

# The Priestly Blessing

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Now, can you turn with me again in your Bibles, this time to the book of Numbers? We're going to be in Numbers chapter 6. In a little section headed in our Bibles, the priestly blessing.

If you've been to baptisms before, you may very well have heard these words being spoken by a minister over a person being baptized.

So I want to spend a few minutes thinking about them together this evening. So Numbers chapter 6 and at verse 22. The Lord said to Moses, 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 upon you and be gracious to you.

The Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace. So they will put my name on the Israelites and I will bless them.

[ 1 : 1 2 ] Amen. Lovely words. So we're here this evening. Most of us are here this evening to witness the baptism of Emily Allison. It's wonderful to have so many people here gathered for that occasion.

It is, as always, a time of joy, a time of people coming together to support the family and to share in their happiness. For us, as a church, we get to formally welcome Emily into our church family.

Having had Stephen and Tizzy with us for a number of years, it's a chance for us to pray for them and to continue to pray for them and to commit as a church to doing that.

But as they begin family life with its unknowns, these are wonderful words of promise from God. Here is God promising his blessing.

Here is God committing himself to being for his people. And we're going to think about what that means for the people then and what it means for ourselves today.

[ 2 : 1 7 ] But one thing as we begin that becomes very clear is that this little passage reminds us of the generosity of God. As we read, you'll have noticed that word that kept repeating the word bless.

Comes up, first of all, in verse 23. Tell Aaron and his sons, this is how you are to bless the Israelites. And that's one of those kind of churchy words, but it's also something that we hear on the streets.

What does it mean? Well, it's much more than simply God bless you, which we hear quite a lot, which can simply mean, well, I wish you well. One writer puts it this way.

God's blessing is the effective movement of sovereign grace from heaven to earth. So the picture here is of God as king.

And God as king who loves and who wants to give out of his kindness, out of his generosity. And so there's this demonstration of that as he pours gifts down on us here on the earth.

- [ 3 : 26 ] When God blesses, it's a deliberate act of his kindness, which has specific advantages then for his people. And this ties in with the message of the Bible.
- One of Jesus' half-brothers by the name of James tells us in the New Testament that every good and every perfect gift comes from God. And God is unchanging.
- So the good things that we enjoy today, whoever we are, wherever we come from, are a gift from God. So we can think specifically this evening, the gift of life and family and friendship and health and community and work and good food.
- All of these are good gifts from God for us to enjoy, for us to return thanks to God for. Now, also interesting in this little section is why does the promise of blessing come?
- Look at verse 22. Verse 22. Who begins the conversation? Who takes the initiative? What we have is the Lord said to Moses. This isn't God's people praying, God bless me, God shower your kindness on me.
- [ 4 : 35 ] Here's God taking the initiative and promising, committing himself to be for the good of his people. So that even though it's the priests that speak, it's Aaron and his sons and their priests, they're speaking as God's representatives.
- They're speaking God's words, promising God's blessing. And that's clear. Verse 24, verse 25, verse 26. The Lord is the one who blesses.
- When does this promise come? In history. Comes at a really important time for God's people, Israel. Because here they are. If you know the story of Moses and the Exodus, they've been set free from slavery.
- But now they find themselves in the wilderness, but they're told to move on. They're told to go on a journey towards the land that God had promised. But that brings with it certain uncertainties.
- Challenges that they don't know about. And so here is a promise to them that God would be with them and for them. It's important too to notice who does this promise come to.
- [ 5 : 48 ] Again, verse 23. This is how you are to bless the Israelites. So this is words from God for the whole community of faith. But at the same time, in verse 24 and verse 25 and verse 26, you see the Lord bless you.
- And that's you singular. So here is a word for the community, but it's for the individuals in that community. This isn't a group of faceless individuals who are lost in a crowd.
- Here is God personally promising to bless the people who put their faith in him. Which is why it's very appropriate for us to use these words at times like a baptism.
- Now one particular way this generosity is shown that I want us to notice is in verse 27. Verse 27. So they will put my name on the Israelites and I will bless them.
- Now there's two ways to think about this picture of God's name being put on his people. First of all, we can think about God placing a stamp of ownership saying, these are my people, they belong to me, they're my treasured possession.
- [ 6 : 59 ] And we can think about it in that way, but we can also think about it in this way. Here is God saying, I'm going to be a father to these people. Here is language of adoption.
- I'm going to bring them into my family so I might love and take care of them. They have my family name on them, so I'm committing myself to be for them.
- When we think about Emily, she's under the love and care of Stephen and Tizzy. She has the family name Allison on her with all the promises, all the protection that comes with that.
- And here is God's generous gift that he is willing to become father to us, to adopt us, to love us.

