

Blessings

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 August 2020

[0 : 00] I think you'll agree with me that the word blessing is a pretty overused word these days. You hear it in all kinds of places. You hear it in acceptance speeches. You hear it in toasts.

You hear it when people find a good parking spot downtown. People use the word blessing all the time. And then you see it everywhere. You see it all over Facebook and Instagram. And, you know, you see a picture of somebody hanging out with their friends on the beach in the Bahamas.

And you see somebody's journal and a cup of coffee in front of a rainy window pane. You know, hashtag blessed. You see this word showing up everywhere. And because of that, it's become really trite. And it's pretty much lost its meaning.

So what I want to do this morning is to talk a little bit about God's blessing. And what God's blessing means when we try to understand it by looking at Scripture.

And my sense is that when we come to understand what it means for God to bless us, not only will we use the word differently, but we'll also want it more than ever.

[1 : 05] And so in order to do this, we're going to be looking at Psalm 67, one of my favorite psalms. It's an amazing psalm. And it shows us a few things about God's blessing. First, it asks or it answers the question, whom does God bless? Who gets the blessing?

Then it shows us what God's blessing is. And then lastly, it shows us how we can know these things. So whom does God bless? What is God's blessing? And how do we know? Let's pray.

Lord, we thank you. And as always, every week, we thank you for your word. And we thank you that in the midst of all of the chaos and uncertainty of these times, that your word is a rock and a lamp and a guide, and that we can open your word with full assurance that you're going to speak to us.

As we pray, you will this morning. We pray that your Holy Spirit would make these words come alive. We pray that those of us who are afflicted would be comforted this morning.

We pray that those who are a little too comfortable might be disturbed or afflicted a bit. Lord, stir it up. And Lord, we pray that in all ways, that only you fully know, you would do your work in us through your word.

[2 : 14] And it's in your son's holy name that we pray. Amen. So we're looking at Psalm 67. First question we want to ask is, whom does God bless?

Who gets the privilege of being blessed by God? And if you look at this Psalm, verse 1 says, May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us.

And some of you may recognize this language. It's very specific. This language is taken from the Old Testament. It's taken specifically from Numbers chapter 6. And this is the place where God gives Moses and Aaron very specific instructions and language about how to bless his people.

So God comes to Moses and says, Tell Aaron, say this to my people. 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. This is what is commonly referred to as the Aaronic blessing. Because it comes from Aaron. Not to be confused with the Ironic blessing.

[3 : 18] Which is a different sermon entirely. This is the Aaronic blessing. And this is the special blessing that God gives to his people Israel. It's sort of like when you have a married couple and they have certain phrases or inside jokes that they use with each other.

That reaffirm and assert the intimacy that they share. This is insider language that God uses with his people. His specific covenant people. And so many Israelites came to believe that this meant, this was just one more sign, that they as the nation of Israel were God's favorites.

That they were God's favorites. That they were inherently more worthy than other nations. And that God had chosen to bless them because he loved them the most.

And so probably by the time that this psalm was written, many people in Israel had come to believe that that's why God had chosen to bless them. And that's why this psalm and the few psalms that preceded in the Psalter, that's why this psalm is actually so amazing.

Because look at verses 2 and 3. It's asking for God's specific covenant blessing. This blessing that was originally given to Moses and Aaron.

[4 : 29] But why is the psalmist praying for this blessing? Well, verse 2. That your way may be known on earth. Your saving power among all nations.

And then as if to emphasize the point, Let the peoples praise you, O God. Let all the peoples praise you. So we're not just talking about Israel anymore.

We're talking about all nations. We're talking about all people everywhere. So then we come back to the question, why did God bless Israel to begin with? And the answer is, not because they're his favorites.

Not because they're inherently better or superior over other people. God chooses to bless Israel because he ultimately desires to bless everyone in the world.

And he desires to use Israel to accomplish that purpose. And that's the truth that this psalm is driving home in the hearts of God's people. If you go all the way back to the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis, you go to chapter 12 in the book of Genesis, this is the first place where God lays out his plan for what he's going to do in the world now that human beings have turned their backs on it.

