

PSALLO

Psalm 128:1–6

In the Psalm before you there are several technical points of translation, a few of meaning, and some of pastoral and spiritual use which we desire to bring to your attention. In the first instance, we notice the title of the Psalm itself, “A Song of Degrees.”¹ As we have intimated before we believe this designation refers to the devotional and spiritual use of these Psalms (among other times and reasons as well) as the men of Israel and their families made their way to the thrice-annual feasts in Jerusalem, First-fruits, Booths, and Passover. This view is supported by Ernst W. Hengstenberg in his work on the Psalms.²

In the text before you, we first mention that there are a few places where the translation, meter, or rhyme has been smoothed by the addition of an occasional English word not found in the Hebrew text. These few instances are designated by the use of *italics*. Further, we have used the older English designations concerning the singular and plural second person for the sake of clarity. As I tell our congregation, if it begins with a “th” it designates one person (thou, thee, thine, thy) and if it begins with a “y” it designates two or more persons (ye, you, your). Interestingly, in the Psalm before us, there are no instances of the second person plural—all usages of the second person are singular, making this a very poignant piece of prose. Another point here is that the divine name used throughout is the Covenant Name, designated LORD,³ and in the interpretive comments below the significance of this usage will be discussed.

The subject of the Psalm is the blessed estate of that man who fears the LORD. As we have a common-meter-double setting, the contextual markers appear more clearly because the first verse in each complete stanza begins with this godly quality, followed by the attendant blessings upon such a man who thus fears the LORD. The first three verses make up the first “stanza” and verses four through six, the second.

As with all discussions of blessing in keeping with godliness, or fearing the Lord, whether Scriptures of the Old or New Testament (Psalm 34:12–16; 1 Peter 3:10–12, and many others), several points of clarification are necessary. It would be a fundamental misunderstanding of this and other passages of Scripture to assert that God blesses us in return for faithfulness, or as it is styled in this Psalm, for fearing Him. These

are the Lord’s encouragements to our duty, as the Lord would reveal to us His will of command, and how He strengthens His instruction to us by His fatherly good pleasure. William Swan Plumer writes: “The promise of temporal prosperity shall be so far fulfilled as may not conflict with the higher interests of the soul. Yet the Lord does not engage to supply the insatiable cupidity of the human heart; but to give his blessing on lawful industry.”⁴ It is clear from the history of redemption, in Scripture and without, that the most godly among us have often been the most maligned, persecuted, marginalized, patronized, etc., culminating in the Lord Jesus Himself. Truly we ought not to take such passages as the one before us, in which blessings are shown as attending obedience, to teach that the Lord operates upon an absolute principle of *quid pro quo*. Note also the character of the blessings promised—they are not what many would consider grand or great, yet when we pause to consider them, they are the sweetest kind of favor that a people in any age might enjoy, that of a happy and well-ordered home (as Plumer notes {p. 1117}: “...where do we find a description of domestic happiness superior to this in beauty and brevity?”).

Working our way through the Psalm then, in the first stanza the Psalmist sees the blessing of those who fear the Lord and walk in His ways. We note first the parallel statement—fearing, and walking, the former inward, an attitude of the mind or heart, the other manifesting that heart in outward conformity to the Lord’s commands, and service to Him. Beginning with the blessing, the Lord gives the encouragement of partaking or eating the fruit of one’s own hands. Several things are taught here, but we must notice first the blessing of labor, and that in all lawful callings. Money for nothing, despite the popular opinion, is seldom good for “the higher interests of the soul.” The Lord blesses with meaningful labor, the industry of which the blessed man translates into the maintenance of this earthly life. The אֲשֶׁר־יִירָא (blessing) of those who fear the Lord rises out of this labor unto Him. Further, this blessed man eats the fruit of his labor—that is, he is not enslaved—the things of this life, the fruits of his labor which are the providential gifts of God, are nourishing to *the man himself*. This has, in proper exposition, both a spiritual and material understanding.

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1. Heb. שִׁיר הַמַּדְּבָרִים

2. See E. W. Hengstenberg, John Thomson, and Patrick Fairbairn, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869), 3:407–408.

