

BLESS OUR HAPPY HOME

PSALM 128:1-6 JANUARY 1, 2017

Good morning church! Happy new year. These are days on the calendar where many people are looking forward hopefully toward some goal. Some are looking for a way or two to improve some aspect of their lives. As a culture, we take time to think and reflect on the past year and often make resolutions for the new one. Because there's a desire for growth and for victory in life. That quest for meaning and purpose and fulfillment is common to all of us. And it's the question that every person and every philosophy is trying to answer.

A few years ago, a movie came out based on an autobiographical memoir titled *Eat, Pray, Love*. It was a bit of a cultural phenomenon (*which is a sad commentary on our culture*), but the theme is given in the subtitle: "One Woman's Search for *Everything* Across Italy, India and Indonesia." It tells the story of Elizabeth Gilbert, who was living a successful life as a writer and wife, but felt unfulfilled, unhappy. So, she divorced her husband. She tried out another relationship. That didn't work. So she decided she'd have to travel the world to find meaning. She went to Italy to eat a bunch of food. India to pray in a bunch of pagan temples. And in Indonesia she fell in love with a South American businessman.¹ And, I'm sure when one closed the back cover of the book they're left with the impression that they all lived *happily* ever after. Not quite.

Miss Gilbert wrote *another* book in 2010 titled: *Committed: A Skeptic Makes Peace With Marriage*. The purpose of *that* book was to tackle her fears of marriage so that she could *finally* come to terms with the idea, marry this *new* love of her life in order that he be allowed access to the United States and not be deported.²

In the book she says things like this:

*"Real, sane, mature love—the kind that pays the mortgage year after year and picks up the kids after school—is not based on infatuation but on affection and respect."*³

This book was a New York Times #1 bestseller. Unfortunately, even after all this, Miss Gilbert *still* has not found the meaning and satisfaction she's spent so long searching for. She announced in late 2016 that she's divorcing the man she met at the end of *Eat, Pray, Love* and is now a lesbian with a *new* love of her life.⁴ This is the story of a person that many people in our culture are looking toward for how to find fulfillment. How sad that she doesn't know the One who loves her most of all.

How do we find happiness in life? That's the question. And when I say 'happiness' I'm talking about the kind of lasting satisfaction that our hearts long for. Our culture tells us to cut and run. Go somewhere *new* to find happiness. A new place. A new race. A new face. And when people pursue those things, their end is like Elizabeth Gilbert's. No lasting satisfaction, but *plenty* of broken lives.

But then, Christians sometimes swing the other way. That if we even *think* about being happy, we've somehow become less Godly. Pastor and author Steven Lawson points out that the desire for happiness is not illegitimate at all. In fact, God cares very much about our *true* happiness and

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eat,_Pray,_Love

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Committed:_A_Skeptic_Makes_Peace_with_Marriage

³ <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/6924954-committed-a-skeptic-makes-peace-with-marriage>

⁴ <http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/people/2016/09/07/eat-pray-love-author-elizabeth-gilbert-in-love-with-female-best-friend/89969268/>

satisfaction. Throughout the Psalms, throughout the wisdom literature of the Bible, even in the Sermon on the Mount we hear God speaking to man about how to discover an incredibly abundant life. We've already heard our text read this morning. It's Psalm 128. The whole theme of this song is how to be blessed. Many of you know that in the Bible the word 'blessed' means 'oh how happy.' It even means 'to be envied.' And 4 times we're told here, by the Holy Spirit, *this* is how you enjoy the blessed, oh how happy, *enviable* life. And it's a life that God wants for us, full of deep happiness not defined by the world's terms, but something much richer, and much *easier* to be found. A kind of fulfillment not defined by the gratification the natural man desires, but a deep and eternal abundance available only through Jesus Christ.

Allow me to read this wonderful song again.