He gives his son Jesus to be our savior so that we might know God as our father in heaven. The one who promises to be with us and for us on our journey of life with all the uncertainty that that might bring with it.

[ 8 : 11 ] So we see the generosity of God really clearly here. It was good news then and it continues to be good news now. But let's think specifically about the words of the blessing.

Let's think first of all in verse 24 about the care of God. There are in this blessing three lines. There are two statements about God in each.

And the second adds more detail to the first. So we think about the first line, it says, the Lord bless you and keep you. In other words, one way that the Lord will bless his people is by keeping them, is by caring for them, is by protecting them.

This was, again, great news for Israel. Because they'd seen how God had acted in their past to set them free from King Pharaoh. They had received God's kindness while they were in the desert and they didn't have food to eat.

God provided. When they didn't have water to drink, God provided. Here is God saying, I'm not about to stop caring for you now. He will keep them.

[ 9 : 20 ] As they move into unknown territory, God would go ahead of them. So while when we think about blessing, it can apply to lots of things in the material world, like good crops and a home and a family and all of those things.

Fundamental to it is God saying, I am with you. I will defend you. And I will take care of you. And I think instinctively, there are times when we appreciate that as being good news.

Maybe you remember from your own childhoods or perhaps you know the experience as a parent. The time when a child has something to do that they think is maybe a little bit scary, a little bit difficult.

Going somewhere that they don't know. They've never been there before. Especially if it's a young child. What's their instinct? It's to reach out for the hand of mom and dad. Well, even more amazing and comforting is this.

The God of the universe is here committing to walk with his people. To hold us in his hands if we will put our trust in him.

[ 10 : 34 ] When Jesus came into the world, he spoke to his disciples' fears by saying, I am with you. Jesus, fully man, fully God, said, I am with you.

I will never leave you. He spoke peace to their fears by saying, I'm here. And I'm mighty to save and to help.

When we think about the story of Jesus, we recognize that he is the one who was willing to face the cross alone.

Jesus walked willingly to a place of pain and loneliness and judgment for sin to become a savior for us. He was the one who, in that moment, was not kept, as it were, so that we might always be.

And so the cross is good news for us and it gives us hope as we see the extent of the care of God for us. In verse 25, as we move to the next line of this blessing, we see something still more remarkable.

[ 11 : 47 ] We are introduced to the smile of God. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you.

Now we know the expression, don't we, in English, that when somebody's face lights up, when the person that they love and delight in walks in the room, maybe somebody you haven't seen for a while, family in another country, and they come back home, your face lights up.

We know that. Maybe that's one of the best bits about being a dad to babies and young children. You can be out for the day, a hard day at work.

As soon as you walk in, you get the smile. Poor mums put all the graft in. They don't always get that response. But that's because we're so busy being away all the time. But we know what it means when somebody's face lights up, when somebody is beaming, when somebody is glowing, because there is joy, there is happiness, there is delight.

And here is what the Bible is saying to us, that the Lord delights in his people. The Lord, the personal God, the powerful God, the perfect God, the God who makes promises, the one who made the universe, delights in and loves his people.

[ 13 : 07 ] One Bible writer by the name of Terence Fretheim, he says this, it's amazing grace to see God's face glowing, not glaring.

And when we stop and think about it for a minute, that makes sense, because when we take a look in the mirror, when we think about our own lives, perhaps we'll begin to think, well, how is it that a perfect God, that a truly wonderful God could love and delight in people like this, people in Israel's story, people like me?

If you know anything of Israel's story, what you'll discover is, there are people who seem determined to grumble at every corner.

Their life is marked by unbelief and disobedience. That when Moses, their leader, goes away for a number of weeks to speak with God, they decide to craft for themselves a golden calf that they can worship as a false god.