[5 : 41] He lays his plan out. Here's how God's going to respond. And he tells all of this to a man named Abram. And he comes to Abram and he says, here's what I want you to do. I want you to pack everything up.

I want you to leave your homeland. I want you to leave your family. I want you to set off on your own. You're going to travel a great distance and you're going to settle in a land that I will show you.

And once you settle there, if you're faithful to me, I'm actually going to bless you. And I'm going to give you a huge family. I'm going to give you more kids than you can even count.

And I'm going to build you into an entirely new family. And then through your descendants, specifically through one of your descendants, my plan is I'm going to bless all of the families in all of the nations of the earth.

So God makes this promise to Abram. He makes this covenant with Abram. And in this language, we see that God actually desires to bless everyone through this nation of Israel that he builds from Abram's descendants.

[6 : 44] So our first question, whom does God bless? God's desire and God's ultimate plan is to bless everybody, regardless of nation, regardless of race, regardless of class.

God's desire is ultimately to bless everybody in the world. And when God chooses to bless some people now, that is always because he is desiring to bless other people through them.

And that's why he blessed Israel to begin with. So before we move on, it's just worth us reflecting on this fact that if God has chosen to bless you now, if God has chosen to bless you now, chances are that blessing has come with a responsibility.

In other words, chances are there are people around you, people in your life whom God is desiring to bless through you. And so not only should we regularly be pausing and taking stock of all of the amazing blessings of God in our lives, but as we do that and as we give thanks, which is a practice that we should be doing in an ongoing way, as we take stock of God's blessings, we should also be asking ourselves, who are the people around me God might be desiring to bless through me, through these blessings that God has entrusted into my hands?

This is one of the core principles of biblical stewardship. And so as we think about the blessings of our lives, if you're blessed enough to have a stable family or a stable household that you live in or a stable group home or network of friends, that's an enormous blessing.

[8 : 26] If you are blessed with financial stability and even financial resources, if you're not living paycheck to paycheck or just barely getting by, if you're not struggling in poverty, if you have enough to live on and maybe a little extra, that's an extraordinary blessing.

You represent a very small percentage of the global population. If you're lucky enough to live in a home, that's an extraordinary blessing. And so we look at these blessings and then we ask, how might God be desiring to use me and these blessings that he's given me in order to bless other people?

One of the greatest blessings that you might have is a professional network. And so one of the questions we might ask is, who are we allowing and giving access to? Who are we opening that network up to who might otherwise not have access to those networks of influence?

These are things that we should be asking on a regular basis. So blessing comes with responsibility. Whom does God desire to bless? Ultimately, God desires to bless everyone. Everyone.

The next question we want to ask is a very key question. All this talk about blessing, what is it? What does it mean to be blessed by God as we look in the Bible?

[9 : 41] And the basic meaning of the word bless, as you see it in scripture, and this comes from a theological dictionary, is to bless is to confer abundant and effective life upon someone or something.

It's to confer effective and abundant life upon someone or something. To cause someone or something to flourish, to give them abundant life.

That's the basic meaning. But if you look at Psalm 67, Psalm 67 takes this way further, makes it a whole lot bigger. Verses one through five show us that God's blessing to the world, God's desire to bless the world, means a number of things.

It means first that his grace is given to everyone. That everybody has an opportunity to experience God's grace. That is, God's willingness to give us what we don't deserve, didn't earn, and could never repay.

That that's a part of God's blessing is that he's the kind of God who wants to give us things that we don't deserve. So everybody gets to experience his grace. It means his presence is felt by everybody. It means his ways are known by everybody.

[10 : 49] It means his saving power is experienced by everyone, that everyone has an opportunity to experience God's saving power. It also means that God's justice is done for everyone with no favoritism.

With no favoritism. Lastly, it means that his guidance leads everyone, that all of the nations are guided by God himself. So this is God's vision of blessing the world.

And so God's blessing means nothing short of the complete renewal and restoration of this world. It means God himself coming to put everything right again in the world that he made so that it will once again be the world that he intended it to be when he made it.

And that goes for us as human beings as well. So this is what God's blessing actually means in this psalm. And one of the things that we need to recognize about this psalm, and this is reflected all throughout scripture, is that all of these aspects of God's blessing go together.

