

RUF Bible Study – Songs of Ascents  
Doug Serven, RUF Campus Minister<sup>1</sup>  
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Psalm 128 – Happiness

*1 Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord,  
ho 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!*

*1-2 All you who fear God, how blessed you are! how happily  
you walk on his smooth straight road!  
You worked hard and deserve all you've got coming.  
Enjoy the blessing! Revel in the goodness!  
3-4 Your wife will bear children as a vine bears grapes,  
your household lush as a vineyard,  
The children around your table  
as fresh and promising as young olive shoots.  
Stand in awe of God's Yes.  
Oh, how he blesses the one who fears God!  
5-6 Enjoy the good life in Jerusalem  
every day of your life.  
And enjoy your grandchildren.  
Peace to Israel!*

*The Message*

ESV

Everyone knows Charlie Brown and his dog Snoopy. He's not on much any more and since Charles Schultz has died, I don't see the cartoons being read these days. Do you remember Snoopy would sit around and act as a philosopher? He used to write, "Happiness is..."

Happiness is .... What? One of Snoopy's answers I remember to be quite a let down – Happiness is a warm blanket. My wife Julie reminded me of a song that went: "Happiness is two kinds of ice cream..." Wow.

But what would you say? Happiness is....

According to the entry at wikipedia.com, "Happiness is an emotional or affective state that feels good or pleasing. Overlapping states or experiences associated with happiness include wellbeing, joy, sexual pleasure, delight, health, safety, contentment and love, while contrasting ones include suffering, sadness, grief, anxiety, and pain. Associated behaviors include smiling and laughter. Happy people are characterized by the belief that they are able to control their situation (destiny). Unhappy people tend to believe that they are a toy of fate. Happiness is directly correlated to the presence of favorable events (such as a promotion, a marriage, lottery winnings etc.) and the absence of troubles or bad luck (such as accidents, getting fired, divorce, conflicts etc.). Happiness, therefore, is dependent upon where we are on the river of self-knowledge."<sup>2</sup>

What do you think of that answer? I'm not too impressed, but there are studies on happiness, happiness quotients correlated with inequality and wealth distribution. There are poems about happiness, and the pursuit of happiness is one of the underlying tenets of our culture. Everyone is supposed to be happy.

This psalm agrees. Blessedness, blessing, happiness are a part of the Christian life, a part of the journey of worship, the song of ascents. This psalm gives us the promises and pronouncements of blessing, and it connects to the idea that the Bible is one long exposition of this blessing. Think of God's pronouncement of "it is good" in Genesis 1 and 2, his eager sending out with blessing to Abraham in Genesis 12, the way blessing works throughout the book, ending with the long blessings to the tribes in chapter 49. You can skip around and think of David, and of course Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

The way of discipleship, the way of faith and worship, is one of blessing. "He [the psalms' author] makes it clear that the way of discipleship is not a reduction of what we already are, not an attenuation of our lives, not a subtraction from what we are used to. Rather, he will expand our capacities and fill us up with life so that we overflow with joy."<sup>3</sup>

Let's look into happiness and what the Bible has to say about it. You will be happy if you –

Fear God

Work hard

Love your family

Look out to your city and church

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<sup>2</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Happiness>

<sup>3</sup> *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 116-117

### ***Happiness is Fearing God***

The psalms starts with: “*Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord.*” And again in verse four we read: *Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.*

Notice that there are no explanations of this, no apologies, nothing. Fear God is a profound reverence.

Eugene Peterson writes: “The Bible isn’t interested in whether we believe in God or not. It assumes that everyone more or less does. What is interested in is the response we have to him: 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 the size of our small minds, insist on confining him within the boundaries of what we feel comfortable with, refuse to think of him other than in images that are convenient to our lifestyle?”<sup>4</sup>

All throughout the Bible, the assumption is that God created the world, rules over it, and has a plan for redeeming it.

“God must be taken seriously. He must not be trifled with. He must be, as he actually is, the center of everything we are, think or aspire to do.” Carl Sagan takes the opposite approach, writing in his book, *Cosmos*: “The cosmos is all that is or was or ever will be.” Psalm 19:1 says Carl Sagan is denying the obvious: *The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.*

Look! Look out! Look up! See God everywhere, all around. Follow this extended illustration from Peterson’s *Eat This Book*.

“Imagine a group of men and women in a huge warehouse. They were born in this warehouse, grew up in it, and have everything there for their needs and comfort. There are no exits to the building but there are windows. But the windows are thick with dust, never cleaned, and so no one bothers to look out. Why would they? The warehouse is everything they know, has everything they need. But then one day one of the children drags a stepstool under one of the windows, scrapes off the grime, and looks out. He sees people walking on the streets; he calls to his friends to come and look. They crowd around the window – they never knew a world existed outside their warehouse. And then they notice a person out in the street looking up and pointing; soon several people are gathered, looking up and talking excitedly. The children look up but there is nothing to see but the roof of their warehouse. They finally get tired of watching these people out on the street acting crazily, pointing up at nothing and getting excited about it. What’s the point of stopping for no reason at all, pointing to nothing at all, and talking up a storm about nothing?”

