

Beautiful Opposites

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Date: 06 April 2025

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good evening to you all and everyone. Welcome to our service. It's lovely to see you this evening and we're delighted to gather on such a beautiful night in the name of our wonderful Saviour Jesus Christ.

It's great to be with you again and I hope that you all do well. As you may know, there's been a death connected to the village and we're just awaiting details to be confirmed tomorrow for Angus's funeral and we'll hopefully hear at some point tomorrow and we'll be able to make sure that they're all made aware of when their entrance will be confirmed. It will probably be towards the end of the week but we'll know more tomorrow.

And also looking forward very much to your communion weekend in a couple of weeks' time. There's details of the services on your bulletin and please do remember that communion weekend in your prayers. We look forward especially to having Bob Actroyd with us and that's going to be a huge blessing and encouragement so we look forward very, very much to that precious time of fellowship in a couple of weeks' time.

Most of all we're here to worship God together and so let's sing to his praise from Psalm 67. Psalm 67, Lord bless and pity us, shine on us with thy face, that the earth thy way and nations all may know thy saving grace.

Now I think that you've sung this this morning but it's a wonderful psalm so it's okay to sing it again. And it ties in very well with the passage that we're going to be reading later on. And these words are just a wonderful prayer asking for God to pour his mercy out upon us.

[1 : 3 1] They're a plea to God for revival and they're also just words recognising the worth and glory of our Saviour. So these are wonderful words for us to sing.

Lord bless and pity us, shine on us with thy face. Lord bless and pity us, shine on us with thy face.

Let people praise thee, Lord.

Let people praise thee, Lord. O let thou nations be glad in songs and voices raise.

Thou justly feed thee, O judge, O judge, O heaven and rule nations all.

[3 : 0 7] Let people praise thee, Lord, let them praise thee, Lord.

O Lord, let them praise thee, Lord.

We thank you that in the East, there are those already reaching the end of their day, and there are those west of us for whom it is still the morning, and then all across the world there are people gathering in the name of Jesus to praise and honour and exalt your name.

And how we thank you that we are adding our voice to that number. And so may the name of Jesus be lifted up here in our midst this evening, and among all those who gather in your name.

[8 : 09] May your blessing be upon each one of us, may we be drawn closer to you, may we be built up in our faith, may we be strengthened and guided by you, so that we would love, serve and honour you this week and for the rest of our lives.

We pray that just as you have given so, so much to us, and so much for us, may our lives be a gift in return of thanksgiving for your amazing grace and love towards us in Jesus.

We pray in his name. Amen. We're going to sing again, this time from Psalm 65. Psalm 65, I'm singing from the beginning, verses 1 to 4, four stanzas.

Praise waits for thee in Zion, Lord, to thee thou's page shall be, O thou that hear art of prayer, all flesh shall come to thee.

Down to the second half of verse 4, we surely shall be satisfied with thy abundant grace, and with the duneness of thy house, even of thy holy place.

[9 : 23] Psalm 65, verses 1 to 4, to God's praise. Praise waits for thee O Lord, to thee thou's page shall be, O thou that's red, and the dark of death, all flesh shall come to thee.

O flesh shall come to thee. Live with Jesus, I must confess, even against me too, the dead, O Lord, come to Christ and burn the wind of dawn.

Blessed is the manner of just truth, and makes the cross to thee, that he within thy course, O Lord, may still unweather thee.

We surely shall be satisfied with thy love and grace, and with the chalice of thy house, in all thy holy grace.

I'll be reading this evening from the book of Numbers, chapter 6. Numbers, chapter 6. Numbers is a fascinating book.

[12 : 29] It comes in the midst of the great journey that Israel is making out of slavery, and towards the promised land. And during those years in the wilderness, there was a lot of instruction given to them, various different trials and challenges, trials and tragedies in the experience of God's people.

And a lot of the book of Numbers is setting out many of the guidelines for the people of Israel as they are being established as God's covenant people.

And we'll be reading about some of those in this chapter, particularly in relation to the law of the Nazarite. But it's especially the great words at the end of this chapter that we're going to be focusing on.

So, you can imagine as we're reading these words, the people of Israel are in the desert, and they are being given instruction by God. They've come out of Egypt, but they are looking forward to the day when they'll enter into the promised land.

And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When either man or woman shall separate themselves to vow a vow of a Nazarite, to separate themselves unto the Lord, he shall separate himself from wine and strong drink, and shall drink no vinegar of wine or vinegar of strong drink, neither shall he drink any liquor of grapes, nor eat moist grapes or dried.

[13 : 59] All the days of his separation shall he eat nothing that is made of the vine tree, from the kernels even to the husk. All the days of the vow of his separation there shall no razor come upon his head, until the days be fulfilled, in the which he separateth himself unto the Lord.