3. Heb. יְהוָה

4. William S. Plumer, *Studies in the Book of Psalms: Being a Critical and Expository Commentary, with Doctrinal and Practical Remarks on the Entire Psalter* (Philadelphia; Edinburgh: J. B. Lippincott Company; A & C Black, 1872), 1118.

sovereignty and human freedom and waded into the mystery of the way creatures relate to the Creator, the finite to the infinite, the one to the many, man to God.¹³⁹

We conclude that Van Til, in congruity with the Westminster Confession of Faith, avoids the rationalism of both Arminianism and Lutheranism by way of his representational principle, which maintains a robust covenant theology that provides an exhaustively personalistic atmosphere in which the relationship between God's sovereignty and human freedom can be properly understood. The self-sufficient triune God of Scripture, in whom unity and diversity are eternally harmonized and equally ultimate, is the foundation of the representational principle, which is expressed by the covenant idea that reaches all reality, charging man's entire atmosphere with personality as he is always operating within the plan of God. The fact that God has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass, as the confession unapologetically affirms, is the *only* environment in which the will of man can operate, his choices can be meaningful and secondary causes are *established*. In fact, "if one allows that anywhere at all man deals with facts or laws that are not based upon the self-conscious, everlasting self-affirmation of God, one is to that extent bound to a static or fatalistic view of reality."¹⁴⁰ And so God's sovereignty does not *take away* (contra Arminianism and Luther's semi-determinism) or *limit* (contra Sproul and Melancthon's synergism) man's freedom, but rather *establishes* it. Van Til summarizes his own conclusion in which we can hear echoes of Westminster Confession of Faith 3.1,

We found ... that the Reformed covenant theology remained nearest to this Biblical position. Other theories of the will go off on either of two byways, namely, that of seeking an unwarranted independence for man, or otherwise of subjecting man to philosophical necessitarianism. Reformed theology attempts to steer clear of both these dangers; avoiding all forms of Pelagianizing and of Pantheizing thought. It thinks to have found in the covenant relation of God with creation the true presentation of the Biblical concept of the relation of God to man. Man is totally dependent upon God and exists with all creation for God. *Yet his freedom is not therewith abridged but realized.*¹⁴¹ ■

139. Van Til, "The Will in its Theological Relations," 2.

140. Van Til, *IST*, 278.

141. Van Til, "The Will in Its Theological Relations," 77.

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In the latter, we remember how the Lord threatened His ancient people with bondage to their enemies in another land if they turned from Him, and He also encouraged them with liberty in their obedience. Spiritually, those who fear the Lord are delivered from sin's bondage, such that they are not enslaved to their lusts which bring even the good things of this life under that cruel mastery. They walk according to the law of liberty (James 1:25; 2:12), making a holy use of all the Lord gives them.

The metaphor of the vine as it relates to the wife of this blessed man speaks of a fruitful vine that grows to the uttermost extremity of his house. Several things are in order here: First, note fruitfulness. The blessing intimated here is the blessing of children, made more explicit in what follows. The fruit of the vine in Israel was a source of much joy, and those years in which the vine flourished were highly prized. But more, note here that this one vine grows to the utmost (Heb. זָרְקָה) portion of the house, translated in the KJV as "sides." The word is used in the Scriptures to speak of the extremity, the uttermost parts of a place (2 Kings 19:23; Isaiah 37:24; Jeremiah 25:32; 31:8; 50:41). I take this to mean, by implication, that this blessed man has one wife—there is no room for two—because this vine grows to all the extremities of his house—this picture of domestic happiness is not marred, as it was so often the case in Old Testament Israel, by polygamy, or divorce—his house is full with this one fruitful vine, which makes his heart glad.

The metaphor of the olive trees as they relate to his children is also instructive and encouraging. They are called olive plants, even perhaps transplants. They are like an olive orchard—planted, ordered, cultivated, cared for, and themselves issuing a product that is desirable, and speaks of true riches. Note that they are gathered around this man's table—they are not estranged, but intimate. He brings them into his closest circle—he gathers them to his table, there to do all that this lovely circumstance suggests. They have a place to gather together, to enjoy the good things of this life, to hear the instruction of a father, to interact with one another, and to present themselves before God in thankfulness for His bountiful goodness to them. Truly, while perhaps considered "old-fashioned" by many, this picture of a godly family regularly gathered around the dinner table, intimate, interacting with one another, hearing instruction, and praying together giving thanks to the Lord, is a timeless reminder of His goodness. Indeed, this is a picture of true riches beyond what is commonly possessed. This man has a domestic situation steeped in loveliness and peace. His labor furnishes a table, his wife fills his affections without a rival and brings him an opulent joy, and his children, well-ordered and close in proximity and affection, cause

his face to shine (Psalm 104:15). The Psalmist has well said, “This man is blessed!”

