WEEKLY SERMON STUDY

The Lord Bless You and Keep You

Based on Numbers 6:22–27 | In the Wilderness: A Fall Series in Numbers (6, part 2)
"So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them." — Numbers 6:27

SERMON SUMMARY

After weeks in the obscure corners of Numbers — census tallies, tribal camping assignments, the Mushites carrying tent pegs, the bitter potion, the vow against raisins — this week brought a kind of whiplash: from the shadows of obscurity into the bright light of familiarity. The priestly benediction is likely the single text churchgoers hear more than any other in their lives. High church or low, Catholic or Protestant or Orthodox, services close with these words again and again. And that very over-familiarity is the danger: the invitation this week was not just to hear the words we know by heart, but to understand what they actually mean.

A World Where Blessing Is Empty

We say "bless you" about four times a day — after a sneeze, as southern hospitality ("bless your heart"), as a sanctified way of saying "good luck." For most of us, blessing has become an empty social nicety. But beneath that uselessness lies something deep and weighty. When God speaks here — "The Lord said to Moses", the same opening as chapters 5 and 6 — he speaks not a word of command or reprimand, but a word of blessing. What follows is poetry: three stanzas that grow like a river overflowing its banks (three Hebrew words, then five, then seven; twelve syllables, then fourteen, sixteen, eighteen). Each stanza opens with Yahweh — the Lord — and strip those three out and twelve Hebrew words remain, one word of blessing for each tribe of Israel. Each stanza moves from God's action toward us to its result: he blesses and keeps (protects, the same word repeated six times in Psalm 121); he makes his face shine (accepts us) and is gracious (unmerited favor); he turns his face toward us (his smile, his delight) and gives peace — shalom, wholeness. All we long for from God, and then the crown: "I will put my name on them." We are given not just God's benevolence but God's very being.

The Ache Behind the Words

Picture the first hearers: every one born into slavery, as were their fathers and grandfathers for four hundred years, under a Pharaoh who wanted their sons dead. Behind them, slavery; ahead of them, the conquest of Canaan — war, death, disfigurement; around them, a wilderness of scarcity and vulnerability. Into that in-between God says, "Put my blessing on them." And it took hold: the blessing echoes through Israel's history (2 Chronicles 30; Psalms 4, 31, 67, 119) as the longing their hearts kept returning to. It even echoes in the ground — in 1979 an archaeologist found two tiny silver amulets in the Hinnom Valley inscribed with these very words, dating to 600–700 BC, the oldest fragment of Scripture ever found. Facing the empires of Assyria and Babylon, God's people wanted this blessing at their breast, carried to the grave. It is the longing every human heart has — to know we are blessed and kept, and that God turns his face toward us.

Blessing Is a Performative Word

What is a blessing? A verbal enactment of God's presence ("put my name on them") and his promise — the effectual goodness of God poured into language. It is not merely descriptive (saying "it's hot in here" doesn't make it hot) but performative: like a vow, a verbal contract, or a wedding "I do," it changes reality. You cannot take a blessing back any more than you can take back a spoken word. And this performative word is the organizing principle of all Scripture: God's first word to humanity is blessing (Genesis 1:28, "be fruitful and multiply"); his first word to Abraham is blessing (Genesis 12); the word appears some 400 times across the Old

Testament; and the last chapter of the Bible (Revelation 22) ends with the curse swallowed up, his name on his servants' foreheads, his face shining. Scripture opens and closes with blessing.

The Great Ache of Human Life

Blessing is also the organizing principle of human life. “The declaration of goodness, the conferral of favor from a voice of ultimate importance, is the great ache of human life.” From birth every baby scans for a smiling face turned toward it. We see what happens when that face never comes: in the Romanian orphanages left by Ceaușescu's decree, infants were fed and bathed on schedule but never rocked, sung to, or smiled at — and the rooms were eerily silent, because the babies had learned their cries would not be answered. They were nourished but not nurtured, given a bed but not a blessing, and it broke them. And it is not only orphans: we chase blessing in the wrong places (“#blessed,” possessions, performance), or, like Jacob, dress up as false versions of ourselves hoping to hear some pronouncement of delight — while Esau cries, “Bless me too, my father!” Even Elizabeth Holmes, in a new documentary titled after her own words “you can see everything,” beams a false smile seeking validation; her father says she broke at nineteen. All of us carry this ache for a face turned toward us.

Grace, Personal, and the Name

Three things about this blessing. First, it is grace. The priest speaks it, but it is not his — “the Lord said … say to them,” and the subject of every line is the Lord. God says, “I myself will bless,” and he says it over people who built a golden calf, who grumble daily, who will prove faithless. They do not deserve it; it is given. A better definition: blessing is God's grace in verbal form. Second, it is personal. The “you” in Hebrew is singular — not “hey y'all, y'all blessed,” but, as Spurgeon said, the high priest taking each person by the hand: “The Lord bless thee.” God puts each of our names in the blank. Third, it comes through Jesus Christ, in whom we are blessed “with every spiritual blessing” (Ephesians 1). An early church father saw the cross as the exact reversal of Numbers 6: the Lord bless you — Jesus was cursed; keep you — he was killed; make his face shine — he died in the dark; be gracious — he received wrath; turn his face toward you — the Father turned away (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”); give you peace — he went to hell itself. He took our cursing so that he could eternally give us God's blessing.

