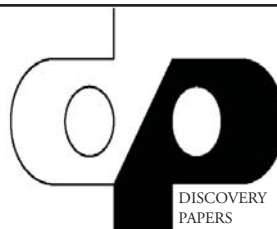


# FRUITFUL WALK

*SERIES: ASCEND*



Catalog No. 20130714  
Psalm 128  
7th Message  
Scott Grant  
July 14, 2013

George Packer grew up in Palo Alto, graduating from Gunn High School in 1978, on his way to becoming an award-winning journalist, best known for his coverage of the Iraq war. This year, he returned to Palo Alto to write a piece on the Silicon Valley for *The New Yorker* and found that much had changed. He observed, especially among those working for start-ups, an obsession with changing the world. In fact, the title of his New Yorker story was simply “Change the World.”<sup>1</sup>

We do seem, in this area, especially concerned with the impact of what we do. What do you want to emerge from your life? And what steps might you take to ensure that something valuable does, in fact, emerge? Psalm 128 is concerned with such questions.

## To fear and to walk

Psalm 128:1:

*A song of ascents.*

**<sup>1</sup>Blessed are all who fear the LORD,  
who walk in his ways.**

The psalmist says that certain people are “blessed” by the God of Israel—given something more than, or other than, what they could get on their own. God enriches their lives. In this case, the psalmist says that God blesses those who both fear him and express such fear by walking in his ways. The psalmist would not have us believe that only those who have mastered walking in the ways of the Lord are blessed, for who among us doesn’t have more to learn? No, the psalmist is speaking of those who are learners, for that is what a disciple is: a learner.

To fear God is not to be afraid of him but to know him, to be in awe of him, and to be in awe that you know him. To know him, you have to begin to see him for who he is, and to see him for who he is, you have to begin to disabuse yourself of notions of who he isn’t. God forbade the making of idols because he didn’t want anyone misrepresenting him. To fear God—that is, to know him— involves continually purging our imaginations of false images of God and igniting them with true images of God evoked by the Scriptures. Challenge the images of God as a distant landlord and a punitive judge, for example,

with the images of God as a seeker of lost humans and as a host who enjoys throwing lavish parties when he finds lost humans, two images that emerge from the parables of Luke 15.

Fear of the Lord is the basis for walking in the ways of the Lord. Some attempt to walk in godly ways, or at least to live in an upright manner, with little or no thought of God himself. Those who do the right thing, so-called, apart from fear of the Lord are not walking in the ways of the Lord. Walking in the ways of the Lord is more a manner of being than simple obedience to commands. To walk in the ways of the Lord means, first of all, walking with the Lord. You learn his ways, and learn how to walk in his ways, by walking with him.

Jesus invited his first disciples to follow him, to—quite literally—walk with him. They followed, walking with him throughout Galilee and all the way to Jerusalem. Along the way, they learned his ways, which converged in Jerusalem as he laid down his life. It makes sense, doesn’t it? You learn about someone’s ways by spending time with him or her. The disciples learned that they needed to forsake their ways and walk in the ways of self-giving love, and they were enabled to do so by walking with the Lord, by being with him.

It’s no different with us. Well, it’s a little different, but it’s no less powerful, especially inasmuch as we, unlike the disciples, know who Jesus is. We walk with Jesus by using our imaginations, joining him in the gospel narratives. Or, as we journey toward Jerusalem in the Psalms of Ascent, we imagine that we are walking with Jesus. Why not? Jesus made the same pilgrimage with his disciples (Mark 8:27-10:52). Along the way, we turn from our ways and turn to his ways: we walk in self-giving love.

First, the psalmist encourages us to fear the Lord and walk in his ways. In fact, that’s all he encourages us to do. The rest of the psalm is devoted to what comes to those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways. Those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways are blessed. In what way are they blessed?

## In field and home

Psalm 128:2-4:

**<sup>2</sup>You will eat the fruit of your labor;  
blessings and prosperity will be yours.  
<sup>3</sup>Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within  
your house;  
your sons will be like olive shoots around  
your table.  
<sup>4</sup>Thus is the man blessed who fears the LORD.**

How does the Lord enhance the lives of those who fear him and walk in his ways? God blesses such people both in the field and in the home.

