

¹ *Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in obedience to him.*

² *You will eat the fruit of your labour; blessings and prosperity will be yours.*

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

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

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.*

We continue looking at the psalms of ascent, the songs and prayers inspired by the Holy Spirit given to their writers as they went up to Jerusalem to worship the Lord. This psalm focuses on the family and is full of promises. Both psalms 127 and 128 are what may be called “wisdom psalms” and as Jonathan said three weeks ago, they might look like they came straight out of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes which were both written by Solomon.

Psalm 128 continues where psalm 127 left off. Psalm 127 is about the city and the sons that bless a man while psalm 128 is about the family and the home. Psalm 127 is a psalm of trusting in receiving the gift of God's blessing while psalm 128 shows how God rewards those who fear God – not fear as afraid - but fear as in awe and respect for God.

The psalm is in two parts: verses 1-4 a statement of blessing and 5-6 a prayer of blessing.

¹ *Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in obedience to him.*

Proverbs 1:7 says: *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.* When the Bible speaks of “fools” it means those who are unwise and morally deficient. Psalm 14:1 says *A fool says in his heart “there is no God”.* Proverbs 3:7-8 says *Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil. ⁸ This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones.* Proverbs 9:10 says *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.* The last verses of Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 end with this: *Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. ¹⁴ For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.*

It's pretty clear that being in awe of God and aware of His existence is crucial for all mankind. However awareness and awe of God is not enough of itself: obeying his commandments is needed as well. In the New Testament Jesus says (John 14:21) *Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.* God has outlined His ways for us in the Bible, which is our instruction manual for life. Putting God at the centre of your life and obeying Him will result in being blessed. Blessed means being happy. The Hebrew and Latin versions of the Bible translate literally as “happy are they who fear the Lord”. Too often we use a religious word – like blessing – without really understanding what it really means. That phrase “bless you” trips off the tongue because it sounds so much better and less trite than if we said “be happy”! God wants us to be joyful, happy and glad; he doesn't want us to be sad, miserable and unhappy. I should say however that the original Anglo-Saxon derivation of the word “bless” is to make holy with blood, or to consecrate, but as the word was similar to bliss (meaning happy, merry and related to the word blithe), its meaning shifted

to be happy and benevolently looked upon by God, while retaining the original meaning when used in religious and other circumstances such as when someone asks for a blessing.

Happy are they who fear the Lord and obey his commandments. Obedience to the commandments came with a promise for the people of Israel, while disobedience came with a curse. The Old Testament covenant God made with the people of Israel remains in place for the descendants of Jacob, but the new covenant God made with us who follow Jesus is similar, expecting us to love God and obey his commandments, but we have the additional intercession of Jesus to remove from us the guilt we have when we make mistakes and do things that are wrong. None of us can obey the commandments completely because we all make mistakes: we might tell a fib, we might pick up something that has been lost and keep it rather than just leave it where it was found so that the person who lost it might come back and find it. Most of the all, do we love the Lord with all our heart, mind, and soul? The rich young man who told Jesus he did obey all the commandments was not contradicted by Jesus. Yet for all his love of his wealth, he was looking for something more, as he asked: *“Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?”* So Jesus said to him, *“Why do you call me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.”*

The faith we have does not require us to do some good thing to gain eternal life, but rather to believe in the Lord Jesus and all that we have just said in the Creed a few minutes ago. The old covenant expected the people of Israel to love God and neighbours as themselves. Doing that would result in the promises in this psalm: the promises of happiness, prosperity based on your own hard work, a loving wife who manages her household well, and a family full of love and contentment.

² You will eat the fruit of your labour; blessings and prosperity will be yours. ³ Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots round your table. ⁴ Yes, this will be the blessing for the man who fears the LORD.

These promises are for today – they will apply to the man who fears God, which means in awe of the majesty, greatness, holiness and righteousness of God. The vine is alluded as a plant with desirable fruits throughout the Bible Deuteronomy 8:6-15 *⁶ Observe the commands of the LORD your God, walking in obedience to him and revering him. ⁷ For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land – a land with brooks, streams, and deep springs gushing out into the valleys and hills; ⁸ a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig-trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; ⁹ a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills. ¹⁰ When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. ¹¹ Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. ¹² Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, ¹³ and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, ¹⁴ then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*

Micah 4:1-5 In the last days the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and peoples will stream to it. ² Many nations will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.’ The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ³ He will judge between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more. ⁴ Everyone

*will sit under their own **vine** and under their own fig-tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the LORD Almighty has spoken. ⁵ All the nations may walk in the name of their gods, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God for ever and ever.*

Olive shoots grow up around an old olive tree when its centre starts to rot and hollow out, so that these trees can live for hundreds of years even if the central old tree is almost dead even rotted away. The roots remain healthy and the shoots continue the olive's life as new trees from the original roots. So his children gather round the man who fears the Lord.

The last two verses are a prayer which relates back to the people travelling to Jerusalem to worship the Lord at the various festivals that required men to make sacrifices and gather together to praise God.

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.

The ark of the covenant was in Zion, the mount or hill on which Jerusalem is built. David brought it to Jerusalem and Solomon built a temple to house it permanently in an inner sanctum. The presence of the living God resided in the ark, which only the Levites could handle as those consecrated to carry it when it was moved around and placed in a tent. When Solomon dedicated the temple it was filled with the glory of God. So this prayer is that God whose presence was physically in Zion, would bless the man who feared him and obeyed his commandments. The writer of the psalm is unknown, but it probably written after the ark came to Jerusalem and well before the decline in Israel's fortunes after attacks by neighbouring kings and falling away of so many from worshiping God alone. There was a period of about a hundred years from David onwards when there was peace and prosperity. It didn't last, and eventually Jerusalem was captured, its citizens sent out in exile and the temple fell into disrepair and ruin.

However the Word of God is not limited by time – today the prayer is as relevant as it was nearly 3,000 years ago. May there be prosperity in Jerusalem and peace in Israel. The state of Israel is now 74 years old, long enough for many of the Jews who returned at the end of the nineteenth and in the twentieth century to have seen their children's children. There is a kind of peace and there is prosperity in Israel for most of its citizens, but all the people are under the threat of war and attack from neighbouring countries. Micah's prophecy has not yet come to pass.

We still need to pray for the continuing prosperity of Jerusalem. We still need to pray for peace in Israel. Amen