

## Message – 25<sup>th</sup> June 2023 ‘We are a blessed people’

I imagine to most of us, the words of Numbers 6:22-27 are familiar. We often hear them as a final blessing in our services

““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 towards you and give you peace.””

Those words are beautiful and meaningful in their own right. However, we are going to dig into the original language a little and hopefully try and understand the way it was meant in its fullness. I also hope that we can understand better what it is to be a blessed person.

First of all, God instructs Moses to tell Aaron to bless the people. What does it mean to bless someone?

In this country, we say bless you as a phrase when someone has sneezed, this is probably from the time of the great plague in response to potential symptoms. We say bless you to show warm feelings for somebody because of something they have done. We say that someone is blessed when they have something good such as ability of great happiness for example I’ve been blessed with good health. In faith circles, the words God bless you are said to ask God to look favourably on a person or situation.

The Hebrew word to bless is barak and it literally means

*to kneel before someone and to give to them something that the giver deems valuable.*

Let’s just imagine what that looks like in the context of the passage. God kneels before the Israelites who have already betrayed him at the foot of Mt. Sinai when they made the golden calf. They have already grumbled against Moses and God.

God knows they will grumble again...and again.

Even so, God instructs Moses to tell his brother Aaron to offer the Israelites this blessing.

Staying with the original language - In Hebrew culture, when something is repeated three times it demonstrates that

Once is good.

Twice is better.

Three times is the best.

Notice that in this blessing, the name of God is repeated three times, indicating that it was a blessing of the Triune God. It mirrors the same richness of blessing found at the very end of the book of 2nd Corinthians.

1. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.
2. The love of God.
3. The fellowship of the Holy Spirit

The blessing has three lines and each line crescendos from good, to better, to best.

Line one establishes the base line of blessing for the Israelites. The Lord bless you and keep you. "The Lord bless thee." If God is kneeling in front of them, offering them something that is valuable, it suggests to me that this is a response to an intimate and personal need.

He is God who offers to keep or protect them from the power of evil and fear of humans. He keeps them by offering us his presence.

This is God who blesses and promises to protect/keep like a shepherd keeps sheep. This is the first line. This is good.

Line two gets a little louder – the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;

God's face shines on the people. God is their light. Not only that, but God will be gracious to them, offering them unmerited favour.

The first line remains and is good, but with this addition it's better.

Line three: the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace."

In some translations we hear the word countenance. This word still means face but we have a little more detail in that we can see God's expression the way he looks at us. Not only does God's face shine on the people, He lifts up His face to them. For a king to lift up, or look upon, someone was to show that that person is received by the king and safe.

Then comes the grand crescendo. God's ultimate gift and vision for a preferred and promised future is one of Shalom, the Hebrew word for peace. This is the best!

Anyone who believes in the name of Jesus is part of God's family and so this blessing is for us as individuals today and as a church.

So then if we accept the blessing offered what does that mean. Should we expect the good life - A loving marriage, obedient children, a vibrant ministry, a healthy body, a successful career, trusted friends, financial abundance — if these are the characteristics of a blessed life, then surely having all of them should translate into an extraordinarily blessed life.

But does it? If someone had all those things, would they be extraordinarily blessed?

But, Rather than turning to God, they might feel self-sufficient and proud. Perhaps a bit smug and self-righteous. After all, it would be their hard work that would be producing all these good things.

Moreover, they wouldn't need to cry out to God for deliverance; everything would already be perfect. They wouldn't need to trust God; they could trust in themselves. They wouldn't need God to fill them; they would already be satisfied.

My desire for God is fuelled by my need. And it is in the areas of loss where I feel my need for God the most. Unmet desires urge me to pray and flick through my Bible looking for God's promises that are underlined.

The thing about Earthly blessings, they are temporary; they can all be lost

It is in the midst of my most painful events and losses that I have experienced God's richest blessings. An awakening of my faith, A sense of being held. A more intimate walk with my companion Jesus than I could explain. My trials have and will make me depend on God in ways that prosperity and abundance never could.

Although Suffering and trials are not blessings in themselves, they are channels for God's grace."

This revolutionary idea of blessing is also firmly established in Scripture.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit. . . . Blessed are those who mourn. . . . Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness 'sake . . . Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you."  
(Matthew 5:3-4, 10-11)

Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven. (Romans 4:7; quoting Psalm 32:1)

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial. (James 1:12)

There is no hint of material prosperity or perfect circumstances in any bible reference. Instead blessing is typically connected with either poverty and trial or the spiritual benefits of being joined by faith to Jesus.

According to the Key-Word Study Bible, "The Greek word translated blessed in these passages is makarioi which means to be fully satisfied. It refers to those receiving God's favour, regardless of the circumstances" (emphasis added).

What is blessing, then? Scripture shows that blessing is anything God gives that makes us fully satisfied in him. Anything that draws us closer to Jesus. Anything that helps us relinquish the temporary and hold on more tightly to the eternal. And often it is the struggles and trials, the aching disappointments and the unfulfilled longings that best enable us to do that.

Pain and loss transform us. While they sometimes unravel us, they can also push us to a deeper life with God than we ever thought possible. They make us rest in God alone. Not what we can do or achieve for him. And not what he can do or achieve for us.

In pain and loss, we long for Presence. We long to know that God is for us and with us and in us. Families, financial wealth, and good health are all wonderful gifts we can thank God for, but they are not his greatest blessings. They may make us delight, not in God, but in his gifts.

God's greatest blessing always rests in God himself. When we have that, we are truly blessed.

At the end of the reading in numbers we read 'So they (that is the priests) shall put my name on the Israeli ties and I will bless them.' This blessing writes God's name on the people. God claims them as God's own.

No matter how far they may stray. No matter how dark the place is that they find themselves when they turn away from God, they will be found. God's name is there and it says, "return to owner."

This blessing is the very heart of the Gospel. God created and continually brings all things into being out of love and for the purpose of loving interdependence, relationship, and true peace. That is what the Garden of Eden represented. It is God's ultimate vision for creation, no matter how long it takes to get there.