

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A New Year Blessing

Numbers 6:22-27

I was leading a service of committal for a gentleman who had served in our nation's armed forces. The service included military honors with the playing of taps, the silent folding of the flag, and the presentation of the flag to the next of kin, with these words: "On behalf of the President of the United States, the United States Air Force, and a grateful nation, please accept this flag as a symbol of our appreciation for your loved one's honorable and faithful service." But interestingly, that wasn't the last word. The presenter also said, "May God bless you and your family."

It means a lot when the last word is a word of blessing. A word seeking God's favor upon you. A word asking for God's protection over you. A word requesting God's guidance for you. A word wanting God's will for you to be accomplished. A word invoking God's presence with you. A word of blessing.

We have words of blessing for each other when we gather here on Sunday. Sometimes they're words we share in a personal, one-on-one way. "God bless you." "Be blessed." "Have a blessed day." These are some of the forms of blessing that we pronounce on one another when we're face-to-face and on the verge of leaving the Lord's house, preparing to go forth in mission in the larger world. Before we scatter into the world to proclaim and practice the good news of the kingdom, it helps to know that we have God's blessing.

This is part of the reason behind the benediction that I pronounce at the conclusion of our worship service. Often it takes the form of a closing prayer. But it's actually more appropriate that it be a word of blessing spoken directly from me to you. Remember that the benediction isn't simply a closing formality. It isn't a cue that all hymnals should now be shut and all bulletin inserts and miscellaneous papers gathered up. It isn't a sign that all the reverence will soon break up and the rest of the day can begin. The benediction isn't just a dismissal, like the final bell signaling that school is out. The benediction is a dismissal with blessing. It's a way for me to transmit the blessing of God to you the people of God.

That's what's happening in today's Scripture passage from the book of Numbers. God tells Moses to tell his brother Aaron, as well as Aaron's sons, how to bless the Israelites. God even provides the specific words of blessing. Say to the people: "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" (vv. 24-26).

Sometimes, especially when we're trying to testify to God's presence and work in human life, it's hard to come up with the right words. God usually doesn't give us a precise script. Instead, we struggle to know exactly what to say to someone who's distraught or suffering or lost or grieving or confused. We ask God to help us know what to say. We ask the Spirit to give us the words. When I stand up here to preach the sermon, it's the culmination of a process of searching and listening for what God wants to say to us. Once I've discerned

fairly clearly the essence of God's word for us, I still have latitude given by God to choose the specific words that I'll use to communicate the message.

But in today's text, God does give a precise script. Use these words. Say this to my people. Tell them this: "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." These words have a long history in the life of the Jewish people, and have long been used by the church as well, especially as a way of concluding services of worship.

I've used this blessing at the conclusion of the Sunday service, as well as other occasions. I've spoken these words over infants and young children when we hold a service of dedication. I often speak these words over the deceased at a service of burial or committal. These are fitting words for both the beginning and the end of life's journey. But they're also fitting for all the steps in between. In fact, that's where they're situated in this morning's Scripture passage. This text is part of a larger section in which God's people are making preparations to leave Mt. Sinai, where they've been camped for almost a year. It's time for Israel to continue its journey, going into and through the wilderness and eventually to the land of promise. So as they prepare to leave Sinai, God's people are given this blessing. It's a blessing for a journey. It's a benediction about God's presence among them as they go.

"The Lord bless you and keep you." That word "bless" really captures all that follows. It covers the benediction in all its dimensions. In this particular case, blessing has to do with God making good on his promises to his covenant people Israel. But the word "bless" goes even further, and invokes everything that God intends for the human beings he has created and the world he has made. Things like life, joy, health, wholeness, flourishing, a place to prosper, as well as just, peaceful relationships within a community of faithfulness and love. This is what it means for God to bless.

But God not only blesses. God also keeps. This means that God guards, protects, and guides. This would be especially meaningful to his people as they wander in the wilderness and need his sheltering care. But it also extends into our journey as God's people in Christ. Having the Lord "keep" us doesn't guarantee that nothing bad will ever happen to us or that our lives will be free of hardship, suffering, and pain. It simply means that we can count on God to deliver us from evil and to accomplish his saving purpose in our lives, as we walk by faith.

"The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you." The language of God's face or countenance is used frequently in the Old Testament as a way of speaking about God's presence, in contrast to God hiding his face, or seeming to be absent from his people. Dallas Willard, who lost his mom when he was a young child, once wrote about another little boy whose mom had died. Because he was especially sad and lonely at night, the boy would come into his father's room and ask if he could sleep with him. But even then, he couldn't rest until he knew not only that he was with his father, but that his father's face was turned toward him. "Father, is your face turned toward me now?" "Yes," his father would say. "You are not alone. I'm with you. My face is turned toward you." When the boy was assured of this, he could finally rest.¹

As God's people, we want his face to shine upon us, giving us warmth and life and love. Though our sins are serious and his judgment real, we want God to look at us with the glow of grace more than the glare of anger. We want to be assured of his presence.

