



Psalm 128 *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!*

Just a couple of months ago, I was in Eau Claire, WI, on the campus of Immanuel Lutheran High School to talk to the high school students about considering the public ministry. During their first hour sessions, I asked the senior class how many of them knew where they were going for college and what they were planning on doing for a career. Very few hands were raised to offer up responses to those questions, which isn't surprising since it was only 7:40 am at the time. But I'm also sure that many of them didn't really know how to answer those questions either. In truth, many people don't know what they want to do for a living even well into adulthood!

I asked them later in the session not about particular jobs, but elements that they would want to have in their life to consider it a fulfilling life, a happy life—what they thought they would need to have a better life. For that question, I did receive a few answers. To get married, to have kids, to buy a house, to watch sports, to have friends—we had a bit of a list going before the end. One response which I didn't get, which clearly is being recommended by God in our text this morning, is stability.

Stability is one of those qualities of life that may not readily come to mind, but that everyone can agree is a tremendous blessing. A life of disordered chaos is tumultuous and difficult. A life of stability, that is one that can easily be accompanied by happiness and love and contentedness, regardless of any sort of financial or other situation. How can we come by such a life of stability? Well, as with anything, if something is to be stable, it all depends on the foundation. Thankfully, we have a good one of those, as we have, in the words of our theme:

Jesus: The Foundation for a Better Life

- I. For stability in your family
- II. For stability in your faith

Which family member does your family revolve around? There's clearly a few different options available. Some say the man is the most important. He's the husband, he's the father, he's the head of household, sometimes he's the breadwinner. So obviously, the life of the family should revolve around the man of the family! Well, others would disagree and say the woman is the most important. After all, "Behind every great man is a greater woman." And who could forget the old adage, "Happy wife, happy life." Plus, in many families, the wife is the breadwinner.

So man, woman? Husband, wife? What about the children? Certainly, the children are the focal point in many households. Sure, some operate by the philosophy of, "Children are to be seen and not

heard,” and yet other families organize their entire lives to revolve around the children and all of their activities. So, who’s really the most important member of your family? Well, the correct answer is Jesus. He’s the most important member in each of our households, and our text shows us why.

I want to draw your attention to one word that appears four times in our text, it’s the English word “B-L-E-S-S-E-D.” I spelled it out, because this is one of those things that we run into in English where you have the same spelling for two different words. In verses 4 and 5, we find the Hebrew word BACAR, this word is translated into English in our text first as “blessed,” and then “bless,” and that’s the idea of blessing as we usually think of it—when you receive blessings from God, God blesses you. That’s the idea behind “B-L-E-S-S-E-D” in verses 4 and 5.

But in verses 1 and 2, it’s actually a different Hebrew word, this time ASHARE. There, those words are translated “blessèd,” and it has a totally different meaning. Perhaps the best way to convey the meaning of “blessed” in English is to think of “better off.” So, you can really do a substitution there, basically, the Psalmist is saying, ***“Better off 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 better off.”***

Better off how? Well, the verses describe it: A person who fears the Lord, that is that trusts in the Lord and loves the Lord, that person is better off because they will—**1)** eat the fruit of the labor of their hands, **2)** this person’s wife will be a fruitful vine within their house, and **3)** the children will be like olive shoots around the table. Let’s think about those blessings in a little more detail.

1) “You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands.” That’s a blessing from God, is it not? Certainly, there’s great blessing in being able to work to earn money, but God provides other blessings along with that labor as well. If you go to work and have a productive day, and you go home and feel satisfied, like you got a lot accomplished—that’s another blessing from God for the labor of your hands! If you cook a meal and sit down and start to eat and it’s delicious and simply hits the spot, it satisfies your cravings—that’s a blessing from God for the labor of our hands! God doesn’t have to bless our labor at all, especially beyond providing us ways to make our living through our labor—but He does, He gives us satisfaction and joy from our work.