“But what those people in the street were looking at was an airplane (or geese in flight, or gigantic pile of cumulus clouds). The people in the street look up and see the heavens and everything in the heavens. The warehouse people have no heavens above them, just a roof.

“What would happen, though, if one day one of these kids cut a door out of the warehouse, coaxed his friends out, and discovered the immense sky above them and the grand horizons beyond them? That is what happens... when we open the Bible – we enter into a totally unfamiliar world of God, a world of creation and salvation, stretching endlessly above and beyond us. Life in the warehouse never prepared us for anything like this.”

God says that you will be happy and blessed if you fear him. If you are in awe of him. If you think about him. That’s the natural response for people who really see God, who come into contact with Jesus.

What would it look like for you if you feared God? In your heart and life are you ready to give over to him? Are you still arguing for his existence?

### ***Happiness is Obedience***

Not only are we to fear God, but we receive blessing when we walk in his ways. *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.*

The Message puts it this way: *All you who fear God, how blessed you are! how happily you walk on his smooth straight road! You worked hard and deserve all you’ve got coming. Enjoy the blessing! Revel in the goodness!*

Thinking about God isn’t enough. Right thinking leads to right acting. Trust and obey, for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey. You don’t have to be smart to be godly. It’s really pretty simple, and we make it tough.

“Not only do we let God be God as he really is, but we start doing the things for which he made us. We take a certain route; we follow certain directions; we do specified things. There are ethical standards to follow, there are moral values to foster, there are spiritual disciplines to practice, there is social justice to pursue, there are personal relationships to develop. None of it is difficult to understand.”<sup>5</sup>

Right. No problem. Be kind to others. Give money away. Love the needy. Be patient. Ask for forgiveness. Take care of your stuff. Help other people. Don’t hit. Rest. Worship. Don’t hurt people. Live within your means. Pray often.

We really can do this stuff, but we don’t, do we? “Because of the ambiguities of the world we live in and the defects in our own wills, we will not do any of this perfectly and without fault. But that isn’t the point. The way is plain – walk in it. Keeping the rules and obeying the commands is only common sense.”<sup>6</sup>

Do you long for holiness in your life? Are you anxious to know what God’s ways are for you? I’d say I don’t see it in my own life nearly often enough, and a longing for holiness is generally absent from our church. I’m not into legalism, but I do want holiness?

But we don’t see it, and we get angry and frustrated. The flesh, the world and the devil are against us. And they are powerful.

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<sup>4</sup> *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 120

<sup>5</sup> *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 120

<sup>6</sup> *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 121

Peterson observes that most of us replace the Godhead Father, Son and Holy Spirit with a new trinity – My Holy Wants, My Holy Needs and My Holy Feelings. “We live in an age which we have all been trained from the cradle to choose for ourselves what is best for us... If the culture does a thorough job on us – and it turns out to be mighty effective in most of us – we enter adulthood with the working assumption that whatever we need and want and feel forms the divine control center of our lives....

My needs are non-negotiable. My so-called rights, defined individually, are fundamental to my identity. My need for fulfillment, for expression, for affirmation, for sexual satisfaction, for respect, my need to get my own way – all these provide a foundation to the centrality of me and fortify against my diminution.

My wants are evidence of my expanding sense of kingdom. I train myself to think big because I am big, important significant. I am larger than life and so require more and more goods and services, more things and more power. Consumption and acquisition are the new fruits of the spirit.

My feelings are the truth of who I am. Any thing or person who can provide me with ecstasy, with excitement, with joy, with stimulus, with spiritual connection validates my sovereignty. This, of course, involves employing quite a large cast of therapists, travel agents, gadgets and machines, recreations and entertainments to cast out the devils of boredom or loss or discontent – all the feelings that undermine or challenge my self-sovereignty.”<sup>7</sup>

Do your needs, wants and feelings have ultimate control of your life? Will getting what you want make you happy?

Have you ever considered that maybe, just maybe, God knows best for your sexuality, for your rest, for the positioning of your heart, soul, mind and money?

It’s not God’s ways that are at fault. Sin seems good for a time, but in the end it hurts us. But we shouldn’t blame holiness for our problems. There is blessing in following God.

