

Right around 2014 #blessed took the Instagram world by storm. People were so obsessed with the hashtag it was printed on t-shirts, sunglasses, and water bottles. But some people don't really understand the meaning of blessed and annoyingly ruined the epic hashtag for the rest of us. What happened is there was tendency to post pictures of yourself at exclusive parties, wearing expensive outfits, or relaxing on luxurious vacations, but trying not to be obnoxious about it by acknowledging that you're #blessed. Thus, no one could possibly condemn you for boasting. One person wrote, "It's fine to acknowledge you're #blessed because you have amazing friends who support you or you find yourself in any other situation that would actually deem you blessed. However, you're not partying in the VIP section of the Four Seasons at Cannes because you're #blessed. You're there because you're rich, you have connections, or you just decided to splurge one night."

One thing is clear from all of this—we often misunderstand what it really means to be blessed. Today we are starting a new series where we're going to look at several blessings in the Bible. And we're going to learn what it really means to be blessed.

Blessings in the Bible

Both blessings and curses were common in the ancient world. They were seen to have a power all their own, which would result in their fulfillment, almost like a magical incantation. But in the Bible, blessings are different. The Biblical writers understood blessing as a declaration of how God acts toward people and sometimes even things.

It started way back at creation. In Genesis 1 we're told after God created mankind in his image he "*blessed them...*" and told them to be fruitful and multiply (1:28). And on the seventh day, after God rested from all his work, it says, "*Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy...*" (2:3). The idea is God favors, delights in, and invests worth and meaning into that which he blesses.

It's not just wishing well for someone; it is more than that. When God blesses us in some way, he's committed to making it happen in our lives. In Genesis 12 God calls Abram, a wandering, Middle Eastern nomad. God says to him, "*I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing*" (Gen. 12:2). God's blessing on Abram meant he was committed to making his descendants into a great nation and making him a blessing to many. It wasn't a wish for Abram, but a commitment to make it happen.

This idea of blessing also played a major part in the story of Abraham's grandson, Jacob. In that culture, the blessing was given to the oldest son, which meant he received a larger portion of the inheritance. Remember Rebecca gave birth to twins with Esau born first and then Jacob. But before they were born, God determined Jacob would receive the blessing and not his older brother. As he grew up, it was clear Esau was his father's favorite. Jacob was so needy for this blessing he resorted to trickery and deceit to get what God planned for him to have all along. When you read the story of Jacob, it becomes clear that we all long to be blessed by someone else, someone important to us. Remember how much later Jacob wrestled with the angel of the Lord all night long, and said, "*I will not let you go unless you bless me*" (Genesis 32:26b). You see, we can't bless ourselves. Sometimes people tell us, "Don't worry about what other people think of you. All that matters is what you think of you." But that's a crock; that never works because we're social beings. We all desperately need to be blessed by someone outside of ourselves.

Ben Kingsley, the Academy-Award winning actor who starred in *Schindler's List* and *Gandhi*, has shared about how he lacked this blessing from his own parents. As a child, he attended an elite grammar school in the expectation he'd go to medical school like his father and brother, but he wanted to be an actor. In a recent interview, he said, "I remember my father referring to me as 'our little Danny Kaye' when I was about seven. That was the only remotely positive comment I remember from them. They never praised me or acknowledged a gram of talent in me. Their way was to mock—'when are you going to finish with this acting lark,' that sort of thing. My mother, far from being proud, was very jealous of my success."

In 2002, Kingsley was knighted by the Queen of England—an event he still talks about glowingly. In the same interview, he said, "I told you about my parents, and the fact that any kind of embrace was totally absent from my life. So to be embraced by Her Majesty ... I felt like stopping people in the street, saying my [mom] loves me, you know. Because that's what it felt like, to me—the filling of a vacuum in the universe." We all have that vacuum. We all need to be blessed by someone other than ourselves.

Even Jesus did. You see that at his baptism. Remember what happened? Jesus went down into the water, and when he came up, he heard the voice of his Father who said, "*You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased*" (Mark 1:11). Although

the word “bless” isn’t used there, it’s clear that’s what’s happening. God the Father is delighting in and blessing his Son, and the Son would go and serve others knowing he had that blessing.

