

Psalm 128 "Blessing flows from fear"

1. Tim began the sermon by reflecting upon what has been coined the prosperity gospel. The belief that God's desire for you would be that you would have "health and wealth", and faith is the way to apprehend such a life. Have you had any interaction with such a conviction and what has been your response to it?

This psalm at first glance could be utilized as a "proof text" for such prosperity thinking. But is that what this psalm is all about?

Read Psalm 128

2. (vs. 1) How do you understand the phrase "the fear of the Lord"?

I would suspect for most in your group the default to think of this phrase is that it is inviting us to be scared of God. To have a fear borne of – if I step out of line God is going to get me. This has been used in some Christian circles as a motivation toward holiness which may have done deep damage to some in your group. You may need to recognize this and tread lightly as a result.

The C.S. Lewis image from the Narnia series comes to mind that may help some make a transition to a reflection on what the biblical writers mean by such a phrase.

In C.S. Lewis most famous book – the Lion the witch and the wardrobe – the children – Peter Susan Lucy and Edmund enter into the land of Narnia through a wardrobe in their uncles home. Edmund has already given allegiance to the witch and sneaks off to join ranks with her. The other three children go to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Beaver – who tell the children they will take them to see Aslan - the King of Narnia.

Is – is he a man? Asked Lucy

Aslan a man – said Mr. Beaver sternly – certainly not, I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great emperor – beyond the sea – don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion – the lion – the great lion.

Ooh – said susan – I thought he was a man – Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.

That you will, dearie, and no mistake – said Mrs. Beaver – if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking – they're either braver than most or else just silly.

Then he isn't safe – said Lucy

Safe – said Mr. Beaver – don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you – who said anything about safe? Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king I tell you.

3. Read Psalm 130:4, and Psalm 147:11 and then use a concordance or a google search to find perhaps a different verse each that contain this phrase. Read each aloud and you may need to read the surround verses to give context. How does your reflecting on other passages that use this phrase help you to understand what the biblical writers mean by "fear of the Lord"?

The following is an unedited excerpt from the sermon that reflects on these questions:

Many of the phrases came from the psalms and proverbs – and followed the same pattern as here - blessed – happy – is the one who fears the Lord – now either the author of proverbs – or the psalmist - has a warped sense of happiness – or fear of the Lord means something other than fear of punishment.

Indeed so – Ps 130 - but with you God there is a forgiveness that you might be feared – Ps 147 - the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him – with Hebrew poetry often a second line is given to say the same thing in a different way – the next line is - in those who hope in his steadfast love.

When the biblical writers use fear they mean when we encounter God – come face to face with his attributes – his forgiveness – love – holiness – beauty - we are rightly moved with wonder – awe – reverence - fear.

Eugene Peterson writes: "Fear God - Reverence might be a better word. Awe. Will we let God be as he is, majestic and holy, vast and wondrous, or will we always be trying to whittle him down to size of our small minds, insist on confining him within the boundaries we are comfortable with, refuse to think of him other than in images that are convenient to our lifestyle? The Bible talks about the fear of the Lord not to scare us but to bring us to awesome attention before the overwhelming grandeur of God, to shut up our whining and chattering and stop our running and fidgeting, so that we can really see him as he is and listen to him as he speaks his merciful, life-changing words of forgiveness."

4. Discuss.

Fear of the Lord leads to obedience, to (as this psalm puts it) "walking in his ways". This is a phrase that points us to wisdom literature. Wisdom literature arises from the conviction that God has knit a pattern into every aspect of life and living it step with those patterns gives the best opportunity for success. His commands then are consistent with the way the world is meant to work.

5. What does the Psalm tell us will be the fruit of walking in his ways?

The following is an unedited excerpt from the sermon that reflects on these questions:

Vs. 2 – you shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands – much biblical wisdom has

to do with diligence – hard work – wise stewardship of resources – and the promise here is not wealth or abundance – the promise here is sustenance – you live in keeping with the pattern that God has knit into creation – and your basic needs will be taken care of – you will eat the fruit of your labour...

Blessed is the one who fears the Lord – who walks in his ways

Vs. 3 – your wife will be like a fruitful vine in your house – your children like olive shoots.

Now this promise is spoken into a particular culture – where there were very clear gender roles – women raised the children – oversaw domestic life.

I think we often get into trouble when we hear such illustrations - well if God spoke into this culture – he must be affirming their cultural distinctives – so therefore here is what a woman should do – and here is what a man should do – here's what marriage should look like – no - no

By hearing such an illustration we are not meant to conclude that this is the way that God designed men and women to relate – we are meant to conclude that if we live in step with the fabric that God has knit into creation - our domestic – relational lives will flourish – even if they look different today than they did then - for his commands - his wisdom are about forgiveness – the use of our tongues – the turning away of anger – the commitment to truth - the raising of children

Blessed is the one who fears the Lord – who walks in his ways

Vs. 5 – may you see the prosperity – the shalom – full flourishing of Jerusalem all the days of your life - like an ever-expanding circle of impact – the blessing - the fruit of living in step with the fabric that God has knit into his creation extends even further – for the pattern that God has knit into human society - is about equality – justice – our interdependence that makes the needs of others our responsibility

Blessed is the one who fears the Lord – who walks in his ways

Our final illustration of that core truth is found in vs. 6 – may you see your children's children – may you have a long and happy life – living in step with the fabric that God has knit into creation undergirds a long and healthy life...

S.I. McMillen was a medical dr. and missionary who wrote a book entitled - none of these diseases – and he was reflecting on his many years as a physician - observing the disintegration of people's material reality as a result of their living out of step with the fabric that God had knit into creation...

For example in one of his chapters – entitled the high cost of getting even – he chronicles the health consequences of harbouring anger – bitterness – resentment – unforgiveness – he saw patient after patient with intestinal issues – high blood pressure – that medicine was only treating the symptoms of – his observations as a physician were illustrating what - H.H. Farmer once said – if you go against the grain of the universe you get splinters

In the book McMillen goes on to share the physical healing that came about when his patients began to live in step with the fabric that God had knit into creation – as they pressed forward in love - forgiveness – reconciliation.

In all of these ways and more blessed is the one who fears the Lord – who walks in his ways

Read Matthew 7:24-27

This image is comparing the wise and the foolish. From proverbs the wise are those who live in step with the pattern that God has knit into creation, and the foolish are those who do not. When the storm comes, or when God's judgement in Jesus comes to flood the earth with new creation, to bring about the fullness of the kingdom all that is in step with that pattern will remain for it is eternal. All that is not in keeping with the pattern will be washed away.

6. What does this image invite us to in terms of how we live, relate, work, and play?

The main piece here to reflect upon is this.

I think the Bible is inviting us to see God's coming in Jesus in judgement not as a – wiping everything away and starting all over again – but rather – a renewing all of creation. That would mean then that when Jesus comes – what he finds on earth that is in keeping with his kingdom will remain for it is eternal. Only that which is out of step with the kingdom will be wiped away. So the question I think must be is what I'm doing here in keeping with the kingdom.

There might be wisdom in reflecting on different areas of life in this question – relating it to work – home life – leisure etc.

In work – is what I am striving for in step with the kingdom?

In relationships – if God's future is about reconciliation what am I working toward?

In community – am I investing in the full flourishing of my neighbourhood?

In leisure – am I enjoying God's good creation, is this an act of worship or an idol?

In investments – am I investing in my security, or using my money to invest in the Kingdom.