These blessings do not exclude difficulties. “But the difficulties are not inherent in the faith: they come from the outside in the form of temptations, seductions, pressures.” The flesh, the devil and the world. “We are in a battle. There is a battle to be waged. But the way of faith itself is in tune with what God has done and is doing... It is not a way of boredom or despair or confusion. It is not a miserable groping but a way of blessing.”<sup>8</sup>

If I want to travel north and all the roads are cut to the east, then of course I’ll complain about the roads. “Religion is an inconvenience only to those who are traveling against the grain of creation, at cross purposes with the way that leads to redemption.”<sup>9</sup>

Friends, let me ask you, is the way you’re trying to get happiness *really* easier than the way that God has prescribed for it?

### ***Happiness is Work***

The text here shows us that we will be blessed when we work hard: *You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you.*

The fruit of your labor is your hard work. Blessings and prosperity are yours in your work, whatever it is. White collar or blue collar work. Working at home with your kids. Being a student whether it be in college or kindergarten.

“If we fear and obey God, nothing we do will be in vain. Our labors will bear fruit; our projects will prosper; even our families will thrive. We may not see all the blessing, and there will always be difficulties, but we will thrive.”<sup>10</sup>

I want you to notice the balance between Psalm 127 and 128. Look back at 127 and notice how it is driven in that *all* blessings are attributable to God alone. Unless God is in it, all human endeavor is in vain. Nothing you do will be worthwhile in the end.

But here in 128 we see that there are important responsibilities that rest on the person who wants to have God’s blessings. Fear and obey God. Work hard and take care of your family. Look out to the city. You have to do stuff. You have to be involved in this world, work and creation in order to fully understand what is going on and to be blessed.

In some ways, these two psalms bring up the question of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility? How do we figure it out?

These show us the answer. God is sovereign. Man is responsible. They go together. The Bible always affirms that.

There are no tricks. No luck required. We simply become Christians and begin the life of faith.

Are you a hard worker? Are you responsible? Are you making the world a better place by taking your part in it? Are you overworking and thus spoiling something that is supposed to be good for you by overloving it?

*You worked hard and deserve all you’ve got coming. Enjoy the blessing! Revel in the goodness!*

### ***Happiness is Family***

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

Wisdom literature allows for exceptions to be sure, so we don’t want to over-apply this and say that you have to have been married and/or have children to be happy. In that sense, we’d have to say you have to be a man for this to apply for it doesn’t talk about husbands being a blessing, just wives. So we’ll remember that you can be blessed and single, for Jesus surely was in a human sense.

But this psalm reminds us that happiness is found in fearing God, obeying him, working hard and loving your family.

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<sup>7</sup> *Eat this Book*, 33

<sup>8</sup> *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 119

<sup>9</sup> *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 121

<sup>10</sup> Boice, 1127

The word mix of “vine/grapes/wine” speaks of sexual enjoyment, festivity, and is linked to times of national and family celebrations. “Wine stands for harvest abundance at the end of a long, dry summer. It ‘gladdens the heart of a man.’ (Ps. 104:5) The psalm is promising that however hard the day-to-day work in the fields may be for a laboring man, to come home to a good wife is somewhat like coming home to harvest. It is a time to forget the hard summer work and enjoy God’s bounty.”<sup>11</sup>

The children around your table are the hope and promise of the future. “Olive trees take a long time to mature and become profitable. Patiently cultivated, they become quite valuable and continue to produce a profitable crop for centuries longer perhaps than any other fruit-producing tree or plant.” The end of the psalm mentions the blessing of grandchildren. How great it will be to see our grandchildren!

So vines and olives are symbols of abundant life, of blessing. And blessing has in it the inherent power to increase. Christian blessing is a realizing that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Marriage and parenting speak of this sort of blessedness.

Tim Keller talks about how one of marriage’s best definitions is that of “gospel reenactment.” You are to help the other person, in a profound way, to experience the gospel in his or her life. That will bring deep joy and happiness. But if you think marriage is *about* your happiness, you will never understand its true power. Giving away yourself is somehow a way of life that brings about pleasure. Jesus understood this.

I don’t understand this.

Meals together. A game of SkipBo. Baseball games on hot summer days. A drive to Montana through the National Parks. These days will be gone before we know it.

My dad just turned 60 last week, and he wanted to have a party. With all his siblings coming in, I pushed to do a big blowout celebration. I didn’t want punch and cake, and I got my way. We’re renting a tent and a band, and will have a barbeque and beer and wine and dancing – and it will be amazing.

I want to bless my dad. I want to be like an olive shoot at his table. I want to be happy.

Too often I want to get away from my wife and kids. I can view them as inconveniences to my happiness. Instead, God says, they ARE my happiness.