2) “Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house;” and **3) “your children will be like olive shoots around your table.”** You’d be hard pressed to find any plant or crop more important in Ancient Israel than grapes and olives. And those are apt comparisons then, because it’s difficult to think up a greater blessing than family—whether that be flesh and blood family, or a church family. Remember, God said, ***“It is not good that the man should be alone,”*** (Genesis 2:18) so God provides that great blessing of family. So, these might seem like rather ordinary blessings, but to work and receive satisfaction from it, to have a wife and children, to have parents, to have a church family—that picture of stability—these are the some of the very best of God’s earthly blessings.

Now, if you pay any attention to the narratives that the *world* likes to spin, it’s the lives of the rich and famous that seem enviable. The ones with better lives are those with money and fame and can travel and have great followings and fans. The world wants us to think those people are better off, so that we’re never satisfied with what we have. And yet here, the text says that the ones that are really “better off” are simply those who fear the Lord. To have stability from the Lord, that is the better life.

Now, I think we all want that sort of stability for ourselves and for our families. But the temptation is to get things sort of out of order. The way the text presents it is that a person fears the Lord—loves, honors, and trusts in God above all things—and then all these other blessings just sort of fall into place. But the temptation for us is that as God gives us these blessings of family and work and everything else, then they become our focus. Rather than focusing on the Lord and His Word and allowing the Lord to take care of the rest, we tend to focus almost exclusively on everything else and give the Lord the remnants of our time.

We spend our days thinking and fretting and striving for the good things of life, but where does that then get us? As King Solomon, the richest man on the face of the earth described in Ecclesiastes: he built houses and planted vineyards, he made gardens and parks for himself, he made pools, he bought slaves, he had great flocks and herds, he gathered silver and gold and great treasures, he brought in singers and many concubines; he says that whatever he desired, he did not deprive himself of it. And then he writes, ***“Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.”*** (cf. Ecclesiastes 2:4ff)

The things we tend to focus on the most and strive for the most—we can’t take them to heaven, they’ll remain here and crumble and decay and be forgotten. But there is *one* thing that you can take to heaven; by God’s grace there is one earthly blessing that will be with you in eternity—that’s your family. Your children, your spouse, your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Now certainly, there are times when members of that family wander away from the Lord. And that’s terribly painful—you lose sleep thinking about them and worrying about them and fretting over them. But if that’s the case for you, I would encourage you to shift your focus back to the most important member of your family, Christ Jesus. After all, **He is the foundation for a better life.** As families get older, and parents stop having that parental authority over their children, remember the true head of household is the Lord. And He will never stop working as the Father of your family. He desires your children’s salvation, even as He desires all people to be saved. So, for the present time, focus on Christ. God promises that the other things will fall into place. Your life will be better, because there will be stability in your family when you are in God’s family, and Lord willing, that’s not just stability for this life but stability for eternal life as well.

Picking back up at verse 4, we read, ***“Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD. The LORD bless you from Zion!”*** Here we run into the other form of “B-L-E-S-S-E-D,” that’s the usual sense of the word, the actual act of blessing. And here the Psalmist indicates a location as the source of God’s blessing, ***“The LORD bless you from Zion!”*** Now, Zion is the name for the mountain in Jerusalem where the temple was constructed. In Deuteronomy 12, God had told the people of Israel, ***“You shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes to put His name and make His habitation there.”*** (Deuteronomy 12:5) The place where God made his habitation was in the Temple in Jerusalem, on that mountain of Zion, and if the people needed to find the Lord to approach Him with sacrifice and receive His blessing, they’d do it at the temple on Mount Zion.

Well, where is God’s habitation now? Is He still blessing us only from a mountain in the Middle East? No, because that term Zion isn’t being used to describe a geographical location, but simply to describe

the dwelling place of God, the place where God tells us to go and look for Him. That place, Zion, is no longer found at the temple in Jerusalem, but in Jesus and His Word. The overarching point is being reinforced: Fear the Lord, seek after Him in His Word, look to Christ above all else, and all the things you need for a better life—they'll simply fall into place.

