RECIPIENTS OF GOD'S BLESSING
Numbers 6:22-27

Let's pray – Father God, creator of heaven of earth, you have blessed us with so many good things in this world. In fact, the Bible tells us that every good and perfect gifts comes from you. So we thank you for the many blessings we have already received. And we ask that you open our minds and hearts now to understand more fully what it means to be recipients of your blessing and grace. In Jesus' name. Amen.

INTRODUCTION – Why the priestly blessing?

As I was praying about what to preach on today, the words of the priestly blessing from Numbers 6 came to mind. These words will be familiar to many of you because most Sunday's I end our worship service using these words of blessing for our benediction.

As I reflected on why the Lord might have brought this passage to mind specifically for today's sermon, I thought of 2 reasons.

First, we celebrated America's 250th birthday yesterday. A common part of July 4th celebrations is to say or sing the phrase, "God bless America." We sang those words just a few minutes ago. Asking for God's blessing is a normal thing believer's do around birthday celebrations. **Whether it is our country's birthday or a loved one's birthday, we often ask for God's blessing on those who have made it to another birthday.**

The second reason it seemed appropriate to preach on these verses is because in a few minutes we are going to be saying goodbye to a member of our congregation: David Fernandez Valbueno. David has been part of our church for over 2 years and in just a few days he will be leaving us to go home to his family in Columbia.

Besides birthday celebrations, goodbyes are another common time when as believers, we ask for God's blessing on a loved one. At the end of the message today, we're going to give David a few minutes to say his goodbyes to us, and then we will gather around him as a church and lay hands on him and ask God to watch over him, protect him as he travels, and bless him as he is reunited with his family.

So, given the 2 specific contexts of America's 250th birthday and David's upcoming departure, it makes sense to me that this passage came to mind as I was praying about what to preach on today.

So, let's look at our Scripture passage now. It is found in Numbers 6: 22-27.

Numbers 6: 22-27.
6 **22** The Lord said to Moses, 23 “Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

24 “‘“The Lord bless you
and keep you;
25 the Lord make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
26 the Lord turn his face toward you
and give you peace.”’
27 “So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”

Did you notice who initiated this blessing?

Was it Aaron? No. Was it Moses? No! Who initiated it? **God did!**

Verse 22 tells us that the Lord spoke to Moses and instructed him to teach Aaron and his sons (who were the Levitical priests) how to bless the Israelites.

What does that mean? It means **we worship a God who wants to bless us.**

We see this all the way back in the creation account. When God was creating the world, he paused 3 times to speak a blessing over what he had made. On day 5 He blessed the sea creatures and the winged birds (Gen 1:22). On day 6 He blessed the humans (Gen. 1:28). And then he blessed the 7th day and made it holy because he on the 7th day he rested from all the work of creating he had done.

This 3-fold blessing in the creation account reveals to us from the beginning that **it is part of God’s nature to bless what he created.**

That means we don’t have to bargain with God, we don’t have to bribe God, we don’t have to twist his arm to try and get him to do something nice for us.

We don’t have to say, “God, if you do this for me, then I’ll do that for you.” Or, “God, if you do this for me, I’ll stop doing this.”

God takes the initiative in generously and freely giving us his blessing.

That’s why God told Moses to tell Aaron and his sons to bless the people of Israel. We serve a God who desires to bless us.

But were the priests just to make up whatever blessing they wanted?

No. That's why the Lord said to Moses: 23 "Tell Aaron and his sons, 'This is how you are to bless the Israelites

God gave Moses the script, a divine formula, that he would teach Aaron and his sons for how the priests were to bless the people.

Why couldn't the priests just make up whatever they wanted?

Why couldn't they just say something like: "I bless you with a thousand head of cattle." Or "I bless you with good health and lots of wealth." Or "I bless you with victory over all your enemies."

The reason is because true blessings originate with and belong to God. They help to accomplish God's purposes in our lives. The priests were simply the conduit for speaking the words of God's blessing upon the people. They were not the originators of the blessing.