They're all facets of the same jewel, so to speak. So you can't have one without the others, right? You can't have abundant life apart from God's presence.

[12 : 08] You need God's presence in order to make abundant life possible. You can't live by God's ways.

You can't live up to God's standards without God's grace and God's saving power. The core message of scripture says that we need God's spirit in us in order to make it possible for us to live out and follow God's ways.

And so you can't have one without the other. And lastly, you cannot have God's justice apart from God's guidance. You can't have neighborhoods and cities and countries, nations that embody the justice of God unless those nations are also guided by God and follow God.

They require each other, right? And I think this is actually very relevant for us right now, this idea of the holistic understanding of God's blessing and specifically the implications around how we think about various aspects of God's blessing.

I think these days we tend to want to separate and separate these pieces out and sort of choose the parts that we want and leave the rest to other people, right?

[13 : 27] So some people, I think, really want God's presence and they really want God's provision in their life, but they don't want to live by God's ways, right?

So people say, you know, I want to kind of live however I want to live and I'm going to expect and hope and assume that God's going to bless me no matter what I do. Really, God just cares that I'm happy, right?

That's a way that some people want to relate to God that doesn't reflect what scripture says at all. Other people, I think, are very focused on making God's saving power and God's grace known to the world.

They really care about evangelism and think that's what Christians should be doing and they're right. But those people also minimize the need for justice and equity in our society, to do justice in God's name.

And so they say, well, evangelism is where we need to be pouring our energy, but not so much justice. And then a third thing that we see is that in our society these days, when people talk about justice, and this includes Christians, when people talk about justice, there are many different ideas of what justice actually means.

[14 : 37] And this psalm makes it clear that God's justice is connected to God's guidance. In other words, there's a specific way in which God envisions justice looking in our society.

And so as Christians, we always want to be asking, what does it look like to do justice God's way? In other words, it's not enough for us to say, God cares about justice.

Here's my definition of justice. Therefore, God endorses this thing that I'm doing. We always want to be asking, is my concept of justice aligning with God's guidance about what God's justice actually means?

And so that makes things very complicated as Christians try to wade into the waters of doing justice and mercy, which is a core part of what it means to be God's people in the world. So for instance, with the very complicated and controversial phrase, black lives matter, this is very complicated for Christians.

And so I think we should question any Christian that writes that off entirely. We should also question any Christian that just fully buys in to everything that represents, because we have to ask a lot of questions.

[15 : 44] For instance, we have to make the distinction between the slogan and the organization, right? So the slogan, black lives matter, that slogan, that idea, the idea that a just society is one in which black men and women are treated with equal dignity and value and equity alongside everyone else.

And that there's not at any level in our legislation, in our institutions, that at no level is there any devaluing of the lives of black men and women in our country. That's something that I think everybody should get behind.

That's something that Christians should not only passionately support, but we should also work toward it in whatever ways that we can, right? So that idea is something that I think fully aligns with the heart of God and how we should be thinking about justice in our society.

It deeply resonates with that. But then if you look at the organization, Black Lives Matter, and you read the manifesto, and you read the values and the priorities, there are some things in there that I think that we can affirm and support, but there are other things in there that I think are deeply problematic, that not only don't seem to reflect God's vision of justice in the world, as we see it in scripture, but don't really seem to have much to do with black life.

And so this leaves us as Christians in a very complicated position. It's not straightforward. So in some ways, we affirm and support the idea and the slogan.

[17 : 09] We work towards social and legislative reform as much as we possibly can. We even affirm and recognize the tremendous value of saying black lives matter and not just dismissively responding by saying all lives matter, that it's a whole lot more complicated than that.

And then there's a reason why that phrase matters. So we affirm that, but at the same time, we don't fully affirm or support the organization, right? And so these are questions that we always have to be asking.

They're hard, they're not easy, they're complicated. I think that's why there's so much disagreement right now, even within the church at this particular cultural moment. But as Christians seeking to bring God's blessing to the world, we have to be very discerning about what blessing actually means.

God's grace, God's saving power, God's presence, God's justice. They come along with God's guidance and God's ways. It's a package deal.