Psalm 128

A Song of Ascents

- 1 **Blessed *is* every one who fears the Lord,
Who walks in His ways.**
 - 2 **When you eat the labor of your hands,
You *shall be* happy, and *it shall be* well with you.**
 - 3 **Your wife *shall be* like a fruitful vine
In the very heart of your house,
Your children like olive plants
All around your table.**
 - 4 **Behold, thus shall the man be blessed
Who fears the Lord.**
 - 5 **The Lord bless you out of Zion,
And may you see the good of Jerusalem
All the days of your life.**
 - 6 **Yes, may you see your children's children.**
- Peace *be* upon Israel!**

This song is one of the songs of Ascents, which are a cluster of 15 songs that would be sung by pilgrims who took the annual trips to Jerusalem to worship in the Temple. This particular song is in 2 parts. In verses 1 through 4 we have an *affirmation* of the fact that God wants to produce incredible satisfaction out of the regular home life. And then in verses 5 and 6 we have a *benediction*, pronouncing yet more blessing on God's people.

First the affirmation.

Psalm 128:1 - ¹Blessed *is* every one who fears the Lord, Who walks in His ways.

Let's also read verse 4.

Psalm 128:4 - ⁴Behold, thus shall the man be blessed Who fears the Lord.

So here we see how to **access** the abundant life. In verses 1 and 4 we have these two matching bookends. God says, "You want to be *truly* happy? Here is the realm where *true* happiness is found."

And we see here that the fear of the Lord is the gateway to happiness. It stands as the entrance and the exit in this section.

We note there in verse 1 the fearing *and* the walking. And we understand that the fear of God is mental *and* actual. It concerns not only the heart and the head and the hopes, but also the hands and the habits and the hustle. Following after God is not just a mental acceptance of certain ideas or philosophies, but a way of life that is practiced as we journey with God in the directions He points us in. *His* standards, *His* methods, *His* values, *His* conduct. When it says we ‘walk in His ways’, that’s what God is talking about. Not just *doctrine* but *action* as well.

Fearing God means that I’m fully oriented toward God in my life. I’m *walking* with God, *worshiping* God, *wondering* at the glory of God, and *weighing* out my steps to be sure I am in harmony with God. When we live in this manner, then the Bible declares that we are on the happy road that leads to true fulfillment and lasting, heavenly happiness.

This opening verse would have been a sweet reminder for those who traveled far to Jerusalem for the feast. If you were one of them, you’ve traveled a great distance, probably on foot. And they’re singing these different Psalms and they get to 128 and find themselves singing about walking with God, and hear God telling them that their faith is not just about some ritual. It’s not just a set of motions they need to step through. It’s a way of life that leads to true meaning and satisfaction. And in this opening they’re singing the reality that God is not *hidden* or restricted to some temple in Jerusalem, but that you could walk with Him in whatever far country you came from. This principle is *much* more true for us as New Testament Christians. What a privilege to serve a God who doesn’t retreat to the other side of the world, but comes to us, to *dwell* in us and make *us* His Temple. Deuteronomy 33 says He is the God who “rides across the heavens to help you.”

Psalm 128:2 - ²When you eat the labor of your hands, You shall be happy, and it shall be well with you.

Here in verse 2 we how all our **activities** can be touched by the spiritual abundance of heaven.

The image here is physical activity, physical labor, being touched by God to bring spiritual blessing and fulfillment. There’s no task or endeavor that our Christianity should not infuse. God wants to be in all of it and bring fruit *from* all of it. And if we have things that we’re confident God *can’t* bring fruit out of because of their nature, perhaps they are weights that we should cast aside as we run our race.

God *wants* to be involved in our work so that He can bring abundant satisfaction to all points of our lives. When it says, “it shall be well with you,” that word ‘well’ means pleasing, valuable, generous, and festive! So, a person who walks in the fear of the Lord is not dour or miserly or purposeless. God says he is meant to be a merry man of generous cheer! A person who can discover heavenly satisfaction even in the hard labors of life. Remember: we serve a God who brings praise into prisons, peace into storms, joy to mourning. Our God is so powerful that He can accomplish an eternal work through *our* regular work in the office or on the line or in the field. We look at men like Nehemiah or Isaac or women like Abigail and Jael. People who accomplished great things in the plan of Heaven while going about their regular lives in the fear of God. And as God does this, He doesn’t take advantage of His people or exploit them. He *fills* them and gives them insight and contentment and passion in ways that they people around them marvel at!

