

**Psalm 128**  
**Walking in God's Ways**  
**a series in discipleship**

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In recent years, there has been a trend to have motivational slogans plastered on coffee cups, on wall hangings, on purses and bags, embroidered on pillow cases, painted on photo frames. In fact, some of you may have these motivational slogans in your home. Motivational quotes may focus on a variety of topics but there is often the theme of happiness. They say something like this: do whatever makes *you* happy or just believe in *yourself*. The Chinese proverb says if you want happiness for an hour – take a nap. If you want happiness for a day – go fishing. If you want happiness for a year – inherit a fortune. If you want happiness for a lifetime – help someone else. American writer Dale Carnegie wrote: “It isn’t what you have, or who you are, or where you are, or what you are doing that makes you happy or unhappy. It is what you think about.” The children’s book character, Winnie the Pooh gave this perspective on happiness: “Don’t underestimate the value of Doing Nothing, of just going along, listening to all the things you can’t hear, and not bothering.” Or consider what the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, said about happiness: “happiness depends upon ourselves.”

Everyone wants to be happy. Everyone wants a life that is happy. And so the world tends to pursue happiness in a variety of ways: through relationships, consumption of goods, travel, food, sex. The basic premise is that happiness is achieved, happiness is attained by amassing something, by increasing, by growing, by getting more or getting bigger. The assumption is that humans must pursue happiness.

Psalm 128 is all about happiness. Psalm 128 tells us how the Christian, no, how each human being, is able to experience happiness. Psalm 128 tells us we don’t pursue happiness but happiness is a gift to us. To be sure, we must pursue something to be happy but the Christian

doesn't pursue happiness to be happy. The Christian pursues something – Someone – to be happy.

Our English translations of this Psalm repeat the word “blessed” or “blessing” four times: in verse 1, verse 2, verse 4 and verse 5. But the original Hebrew actually uses two different words to express blessing. In verse 1 and 2, the Hebrew word eh'sher is translated as happiness or blessedness. This Hebrew word (eh'sher) for blessed comes from the Hebrew word aw-shar. Aw shar means to go straight, to go on, to advance. The implication here is that blessedness or happiness comes from a direction, a path, a pilgrimage. Thus, the Hebrew word we find in verses 1 and 2 that we translate as blessed or happy describes the sense of happiness and wholeness that we experience when we are living on the path that leads to God, when we are living in a direction that is towards God, when we are on the pilgrimage of Christian discipleship. Blessedness and happiness comes to us when we are in good relationship with Jesus Christ.

There is a second Hebrew word for blessed that we find in this passage. The Hebrew word in verses 4 and 5 is bawrak which means to kneel or bless. Over twelve hundred times, this particular Hebrew word for blessing is used in the Old Testament. It is used to describe God's actions towards us as God gives out of his abundance to us. This word is used to describe the gifts we receive because we are in a covenant relationship with the Triune God. This word is used to describe the nature of our relationship with God because he is a God who saves, who redeems, who restores, who makes new.

Psalm 128 is a Psalm that is about blessing. But Psalm 128 is not the only place we read about blessing and happiness. In fact, from the beginning of the Bible in Genesis through to the end in Revelation, we read how the Bible is one long exposition, one long declaration, one long proclamation of blessing.

In the first page of the Bible, in Genesis chapter 1, we read how God created the heavens and earth and all that is in them. We read how God created humankind in the image of God; male and female God created them. Then in verse 28: God *blessed* them. After the great flood that wiped out all living things on earth, God *blessed* Noah and his sons. A few chapters later in the book of Genesis, God said to Abram “I will *bless* those who *bless* you”. Before the patriarch Jacob died, he pronounced a blessing to each of the twelve tribes of Israel, “giving each the *blessing* appropriate to him” (Genesis 49). King David, known to be a man after God’s own heart, a man who certainly experienced great pain and problems and sin, was also rich in *blessing* (2 Samuel 7:29).