### ***Happiness is the Lord Blessing Your Church and City***

The psalm finishes with an outward look: *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!*

Commentator Derek Kidner writes: “If piety can be too individualistic, and a family too contained, the final strophe takes care of both these dangers. Zion, where the faithful gather, is where ‘you’ (singular) can expect to find blessing; and your family’s future is bound up in Zion’s welfare and that of Israel.”<sup>12</sup>

In other words, it can’t just be you and Jesus. Not if you are to be a biblical Christian. You have to include your family to be sure. And many people do that. But it can’t just be you and your family and Jesus. That’s not far enough. Biblical faith includes the church, God’s people, AND the land around you, the cities. You are to be involved in a community of faith and worship, and to be a blessing to the world.

In Jer. 29:5-7, we read this command to the people of God in their context of Babylon: *5 Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. 6 Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. 7 But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*

Happiness for us will be in fearing God, obeying him, working hard, loving our families and our church, and in getting involved in the city and university in various ways. Seek the welfare of the city where he has sent you. Here. Pray to the Lord on its behalf. In OU’s welfare, in the city of Norman’s welfare, in the state of Oklahoma’s welfare, you will find your welfare.

David Helfgott wanted to be happy. He wanted to please his father. But it was impossible. His father demanded perfection, winning and complete fidelity. The playing field was the piano. But David never was happy.

He worked and worked, trying to earn the favor of his father. He played, and won, but it was never quite good enough. Everyone else thought he was wonderful, but not his dad. When we was offered scholarships, his father wouldn’t let him leave to train. But David finally broke away. His father pled with him not to go, saying, “If you leave this house right now, I will never speak to you again. You will be dead to me. You will not have a father or a family.” David left Australia, left his father in tears.

He played at the Royal College in London, and decided to learn to play Rachmaninoff’s Third Piano Concerto, considered one of the hardest pieces to play by anyone, let alone a teenager. He wanted to play it to make his father happy. He practiced for months and months, obsessed with getting it just right, drove himself to exhaustion, and he performed it perfectly in concert to a standing ovation. He immediately passed out from emotional strain.

The movie picks up with David ten years later, a broken man living in a mental institution, his talent wasted, his life in shambles. But he starts to play again, alongside the bumbling tries of a woman at the home. He mumbles to himself as he plays, saying that it’s not very good, that he’s out of practice, that he’s missing notes. But he plays.

He eventually begins playing at a restaurant three times a week, to the astonishment and acclaim of the patrons. They cannot believe it’s David Helfgott (they’d remembered him), and they couldn’t believe how good he was. But now he played with passion, and with joy instead of for the exacting smile of his father. He tells his father goodbye in one scene, watches him walk

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<sup>11</sup> Boice, 1128

<sup>12</sup> Kidner, 444

away and is free. And he finds love somewhere else. He marries Gillian, who leads him to greatness and to playing again in concert halls to standing ovations. He played happy. He played muttering, yes. But he played with joy now, stumbling joy.<sup>13</sup>

We all want the love of the father. Our earthly fathers fail us. David's dad did what he thought was right, perhaps. But he destroyed his son. We all grieve that sort of loss. Anything we give ourselves to will crush us in the end and be destined to failure. Psalm 127 tells us that. But true happiness can be found in the love of our true Father, because of our brother who took the wrath due us. We may mutter, because sure, things aren't really as good as they could be as we obey and do our work and try with our families, church and world. But we can be happy, truly happy.

Am I just saying "Be happy"?

No. I'm saying two things. The first is that the fabric of the universe is designed so that if you fear and obey God, you will achieve true happiness. It may not be all now (in fact, "your best life now" is a bad idea – your best life will be in the new heavens and the new earth), but it will be there. God's way is best, though it may not appear to be. Trust in it. Trust in him.

The other thing is that sin has so marred this happiness way, that you have to see Jesus. You can't just "be happy." You have to have a happiness representative, a stand in, so that you can actually attain happiness. You cannot fear God enough. Jesus feared God for you. You cannot perfectly obey God. You will fail. Jesus obeyed God, and he took your disobedience. You will mess up your marriage and your children. Children you will be a bad olive to your parents. Jesus didn't have a wife, but he had intimacy with the Father. He was the perfect son, taking your belligerence and hatred. You will ruin the wine, the goodness in your life. But Jesus was in the wine press so we could taste the wine. Jesus loved Israel, and gave himself for her.

"The easiest thing in the world is to be a Christian. What is hard is to be a sinner. Being a Christian was what we were created for. The life of faith has the support of an entire creation and the resources of a magnificent redemption. The structure of this world was created by God so we can live in it easily and happily as his children....In the course of Christian discipleship we discover that without Christ we were doing it the hard way and that with Christ we are doing it the easy way. It is not Christians who have it hard, but non-Christians."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> This story was pictured in the 1996 movie, *Shine*.

<sup>14</sup> *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 115