First, the psalmist says, if you fear the Lord and walk in his ways, “You will eat the fruit of your labor.” In order to eat the fruit of your labor, you must, of course, labor. It is assumed that one who fears the Lord also labors. The psalmist knows nothing of the person who isn’t willing to work. The apostle Paul even goes so far as to say, “If a man will not work, he shall not eat” (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

A particular satisfaction comes from benefiting from what you have worked for, doesn’t it? The fruit from your own garden always tastes sweeter. Most of our food, however, comes from the work of other people. For the most part, we work to make money and we go to a store to buy food. Occasionally, when I go to the market, I remember to give thanks for those who planted, raised, and harvested the food I’m buying.

First, the psalmist says that God blesses those who fear him and walk in his ways in the field. Second, he says God blesses such people in the home. Particularly, he invokes the experience of men with wives of childbearing age.

The wife of a God-fearing man, says the psalmist, will be “like a fruitful vine,” a simile that refers to both her sexual charm and her fertility (Song of Solomon 7:8, Judges 9:13). She will not only be a fruitful vine, she will also be a fruitful vine within the house—meaning, she won’t be given to wandering and wondering about other men.

The psalmist employs another simile to refer to the children of a God-fearing man: they will be “like olive shoots.” Young children need to be nurtured, like olive shoots, so that they will grow into mature, fruitful adults, like mature olive trees. Children, like olive shoots that outlive the trees they came from, represent hope for the future. Thus the God-fearing man, through his olive-shoot children, is blessed by God in order to bless future generations.

Is it true that the man who fears God and walks in his ways will be blessed in the field and the home in such ways? Experience tells us: not always. The Scriptures themselves tell us: not always. In particular, the Psalms themselves tell us: not always. Some of the psalmists wonder why

the wicked prosper and why the righteous suffer. In one sense, then, we should read this psalm the way we would read a proverb: as a generally true axiom and not as an iron-clad promise.

For example, a God-fearing man who walks in the ways of God is more likely to have a positive influence on his wife and children than one who cares nothing for God and his ways. He is more likely to create an environment in which his wife and children flourish. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7:12-16, expects a believing spouse to have a positive influence on an unbelieving spouse. However, it does not necessarily follow that every God-fearing man will have a wife who is like a fruitful vine within his house and children who are like olive shoots around his table. Some God-fearing men never marry, other God-fearing men are unable to have children, while still other God-fearing men lose their wives before they ever have a chance to become fruitful vines.

## Deeper fruitfulness

In another sense, however, the fruitfulness of field and home represents another, deeper kind of fruitfulness. Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matthew 5:6). Those who fear God and walk in his ways, who hunger for his justice and work and pray for it, will be satisfied when the kingdom of God comes in full. Indeed, they will be satisfied with the fruit of their labor.

The apostle Paul suffered greatly and, as far as we know, had no family, but who can say that he wasn’t blessed? Whatever fruit and wife and children may have meant to him, he considered all things loss in view of the “surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:8). The apostle John said, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth” (3 John 1:4). He is speaking specifically not of his flesh-and-blood children but of a spiritual child, whom he nurtured like a tender olive shoot.

Finally, no one ever feared God more than Jesus of Nazareth, yet God did not bless him with a wife like a fruitful vine within his home or with children like olive shoots around his table. In fact, he had no home, “no place to lay his head,” until he breathed his last and bowed his head while hanging from a cross (Luke 9:58). But what was he doing on the cross? He was laying down his life so that he might win for himself a bride, his church (Ephesians 5:25-27). Indeed, for almost two thousand years now, Christ has had a fruitful vine for a wife, and countless children of God have been born. Indeed, God blessed his Son, raising him from the dead and enthroning him as Lord of creation.

As those who fear God and walk in his ways, we are blessed—simply to fear God, simply to know him, and in a myriad of other ways also. If you have food to eat, for example, you're blessed. Thus Jesus urges us to give thanks to God for our daily bread. Surely, though, everything that Psalm 128:1-4 promises will be realized in the truest sense on the day of the Lord, when the labor of our hands will satisfy us, when we attend the wedding supper of the Lamb, and when the olive shoots we have nurtured, whoever and whatever they be, mature in the kingdom of God. Indeed, "blessings and prosperity" will be ours, and "thus is the man blessed who fears the Lord."

