

A Blessing for God's People

Numbers 6:22-27

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These beautiful words come as something of a surprise following a census of Israel, instructions for the Levites and guidelines for special vows to the Lord. Suddenly, there is this blessing that the priests were to speak over the people and so put God's name on the people. This is a way of designating the Israelites as a people for God's name, called by God's name.

We still use it in a similar way. Methodist youth groups used to say some version of this blessing. It's still appropriate for Christian prayer and worship because we still need what it asks for.

When our daughter Rachel was a baby, we got a tape of lullabies by Michael Card called *Sleep Sound in Jesus*. One of the songs on it is this priestly blessing set to music. We must have played it hundreds of times as our kids went to sleep. I sang this blessing over them as they went to sleep or as they were sleeping. I still recite it silently sometimes as I pray for my family and for you all. You can make this blessing a prayer for others: "Lord, bless them and keep them...", or for yourself: "Lord, bless me..." or for you and your family: "Lord, bless us..."

In the ancient world, people believed that blessings and curses, once spoken, had a power in them and they couldn't be taken back. They did think that failing to live faithfully could bring a curse on a blessing or, a curse could be transformed into a blessing.

Without believing that words are somehow magical, we can still recognize the power of a simple blessing. Even a small simple blessing can have a big impact. Fred Craddock tells about a church he served in Tennessee. A girl about seven years old came regularly for Sunday School, and sometimes her parents let her stay for worship. The parents didn't attend. They had moved from another state to work at the new chemical plant. They were upwardly mobile and ambitious and they didn't come to church. They must not have felt the need for it.

But the whole town knew about their Saturday night parties. They gave parties, not for entertainment, but as part of their upwardly mobile thing. That determined who was invited: the right people, the one just above, and finally on up to the boss. And those parties were full of drinking and “wild and vulgar things.” Everybody knew. But there was their beautiful little girl every Sunday.

One Sunday morning, she was there and her mom and dad were with her. After the sermon, at the close of the service, came an invitation to discipleship and Mom and Dad came to the front. They confessed faith in Christ. Afterward Fred asked, “What prompted this?”

They said, “Well, do you know about our parties?”

He said, “Yeah, I’ve heard about your parties.”

They said, “Well, we had one last night again, and it got a little loud, it got a little rough, and there was too much drinking. It woke our daughter, and she came downstairs to about the third step. She saw that we were eating and drinking, and she said, ‘Oh, can I say the blessing? God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food. Good-night, everybody.’ She went back upstairs. People started saying, ‘Oh, my land, it’s time to go, we’ve got to be going.’ ‘We’ve stayed way too long.’ Within two minutes the room was empty.”

The mom and dad began cleaning up, picking up crumpled napkins and wasted and spilled peanuts and half sandwiches, and taking empty glasses on trays to the kitchen. And with two trays, he and she met on either side of the sink. They looked at each other and he expressed what both were thinking: “Where do we think we’re going?” That was the moment of truth for them (*Craddock Stories* 23-24). They decided to make a change. A small simple blessing led to big changes.

If we really heard this blessing from Numbers, if we really received it, do you think we would face a moment of truth? We might be changed. We might really become the people of God, bearing God’s name—God’s nature and character.

Earlier, in Leviticus, Moses and Aaron went in to the Tent of Meeting (another name for the Tabernacle). “When they came out, they blessed the people; and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. Fire came out

from the presence of the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted for joy and fell facedown" (9:23-24).

This passage in Numbers may give the words for the blessing that Leviticus referred to. Anyway, this is how Aaron and his sons, the priests, were to bless the people of Israel and so put God's name on them and God would bless them.

The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.

These three short phrases include some of the Bible's greatest words and ideas.

First, notice the emphasis on the Lord. The Lord speaks to Moses and tells him how the priests are to speak this blessing. Each phrase of the blessing begins with "the LORD." Repeating God's name three times, along with the phrase, "I will bless them," emphasizes that God is the source of all Israel's blessings and benefits.

From a Christian perspective, repeating "the LORD" three times hints at the Trinity. Moses and the Israelites wouldn't have had a concept of God as Trinity, so we can't read too much into this. But looking back through the New Testament, we can see here a suggestion of God's being Trinity.

Each line includes two parts. The first announces God's moving or calls for God's moving toward the people: "Bless—make his face shine—turn his face toward you." The second part shows God's activity for the people: "keep you—be gracious to you—give you peace."

"Bless" is a broad term in the Bible. But throughout the Old Testament, God blesses people in specific ways. God gives children, prosperity, land, good health, and God's own presence. In the Beatitudes, Jesus speaks of people who are truly blessed. The word he uses there means being truly happy or being congratulated. The truly blessed people are those who receive God's kingdom, the life of the kingdom, and all the

benefits of the kingdom. Paul writes that God “has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ” (Ephesians 1:3).

When I pray for God to bless someone or I say, “God bless you,” I try to have in mind all this rich meaning and content of blessing.

God’s blessing of the Israelites here involves God’s “keeping” them. God’s keeping is God’s care and protection. The people of Israel would certainly need that as they journeyed on to the promised land and as they entered and took possession of it. The rest of Scripture, and experience, shows us that God’s keeping does not mean protection from all hardship, pain, or sorrow. But it does mean that God is with us and helps us through all of those things. And sometimes God’s care does mean deliverance from sickness or suffering and not just help getting through them. If you need to experience God’s care and keeping, you can pray with confidence for it. And we will pray confidently for God to bless you with healing and wholeness, with guidance and strength, and to provide all that you need.

