

Psalm 112

The Happiness of the Man who Fears the LORD

1. Introduction

Psalms 111 and 112 have much in common and form a complementary pair. Both open with the command “Praise the LORD!” Both are acrostics in which the lines start with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Key words and phrases used in Psalm 111 are re-purposed in Psalm 112 (see examples highlighted overleaf). But whereas Psalm 111 is a theological reflection on the God of the exodus, Psalm 112 is an ethical reflection on how the people of the exodus should live. Derek Kidner fittingly titles Psalm 111 “God at Work” and Psalm 112 “Godliness at Work”.

Although these notes are focused on Psalm 112, it is necessary to say something about Psalm 111. Psalm 111 declares the praises of Israel’s saving God and implicitly calls Israel to walk with her Saviour.

The works of the LORD (111:2-7a) which are full of splendour and majesty, which are wondrous and to be remembered, which are powerful, faithful and just, are the works God performed in the exodus, the Red Sea crossing, the wilderness progress, and the conquest of the Promised Land. At Sinai God showed himself to be “gracious and compassionate”. In the wilderness he provided food for his people. In Canaan he gave his people the inheritance of the nations.

In 111:7b-10 prominence is given to the Law. The precepts which are trustworthy and maintained by God are also to be performed by his people – the Law expressed both God’s benevolent will for Israel *and* directed Israel’s obligation to walk faithfully with God. Redemption and the revelation of a holy God strong incentives to step up to the plate. Thus the psalm turns from an emphasis on what God has done in redemption to how redeemed people are to live. The affirmation of v. 10 (“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom”) provides the entrée for Psalm 112 (“How happy the man who fears the LORD!”).

Psalm 112 has many of the characteristics of wisdom literature, e.g. the opening affirmation “O how happy...!”, its acrostic structure, its emphasis on the fear of the LORD and delight in the Law, its contrast between the righteous and the wicked. The opening affirmation (“O how happy...!”) and the closing woe (“the desire of wicked men will perish”) is very similar to Psalm 1.

2. Structure

There is a huge amount of debate about the structure of both psalms. Derek Kidner suggests that the psalms have no structure beyond their acrostic shape. The translations provided overleaf attempt to elucidate structures which focus in both cases on verse 7. In the case of Psalm 111, verse 7 is a turning point from talk about God’s works to talk about his words. In the case of Psalm 112, the central verse emphasises the key relationship of trust which keeps the righteous man in equilibrium even when under pressure from circumstances and adversaries (the theme of vv. 6-8).

The (tentatively proposed!) structure of Psalm 112 is then,

A (vv. 1-3) The God-fearer enjoys the blessings of the covenant

B (vv. 4-5) The God-fearer among the needy (he lends)

C (vv. 6-8) The God-fearer among his opponents (he is steadfast)

B' (v. 9) The God-fearer among the needy (he gives freely)

A' (v. 10) The God-hater melts away – his desire perishes

3. Comparing Psalms 111 and 112

I have highlighted words and phrases in Psalm 111 which are re-purposed in Psalm 112. I assume that the author of Psalm 112 composed his Psalm as a reflection on Psalm 111. Thus I assume that:

- when we read that the God-fearer *delights* in God’s commandments (112:1b), this is a reflection on the statement in 111:2 that the works of the LORD are investigated by people who *delight* in them;
- when we read that the God-fearer is “*merciful and compassionate*” (112:4b), this is because his character is a reflection of the LORD who is also “*merciful and compassionate*” (111:4b);
- when we read that the God-fearer has “offspring” who are mighty in “the land”, and that they are “blessed” (112:2), this is because “land, children and blessing” are the fulfilment of the covenant God remembered and commanded through the exodus (111:5, 9).

I therefore suggest that the message of Psalm 112 is that the happiness of the God-fearer arises out of a deep and deepening understanding of the nature of redemption. This deep and deepening understanding of redemption impresses the God-fearer with the obligation to walk in a manner consistent with God’s grace (111:4), God’s covenant (111:5) and God’s holiness (111:9). This faithful walk of “new obedience” reforms the character of the God-fearer so that he becomes more and more a “God-bearer”, i.e. one who bears the divine image. This in turn results in the God-fearer/bearer enjoying the blessings of redemption.

Of course, this message needs to be kept in balance with the message of the whole body of Biblical wisdom, e.g. the book of Job, which acknowledges that God-fearers do not always *appear* to enjoy God’s blessing.

The answer to this puzzle is the Lord Jesus, *the* God-fearer. His life appeared to come to an end under the *curse* of God, not his blessing. But death did not have the last word. God raised and exalted his Son, and Jesus is now not only the consummate “happy” man, he is also the *source* of all the blessings of salvation to his people. Perhaps then we should sing Psalm 111 as a depiction of the *God* who worked for our salvation at Calvary, and Psalm 112 as a depiction of the *Man* who worked for our salvation at Calvary – always remembering that they are one and the same Person, the God-Man, Jesus Christ.

Psalm 111

¹ **Hallelujah!**

א I will thank the LORD with my whole heart;
ב in the council of **the upright** and congregation.
ג ² Great are the works of the LORD,
ד investigated by all who take **delight** in them.
ה ³ His work [is marked by] splendour and majesty,
ו **and his righteousness abides for ever.**

ז ⁴ He has made **renown** [for himself] by his wonders;
ח **merciful and compassionate** is the LORD.
ט ⁵ He gave food to those who feared him;
י he remembers his covenant for ever.

כ ⁶ His mighty works he declared to his people,
ל that he would give them the inheritance of nations.
מ ⁷ The works of his hands are true and just;
נ all his precepts are faithful;
ס ⁸ they are **maintained** [by him] for ever and ever;
ע they are [to be] done in truth and uprightness.

פ ⁹ He sent a ransom for his people;
צ he commanded his covenant [to be kept] for ever;
ק his name is holy and awesome.

ר ¹⁰ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
ש good understanding have all who do them;
ת his praise **abides for ever.**

Psalm 112

¹ **Hallelujah!**

How happy the man who fears the LORD;
in his commandments he **delights** greatly.
² His offspring will be mighty in the earth;
the generation of **the upright** will be blessed.
³ Wealth and riches are in his house,
and his righteousness abides for ever.

⁴ He shines in darkness a light for the upright;
he is **merciful and compassionate** and righteous.
⁵ A good man, he is merciful and he lends;
he conducts his affairs with justice.

⁶ He will never falter;
the righteous man will have **renown** for ever.
⁷ He is not afraid at bad news;
his heart is firm, trusting in the LORD.
⁸ His heart is **maintained** [by God] – he will not fear;
eventually he will look upon his adversaries.

⁹ He distributes freely, he gives to the needy;
his righteousness **abides for ever**;
his horn will be raised up in glory.

¹⁰ The wicked man sees and is vexed;
he grinds his teeth and melts away;
the desire of wicked men will perish.

The Hebrew alphabet in the left hand margin shows how both acrostics progress.

The collection of verses into “stanzas” and the indentation of the stanzas is my own tentative guess at how the psalms are structured. I have worked on the assumption that both psalms have the same ABCB'A' structure.

Similar words and phrases used in both psalms are highlighted by using **bold text**. I haven't marked all such occurrences – you can find others for yourself.

Psalm 111 opens and closes similarly – with thanks (v. 1a) and praise (v. 10c). Psalm 112 opens and closes with contrast – with “happiness” (v. 1a) and “perishing” (v. 10c).