Then we get to the New Testament, and discover there that blessing is a theme that keeps on emerging. Jesus begins his well-known Sermon on the Mount by identifying eight attributes in the life of a disciple of Jesus. Jesus begins each by saying “blessed”, which makes this section commonly referred to as the Beatitudes. Then we find some more teaching on blessedness that seems to go against the teaching of the world on happiness. In 1 Peter 3:14 we read “But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are *blessed*.” Or James 1:12 which says “*Blessed* is anyone who endures temptation”. And then we get to the book of Revelation and we hear seven clear blessings, beginning with these words in verse 3 of chapter 1: *Blessed is the one who reads*

*the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it*"; and culminating with these words from Jesus Christ in verse 7 of chapter 22: *Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book.*

It is clear that blessing and happiness is a dominant theme in the Bible. God pronounces blessing to the believers, God promises blessing upon His people, Christian saints are considered blessed even in, and perhaps especially during, circumstances that are not always externally happy. Jesus summed it up in the statement: "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

So if blessedness and happiness are so prominent in the Bible, is it really that important? The world around us seems to think happiness is pretty important. And the Bible certainly affirms this. But the Bible presents a different understanding of blessing and happiness. Blessing or happiness, understood through the lens of an Israelite, through a Jew, through God's people is not about something external. It's not about having good luck, or having a particularly wonderful day where everything just seems to go right, it's not about winning the lottery. Rather, theologian Johannes Pederson describes happiness, through the lens of an Israelite as: "inner strength of the soul. Happiness cannot be given to a person as something lying outside them. The action of God does not fall outside but at the very center of the soul, that which it gives us is not something external, but the energy, the power of creating it. The blessing thus comprises the power to live in its deepest and most comprehensive sense. Nothing which belongs to action and to making life real can fall outside the blessing. Blessing is the vital power, without which no living being can exist."

This is what is given to the Christian disciple, the pilgrim on a journey towards God. Notice that happiness and blessing isn't pursued by the Christian. We receive the gift of blessing and happiness from God. The world pursues happiness but the Christian receives happiness. How does this work? What kind of blessing do we experience?

Well, Psalm 128 tells us. This Psalm is bookended by the word blessing or happiness. The Psalm begins with three promises: First, happy are all who fear the Lord. Second, you will eat the fruit of your labour – or you deserve what will happen. And thirdly, all shall be well and happy for you. The Psalm ends with three declarations of blessing: First, the one who fears God is blessed. Second, enjoy the goodness in Jerusalem. Thirdly, enjoy your grandchildren. This Psalm is one long exposition of blessing, of happiness. It begins with promises of blessing; it ends with declarations of blessing, and the middle part shows us an example of how that blessing happens. The middle part is an illustration of blessing. The middle part of this Psalm tells us how blessing works.

We read *“Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.* So does this mean that the only way to experience blessing is for a man to have a wife and for them to have many children who grow up around the table? There are some who cannot bear children or who do not have that desire. Does it mean they are not happy? Or can never be blessed? No, not exactly. We must remember that this Psalm, like all of the Bible is situated in a specific time, place, and culture. So we should expect that what the Psalmist writes is an understanding of what happiness meant in that time and place and culture. In Hebrew culture, it was normal to define happiness in

terms of marriage and an abundance of children – this was simply expected of every man. Children stayed in the home until they married, they came together and grew together around the table like a fruitful vine and olive shoots. This is an illustration of blessing – not one which is required of us to imitate exactly. Few of us these days try to have as many children as we possibly could and many parents don't try and keep their children at home for the rest of their lives!

But in this picture of blessing, in this illustration of mother and father and children, in this picture of family, we hear a deeper meaning of how we experience blessing. Blessing is most experienced by giving, by sharing. Delight is most experienced through the sharing of life with another. Blessing and happiness are experienced when we learn to give ourselves to others, when we serve others, when we care for each other and love one another. Blessing and happiness come to us not because the circumstances are joyous but because we have given.

In a profound and significant way, many of us experienced this kind of blessing yesterday at the funeral service for Don Ford, at our worship service. This indeed was certainly my own experience – I was blessed through the service. Though the circumstances were full of grief and sorrow and sadness, there was blessing because the church family and friends gathered to give comfort to one another, to pray with one another, to be present to each other, to carry the grief together. This is blessedness.

