

Numbers 6:22-27

²²The LORD told Moses ²³to speak to Aaron and to his sons and to tell them to bless the Israelites with these words:

²⁴The LORD bless you and keep you.

²⁵The LORD make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you.

²⁶The LORD look on you with favor
and give you peace.

²⁷In this way they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.

Blessing

I.

Fickle they were as a people. They had been excited to get out of their life of drudgery. It had seemed a hopeless life. There was really no future, they just plodded around at the same dead-end jobs day after day. There was little choice. Really, there was *no* choice; they *had* to continue.

On they labored. Laying bricks, baking bricks, collecting materials to form the bricks. It was an utterly hopeless existence. But what choice did they have? Men stood behind them with whips forcing them to continue at their tasks.

Along came a charismatic figure. He hadn't seen himself as a charismatic figure at first, but he inspired them—he gave them hope. Hopelessness faded and they suddenly expected everything to come up roses.

Pharaoh balked. Their lives got even worse, if that were possible. Fickle people that they were, they immediately turned from hope back to despair and began to complain bitterly.

Finally this Moses fellow prevailed. They were released from bondage and happily began the trek out of the country of their misery. One minute they were hopeful, the next this fickle group turned right back to despair when war machines were bearing down on them. Back to complaining and a lack of trust.

Moses stretched his hands over the Red Sea and the water stood up in walls, allowing them to pass through, while Pharaoh's army was drowned. Elation and jubilation returned. For a hot second.

A sequence of complaints and failures of trust in the God who had just shown them his unlimited might began. They complained about no food; they complained about no water; they complained about the food God miraculously provided them. Moses went up on Mt. Sinai to receive God's law for the people, and they turned to a Golden Calf of their own making.

The Bible History failures of the people of Israel go on and on and on.

II.

Fickle we are as a people. Could you see yourself in the examples I gave of the People of Israel as they prepared to leave Egypt and began the journey to the Promised Land?

Many of us feel our lives are drudgery as we plod to work day after day. It seems that nothing will change; that nothing *can* change. It feels as though you have little to no choice. So on you labor, whatever the task. Your existence feels hopeless. Though there are not literal slave drivers with whips standing behind you demanding that you continue, the choices in your life seem narrow to non-existent. You must continue in the path set before you. You need that income to survive. You need that job to continue, mind numbing though it might be, to sustain your housing payment and your car payment and your grocery bill.

With a little luck, there might be something left over for your retirement account.

When things seem to be going well, *perhaps* you remember to give thanks to God for your circumstances. More often, you give yourself a pat on the back for all your wisdom and ability to take the bull by the horns and make something of yourself—to make some income.

Then adversity comes. Sickness, perhaps. A job market that tightens. Your income doesn't keep up with inflation, especially with the skyrocketing gas prices that affect every area of life—or will soon, if you haven't noticed yet.

With adversity you cry out to God. Why, Lord? Why do you make me go through these things? All of a sudden, it's *God's* fault that things aren't going well when before you praised yourself for everything that was going according to your plan.

Fickle we are as a people, just as were the People of Israel. Grumble and complain and whine about what we perceive to be lacking as blessings from God, while failing to notice the blessings that are there.

III.

So, let's turn to this blessing from God. With few exceptions, you hear this blessing at the end of every Sunday service. The pastor speaks the blessing God commanded the priesthood of Israel to pronounce over the people.

Some pastors precede the blessing with something like this: "Receive with believing hearts the benediction of the Lord." Such a statement has value. It is a reminder that we need faith in God and his promises.

People often don't want to admit a need for God. Society—especially *American* society—used to teach that we are a people who pull ourselves up by the bootstraps. A slogan was adopted, even by godly people, that reflected this belief: "God helps those who help themselves." But you can't help yourself earn heaven. Society more recently began to teach that we are a society that needs the help of government entities. Rely on them to make your decisions and give you whatever you need to survive. But government assistance doesn't get you to heaven, either.