By giving the priests the exact wording, God ensured that in good times and hard times the Israelites would hear a consistent message of truth about who God is and what he wanted to do for them. They would learn that he is a God who wants to be with them and show them favor and protect them and give them peace.

Even though blessings are for us, they are not about us. They are about God, and what God wants to do for us. They reveal God's heart to us. By following the divine script, the priests ensured that God's will was being presented, not their own will.

We can think of the blessing in Numbers 6 a bit like the Lord's prayer in the New Testament. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he gave them a pattern they could follow when they didn't know how to begin.

But the template also revealed God's priority for our lives. For example, by teaching us to address God as "Our Father," Jesus was helping us to understand God's heart for intimacy and familial relationship with him. By saying, "Hallowed be your name," Jesus was showing us God's holiness, and how we are to honor him and respect him.

By praying, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," Jeus was highlighting the importance of submitting to the rule and reign and authority of God.

By having us ask God to "give us this day our daily bread," Jesus revealed God as the one who provides for and sustains our life.

By teaching us to ask for forgiveness of our debts even as we forgive our debtors shows how God values mercy, and grace and love over hatred or resentment and revenge.

In a similar way, even as the blessing we find in Numbers 6 serves as the template for the priestly blessing, it also reveals some important things about God and our relationship with Him.

Verse 23 and 27 say that this blessing is for the people of Israel, the whole community. However, the pronouns for "you" are singular. We can understand it this way – The Lord blesses the community by blessing the individuals in the community. And the Lord blesses the individuals by blessing the corporate community.

Another way to understand this is that in the crowd of over 2 million Israelite people alive when this blessing was given, God saw each one individually. "And God sees you. God knows you intimately, cares for you individually and blesses you personally." (Read this somewhere and it stuck with me.)

Let's listen to blessing God scripted again:

24 ""The Lord bless you
and keep you;
25 the Lord make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
26 the Lord turn his face toward you
and give you peace."'
27 "So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them."

In Hebrew, the blessing reads like a poem. It has 3 lines and each line has 2 parts, so there is really a total of 6 parts we want to discuss. Each line starts with divine activity, something God wants to do for us, and ends with some kind of spiritual benefit to the recipient.

Let's look at each part now and see what we learn.

<u>Part 1 – The Lord bless you and keep you. This is the blessing of God's provision and protection. Let's take it one segment at a time.</u>

<u>a. The Lord Bless You.</u>

A blessing is a gift. It might include things like health, relationships, children, jobs, finances, land, property, success.

So, the priestly blessing opens with an invocation for God to supply all the external stuff that we need for life on this earth.

This is the equivalent of the line from the Lord's prayer where Jesus taught us to ask God, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matt 6:11).

It's also like what Psalm 23 says: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters." Sheep need food and rest to be healthy. A shepherd provides these things for the sheep.

As our good shepherd, God knows we need stuff to live too – food, clothing, shelter – He cares about those necessities, that's why he instructed the priests to pray for God's blessings. But sheep also need protection from predators. They can't lie down in green pastures unless the shepherd watches over them to keep them safe. Otherwise a wolf might sneak up on the flock in the middle of the night and have one of the sheep as a tasty midnight snack.

That brings us to part 2 of the first line of the blessing. The Lord who blesses you will also keep you.

b. and keep you.

The text doesn't elaborate on what God is keeping us from. But we can infer that the Lord will keep us safe from everything that comes against God's blessing in our life.

Psalm 121:5-8 supports this. There we read:

The Lord watches over you—
the Lord is your shade at your right hand;
6 the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.

7 The Lord will keep you from all harm—
he will watch over your life;
8 the Lord will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore.

What is God keeping his people from? Anything that would harm them. The God who provides, also protects. The God who gives also guards.

There's a funny and powerful story told in Numbers 22 – 24. Balak of Moab tried to hire the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelite people. But every time Balaam wanted to open his mouth to try and curse them, the Lord made him bless the people of Israel instead. This would be a clear example of the Lord keeping his people from harm.