## Basketball junkie

I read a feature in *The New York Times* June 23 about a man named Howie Garfinkle, eighty-three, who lives alone in his Manhattan apartment. He never married; instead, he devoted his life to basketball, as a coach, scout, summer camp creator, and director of clinics. Famed basketball coach Bob Knight said of Garfinkle, "From an early age, he set a course for his life and followed it happily. He never got married, and maybe that's because basketball was always his true love." Garfinkle:

*I'm very satisfied with the way my life turned out. I know I gave up some other things, like having a family, but I loved every minute of my basketball life. Putting aside all of the great players and all the great basketball moments I have witnessed, the game has given me some of the greatest and most loyal friends a person could ever ask for. It's really given me a wonderful life.<sup>2</sup>*

If a never-married bachelor, living alone in his New York apartment, can be satisfied with basketball, how much more can those who hunger for righteousness expect to be satisfied with the fruit of their labor—now, yes, but especially when the kingdom of God comes in full? Thus is the man or woman blessed who fears the Lord.

If you're blessed, and you realize you're blessed, what about everyone else? What do you think about them?

## Prosperity for all

Psalm 128:5-6:

**<sup>5</sup>May the LORD bless you from Zion  
all the days of your life;  
may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem,  
<sup>6</sup>and may you live to see your children's  
children—peace be upon Israel.**

Through verse 4, the psalmist has proclaimed that

certain individuals are blessed in certain ways; finally, in verses 5-6, he wishes that individuals, apparently those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways, would be blessed in certain ways. Therefore, despite the affirmative language of verses 1-4, we might, once again, conclude that the blessings invoked throughout the psalm are not iron-clad promises of particular ways in which God-fearing people are always blessed in a temporal sense.

The psalmist also particularly identifies the Lord, the God of Israel, as the one who blesses, and he identifies Zion, the mountain on which Jerusalem was built, as the place from which the Lord blesses. The Lord dwells in the temple, which is in Jerusalem: "For the LORD has chosen Zion, / he has desired it for his dwelling" (Psalm 132:13). Twice more in the Psalms of Ascent the psalmists will speak of the Lord's blessings coming from Zion (Psalms 134:3, 135:21). It would not be lost on pilgrims journeying toward Jerusalem that they are moving toward the place of God's dwelling, the place from which he blesses.

The psalmist, who earlier promised God-fearing individuals that prosperity would be theirs, now wishes that they would see the prosperity of Jerusalem. The prosperity of the individual is thus bound up with the prosperity of Jerusalem, the city of God's people. Really, what good does it do me to be blessed as a follower of Jesus unless all God's people are also blessed? For if I truly believe in Jesus, I will also care about his other followers—indeed, for that matter, I will care about all people.

Writer Frederick Buechner tells of running into an acquaintance from college when they were both in their early twenties. Buechner had just signed a contract for his first novel, and his college friend was working as a messenger boy. Buechner was experiencing the fulfillment of his "wildest dreams of literary glory" while deeming himself "on the brink of fame and fortune." His college friend? Not so much. Buechner:

*But instead of feeling any pride or sense of superior accomplishment by the comparison, I remember a great and unheralded rush of something like sadness, almost like shame. I had been very lucky, and he had not been very lucky, and the pleasure that I might have taken in what had happened to me was all but lost in the realization that nothing comparable, as far as I could see, had happened to him. I wanted to say something or do something to make it up to him, but I had no idea how or what and ended up saying nothing of any consequence at all, least of all anything about the contract that I had just signed. We simply said good-bye in the lobby, he going his way and I mine, and that was that. All I can say now is that something small but unforgettable happened inside me as the result of that chance meeting—some*



*small flickering out of the truth that, in the long run, there can be no real joy for anybody until there is joy finally for us all—and I can take no credit for it. It was nothing I piously thought my way to. It was no conscious attempt to work out my own salvation. What I felt was something better and truer than I was, or that I am, and it happened as perhaps all such things do, as a gift.<sup>3</sup>*

Prosperity, however you define it, only counts for something if it is shared. If you see yourself as blessed, and you wish for all to be blessed, then you're doubly blessed, for God has opened your heart to a great truth: he blessed you so that you might bless others; you're blessed to be a blessing.

The New Testament speaks of a different kind of Jerusalem, a heavenly Jerusalem, a new Jerusalem, to which believers, in one sense, have already come and which itself, in another sense, will one day come (Galatians 4:26, Hebrews 12:22, Revelation 21:2). In fact, according to Revelation 21:9-10, the new Jerusalem is as much a people as it is a city. Therefore, if we appropriate the psalmist's wish for Jerusalem today, we would wish for the prosperity of all God's people in anticipation of the eternal prosperity that they will experience in the new creation.

## Spiritual descendants

The psalmist wishes not only that individuals would see the prosperity of Jerusalem, he also wishes that they would see their grandchildren. He wishes for their longevity and for a particular joy that comes with longevity, at least for some.