Psalm 128:3 - ³Your wife *shall be* like a fruitful vine In the very heart of your house, Your children like olive plants All around your table.

Beautiful verse. Verse 1 gives us the **access**, verse 2 highlights our **activities**, and here the Psalmist turns to the **attending** of the family.

We're brought out of the office and into the home. And here the song uses lush, vibrant language to describe what God desires and can supply in our family relationships. Of course, we recognize that this is not a guarantee for every marriage and every child. We'll come back to that in a moment. But here we see Heaven's desire for the Christian family whose God is the Lord.

The Psalmist starts with the wife. He says she's 'like a fruitful vine'. A grapevine is a plant that needs support. It's lifted up off the ground. Put on a trestle or a wrapped around a pole. This imagery is used for a variety of reasons. But for this morning here's what I want to say, mostly to the husbands that are here: Men, your Christian wife has a *limitless* potential for fruitfulness. But she must have *support* and that is our *honor* to accomplish as faithful husbands. If we find ourselves thinking that our wives aren't producing enough fruit in general or in some specific area, the answer is *not* to do what Elizabeth Gilbert did. The vine won't be greener in another man's house. The answer may be that your wife needs more Godly support. Cultivate. Protect and refresh your wife. Because when a vine is properly supported and allowed to grow, then it bears many *clusters* of fruit. Wives, you're also responsible as children of God. Your spiritual health is meant to be bolstered by your husband, but you are designed to grow and bear your fruit as you soak up the light and the water and live as the new creation you are. In our context this morning, your heart shouldn't be set on *escape* but that you *and* your husband be bringing forth incredible amounts of fruit from the heart of the home.

The Psalmist next moves to the children. And he says they are like olive plants all around your table. The plants here are newly sprouted buds. They have a long way to go. There's a lot of work to be done to train them and prepare them and get them to produce a crop. But, once they do, they yield ongoing, rich fruit. Olive trees live for centuries. There are some they have found that are 2,000 years old. A legacy of fruitfulness because some farmer did the work and *continues* that work.

And, notice, it says that they are all around your table. Meaning the place you go for sustenance is *also* the place where you accomplish your most important work. Your wife is the vine in the heart of your house. Your kids are the plants around the table. Men: home is not the place where we disengage and unplug. It's the place where the most meticulous and meaningful work is done. But as we fear God in the home, God says that our lives will be filled with wonderful fruit that brings happiness to our days.

James Montgomery Boice notes that the symbols used in these analogies aren't the mundane staples of grain and wheat, but the song uses vines and olives. These are symbols of rich abundance. Products used not just for food, but also for merrymaking and for medicine and for worship and for light and for the anointing of kings. They are crops that are costly and delightful. It's a beautiful revelation of the kind of portrait God wants to paint with our lives. And here in verses 1 through 4 He affirms that it's His desire to accomplish this.

In verses 5 and 6 we see a **benediction**:

Psalm 128:5-6 - ⁵The Lord bless you out of Zion, And may you see the good of Jerusalem All the days of your life. ⁶Yes, may you see your children's children. Peace *be* upon Israel!

Before we discuss this further blessing, I do want to take a moment and acknowledge the fact that these incredible statements do not always ring true in our experience. Even as Christians, we sometimes go through intense suffering. We lack that satisfaction that we thought Jesus promised to deliver. For many of you, 2016 was an excruciating year for one reason or another. Maybe for many reasons. So, the question is: “Lord, how do I sing this song?” We open the Scripture and see God making Himself involved in our lives, bringing the power of heaven to us. Talking about life more abundantly, rivers of water flowing in and through us and beauty from ashes. But what about those broken marriages? What about those prodigal children? What about those failed ventures?