You see, the world tells us that happiness comes when we take from someone else or from something else to satisfy our internal cravings and desires and longing. My standard of living

goes up when someone in another part of the world has to lower their standard of living. As the western world pursues and chases happiness through consumption of material goods, food, and sex, then more and more people are often made poor, hungry, and exploited. Just reflect on the stories and images from Black Friday: lack of food or goods isn't often the problem; it's greed and happiness. But the Christian disciple knows that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Now we all intimately know that to live a life in abundance of blessing does not mean there are no challenges or difficulties. The Bible in fact seems to suggest the very opposite; that in our trials and temptations is where we experience blessing. Why? Because challenges and problems are not inherent in the life of the Christian believer. Let me explain. Our problems and difficulties and challenges and trials come to us from the outside through temptation, pressures, expectations, demands: through people or things, through time or place. But the direction of discipleship, the path of pilgrimage, the journey of the Christian believer is towards God. And God's actions on earth, seen most clearly in the life of Jesus Christ, are about forgiveness and healing, restoration and renewal, salvation and wholeness. The way of faith is in tune with what God has done and is doing. The way of faith matches with the ways of God. So our problems don't originate in God, they originate in the world. Thus, discipleship is a road that is not innately about misery or despair or distress. Discipleship is the way of blessing because discipleship is the way of Jesus Christ. When we walk in the ways of God, we are blessed, we are happy.

How do we go about experiencing this blessing? How can we receive blessing? Well, it starts with that first step of discipleship: repentance. It starts with us turning around to Jesus, it

continues with our everyday decision to say yes to Jesus, to love and obey Him, to believe the truth that God is at the centre of our lives and existence. It grows as we learn and discover how God has made this world and how he is redeeming and renewing and restoring all of it. It is, as the Psalmist says in the opening verse, about the fear of God and learning to walk in his ways.

Now this word - fear – sometimes gets interpreted wrongly. Reverence or awe are perhaps more fitting words because these words speak to our response to God. Reverence and awe are about how we relate to God. Reverence and awe explain our actions, not belief. After all, belief in God is not the primary concern of the Bible. There are many who believe in God but who are not Christian followers. Rather, the Bible is more concerned about our response to the Triune God. We may believe in God, yes, but how do we respond to the God in which we believe? Do I want to change God to become someone who will satisfy what I want? Do I want to control God so that He is only active in the world when it suits me? Or will I allow God to be who God is in all his glory, majesty, holiness, and wonder? So the Bible speaks of the fear of the Lord, not to make us scared or afraid of God the Father in Heaven but to point us to the overwhelming grandeur and majesty of God, to quiet our thoughts and presuppositions so that we can really see him as he is and listen to him as he acts with his grace and mercy and love

We all want to be happy, to be blessed. God's ways and God's presence are where we experience the happiness that lasts.

Since September, we have been working through the songs of ascent. We have discussed the faith skills needed for a lifetime of discipleship. We know that discipleship is not something that

happens overnight, or in a week, or month, or even a year. It happens slowly, deliberately, purposefully over our whole lifetime. There are certain faith skills that help us in this: repentance, God's protection and help, worship, serving, security, joy. These songs of ascent were sung by pilgrims, as they left their everyday and ordinary lives. They were sung by individuals and speak about parts of life that every person experiences: trials and challenges, work, family, relationships, sleeping and playing. But these were also songs that were for all of Israel: *peace be upon Israel*.

So allow me this morning to take some time to put this Psalm in the context of our church family, in the context of God's house, in the context of His people. This Psalm can certainly be understood and interpreted through the lens of one individual or one family unit – a husband, wife, and children. But I want us to hear this through the lens of RBC. As I read this Psalm several times this week and prepared for my sermon, I spent time during the morning praying and walking through the sanctuary. I could picture the Klassen's over here, the Aasman families over there, Loverna and Sandy sitting at the front, the Ooms at the back. I considered the memories you hold dear and the stories being written now. But as I pictured you all, I began to wonder what this Psalm is saying not to you as individuals but to us, as a church family, as God's people. I considered how this Psalm speaks to the story of the church, to the history of RBC.

*Blessed are all who fear the Lord, who walk in His ways. You will eat the fruit of your labor, blessings and prosperity will be yours. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your sons will be like olive shoots around your table. Thus is the one blessed who fears the Lord.*

*May the Lord bless you from Zion all the days of your life; may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem, and may you live to see your children's children. Peace be upon Israel.*

What does it mean for RBC to fear the Lord? What does it mean and look like for RBC to walk in His ways?