Now, when we consider all these blessings listed in our text—satisfaction from our work, a wife, children, even grandchildren are mentioned—they're all painted as blessings which almost sound like they're coming to us as rewards. God is saying, if you fear the Lord, this is what I will do for you. And that sounds odd to our Lutheran minds, because we've been so well trained to have the alarms start sounding in our head when we hear the idea of God rewarding us for our work. And yet, in these rewards, we see the grace of God shining forth.

Because what other blessing does God give you from Zion, from His Word and through Christ? Faith! That fear of the Lord which results in all of these blessings from God—that is a gift which God gives to you. So, by His grace, God rewards you for the work that He does. It's like what Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians, ***“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”*** (Philippians 2:12-13) Here we are, a people receiving numerous blessings for fearing the Lord, and the only reason we do that is because God has gifted that to us as well. What a blessing it is that all of this comes from God, because if it was in anyway up to us, we would have no stability whatsoever—not in this life or in eternity.

Because we receive everything from the Lord, including our faith, then we have stability in our faith. The flashiness and the glamour of the lives of the people of this world are anything but stable, and that's because it's built upon the words and opinions of others. But that all changes so quickly, the wave of popular opinion ebbs and flows, and the stability of a person's life goes along with it.

We may fall into this same trap, finding the comfort for our eternal life in the things other people say to us, “You're a nice guy. You're a saint. You do so much for the church. You're so generous.” But those kind words come and go. If the only place you find comfort for your salvation is in the descriptions others make of you, then your life is going to be one of being tossed about in the sea of doubt. Instead of this, fear the Lord. That is, find comfort in what Christ says. For when your basis for eternal life is found in God's Word, then you have stability in your faith.

Because those words don't change. Rather, hear how God describes you in our Old Testament reading: ***“As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.”*** (Isaiah 62:5) How about these words from the Prophet Jeremiah, does this sound like it will change? ***“I know the thoughts I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.”*** (Jeremiah 29:11) Even when the stability of our lives and our families are disrupted, God promises you in the letter to the Hebrews, ***“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”*** (Hebrews 13:5)

So fear the Lord, place your trust and confidence only in the unchangeable fact that Jesus Christ died to take away YOUR sins. In that fact, you have stability. For that is the firm foundation which will never shift, which can never fail. On Christ, we have solid ground, for stability in our families and stability in our faith.

Now, in truth, it might seem a bit odd to talk about stability on today of all days. Obviously, you know I am moving after the service today; here at Immanuel, you still don't know who your next pastor will be. And yet, that's ok, because the pastor is not the foundation of a congregation. Just as Jesus is the most important member of your families, He's also the most important member of this congregation. And that will not change.

When I think about all that you have done for me and my family—the constant love and support for me and my family, in all of its forms—I am forever indebted to this congregation and to each of you individually. And in my weakness, when I think of all that, of all those memories here—I fret, and I worry about this congregation. What will become of this church during the time when I am not here? And yet, that's my sinful nature speaking.

If you find yourself worrying about the same things, I'd encourage you to shift your focus away from these things that are subject to change, and instead focus on the thing that does not change. That's your Savior and His ever-present love for you. He will never leave you nor forsake you. As Paul writes to the Romans, ***“He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?”*** (Romans 8:32) As we said earlier, Jesus continues to love you and work for you and your family, even when some of those family members leave. And that's true even when a pastor departs. Your Savior—He is the foundation for a better life. Through Christ alone, you have stability that can never be shaken, because Christ doesn't change. He is ever faithful, He will continue to work to bring you and your families and this congregation to His side in heaven. And I thank God for that. In Jesus' name. Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”
(Philippians 4:7) Amen.

Pastor Sam Rodebaugh
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