Part of the way we experience God's blessing is through his protection. We might not ever know all that he has kept us from. But certainly, the Lord has kept us.

- The Lord has kept us from losing our job and being unemployed.
- The Lord has kept from being sick or getting sicker
- The Lord has kept us from accidents
- The Lord has kept us from sleeping on the streets

- The Lord might have even kept us from divorce court.

[This whole section above, starting with "b. And Keep You" is adapted from H.B. Charles Jr.]

The most profound way God keeps us safe is by being present with us.

When I was a child growing up in Hong Kong my family lived in a village. There was a pack of village dogs that would run out and bark fiercely at us often when we were walking up the hill to our home. If I was alone, I was terrified. But when my dad was with me, I didn't fear. He was much bigger than me. And, in order to protect me, he would run at the dogs, yelling and pretending like he was going to throw rocks at them, and they would run away and leave us alone, or at least not come any closer. My dad's presence with me kept me safe.

"The Lord bless you and keep you," is not just a blessing for material wealth and external stuff, but it is the blessing of God's very self to guard, protect, preserve and watch over (or, "keep") his children. It is his presence with us that keeps us safe.

This leads nicely into the second line of the blessing.

2. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you – This is the blessing of relationship and the unmerited favor that comes from it.

This week I read a story written by a pastor named Don Wick, at the time of his retirement. I'm going to read directly from the sermon he wrote as he reflected on this blessing. He said:

"I was at the Cleveland airport recently to meet a faculty candidate who was arriving for an interview in our department. While waiting for him, I watched two women who were eagerly anticipating the arrival of some loved ones. One was going to hide behind a pillar to surprise the passengers. Eventually, a young couple came down the escalator into the baggage area and these two women jumped out and welcomed their friends and there was much laughter and many smiles and hugs between the parties involved.

When I met my arrivee, we shook hands and I welcomed him, but there were no hugs, no beaming, because ours was a new and business relationship, an acquaintanceship only, not a deep personal relationship.

God beams when He sees us coming to Him. His face shines upon us. He graciously welcomes us into His presence. This is what I want you to experience in your walk with God – His warm grace. Grace is favor. I pray that you will enjoy the favor of a loving relationship with God and find opportunity to introduce others to such a relationship also" *[Don Wick – Blog].*

What I personally think of when I read this blessing, is the picture on your bulletin cover, and now being projected onto the screen. It's the picture of a smiling and radiant parent looking lovingly at their child, beaming with love. That love is God's grace to us.

Did you know that God loves to smile on you? Perhaps you think he looks with displeasure on you or turns an angry face to you. That might be what we deserve when we do wrong things. But that's not what God wants for us.

The Bible does say that our sins separate us from God. But it also says that if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

If there is something you've done wrong, an area where you have messed up, confess it to Him, ask for his forgiveness, so he can scoop you up in his arms and beam at you.

The Lord is merciful and gracious with us. He loves us so much that he came into the world to die for us, so that we could be restored to right relationship with Him. (John 3:16) We didn't deserve it, but he did it anyway. That is the blessing of his graciousness with us. He doesn't treat us the way our sins deserve.

There is a Dennis the Menance comic strip where Dennis is walking away from Mrs. Wilson's house holding some cookies. His friend asks what they did to deserve the cookies. Dennis replies, "Mrs. Wilson didn't give us the cookies because we are good. She did it because she is good!" *[HB Charles Jr.]*

This leads us to the 3rd and final line of the priestly blessing.

3. The Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace – This is a blessing that brings an inward state of peace.

I remember as a child, wanting my mom to look at me doing things. For example, when I was learning to dive from a diving board into the swimming pool. Look Mom, Look at me mom. See what I can do.

In a similar way, when my children were little, they also asked me to look at them when they are doing something cool. "Look at me, mommy. Look, Mommy. Look at me."

For lack of a better word, I call this the "Look at me" part of the blessing. Before we even have to ask God to look at us and notice us, he has promised to turn his face towards us and see us. He has promised to look at us, not with the sideways glance of someone who is terribly busy, but with the attention and affection that a full on turn of the face gives.