In the second stanza, we have translated הַגִּידָה כִּי־יִבְרַךְ as “behold indeed thus...” owing to the intensifying and demonstrative nature of those words in this context. Here the Psalmist introduces another aspect of this blessing to be considered by all those who fear the Lord. Note that this blessing is out of Zion. With many authors, receiving the Psalms as praise for God’s people of all ages, we understand Zion to speak not of the city in The Middle East, but to the Church, which was in the Psalmist’s day centered in that city in which the Lord had chosen to place His Great name, and which continues today wherever His name is proclaimed in verity (Hebrews 12:22–24). And so we learn here, as we do elsewhere in the Psalter, the high regard toward the visible Church the Lord presses to His people (Psalm 87:1–3). His blessings spoken of above are said in this second portion to flow “out of Zion.” This might at first seem confusing—the Church does not provide the labor, the wife, and the children of this blessed man. How then can these blessings be said to flow out of Zion? The solution is not really that obscure—it is the blessing that the Lord provides in His Church that leads to the fear of the Lord, walking in His ways, and in this way she is instrumental to these earthly encouragements. As the Church preaches faith and repentance (Acts 20:21), as she proclaims the commands and counsels of the

Lord, she sets the stage for that God-fearer to believe, and to do what he has heard proclaimed in Zion, and thus is encouraged by these blessings. Further, we learn that this blessedness from the Lord is not only a private, family or domestic enterprise, for the Psalmist adds that the godly man’s desires are not only for children and grandchildren, but that Zion herself would flourish and be in peace. It is for this reason that we see the use of the Divine name Lord, for these blessings are blessings “in Covenant” flowing from Zion, where the Lord has Himself covenanted with His people in Jesus Christ.

Thus the Psalmist has described the encouragement of the Lord to us to fear Him and to walk in His ways by a domestic loveliness and prosperity, and a Church furnished with posterity, good, and peace. In a day when these institutions of God’s own establishment, marriage and family on the one hand, and the Visible Church on the other, are discouraged, and would by some even be destroyed, this Psalm reminds us of true blessedness—that it comes from God, mediated ordinarily to us through Zion, visited upon our families, and enjoyed by those who are steeped in the ways of the Lord. These divine institutions are not subject to men for their existence in this world. They are founded, firmly established, maintained, and blessed by the Lord, as are all those who walk in His ways.

Todd L. RUDELL ■

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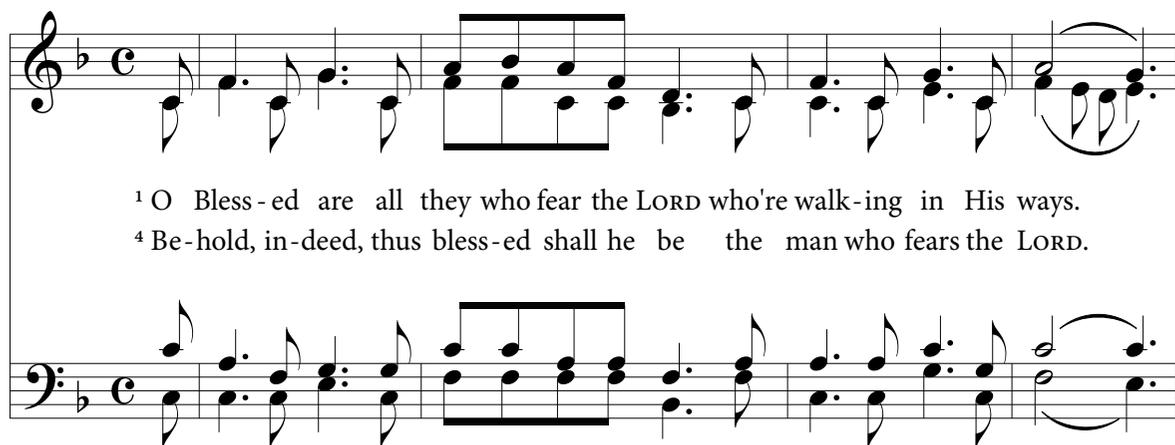
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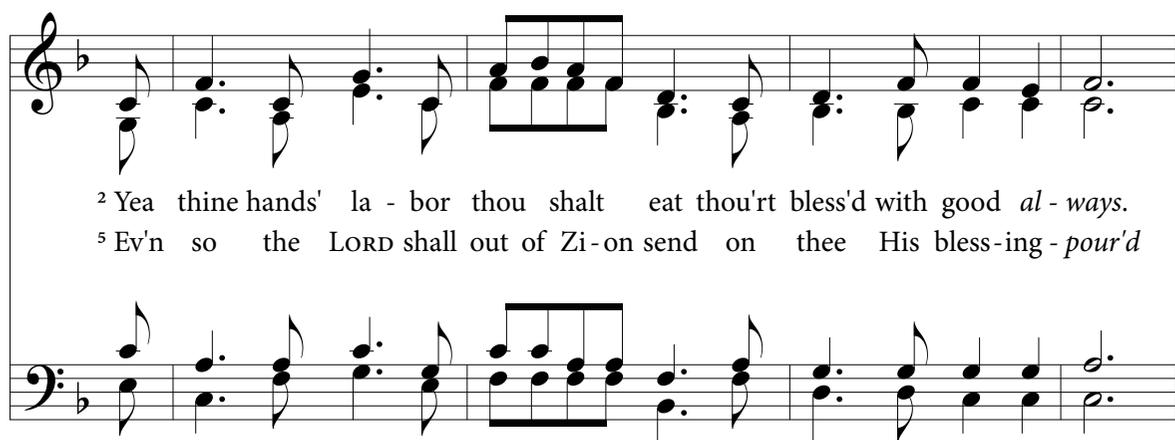
A Song of degrees.