My maternal grandmother, Josephine Pedersen, was reared as a Catholic on the East Coast, but when she was abandoned by her husband, she left with her two daughters for the West Coast. As a divorced woman, she assumed that there was no place left for her in church. One day, after she had remarried, a Presbyterian minister invited her to church, and she told him that she was divorced. He said come anyway. She came, and she discovered Jesus in a new way.

When I was an adult, after I began following Jesus, my grandmother told me of a woman who taught Bible studies that opened her eyes to the beauty of the Scriptures. "And Scott," she said, "she taught the Bible verse by verse!" When I was a child, before I began following Jesus, my grandmother gave me a book called *Children's Letters to God*. As a child, I didn't appreciate the gift, but as an adult, I treasure it as an example of my grandmother's love for me and concern for my spiritual life. In fact, forty-seven years later, I still possess *Children's Letters to God*. And

my grandmother? She feared the Lord and lived to see her children's children, and she lived to see one of them grow up, like an olive shoot, to become a pastor and invite others to church, the way the Presbyterian minister invited her to church so many years ago. Now I have a wife—indeed, a fruitful vine—and two olive shoots of my own. And on it goes. Because spiritual fruit reproduces itself, it never dies.

If the apostle John could say that he had no greater joy than to hear that his spiritual children were walking in the truth, then it can also be said that those who follow Jesus into their latter years, whether or not they have grandchildren, can experience a special joy to know that those whom they have loved for the sake of the gospel are in turn loving others. Moreover, all of us who have loved for the sake of the gospel can look forward to seeing generations of spiritual descendants in the new creation.

Finally, the psalmist, like the writer of Psalm 125, wishes peace for Israel, for God's people as a whole. The familiar Hebrew word for "peace," *shalom*, means more than simple absence of conflict; it also conveys an all-encompassing wholeness. When the apostle Paul wishes peace for "the Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16, he's wishing, especially, that followers of Jesus from different races would include each other and experience the presence of God together. Again, as we appropriate Psalm 128 today, we find ourselves, as individuals, bound together with the people of God as a whole, in this case wishing and working and praying for unity and the rich collective experience of the presence of God.

## On the road

What do you want to emerge from your life? How does a little spiritual fruit sound, a little spiritual fruit that reproduces itself and therefore never dies? What steps might you take to ensure that spiritual fruit emerges from your life? Steps: that's what you need. You need to take steps—steps with Jesus. As a disciple of Jesus, learn—and keep learning—to walk with him. Especially, use your imagination to join Jesus in the gospel narratives. If you do, you'll be blessed with spiritual fruitfulness—now in part, later in full, when the kingdom of God comes.

Imagine, then, that you're one of the disciples, on the road, going up to Jerusalem (Mark 10:32-45). You have great dreams about what will happen when you arrive in Jerusalem. Perhaps you have all sorts of dreams about what you will get from following Jesus. On the way, Jesus takes you aside, along with the rest of the disciples, and tells you that when you get to Jerusalem, he will be condemned to death, mocked, spit on, scourged, and killed—and rise again three days later.

Sure, you've been told all about suffering for Jesus, about taking up your cross, and that you'll be rewarded at the resurrection from the dead, but somehow, none of that seems real. What seems real, or what you'd like to be real, is the prospect of sitting at his right or left when he takes over in Jerusalem. In other words, you're hoping that he'll reward you with a position that garners you the success and affirmation you crave here and now. So you come up to him and say how about it Teacher?

Jesus tells you, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" He may tell you that you don't know what you're asking, but you'd like to tell him that you don't know what he's saying, but instead you say, sure, whatever it takes. Okay, Jesus says, not only to you but also to all the disciples, try being a slave with no rights: "whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant; and whoever wants to be first must be your slave" (Matthew 20:26).

Hmm. How did we go from sitting at the left or right of Jesus to being everyone's slave? There must be more to walking in the ways of the Lord than you're grasping. There always is. There always will be. Confused? That's okay. Remember, you're a learner. You're walking with Jesus, and if you're walking with Jesus, even if you're confused, you're blessed. Blessed are all who fear the Lord, who walk in his ways.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>George Packer, "Change the World" (The New Yorker, May 27, 2013).

<sup>2</sup>Vincent M. Mallozzi, "A Five-Star Original in Basketball" (The New York Times, June 23, 2013), Sports 1.

<sup>3</sup>Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1982), 97.