

Berakhot

Numbers 6:22-27 | Psalm 1 | Ephesians 1:3-6 | Matthew 5:1-12

NUMBERS 6:22-27

²² The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ²³ Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them, ²⁴ The LORD bless you and keep you; ²⁵ the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; ²⁶ the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. ²⁷ So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.

INTRODUCTION

There once was a man down at the racetrack, passing the day, betting on horses. Over the first few races, this man had not done well. Just as he was going to place a bet, he noticed a priest enter the stalls and, to his great surprise, bless one of the horses, making the sign of the cross. Deciding to take a chance, he placed his bet on that horse. The horse—a longshot—won the race, much to the man’s delight. He pocketed his winnings and watched again and again, as the priest chose a horse, administered a blessing, and the horse won. Each time the man increased his bet. The final race of the day came, and the man watched as the priest, once again, made the sign of the cross on a rather elderly and feeble-looking horse. Confident as ever, the man emptied his bank account at the cash machine and maxed out his credit cards betting on this horse. The buzzer rang and the horses bolted. And the man stared dumbfounded as this horse—this horse on which he’d bet every cent to his name—hobbled along in last place. The race came to an end and the man ran down to the track and confronted the priest: ‘Father! Father! What in the world happened? Every horse you blessed, all day long, won. But this last horse? What happened? I’ve lost everything!’ The priest, after a moment’s silence, and with a sympathetic look in his eyes, said: ‘My son, you need to learn the difference between a blessing and the last rites.’¹

Blessing is a complicated thing, but something worthy of some attention. And if you haven’t guessed already, we’ll be taking a look at the idea of blessing today, focusing on the Numbers 6:22-27 reading. And what a year to be talking about blessing! Yet, as we draw 2020 to a close—a year in which even Netflix produced a movie called “2020 Must Die”—I think blessing is something we should seek to understand better. It’s something we may have taken for granted. It’s something—as this passage demonstrates—that should encourage us in our faith. And so, let’s take a look at the biblical concept of blessing, especially as it is found here in probably the most famous blessing in the Bible. We’ll do so in two ways—first looking at the concept of blessing as we find it through the Scriptures, and then taking a look at the particulars of this Aaronic blessing. Let’s begin.

1. WHAT IS A BLESSING?

The first question for us this afternoon is this: What is a blessing? We might consider it in practical terms, for example. Very simply, it is a pronouncement or prayer of God’s favour or protection. It can range from, for example, any person thanking God for the provision of food before a meal—we call that a blessing—to a member of the clergy making a particular, even formulaic, statement of God’s favour on a whole church. In that sense, the theological concept of blessing can be quite wide. It might be helpful to think of blessing in a couple categories:

¹ This is a variation on an old joke. Origin unknown.

invocative and constitutive. An *invocative blessing* is when someone invokes—that is requests or recognizes—God’s favour in a situation or for a particular purpose. So, we can thank God for a meal, or bless a neighbour with Christmas cookies in the name of our Lord, or even be a blessing to someone in rather ordinary ways. Anyone can do these things—and should. A *constitutive blessing*, however, signifies the sanctification or dedication of someone or something for a sacred purpose, and so, attempts to change its spiritual state. So, whether it is blessing a home, or blessing the bread at Holy Communion (as Jesus did in the Gospels)—this kind of blessing signifies a change in spiritual condition. And as such, in our tradition, it is only done by the rightly ordered and appointed leader, our Bishop, and those whom he appoints to represent him (our priests). It is worth noting at this point, that in a specifically Christian sense of the concept of blessing, it is God who blesses. Not us. We may recognize, declare, request, and even be God’s blessing—but it is “the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” not us, that is being referenced.² And so, while a practical understanding of blessing in both a very general and specifically liturgical sense is hopefully clear at this point, it is for this reason that we must also consider the biblical background of blessing as well. It is because it is God’s blessing, not ours, that is important.

In particular, I want us to consider the blessing of people. And for this, we consider the first appearance of the term back in Genesis 1—*barak*, just the like the name of the previous American President—and the Hebrew concept of blessing or *berakhot*. In Creation, three times (days 5-7), God blesses the animals of the water and air, and then human beings, and finally the seventh day itself.³ Later, in chapter 9, God blesses Noah and his family.⁴ Just a few chapters after that, in chapter 12, amid the instituting of the Abrahamic Covenant, God promises blessing for Abram and all his descendants.⁵ In other words, the goodness of Creation and setting it aside for God’s use and the establishing of God’s people, and setting them aside for God’s use, according to Covenants with God, is the basis for blessing. The Mosaic and Levitical laws, established over the next few books, affirm this concept—those who keep covenant with God, those who live according to his ways, will receive his blessing (in contrast to the curses found alongside the blessings enumerated in places like Deuteronomy 28).⁶ This is also affirmed in the Davidic Covenant, in which the blessing of his Servant’s house is promised forever.⁷

This is very important—God’s blessing isn’t dispensed indiscriminately. It is for his people and it is tied to faithfulness and obedience. That is, we don’t set the terms of God’s blessing upon us, he does. As we learn later in the Wisdom literature, especially Job and Ecclesiastes, this means that God’s blessing isn’t transactional. This is no works-righteousness nor is it a prosperity gospel. You don’t get blessed in this life just because you’re faithful (anymore than those who aren’t God’s people won’t experience prosperity), nor do you earn God’s blessing through obedience and keeping the Law. Rather, we obey and remain faithful because we are confident in God’s blessing to come. In other words, we are set aside for sacred use—we are blessed in that sense—first in our behaviour—with the hope of being blessed in the material sense later—in the gift of eternal life with God.