The Benediction of Israel

Well, today we’re going to look at what is perhaps the oldest formal blessing in the Bible. It’s sometimes called a “benediction.” That comes from a Latin word meaning “good word.” This blessing or benediction is found way back in the book of Numbers. The book of Numbers is all about Israel and their wanderings in the desert. In fact, the Jewish people called this book, *“In the desert.”* These were the days of Moses, and one of the things that happened in the desert was Moses went up on Mt. Sinai and met with God. God gave him things like the Ten Commandments and all the instructions about the tabernacle, the sacrifices, and how to worship God. One day, while Moses was up there, God said this to him,

“Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to 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.””

“So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”

(Numbers 6:22–27)

That is the benediction of Israel, given by God to Moses who then passed it on to Israel’s priests, the sons of Aaron. By the way, this benediction has quite a history. In 1979 a guy named Gabriel Barkay was digging in some caves near Jerusalem and discovered two tiny silver scrolls dating from the late seventh century BC. When the two scrolls were unrolled, they found this benediction inscribed in the silver. And this is the earliest occurrence we have of a Biblical text in an extra-Biblical document, even earlier than the Dead Sea Scrolls. It’s also the oldest extra-Biblical reference to YHWH, the God of Israel.

Something else fascinating about this benediction is its structure. The first line has three Hebrew words, the second line has five words, and the third line has seven words. There are 15 total words, but, if the three instances of “Yahweh” are removed, 12 words remain, which would be one word for each of the tribes of Israel.

Now what I want to do with this benediction today is simply answer three questions: First, what is this blessing that’s actually given here? Second, how does this blessing come to us? And third, what difference does this blessing actually make in our lives?

What is this blessing?

Let’s look at the first question: What is this blessing? There are three things actually given and promised here, corresponding to the three lines. And by the way, they are all promises to us as individuals. The six “you” pronouns in this benediction are all singular, indicating they’re for individual people, not just Israel as a nation.

The first blessing is **God’s protection**. *“The Lord bless you and keep you.”* When God blesses his people, he keeps them. The word “keep” pictures a soldier alertly standing guard at his post. The Lord guards his people with great care. Imagine Yahweh standing guard. The Old Testament writers called him “the Lord of Hosts” (armies) who is sentinelled over us. He protects us, defends us, shields us and shelters us. I can’t help but think of what Jesus said, *“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand”* (John 10:27–28).

The second blessing is for **God’s favor**. *“The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you.”* In the ancient world, if your god shined his face on you, it meant you were recipients of his favor. In contrast, the ancient writers said that lack of favor was a result of god hiding his face. It’s like when you see a homeless person begging on the sidewalk, if you chose not to help them you turn your face from them, but if you want to help you look at their face. For God to shine his face on you means he’ll be gracious to you; he’ll show you favor.

The third blessing is for **God’s peace**. *“The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.”* Again, God’s face turns towards toward us, and he gives us his peace. “Peace” is the Jewish word, “Shalom,” which is more than the absence of conflict. Shalom is about wholeness, completeness; it’s about right relationship with God and people. Shalom is how an upside-down world is put right-side up. Jesus said, *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid”* (John 14:27).

That is the content of this blessing. It’s not going to exclusive parties, wearing expensive outfits, relaxing on luxurious vacations, or winning the Super Bowl. It’s God’s protection, his favor, and his peace. It’s interesting Paul begins most of his letters with a similar blessing: “grace and peace.” Why is that? Back to this benediction in Numbers, some people see a structure to the benediction where the first line is the summary, and the next two lines are an extrapolation of the summary. In other words, how does God bless you and keep you? He’s gracious to you, and he gives you peace. That could be the shortened to two words: grace and peace. So maybe Paul had the benediction of Israel in mind. It’s also interesting that Paul almost always adds these words: *“Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.”* Again, this blessing of the Old Covenant

God made with Israel is now given to the church under the New Covenant we have with God through Jesus.

And when you think about it, this is what we all long for, isn't it? We live in a dangerous world. We long to know whatever happens to us, God is standing guard over us. We also long to be accepted and favored by someone; to have someone who looks for our face in the school picture first. We long to know God's peace, his wholeness, his shalom, both within ourselves and in our relationships. The great thing is, that's what God wants for us. That's how good, gracious, and loving God is.

How do we get this blessing?

This leads to the second question: how do we get this blessing? The simple answer is it comes from the Lord, specifically from Yahweh, who's the subject of each verb in this blessing.

This raises an important question: How can a holy God bestow such favor on sinful people? It's like when Moses was up on Mt. Sinai, and he asked God to show him his glory. God said something to Moses, which is very significant. Let me paraphrase what God said in Exodus 33, "Sorry Moses, you can't see my face. No one can see me and live. Instead, I'll cover you with my hand until I've passed by. Then I'll remove my hand, and you'll just see my back, but my face can't be seen." Why did God say that? Because, just like all of us, Moses was a sinful man and sinful people cannot see the face of God and survive. So how can a holy God possibly say to us here in this blessing, "*My face will turn towards you and shine on you?*" How can he promise that?