God sees you. He sees your joys, he sees your struggles. He sees when you get it right and he sees when you need a little more practice mastering something. He sees

when you are hurting and need comfort and he sees when you need encouragement. He is attentive to your needs.

That's why Philippians 4:6-7 says:

6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. **7** And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Peace is not the absence of conflict or hardship in life. It is the presence of something positive. It is having a sense of God's presence with us even when we go through the trials and difficulties that life brings.

God's blessing upon us does not mean that we will never face hardship. It means we won't go through them alone.

God's blessing upon us doesn't mean we won't ever die. All of us die at some point because all of us have sinned. But if we die in the Lord, we have the hope of heaven and eternity with Him.

If we turn towards God now in this life, even as He turns towards us, we will go through life under his watchful eye and with His presence to guard us, guide us and comfort us on the way.

CONCLUSION – When God Puts His Name on You

When the Lord spoke to Moses and instructed him to teach Aaron and his sons how to bless the people of Israel, he revealed the kind of God He is. A God who loves to bless his children with good things, even His very presence.

God promised that when the priests played their part and followed the script God himself had written, pronouncing these words of blessing over them, then God would put his name on the Israelites, and he would bless them.

"So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them." (verse 27)

What does it mean to have someone's name on you? If you've ever watched Toy Story, it's like what Andy did with his little doll Woody in movie. He got out a pen and wrote his name Andy on his toy. He wrote his name on the sole of Woody's boot to show that Woody belonged to him.

If you have come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ then you have the name of the Lord written on you.

Now at some point in the story, and there are multiple Toy Story movies and I can't quite remember which movie this happened in. Maybe the 2nd one. A toy collector picks up Woody, and in effort to restore him to a more pristine condition, he sows up the rips in Woody's clothes and he paints over Andy's name.

Sometimes in life we might feel like we don't deserve to have God's name written on us. We've done something, or there is something in our past, and maybe we feel like we need to paint over God's name.

At some point in the story, Woody and Andy are re-united and Andy scrapes the paint off to reveal that yes, this is my doll, this is my toy, this is my Woody.

God does the same for us. There is no paint, there is no sin, there is no thing you have done that can ever completely cover the Lord's name on you. He will wash it all away when you come to him and ask for forgiveness. *[Taken from Calvary Chapel Youtube Devotional Series]*

When God puts his name on us, it shows we belong to him. And when we belong to God, all the blessings he has for his people are ours as well. 2 Corinthians 1:20 tells us that in Christ all God's promises are yes and amen.

I read a story by a man named H.B. Charles. He illustrates this point this way. He said -

> H.B. Charles Jr.
>
> As my wife and children were traveling, I saw a picture of them eating breakfast on the plane. When they landed, I fussed at my wife for taking my SkyMiles to upgrade her and the kids. She said she didn't do it. "You did it," she said, "When you named my son, H.B." When he checked in, they thought he was me. They gave him TSA pre-check. He was upgraded to first class. And they all were upgraded with him, because he has my [his father's] name. This is what happens when you run to the cross and put your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

He puts his name on you and all the blessings that are his, become yours as a result.

Many people have a lot of good things. A lot of external blessings, a lot of wealth, especially here in the Bay Area. But many of those people don't live with peace. There's a lot of anxiety and depression and internal struggles.

The true blessing is God's presence with us and the peace that comes from relationship with Him. That blessing is about an inner contentment and an inner strength that allows us to weather the storms of life. It's not an easy thing, being able to trust God in times of anxiety, fear and uncertainty.

All of us face challenges. All of us have struggles. We can do life with or without the blessing of the Lord. Which path will you take today?

Let's Pray: Lord, you have blessed us so richly. Thank you for the blessing you gave Moses to give to Aaron to teach his children and eventually pass on to us. Thank you for all that it means for us. Will you help us to live into your blessing in a new and real way. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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BENEDICTION:

Numbers 6

24 "'The Lord bless you and keep you;
25 the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;
26 the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.'