When the Blessing Is Spoken

When was this blessing first given? Leviticus 9 tells us: Aaron lifted his hands and blessed the people only after the sin offering, burnt offering, and fellowship offering were complete — when atonement was made, when it was finished. And how does the Gospel of Luke end? After Jesus has made the sacrifice, “he lifted up his hands and blessed them, and while he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.” Whatever we are facing, the image of Jesus until he comes again is of a Savior with hands raised, the work finished and the curse done, looking each of us in the eye and saying our name: “The Lord bless you and keep you.” This is why baptism (“I baptize you in the name …”) and the benediction mirror each other — grace, personal, the name — and why every service ends with a blessing: we are blessed to be a blessing, sent out to turn God's face toward a world aching to see it, as Henri Nouwen did when he held a broken young woman named Janet and told her, “You are God's beloved … the Lord bless you and keep you,” and found a whole line forming behind her, each one asking, “Can you bless me too?”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1	The benediction may be the text we hear more than any other in our lives. Has its familiarity made it feel empty for you — and what would change if you really heard it as God speaking your name?
2	The first hearers had slavery behind them, war ahead, and a wilderness all around. How does knowing that setting change the weight of God choosing to speak blessing — not command or reprimand — into their “space between”?
3	A blessing is a “performative word” — it doesn't just describe, it changes reality, like a vow or “I do.” How does it reframe the benediction to realize God's words actually do something to us rather than merely wish us well?
4	The preacher called the longing for “a face turned toward us” the great ache of human life, and showed its absence in the Romanian orphanages. Where do you see that ache — in yourself or in others — and where are people tempted to seek blessing in the wrong places?
5	God blesses people who made a golden calf and grumble daily — “I myself will bless.” Why does it matter so much that blessing is grace, something given rather than earned? How do we still try to earn it?
6	The Hebrew “you” is singular — as if God puts each of our names in the blank. What would it mean this week to receive the blessing personally, as spoken to you by name, rather than to a crowd?
7	The cross is the exact reversal of Numbers 6 — Jesus was cursed, killed, forsaken in the dark so that we could be blessed. How does seeing that the risen Jesus stands with hands raised, blessing you, change what you carry into this week?

LIVING IT OUT

Take the truth of this passage out of the study and into the week. Consider these prompts across four areas of ordinary life.

In Your Inner Life

- Slow down over the benediction this week. Read Numbers 6:24–26 aloud with your own name in it, and let it answer the ache for a face turned toward you.
- Notice where you chase blessing in the wrong places — "#blessed," possessions, performance, pretending to be someone you're not — and bring that longing to the God who gives blessing by grace.

In Your Closest Relationships

- Speak a blessing over your spouse, children, or a friend — out loud, by name. Like the father sending his child to college, put your hand on them and pray these words.
- Remember that children especially are "scanning for a smiling face." Be the one who turns your face toward them with delight, not just provision.

In Your Daily Life and Work

- Make your everyday "bless you" mean something. When you say it, pause and actually ask God to keep and be gracious to that person.
- You are blessed to be a blessing — look for one person this week who feels overlooked and turn God's favor toward them in a concrete way.

In Your Faith Community

- Receive the Sunday benediction differently now — not as a signal the service is ending, but as God personally putting his name on you and sending you out.
- Be a Henri Nouwen to someone who is aching: offer a real blessing, not a quick formality, to the person in your church who most longs to hear it.

SERVICE CHALLENGE

Faith takes on flesh when we act. This week, become a channel of the blessing you have received — turning God's face toward someone who aches to see it.

Step	This Week's Challenge
1	Receive it first. Begin the week by slowly praying Numbers 6:24–26 over yourself, by name, until you believe the risen Jesus is speaking it to you.
2	Name one person. Ask God to show you someone in your life who is aching for a face turned toward them — overlooked, discouraged, or far from home.
3	Speak a real blessing. Out loud and by name, bless that person — a spoken prayer, a note, a hand on the shoulder — not a quick "bless you" but the real thing.
4	Turn your face toward the forgotten. Do one tangible act of care for someone the world feeds but doesn't nurture — a visit, a meal, undivided attention, a word of delight.
5	Send them on. End your encounter by pointing them to the source — that this blessing comes by grace, through Jesus, who took the curse so they could be kept.

Optional Extended Challenge

Trace the thread of blessing across Scripture this week: God's first word (Genesis 1:28), his call to Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3), the priestly benediction (Numbers 6:22–27), the ascension blessing (Luke 24:50–53), and the final chapter (Revelation 22:1–5). Notice how the Bible opens and closes with blessing — the curse swallowed up and God's name on his people's foreheads.

Closing Prayer Guide

Close your time together in prayer, using these movements as a guide:

- Gratitude — Thank God that his blessing comes to us by grace, personally, and through the death and resurrection of Jesus, who took our curse.
- Receiving — Let each person hear the benediction spoken with their own name, and rest in the face of God turned toward them.
- Confession — Name the places you have sought blessing in the wrong things or tried to earn a favor that is freely given.
- Sending — Ask God to make you a blessing this week, turning his face toward the people around you who ache to see it.

"The image we have of Jesus until he comes again is a Savior with his hands raised. The work is finished, the curse is done — and he is looking each of us in the eye, saying, 'The Lord bless you and keep you.'"