"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." We need God to look at us with a merciful, compassionate expression, recognizing our faults, holding us accountable for our failings, but treating us with favor. As God does so, it leads toward the climax of the benediction, and one of the most important words in the Hebrew vocabulary: *shalom*, peace. The term has a wide range of connotations: wholeness, longevity, safety, security, health, flourishing, right relationship. It also means more than just the absence of conflict, division, and violence. It means the restoration of justice and the harmony of the whole creation. It means the triumph of God's design and purpose for the world. What better way to conclude this benediction, this blessing.

Hearing the enduring words of this benediction can remind us that blessing is a serious business. If we're not careful, we can get into the habit of using the language of blessing casually or strictly out of habit, without thinking in deeper ways about what we actually mean. When you bless somebody, you're not just saying, "Take care," or "Have a nice day," or "Stay safe," or "May the Force be with you" or "Live long and prosper." Actually, for any of you who are Star Trek fans, Leonard Nimoy, who played the part of Spock, once acknowledged that he came up with the idea of the Vulcan hand salute by recalling part of his Jewish background. He remembered the hand gesture that members of the priestly tribe would use as they stood up in front of the congregation to bless everyone, including the words, "The Lord bless you and keep you. . ." Nimoy eventually brought the hand gesture into the show as the Vulcan salute. That's just a little bit of Star Trek trivia and Bible trivia combined, so you can go home and tell your family and friends what you learned during today's sermon.

As I was saying, blessing is a vital part of who we are and what we're all about as the church. It's important that you be able to gather with God's people for worship, study, and fellowship, and then leave this place knowing that you've been blessed. That's because receiving the blessing of others, gratefully and thoughtfully, can shape your own attitudes and actions. Sometimes it even happens in places beyond the church. Pastor Patrick Willson tells about such a place. It was a Burger King in the Detroit airport. Willson says:

The day I went there I was on my way to Kansas City to preach a colleague's ordination service, and the ticket the church sent routed me through Detroit. My flight arrived around noon, and I knew if I didn't get something on my stomach the flight to Kansas City would be miserable. The only place to eat on this concourse was a Burger King. The line for Whoppers and fries snaked around four or five times, but it seemed to be moving. As I neared the front it became obvious that the three Asian gentlemen in front of me had only the barest acquaintance with English. They tried to order, and the two bright, twenty-ish kids behind the counter were the very soul of patience. They listened, tried to repeat their order; they pointed to pictures on the big electronic menu; heads nodded, it was taking a while. "Oh, for God's sake!" said the man behind me. One of the young men taking orders looked up with a smile: "We'll get your order in just a moment, sir! Don't you worry; we'll get you to your flight on time." The two young men went back to trying to understand, smiling, encouraging the three Asian gentlemen. You can go to very expensive, really elegant restaurants and not get hospitality like that. I hope they got what they ordered. I got my Whopper, fries and Coke, went to the cashier, paid for my lunch, and as the cashier returned my change, she said to me: "The Lord bless you and keep you on your flight." I was stunned. "And....and...uh the Lord bless you," I stammered out. I went and sat down to eat, but I felt like I could have flown to Kansas City by myself. I don't know what church that woman belonged to, but it was a church that had empowered her to bless. I recommend the Burger King in the Detroit airport; I can't wait to go back there again. Wouldn't you want to eat at a place like that? Wouldn't you want to belong to a church like that?²

The church is a community where we get blessed, and where we get the power to bless others. In other words, we're called through Christ to be a blessing and give a blessing. But before we rush into the business of blessing, notice how our Scripture passage closes with an affirmation that God is the one who blesses. "So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them" (v. 27). Those who bless the people will be putting God's name on the people. Putting the Lord's name on the people implies ownership. It shows that they belong to God, and that God is the ultimate source of all blessings.

So there is blessing to be done, and God is the one who will do it. What God intends for others, and for the world, isn't something we can accomplish by ourselves. What God wants for others, and for the world, isn't something we can pull off on our own. What God wills for others, and for the world, is beyond our power to accomplish. But through our words, our work, our witness, God can and will bless. So as we take our first few steps into this new year, use both your lips and your living to say to others, "The Lord bless you and keep you."

¹ This story is summarized by John Ortberg, "God Is Closer than You Think." Dallas Willard Center <<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2017/may/5052217.html>>.

² Patrick Willson, "The Words We Are Given." *Journal for Preachers* (January 1, 2006) 36-37.