We shouldn’t be afraid to bring those questions to God, as long as we’re willing to trust Him and praise Him as we ask.

In all honestly, there aren’t very simple answers to why our experience does not always match the affirmation. But here are a few factors that can help us put the temporal life into perspective.

First, we recognize that any isolated Scripture, like Psalm 128, does not stand apart from the *rest* of Scripture. There are over 31,000 verses in the Bible. This morning we have *six*. That’s not to say that they contradict the other 31,000, but we understand that the whole truth of God’s revelation cannot be poured into each individual verse. That is why we’re given the *entire* word of God to learn and to discover as we walk with the Lord.

Second, we understand from the rest of the Bible that many of the promises of God are not entirely realized in our temporal lives. There is a coming future where our joy and our fulfillment and our glorification will finally be made *complete* to a degree that we cannot even fathom today.

Third, we live in a reality where God has allowed human beings to exercise a free will to choose. None of us are perfect. And none of us can force the world around us to always choose God’s way. Neither does God force anyone to choose His way. But instead, He allows human beings to make decisions and those decisions have repercussions. And even if you are walking in the fear of God, that does not mean that the Lord will overpower the free will of those around you.

But here’s what we *do* know: We know, from the Bible, God’s heart and His intentions for His people. We know the kind of potential He installs in the life and the home of the Christian. We know the rich generosity that He loves to shower on us. And that is what is on display in Psalm 128. The first part talking about how it works practically. And then in the second, *another* pronouncement of blessing on God’s people. This text reveals a God whose arm is not short and whose promises are not lax.

We should mark that it says there in verse 5 ‘*all*’ the days of your life. God wants us to deeply enjoy every stage of our regular lives, lived out with Him. This morning, we find ourselves on different sections of life’s calendar. But no matter what stage we’re in, the Lord still has spiritual fulfillment for us generally and specifically. He wants us to see and experience heaven’s goodness *in* earth’s endurance. Never are we promised perfection in *this* life. There’s hard work to do. Not every marriage will be smooth sailing. Certainly raising children is not without struggles. But in this Psalm it is affirmed that regular life, particularly the regular *family* life is to be cherished. And that when we live it out in the fear of God, we gain access to a certain satisfaction that cannot be found elsewhere. Not in any earthly pilgrimage to India or gluttonous feast in Italy. No sleazy fling with a stranger in Indonesia. God explains here that He pipes the most meaningful purpose and rewarding satisfaction right into your home. Your life is already plumbed for it. He affirms it.

We're at the beginning of a new year. We're all looking forward in one way or another. Our Lord's hope is that *all* of us will enjoy and cherish our Godly lives throughout all our days. Back in verse 1 there is a careful phrase: "Blessed is *every* one who fears the Lord." The heavenly happiness we're talking about here is not only for those ages 13 to 18, or only for those with an AARP card or anything like that. How to we lay hold of it? by fearing God and walking with Him, finding purpose in all our labor, but discovering our deepest happiness and spirituality not hiding in some monastery or Taj Mahal, but right around the kitchen table. The Lord has hidden great treasure there.

The world around us is going to keep trying to convince us that the way to be happy is to escape or to pretend or to compromise. It will be packaged up in lofty sounding language like when Elizabeth Gilbert said this in *Eat, Pray, Love*:

*"Happiness is the consequence of personal effort. Sometimes [you have to] even travel around the world looking for it. You have to participate relentlessly in the manifestations of your own blessings."*⁵

And then Psalm 128 comes along, revealing that God is *for* you and wants you to discover the true meaning of life, true abundance in life. It can't be bought, it's far too precious. But it's freely given to those who will go His way. So, as we look to a new year, let's determine to orient ourselves toward God. Because when we do that He is able to funnel in more and more of His wonderful, spiritual blessings to our hearts, in our families, through our work, ultimately realized and fully enjoyed when we stand with Him in glory.

⁵ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/10837-happiness-is-the-consequence-of-personal-effort-you-fight-for>