minutes later, or the vomit in the car on the way home. It just captures the happy moment.

And for Israel there was a happy moment – under King David and King Solomon, when Israel was at peace, and they built the temple. The people were in the promised land, enjoying the rich blessings of God. Life at that moment must have looked like Psalm 128.

But only a generation later, the kingdom of Israel was split into two and that moment of happiness and blessing was spoiled forever... Israel would never again return to that golden age of King David and Solomon.

You see the problem with pinning your hopes on earthly blessings is that they don't last.

You might get snapshots of happiness, but not every moment will be happy.

In fact, not every life will look like the snapshot in Psalm 128. Some of us won't marry. Or we'll marry but be unable to have children. Some of us won't live to see our grandchildren. Some of us will have grandchildren but be unable to see them because of relationship breakdown.

Life doesn't always look like Psalm 128, even for good, Christian people.

And if your life doesn't look like Psalm 128, does that mean somehow God *hasn't* blessed you? I think that's the question to ask as we try to understand Psalm 128. If my life doesn't look like Psalm 128, does that mean somehow God *hasn't* blessed me?

PAUSE

This is where we have to look elsewhere in the Bible to help us understand Psalm 128, and the place to look is Jesus.

When we want to know what a blessed life looks like, we look to Jesus. But here's the thing - Jesus' life didn't look like Psalm 128. He never married, never had children, had no place to lay his head and died at 33 years old. Did he receive God's blessings? Absolutely he did! Perhaps he understood God's blessings more than any other human in history...

So we can't say that family and material prosperity are the sum total of God's blessings to his people, because if they were, then many of us would think we are under God's curse.

And so we need to move from what the Old Testament says about blessing, to see what the New Testament says. To see how the promise of blessing is fulfilled in Jesus...

A snapshot from today

So open up to Ephesians chapter 1 with me. And we'll see what blessing looks like in Christ.

Reading from Ephesians 1:3 (leave on screen)

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

We're going to leave that passage on screen for a moment while I ask you some questions about it – it's the former teacher in me. But I want you to look in the passage for the answers to the questions I'm going to ask...

1. As you read that passage, what does it say about the kind of blessings that we have been blessed with? We've been blessed with *spiritual blessings*.
2. And how many spiritual blessings does it say we have been blessed with? *Every* spiritual blessing.
3. And what does it say we have to do, to get these blessings? Somehow be 'in Christ'
4. Lastly, where do we find our spiritual blessings? In the heavenly realms.

So this is a very different picture from material blessings, on earth, which we earn through obedience.

Instead (here in Ephesians) we have a picture of spiritual blessings, in fact, every spiritual blessing, in the heavenly realms, which are tied up with being 'in Christ'.

And these are not future promises. Look again in v3 –

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who **has** [already] blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ...

This passage says if you are 'in Christ', you already have every spiritual blessing that God has chosen to pour out on his children.

And Paul lists those blessings from God one by one. (slowly)

- (v4) he **chose** us in [Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.
- (v5) In love⁵ he **predestined** us to be **adopted** as his sons through Jesus Christ
- (v7) ⁷ In [Jesus] we have **redemption** through his blood, the **forgiveness** of sins
- And going down a few verses to v13:
- When you believed [in Christ], you were **marked** in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,¹⁴ who is a deposit **guaranteeing** our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession--to the praise of his glory.

This is an abundance of blessing from our heavenly Father to his children, and given lavishly (like it says in v7) according to the riches of God's grace and mercy.

A few years ago I preached a sermon series '*If you could ask God one question*'... We asked people via Facebook to write in the questions they had for God – it was great, we reached thousands of people with the survey, all through church members sharing the link on social media.

But it was interesting as I read the questions that people asked, so many people have the impression that God is an angry God, bent on destruction and desperate to send people to hell, and to punish them for their sins.

I really wish they'd read Ephesians 1:3-14. Because this isn't the picture of a God bent on destruction. It's the picture of a God bent on **blessing**. The God who wants to bless his wayward creation. The God who steps into human history to redeem and forgive fallen humans, and to adopt them back into the family of God. Not a God who demands we jump through religious hoops, but a God who puts his Holy Spirit in our hearts so that we are guaranteed our heavenly inheritance – which is eternal life in Christ Jesus.

This passage is extraordinary in what it says God has **already** done for us, if we are *in Christ*. How richly he has blessed us *in the heavenly realms already*.

If you are friends with Jesus, you are blessed! I want you to know that...