Gefen Poriyah

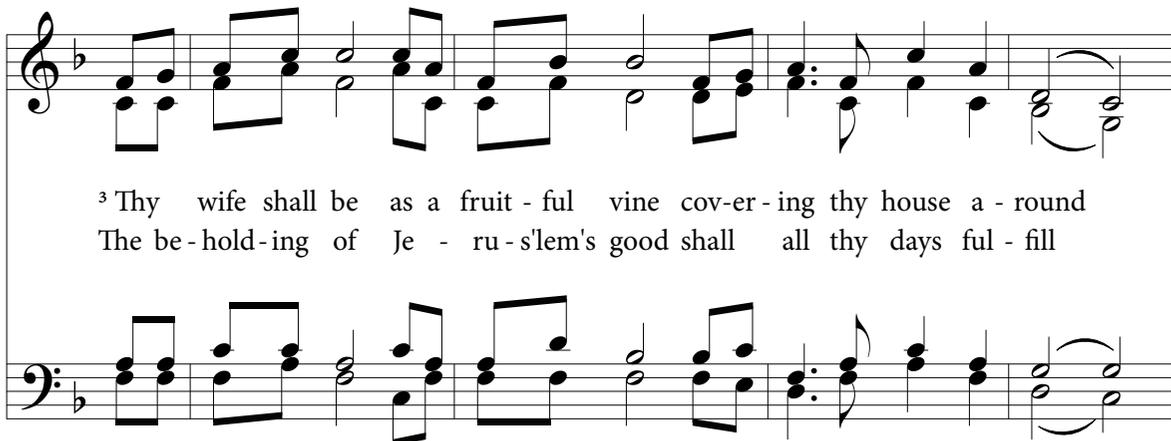
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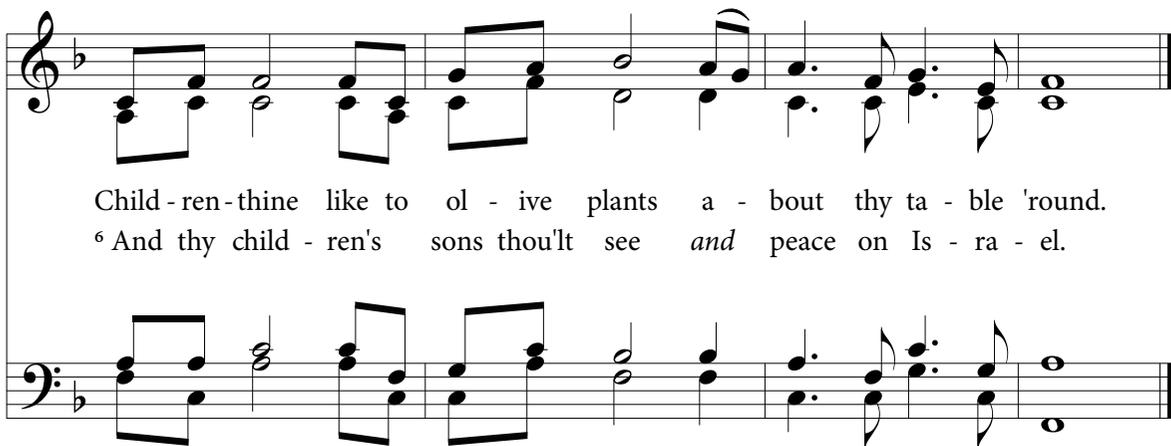
¹ O Bless-ed are all they who fear the LORD who're walk-ing in His ways.
⁴ Be-hold, in-deed, thus bless-ed shall he be the man who fears the LORD.



² Yea thine hands' la - bor thou shalt eat thou'rt bless'd with good al - ways.
⁵ Ev'n so the LORD shall out of Zi-on send on thee His bless-ing - pour'd



³ Thy wife shall be as a fruit - ful vine cov - er - ing thy house a - round
The be - hold - ing of Je - ru - s'lem's good shall all thy days ful - fill



Child - ren - thine like to ol - ive plants a - bout thy ta - ble 'round.
⁶ And thy child - ren's sons thou'lt see *and* peace on Is - ra - el.