We are in a time of pastoral transition. In fact, we have been in a time of pastoral transition for nearly 6 months. In June, after many years of faithful and loving service, Pastor Greg retired. In May we began to look for an interim pastor, with the anticipation that an interim would come mid-August. A job posting went on the CBWC website. In late spring, the interim pastor search committee began having fruitful and promising conversations with a candidate. So it was unexpected when the candidate indicated that this was not the right time to serve at RBC. We received a few more applications, none of which really fit with RBC. We broadened the search by contacting about a dozen individuals from a transitional pastor website. Only one responded back with a willingness to consider RBC. Recently, that candidate declined to move forward with conversations about the interim position after prayerful consideration to seek God's direction in this matter.

Despite all our efforts, God's (clear) voice through this process to date has been 'not now'. So it is important for us, as a church, to listen to this. And if this is His way, let us remember that God forms His people in many different ways – wandering for 40 years in the wilderness, through exile, and sometimes in unexpected ways. The absence of an interim pastor is another opportunity for God to form us as His people – to be people who trust Him in what is not known,

to be people who pray for one another, to be people who love and care for one another, to be people who persevere through challenges, to be people who have hope in uncertainty, to be people of joy because we know that God is with us.

There are many mature men and women in our church family who have gone through uncertainty and challenge. There are many godly women and men here who have journeyed with the church family through various changes and they have been formed in Christ through this process. These men and women bear faithful witness to the love of God: they have deepened trust in the Triune God, they have knelt before God in prayer for His church, they have deeply cared for one another, they have patiently and steadfastly persevered in faith, they have remained hopeful and joyful in all circumstances. We must look to them to encourage us all, especially those of us who are newer in faith or new to church change.

No pastor can teach us how to trust God. No pastor can make us pray. No pastor can change our heart so we love and serve each other. No pastor can decide we'll persevere. No pastor can give us hope or joy. But a pastor can pray that God would give His people the gifts of faith, hope, and love. These are the discipleship skills that sustain, comfort, strengthen, and equip us.

*Blessed are all who fear the Lord, who walk in His ways.* Perhaps to walk in God's ways right now is to be without an interim. Perhaps to walk in God's ways right now is to give ourselves to God and to each other, to be formed as God's people through His gifts of faith, hope, and love. And as we walk in His ways, we stand on His promise of blessing.

Yes, we are in a time of pastoral transition. But I believe that at a deeper level, we, as a church family, are in a time of formation, a time of discipleship, a time of spiritual growth. This is God's gift to us. He invites us to come, He invites us to trust, He invites us to pray, He invites us to obey, He invites us to walk in His ways. Amen.

Let us pray:

Merciful God,

We come before you this morning and we repent of the ways that we have tried to change you, tried to fit you into a box, tried to make you be something and do something that suits our needs or wants. We confess that we have not always responded to you with reverence, with awe, with wonder, or with fear; and so we have forgotten your glory, your majesty, your holiness, your ways. Forgive us we pray.

We gather this morning to worship you and because we are in need of your blessing. We desire your gift of happiness, not the happiness that comes through the world's ways, but the happiness, the blessedness that comes when we walk in your ways.

Help us, as a church family, as your people, to walk in Your ways. Because we know that when we walk in your ways, when we are participating with your work of formation and transformation in this church, with your actions of redemption and restoration in Whitehorse, with your Kingdom work of forgiveness and healing in this world, then we truly are blessed. For to walk in your ways is what we were designed and created to be and do. Grant us now, especially in this time of change, to be people who persevere, who are patient, who are steadfast, who are full of your gifts of faith, hope, and love. Help us to look to our brothers and sisters in Christ, whom you have given to RBC as gifts to encourage us, to show us how to trust and how

to pray. Help us to pay attention to each other: to love and serve and care for one another. For in our sharing, in our giving ourselves to others then we will be blessed.

Grant your wisdom and strength to our pastoral search committee: to Song, to Dave Anderson, to Esther, to Rod, to Jody. May they also fear you and walk in your ways as they discern your calling upon this church.

I pray for all of those who call RBC home. I pray for those who give of their time, skill and talent, for those who participate in the ministry of worship, children's education, youth, small groups, deacons and elders. May they deeply know the joy of serving your people. I pray for those who are unable to volunteer their time and skill. May they find joy in bathing the church in prayer. I pray for those who feel lonely or confused or disconnected or hurt from RBC. May they know the deep deep love of our Saviour and the gift of forgiveness.

We thank you for the many ways you provide for our needs and protect us. We entrust ourselves – your people – into your loving care and grace; knowing that you who started a good work in us will bring it to maturity.

And all of God's people say:

**Amen.**