It's not a la carte. We don't just pick and choose what we want. It's all or none. So whom does God bless? God blesses some people because ultimately through them, he wants to bless everyone.

[18 : 23] God's desire is to bless every single man, woman, and child in this country and around the world. God wants to bless everyone. That's whom God blesses. What is God's blessing?

Well, it's nothing short of the total renewal and restoration of this world and the people God has made. So this is a very comprehensive, vast vision of blessing.

And some people may hear this and think, well, this is just pie-in-the-sky optimism. There's no way this could ever come about. Is there any evidence? Is there any way we could actually know that this is the kind of thing that God is planning for this world and the kind of thing that God is doing right now?

And that's one of the reasons I love this psalm. Because we say, what assurance can I possibly have that God does desire to bless and restore this world? And verse 6 answers that question.

The earth has yielded its increase. God, our God, shall bless us. And I love this. You know, theologians talk about the concept of God's common grace.

[19 : 25] All of the ways that God loves and provides for His people everywhere. No matter what they believe about Him, no matter if they believe that He exists, no matter if they've completely turned their backs on Him.

God's common grace means that God still blesses and provides for all of the people of the earth, regardless of what they believe, regardless of how they live. And as this psalm draws our attention to, the earth itself is actually a great example of God's common grace.

The psalmist is saying, look at the earth. Look at how beautiful this world is that God has made. Look at how the earth provides for us. Look at how God designed the earth to provide everything that we need.

And so think of all of the food and the medicine and the minerals and the natural resources that we derive from the earth. Apart from which, our survival, our abundant life would not be possible.

These are examples of God's common grace. So God's common grace is one reason that we can be assured that God desires to bless us and will continue to bless us.

[20 : 38] The psalmist is saying, look at the abundant blessing of this world. The kind of God who would do something like this. Surely that God will continue to bless us. Surely we can trust the heart of that kind of God.

And I think that that's really compelling evidence that shows us the kind of God we're dealing with. And yet we, as people living in this day and age, we have far more assurance and far more evidence than this psalmist ever could have imagined.

Because if you look at Paul's letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul, Paul goes back to the promise that God made so long ago to Abram.

He talks about this promise that God made to one day bless all of the nations of the earth through Abram's descendant. And then Paul says, that promise has been fulfilled.

That promise that Abram was waiting on, the promise that the psalmist was waiting on, that promise has finally, after all of this time, it's finally been fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

[21 : 48] And so he says that Jesus Christ was willing to give his life for us on the cross. And here's what he says, so that in Christ, Jesus, the blessing of Abraham, so he's the blessing, the blessing of Abraham, might come to the Gentiles so that we might receive the promised spirit through faith.

In other words, all of the beauty and all of the goodness and all of the common grace, all of that, everything like that in the world is just a preview.

It's just a pre-blessing. The true blessing, the ultimate blessing, is Jesus Christ himself. If blessing means to confer effective and abundant life, the place where you're going to find that more than anywhere else is in the person and the presence of Jesus Christ.

He is the fulfillment of God's promise to bless everyone in the world. So regardless of where you are right now, regardless of what you believe, regardless of what your life looks like, regardless of even any of the ways that you have previously thought about faith or Christianity, this opportunity is sitting in your lap right now.

If you desire to experience God's blessing, if you want to know his grace and his saving power and have his presence in your life, and if you want your life to be filled with the abundance that God is able to provide, that only God is able to provide, it begins by coming to Jesus Christ in faith.

[23 : 24] It begins by recognizing that Jesus Christ is God's true and ultimate blessing to this world. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you.

We thank you for your word. We thank you for your power at work in us. We thank you for your blessing that is at work in the world. Lord, we pray that you would continue to do your work in the world.

We pray that you would give us eyes to see not only the blessings that you have put in our lives, but all of the ways that we're meant to use those blessings, that you would draw to mind and draw to our attention the people in our lives whom you're desiring to bless, and that you would embolden us and fill us with love and compassion to do your work in their lives, Lord.

And we pray this not only for our good or the good of our city or our country or our world, but ultimately that your name would be glorified, that as this psalm says, that all nations, all people would praise you, Lord.

And we pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. Amen.