

## Prosperous Labors? – Psalm 112 (1Sept19)

I'll admit I didn't like this Psalm to start, and was disappointed it was the final one in our Psummer of Psalms.

At first, I thought it was offering false assurances and guarantees, trying to sell a bill of goods. I was reading it to declare that if you believe in God enough, you'll be rewarded with descendants, wealth, riches, triumph. Put in a little supernatural dedication to get utterly this-worldly possessions. I don't believe that's true, even if it markets well.

I was further disgusted when I discovered there's a book called "The Psalm 112 Promise: 8 Keys to Becoming Stable and Prosperous." Yuck. Hinting what might be inside those pages, it says the author is quote "gifted with a strong apostolic anointing." If the dubious theological language weren't enough, the guy also has a weekly Christian television show! I know I'm letting my arrogance and condescension show, but c'mon. The back of the book asserts that "this step-by-step guide will help you achieve not just wholeness in your relationships, finances, and health, but also restoration in your heart and soul."

Now, I recognize that as much as I'm deeply skeptical of such things, it has appeal. I don't want to be so dismissive as to ignore that somebody may have arrived here today wondering about material rewards for devotion, whether God responds to prayers to help in relationships, finances, and health, just as the book alleges. It's a big proposition.

Yet any time there's an If...Then statement about you and God, I get alarmed. Like the divine butler Emily preached about last week, who comes to respond to your requests, this subverts God's will and action to your own. It makes God's love and blessing conditional and dependent on you and your behavior. It negates any sense of a promise from God—and that God always keeps promises is pretty much my basic definition of who God is for you.

This book takes Psalm 112 and tries to discern 8 steps, 8 "if...then" statements, such as "If we fear God, then our lives will be blessed. If we worship God through obedience, then we will have generational blessing. If we intimately know the God we serve, then we will have more than enough."

One church-speak phrase for such sentiments is "prosperity gospel." Hawked by the sort of preachers who have toothy grins and drive (or are driven) around in luxury sedans, this claims the main focus of the good news, the driving purpose of God, is to make some people rich. And faith is then proven or showed off in being wealthy.

Such a concept would read this Psalm to mean that if you're righteous, then you'll be rewarded with the materials gains our world is constantly striving after. One commentary I read this week pointed out that if it actually worked that way with automatic compensation, righteousness might be more universally pursued.\*

Yet even more than testing a bank account's alignment with faithful dedication, the notion of God rewarding you with prosperity is given the lie most quickly simply by looking at Jesus, the embodiment of God's will. When we want to know what God is like and how God acts, we look at Jesus. And Jesus is, of course, well-known for his nice white teeth and riding around in a luxury sedan. Wrong! He didn't even ride a luxury donkey. The opposite of being blessed with wealth, Jesus was homeless, scorned, poor, and killed. How's that for a vision of God's blessing active in our world? Not so much the prosperity gospel.

When I went back with that sense of God through the lens of Jesus, I actually discovered the Psalm was closer to our Christian identity and further from the well-dentured limo-riders, and then I began to appreciate the Psalm more.

For our usual cultural sense, prosperity comes not from obedience, but it's wickedness that pays. The cheats, the schemers, the liars, the selfish are the ones who get ahead, at least in our society's

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\* [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3160](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3160)

definitions of who is winning and who is behind. We're even told that greed is good, that the admirable ones are the cutthroat hedge fund billionaires or CEOs who manage to cut ends by mistreating their employees.

But this Psalm doesn't actually establish the bottom line as a balance, as gross income, as net worth, with power over others. Instead, the focal point is those who deal generously and lend and act justly. Offering no interest loans is not a get-rich-quick scheme in the framework of our economy.

In fact, it's probably better to remove this from our categories of economy altogether. We're warped into thinking it's all always about money. But this is really about relationships, about interpersonal interactions, about how we respond to people and their needs. This Psalm isn't a handbook on shortcuts to financial independence, but rather commends dealing well with each other.

It reminds us that that is what offers security. We aren't kept safe by taller walls and bigger guns and meaner attitudes gnashing teeth. Just the reverse, anger will proliferate the evil tidings and prompt fear and in the end prove futile. In the words of Jesus, those who take the sword will die by the sword. But if rage is defused, if it's not a retaliatory environment, if it's not about aggression over others, if it's about cooperative relationships, then that clearly reduces fear that somebody is out to get you.

Again, that's not modeled much in our world of border disputes and zero-sum bellicosity, where fear is marketed to us and most of our systems are structured around what you lack.

So what would convince you to give up pursuing that path, chasing the wind, rushing from discontent to discontent, always feeling the lack and fleeing fear?

Well, this Psalm is working to convince you. It proclaims that God's way is with this generous living, the sustenance of relationships. You may come to church not so much with the questions of whether there's a way to connive God into giving you wealth and a bigger house. Even with

lingering yearning, you may not be quite convinced that there are 8 simple steps to God fixing your relationships and ensuring your health.

But I suspect you may well be like me, that you need this opportunity to be reminded that this way of living is good and right, that it is worthwhile, since generous living in relationships takes dedication and some courage.

When the cries of the world fight against a vision of charity and kindness and peace, when fear lurks in every decision, and when you're worried about whether you have enough, whether you'll get by, whether your kids will match the model of success, this needs some reassurance.

This is God's way, God's goodness, God's freely given abundance that is every breath and every heartbeat and every bite of food and all our existence. This is the care and virtue God intends for us and from us. And so it is worthwhile to live this way.

It is especially worth considering on this Labor Day weekend. We most often think of labor as something to avoid. We consider work as a contrast to rest. We conceive of jobs as a way to make money, and often little more, and yet we define ourselves by that role and not by other relationships.

But this reminds us that God's blessing extends in all the areas of our life, and our vocations are callings from God and callings on behalf of these relationships.

So instead of thinking how we fill our days or what our obligations are or what makes the most money, we are invited to consider how we extend God's love and generosity, where our roles aren't just for selfish gain, but serve to benefit others and extend security and delight.

We're accustomed to see that in our offerings and donations as doing good for others. But it's perhaps most in our families, where our deepest relationships are intended to foster life for each other. Such holy living isn't by any means restricted to professions such as mine, nor the volunteering that you do in this place. God's love and blessing radiate into all the places of your life

and all aspects of your days, so that it may extend  
also to others, as you are blessed to be a blessing.