A Snapshot of the future

So Ephesians 1 is a snapshot of our current blessings in Christ.

And when we read Ephesians 1 alongside Psalm 128, I think we start to get a snapshot of what heaven will be like for us, a snapshot of the future.

Psalm 128 pictures a family around the table enjoying the reward of their labour, the joy of fellowship with one another, the closeness of family and the love that they share for one another. Heaven is often pictured as a banquet, a feast.¹ And as God's children, gathered from all over the world, we'll share at that table, we'll enjoy the abundance of God's provision, we'll know the peace of God as every tear is wiped away, as injustices are no more. That peace and prosperity, that blessing will be ours along with all those God has adopted as sons and daughters in Christ.

Psalm 128 is a snapshot of our future blessings...

A snapshot of the church

But I think it's also a snapshot of the church today, or what the church could be like.

When you look at God's people in the New Testament, and throughout Israel's history, they come from a different cultural background from most of us. A Middle Eastern culture, compared to our Western, individualistic culture. Theirs was much more of a communal society, where extended families were expected to care for one another, there was an expectation of offering hospitality, and whole communities cared for the vulnerable among them. For example the church is instructed to look after the older widows in 1 Timothy 5.

So come back to Psalm 128. This family in Psalm 128 which is enjoying God's blessings together, which is enjoying the fruit of perhaps working together, sharing the abundance of God's blessing together, being family together – I think that's the picture we get of the early church in Acts 4. The church being a blessing to one another, being family to one another.

Could we be a church like that?

I'm not suggesting a commune, or Christian socialism. But I am suggesting that when Christ adopted us as sons and daughters of God, he adopted us into a new family. Our biological families are a gift of God, but they grow as new members are welcomed in, as boyfriends and girlfriends become fiancés, as children are born, we welcome them with open arms.

And I think the church can be the same. Church can be full of aunties and uncles in Christ, grandparents in the faith, nieces and nephews and grandchildren as we invite people to our tables, as we invite people into our homes, as we invite people into our extended families.

¹ Psalm 23:5; Isaiah 25:6; Isaiah 55:1-2; Revelation 3:20; Matthew 8:11-12; Luke 14:15

I know we can't do that right now because of the pandemic, but it doesn't stop us picking up the phone. Or dropping a note off in somebody's letterbox. There are a hundred ways to open your heart to the people of God, and God says here in Psalm 128 that this extended family is the heart of blessing and prosperity. The heart of being blessed is to belong to the family of God today and forever.

As a church, we are praying that God will bring more and more people into our church family from all over the Napa Valley, and beyond. And it's my prayer that we adopt them into our church, so that they might become part of us, and we part of them. Family. Sharing life's ups and downs together, as we glory in the work that God is doing as he pours out every blessing on his people in Christ.

That's the snapshot I want to see.

Will you pray for that with me?

Prayers for 9.6.20 by Joanna Bidwell

Father, if you are for us, who can be against us? You did not spare your own Son, but gave him up for us all, so we know that you will graciously give us all things. Because of your promises, we are convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels or demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from your love which is shown to us so clearly in Christ Jesus our Lord. For this we are truly grateful.

Father, we pray that as your redeemed people that we would fear you because you are God and yet at the same time know and trust that you are our loving and gracious God in whom we find refuge and shelter. Thank you that you are trustworthy and worthy of praise.

We pray Lord for our Senior Pastor, Dan Bidwell. Thank you for sending our pastor to shepherd your church. We are grateful for the love you put into his heart for you and your people. We appreciate the unique set of gifts and talents that enrich Dan's ministry in preaching and teaching your word and in turn blessing your church. Surround him Lord, with your people that love him, pray regularly for him and support him in his ministry.

We pray also for Charlotte our Kid's Minister and Communications Manager. We pray that through her faithful teaching of your word to the children in our church, that they and their parents and grandparents, grow in the spiritual disciplines of Word, prayer, meditation, Scripture memory, and worship. We pray that you would be using this time to grow our families as they spend time in family worship together, knowing and trusting you more and more. We pray for energy, creativity, stamina and focus as she continues to boost our platforms on social media.

Thank you, Lord, for our volunteers in our pastoral ministry. Thank you for their servant hearts that seek to make you know through word and deed. It takes a lot of time and energy Lord to care for others and so we pray for perseverance and good self-care to continue to care in the long term.

We pray all of these things in the mighty name of Jesus, Amen.