The answer is found in when and to whom this blessing was actually given. You see, in the Old Testament, the priests daily offered sacrifices in the morning and evening. On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies twice with the blood of sin offerings. Having offered all the necessary sacrifices, he'd then come out to bless the people. He'd stand up, raise his hands, and say, "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace."

Make no mistake; this blessing was only given by the High Priest to the covenant people of Israel. Now let's think about this in the context of what we know about Jesus. Jesus is our High Priest who went into the Holy of Holies and offered a sacrifice for our sin. Unlike the priests before him, he didn't offer up a lamb or a goat; he offered himself. Not only that, he didn't have to do it day after day, year after year, but only once for all. And because of his sacrifice, he can raise his hands and speak this benediction over each and every one of us as an act of radical grace.

I saw something this week in the gospel of Luke I've never really noticed before. At the very end of Luke's gospel, after Jesus has been crucified and raised up, it says this, "*When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken*

up into heaven" (Luke 24:50–51). Jesus, our Great High Priest, who has paid for our sin and given us his righteousness, tearing open the veil so we could enter into the Holy of Holies and see the face of God, offers a blessing. I cannot help but wonder if it was this very blessing he gave them, "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace."

How do we get this blessing? We trust what Jesus did for us on the cross was enough. We give him our sin, and in exchange, we receive from him his righteousness. We stop trying to get this blessing on our own, and trust in his goodness and grace to bestow it on us.

How does this reshape our lives?

Third question: How does this change us? How does this reshape our lives? Look again at v. 27. After instructing Moses about the blessing, God says, "*So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.*" God says somehow this blessing will put his name on his people. You might say, through this blessing, he names us with his name. It's like when an orphan child is adopted, and she gets a new name. She's given the name of her father and mother.

When we're baptized, we are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He puts his name on us. And that completely reshapes our lives. We have a new sense of identity. We know who we are. We have a new sense of solidarity because we're not alone anymore. We're part of a family. We have a new sense of security. Nothing can happen to us to ever change our name again. And all of this changes us because we no longer have to look for those things in other places. We don't have to constantly seek for a sense of identity, solidarity, and security through the approval or the love of others. We are freed from all of that. We don't live from a deficit but from a surplus. We don't have to go around constantly trying to prove to ourselves and to others we're worthy of this blessing, we can rest in it. This is who we are; we bear his name. And one more thing it brings us—accountability. We represent his name to the world, and there's a responsibility in that. We need to live in ways, which reflect who he is.

So what do we do with this? Well, it starts with faith. There's an objective and a subjective aspect to this. When you hear this benediction, you have to believe it's yours. And, remember, we can believe it based on what our Great High Priest has done for us. When we believe this objective fact, we'll experience the joy of it in a subjective way. And this isn't something we just do once when we become a Christian; we do it every day. Every day we renew our minds with this truth, which is, God's face is turned towards us and shines on us because of the riches of his grace. Only then will we be able to live out of this blessing instead of seeking it from others. By the way, that's why the spiritual disciplines are

so important. We set aside time in our day to renew our minds. We come to church to renew our minds.

When we do this, two things will begin to happen. First, we will bless God. Do you know what the disciples did immediately after Jesus blessed them in Luke 24? It says, ***“Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God”*** (Luke 24:52–53). When you’re blessed by God, you just can’t stop blessing God, worshipping, and praising him. C.S. Lewis once called praise “inner health made audible.” He said that because when you know you had this blessing, your heart couldn’t help but overflow with praise to the One who gave it to you.

The second thing, which will happen, is we’ll bless others. When we know this blessing, when we understand his name is on us,

we’ll want to bring this blessing to others. We will know we’re tasked to go and live as God would live in the world. We receive his blessing to be a blessing. We’re even called to be a blessing to those who oppose us, hurt us, or insult us. Listen to what the apostle Peter wrote, ***“Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing”*** (1 Peter 3:9). Recently, I received what felt to be an insult, and my natural reaction was to defend myself and return insult with insult. But when I realize I’ve inherited a blessing, I don’t have to do that. I can give a blessing instead of returning an insult. Why? Because my heart is full, and my life doesn’t depend on what someone else thinks or does. I’ve been blessed to be a blessing.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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