God, it's this people that God is saying he delights in. And we need to ask, how is that possible? And if you know your own heart, maybe you recognize that their story is not so far different from our own.

[ 14 : 26 ] That when we compare ourselves to others, now we can maybe feel that we're doing okay and God might accept us, but when we consider God's perfect standard, when he says that we are to love with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and to love our neighbor the way that we love ourselves, then perhaps we begin to see that it should be God's glaring face, not his glowing face that we experience.

So how is that possible? How can we know God delighting in us? Well, we need to keep looking at verse 25. We need to see God's grace.

The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. May God extend undeserved kindness to you.

Now, let's just stop for a moment. Who speaks this blessing? In verse 23, we were told this message from God comes from Aaron. Aaron is the one who made the golden calf idol that the people worship.

He is the one who is responsible for helping to turn the people away from worshiping the true God. So Aaron, as he speaks this word of grace, is one who knows from firsthand experience the mercy and the forgiveness of God which he knows he didn't deserve.

[ 15 : 53 ] Grumbling, complaining, disbelieving, false worshipers can only know God's gracious smile because of Jesus.

When we read about Jesus' baptism, maybe you remember the words that God the Father spoke from heaven. He said, this is my son whom I love.

God delighted in Jesus. God's smile was on Jesus. But at his day, as Jesus becomes our substitute, bearing our sin and guilt, as Jesus becomes that sacrifice to pay for our sin and to set us free, this beloved son cries out, my God, my God, why have you abandoned me?

He loses that sense of the smile of God so that by faith in Jesus, we could know it forever. That by faith in Jesus, we can know that God delights in us because we are in Christ Jesus.

The last thing to notice about this wonderful blessing, so we've seen God's care, we've seen God's delight, we also see in verse 26, the peace of God.

[ 17 : 19 ] The Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace. It's said that we live in the age of distraction.

I guess especially with our smartphones, that's perhaps especially true. One thing about children is that they can spot it a mile off when their parents are distracted, when their thoughts are elsewhere or their attention is elsewhere.

And sometimes, and maybe you've had this experience, sometimes children will literally grab your face and turn it towards them so that they can share their big news. Now here's a wonderful promise of blessing from God as Father, and it's this.

He is not like us. He is not like human fathers when we're too distracted to pay attention to our kids, where we're kind of listening, but kind of elsewhere.

He's not like that. He doesn't get distracted. He's never absent-minded. He's never too busy. He is always fully committed to His people, both as a community of faith and as individuals.

[ 18 : 37 ] There's a sense of wonderful mystery about that, that God can make this promise to the whole community. Let's say there's maybe a million or so people in the nation of Israel at that time, and God can say to each of them, I will turn my face towards you, and I will hear your prayers, and I will pay attention, and I will respond in just the right way to each one.

No individual will get lost in the crowd. And that's an amazing thing for us to think of. I'm not a multitasker, and I don't understand how that works, but that is reality.

So it's true for every Christian believer in the whole world. God is never too busy for us. God always hears when we pray. He's always ready to respond. And no wonder then that the consequence of the Lord turning His face towards us is peace.

Peace from God for the people of God. To know that this God, this one is turned towards us, loving us, caring for us, delighting in us.

Here is the ultimate source of deep inner peace and joy. Here is where wholeness and rightness comes in our lives. And again, it's all because of Jesus for us.

[ 19 : 55 ] Because Jesus went to the cross, and He experienced the loss of peace at the cross to gift to us. Peace with God, because He cancels our sin, and peace from God, of knowing that we are His, that we are secure with Him.

The ultimate hope of the Bible is connected to this. Again, one of Jesus' closest friends, John, in his first letter, writes this, Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be is not yet been made known, but we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.

The greatest blessing God offers is Himself. The ultimate hope of the Christian life is that one day we will see Jesus face to face, that He will wipe every tear from our eyes, having made everything new, inviting us to enjoy perfect life and light and love for all eternity.

So this is our prayer for Emily on the day of her baptism, that she would know this wonderful peace, that she would know the smile of God, the protection of God in her life.

And it's God's blessing that's available to us all, whoever we are, through faith and the Lord Jesus.