With Mount Sinai still looming large in the background, the People of Israel didn't have to look far to see their own failures. The ashes of the destroyed Golden Calf were not far away. Fresh in their memories were their fears of chariots chasing them down and the shortages of food and water they had so bitterly complained about.

Into their failures and ours, God speaks.

Consider the word "you" in this blessing from God. Have you ever given it much thought as the blessing is spoken at the end of a service? It would seem the pastor is speaking God's blessing to the group—a collection of God's people. Not at all. Every single part of God's blessing has a singular "you" in the Hebrew. Have you noticed my head move around when I am announcing this blessing before the close of the service? My intention is to speak this blessing of God to each one of you—individually. This blessing is personal. This blessing is yours.

There is something else you perhaps miss by hearing this blessing in English. In Hebrew, the first sentence is three words, the second is five, and the final sentence is seven. God builds his blessing to signify for you completion.

"The LORD bless you and keep you" (Numbers 6:24, EHV). The words "bless you" fly off our lips whenever someone sneezes. Back in the middle ages, many would say this as a protection against the devil snatching a person's soul, or because they might be very near to death because of the plague. When *we* say "bless you," it's just a wish. We are hoping that the person will be blessed. When the benediction says "the Lord bless you and keep you," there is no doubt. God, the Savior God who promised a Savior, makes this statement of

blessing as an absolute fact. This is why the benediction does *not* say: “*may* the Lord bless you and keep you.” God’s blessings are not conditional; they are not a maybe; they are fact. God promises.

“The LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you” (Numbers 6:25, EHV). Remember when God told Moses that no one could look on God’s face and live? Yet here he promises that his face will shine on you. Be gracious to you? It is only because of the grace of God that he did not and does not turn aside from us in our sins, but instead sent Jesus. In fulfillment of God’s promise, Jesus took all our sins of whining and turning aside to gods of our own making and paid for them in full. Because of Jesus and in Jesus, we can and do see all the glory of God, and one day we will see him face to face.

“The LORD look on you with favor and give you peace” (Numbers 6:26, EHV). Peace. Shalom in Hebrew. Shalom is used as a greeting, both for hello and goodbye.

Peace doesn’t necessarily mean that everything in life is happy. Paul said in the Second Reading today: “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1, EHV). It is because of what Jesus has done that peace is possible. True peace isn’t necessarily happiness in this life, but peace with God. Peace with God only comes when and because our sins are forgiven. Paul even goes on that because of this peace with God “We also rejoice confidently in our sufferings” (Romans 5:3, EHV). Then he explains why: “Suffering produces patient endurance, and patient endurance produces tested character, and tested character produces hope” (Romans 5:3-4, EHV).

We have the sure hope of salvation in Christ Jesus. That gives us the real peace with God which God pronounced on his people in the benediction.

IV.

“In this way they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them” (Numbers 6:27, EHV).

God put his name on the people. They were about to set off for the Promised Land from Mt. Sinai. Soon Joshua and Caleb and the other spies would be sent out to see what that land looked like. The other ten declared that taking control of that land was impossible. Only Joshua and Caleb disagreed and declared that the Lord of this blessing would give them the land.

The people were fickle once again, and failed to trust in God when they heard the report. God sentenced all those over 20 to die in the desert and never see the Promised Land, except Joshua and Caleb alone. Only after that whole generation had finally succumbed to death did the rest of the people enter the land.

The point of mentioning this is that God knew of the past failures of the people, and their future failures, as well. He knew they would continue to be fickle, yet he wanted his blessing to be pronounced to them. He wanted his name put on them. He promised his blessing.

God knows your past failures, yet he still pronounces his blessing on you. He knows you will fail again, yet he still pronounces his blessing on you. He has given you his name in a very special and personal way at your baptism. You are part of his family; you are his own. At the end of each service, he reinforces his promise to you and his blessing to you, the same way he always has.

Today, before you leave worship, he will bless you yet again. His forgiveness, his goodness, his life that conquers death, and the peace which surpasses all understanding will be announced to you yet again. When you hear it, remember that it is for you—personally—individually. Amen.