² The Archbishop’s Council 2000, *Common Worship* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), 183.

³ Gen 1:22, 28, and 2:3.

⁴ Gen 9:1.

⁵ Gen 12:2-3.

⁶ See also Lev 26:1-46

⁷ 2 Sam 7:29.

I know that just got a little heady and theological, so let's be specific. What is the nature of this blessing? For this, we turn to one of the oldest and most well-known of the biblical blessings, one that has been used liturgically both by Jews and Christians for as long as either group have existed as such. It is that blessing we heard earlier, the Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6:22-27.

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

WHAT IS THIS PARTICULAR BLESSING?

On the surface, this blessing is simple. We've probably each heard it a thousand times, and yet, it is worth digging into a bit. There is the three-fold reference to the Lord—*Yahweh*—which is grammatically unnecessary, though an intentional reminder, I think, of from where blessings come. The blessing is structured as three pairs of petitions—asking God to bless his people in three particular ways. And I want to focus in, briefly, on what is specifically being referenced—four items in particular: being kept, the Lord's face, grace, and peace.

- *The Lord keep you.* This phrase speaks of the Lord's protection in particular. In Psalm 121, we hear of the Lord as one who keeps: "*The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and for evermore.*"⁸ The Lord protects his people, metaphorically from the sun and moon, and from evil. He keeps your life. And how? In the New Testament, this is expressed in terms of being kept for Jesus. In Jude: "*To those who are called, who are beloved in God the Father and kept safe for Jesus Christ.*"⁹ The Aaronic blessing is, first, a declaration of hope that God will keep us safe.
- *The Lord be gracious to you.* May God show us his grace—may he deliver us from trouble—trouble we deserve for our sin, and deliverance we don't deserve. This is the essence of grace—the unwarranted favour of God. It is the opposite of *karma*, the notion that we get what we deserve. Paul puts it like this in his second letter to Timothy: God "*saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*"¹⁰ The Aaronic blessing recognizes that the blessing is unmerited.
- *The Lord make his face shine upon you and lift up his countenance upon you.* The double reference to God's face here is important—and it has to do with a reading we heard in Morning Prayer on Tuesday. You may remember when Moses was on Mount Sinai, in Exodus 33, and he asked God to show him his glory. The Lord obliges, saying: "*I will make all my goodness pass before you... But, you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and*

⁸ Psa 121:5-8.

⁹ Jude 2.

¹⁰ 2 Tim 1:9-10.

*live.*¹¹ The Aaronic blessing hopes for something that even Moses did not get, a glimpse of the glory of God in the form of profound intimacy, seeing God face-to-face. May God know us so well that we come to know his face, and he looks benevolently upon us. Paul puts it like this in his first letter to the Corinthians: *“For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”*¹² And the final phrase:

- *The Lord give you peace.* This notion—peace—means much more than the absence of conflict or war in the Old Testament. Peace—*shalom*—is the presence of well-being, health, prosperity, and even salvation. It is the fullness of God’s gifts to his people—that they may experience his peace. Ultimately, this peace is provided by Christ Jesus—through his death and resurrection. For we are not at peace with God, apart from Christ’s intervention. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, puts it like this: *“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.”*¹³ In the end, the Aaronic blessing culminates in hope of peace with God.

CONCLUSION

As I begin to conclude, I want to try to summarize what we’ve seen. Blessing comes from God, is undeserved and yet is given according to his covenantal terms, ultimately being realised in the gospel itself—the blessing of eternal life and peace with God only possible through the mediation of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. And so, ours is to declare the blessing of God, to request it, to hope for it, and even in a year like this one—to enjoy it. For the ritual act of blessing and the daily presence of words of blessing point us to our God—who is far bigger than anything this year could throw at us, and far bigger than anything yet to come. So, as we look to 2021, may we find it to be the year of the Lord’s blessing, always remembering those words of the doxology: *“Praise God, from whom all blessings flow.”*¹⁴

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, we thank you for sending your Son, that through his sacrifice, we find eternal blessing in you. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

¹¹ Exod 33:12-23. The cited text comes from verses 19-20.

¹² 1 Cor 13:12.

¹³ Rom 5:1-2.

¹⁴ Thomas Ken, "Awake, My Soul, and With the Sun," 1674.