For the Lord to make his face shine on us means that he looks at us with love and compassion and joy. It’s like God is smiling at us. I think of how we describe proud parents “beaming” at their children.

Accompanying God’s shining face is God’s being gracious to us. Grace is one of the great words of the Bible. It’s part of God’s character all through Scripture—Old Testament and New. We get a fuller picture of grace in the NT, but it’s there in the OT as well. God’s grace is God’s favor and love and blessing that he gives just because he wants to give. We don’t earn or deserve it. If we did, it wouldn’t be grace. Grace is the outpouring, overflowing love and mercy and kindness of God to people. Jesus reveals it and gives it most fully, especially in his death on the cross, but really in all that he does.

The third line announces or asks that God “lift up his countenance” or turn his face toward us. Where “shining” refers to the kind look on God’s face, lifting up or turning toward means to pay attention. God regards us, pays attention to us, considers us. In Scripture, the opposite of this is when God turns his face away from his people. That is, God seems to ignore them or is punishing them. But God desires to look on his children and watch over them.

The final gift here is peace. Peace in the Bible is more than the absence of conflict. It refers to well-being, prosperity, harmony, wholeness, integrity in all of life. It's really another word for salvation. God wants to give us that peace. Jesus reveals the full meaning of peace. He gives peace to his people (John 14:27). He is our peace and he makes peace between God and people and between groups of people who were once alienated from each other (Ephesians 2:14-15).

We have all that this blessing talks about when we see God's face, when we seek and enter into God's presence. Psalm 27 says, "My heart says of you, 'Seek his face!' Your face, LORD, I will seek. Do not hide your face from me, do not turn away your servant in anger; you have been my helper" (8-9).

"To see God's face" is a figure of speech. God is spirit and is invisible. We can't "see" God. But faith is a kind of seeing. And God has shown himself in a human face. Paul writes, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). Jesus told his disciples, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Jesus fulfills the meaning of the Old Testament. In Jesus we find God's blessing and keeping. In Jesus, God shines upon us and gives us grace. In Jesus, God regards us and gives us peace.

Frederick Buechner describes the opening scene of the Italian film *La Dolce Vita*. A helicopter is flying slowly through the sky not very high above the ground. Hanging from the helicopter in a kind of halter is the life-size statue of a man dressed in robes with his arms outstretched so that he looks almost as if he is flying himself. The helicopter flies over a field where some men are working in tractors and causes a great deal of excitement. The men wave their hats and hop around and yell. One of them recognizes the statue and shouts, "Hey, it's Jesus!" At that, some of them start running along, waving and calling out to the helicopter. But it keeps going, and reaches the outskirts of Rome. It passes over a building with a pool on the roof where several girls are basking in the sun. Of course they too look up and start waving, and the helicopter does a double take as the young men

flying it get a good look at the girls and circle back to hover over the pool where, above the roar of the engine, they try to get the girls' phone numbers, explaining that they are taking the statue to the Vatican and will be only too happy to return as soon as their mission is accomplished.

Buechner says when he saw the film, the audience laughed at that. There was the sacred statue dangling from the sky, on the one hand, and the profane young Italians and the bathing beauties on the other hand—the one made of stone, so remote, so out of place there in the sky on the end of its rope; the others made out of flesh, so bursting with life. Nobody in the audience had any doubt about which of the two came out ahead or at whose expense they were laughing. But then the helicopter continues on its way, and the great dome of St. Peter's looms up from below, and for the first time the camera starts to zoom in on the statue itself with its arms stretched out, until for a moment the screen is almost filled with just the bearded face of Christ. And at that moment no one in the theater laughed at all.

For a moment, not very long to be sure, there was no sound, as if the face were their face somehow, their secret face that they had never seen before but that they knew belonged to them, or the face that they had never seen before but that they knew, if only for a moment, they belonged to.

I think that is much of what Christian faith is. It is for a moment, just for a little while, seeing the face and being still; that is all.

Buechner goes on to talk about the birth of Christ and how those who see Jesus and believe in God are never quite the same. Then he concludes:

But what of those who both believe and do not believe, cannot believe—which is some men all of the time and all men some of the time? The statue with its outstretched arms hovers in the sky, the still face looks down, and they recognize the face and call its name. They wave and go running a little way along the uneven ground beneath it.

... For them, too, the believing unbelievers, nothing is ever quite the same again either, because what they have seen and heard in that moment of stillness is, just possibly, possibly, the hope of the world. And what they feel in their hearts as they wave—maybe only with one hand, a little wave, not very certain but with his name on their lips—is the stirring of new life, new courage, new gladness seeking to be born in them even as he is born, if only they too, we too, the wide world too, will stretch out our arms to those arms and raise our empty faces to that bewildering face. (*The Hungering Dark* 11-13, 15)

Have you caught a glimpse of God's face shining, smiling on you, looking at you with compassion and affection and regard? Look at God's face and find blessing, care, grace and peace. I wonder if Paul had this in mind when he began nearly all his letters with, "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Grace and peace go together. When we receive grace we also find peace. Open your heart, receive the gift God offers today. Be blessed. And remember that, like Abraham, we are blessed to be a blessing.