He shall be called holy, and shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow. All the days that he separateth himself unto the Lord he shall come at no dead body.

He shall not make himself unclean for his father or for his mother, for his brother or for his sister, when they die, because the consecration of his God is upon his head. All the days of his separation he is holy unto the Lord.

And if any man die very suddenly by him, and he hath defiled the head of his consecration, then he shall shave his head in the day of his cleansing. On the seventh day shall he shave it. And on the eighth day he shall bring two turtles, or two young pigeons, to the priest, to the door of the tabernacle of the congregation.

And the priest shall offer the one for a sin offering, and the other for a burnt offering, and make an atonement for him, for that he sinned by the dead, and shall hallow his head that same day.

[15 : 12] And he shall consecrate unto the Lord the days of his separation, and shall bring a lamb of the first year for a trespass offering, that the days that were before shall be lost, because his separation was defiled.

And this is the law of the Nazarite, when the days of his separation are fulfilled, he shall be brought unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. And he shall offer for his offering unto the Lord one he lamb of the first year without blemish for a burnt offering, and one ewe lamb of the first year without blemish for a sin offering, and one ram without blemish for peace offerings, and a basket of unleavened bread, cakes of fine flour mingled with oil, and wafers of unleavened bread anointed with oil, and their meat offering, and their drink offerings.

And the priest shall bring them before the Lord, and shall offer his sin offering, and his burnt offering. And he shall offer the ram for a sacrifice of peace offerings unto the Lord, with a basket of unleavened bread.

The priest shall offer also his meat offering, and his drink offering. And the Nazarite shall shave the head of his separation at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, and shall take the hair of the head of his separation, and put it in a fire which is under the sacrifice of the peace offerings.

And the priest shall take the softening shoulder of the ram, and one unleavened cake out of the basket, and one unleavened wafer, and shall put them upon the hands of the Nazarite after the hair of his separation is shaming.

[16 : 33] And the priest shall wave them for a wave offering before the Lord. This is holy for the priest, with the wave breast and heave shoulder, and after that the Nazarite may drink wine.

This is the law of the Nazarite, who hath vowed, and of his offspring unto the Lord for his separation. Beside that, that his hand shall get, according to the vow which he vowed, so he must do after the law of his separation.

And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto Aaron, and unto his sons, saying, On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel, saying unto them, The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.

The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee. The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace. And they shall put my name upon the children of Israel, and I will bless them.

Amen. This is God's word, and may he add his blessing to it. Let's again bow our heads in prayer. Father, Father, we thank you so much that your word is open before us, and we pray that we will be open before you.

[17 : 48] We pray that your word will speak powerfully into our lives, giving us words of encouragement, words of guidance, even words of rebuke, if we need it, but alongside that, also words of grace.

Because our great desire is to know you more, and to walk more closely with you. And we come before you this evening, confessing our sin, and acknowledging before you that in our thoughts, in our words, in our actions, we stray from you, and often we do things that are just the opposite of what you've asked for, and what you desire for us.

And we confess that before you with sorrow. But we thank you also that the great promise of the gospel is that as we confess our sins, your promise is that our hearts will be cleansed, and that in Jesus, though sin doth abound, grace doth much more abound.

And we thank you that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from sin. We thank you that whoever believes in you will not perish, but have eternal life. And so for us all, as we acknowledge our sins before you, may we also be reminded and assured of the great promises of the gospel.

And may the reality and joy and peace that that brings fill us with hope and renewed strength as we go into a new week. We confess, Father, that often we are very burdened by everything that's going on in our lives, with our worries and our concerns, our frustrations and disappointments.

[19 : 28] And we pray, Father, that you'd help us to see past all of these, to see you, our Heavenly Father, to see Jesus at your right hand as our exalted Saviour, and to know the reality of the presence of your Spirit in our hearts, in our midst, in our lives.

We pray that the good news of the gospel would renew us and refresh us, that we're going to a new week with our faces shining with joy. and we pray that that would be a very powerful witness to those around us.

We pray for the congregation here, and we pray that you would bless all the work that's being done here for you. Bless the ministry each week here. We thank you for all those, Lord, who are helping with supply in this congregation.

We pray that you would look after the congregation at a time of vacancy, and we pray especially that over coming weeks we would see your guiding hand upon us. We pray that we would be directed towards the person of your choosing, the man to be the next pastor of this congregation.

And we pray for guidance, we pray for clarity, and we pray for unity that you'd help us through this time of vacancy. We pray, Father, for all the congregation here, for the elders, the deacons, for all those in positions of leadership and responsibility, that you would uphold them and bless them and strengthen them.

[20 : 50] Bless all the work that's been done. We think especially the work being done with the children through Sunday school and for the connection that that gives to many families in this community. May these ties deepen further over coming weeks and months.

Help us as a congregation to be wise in terms of all that we seek to do, all that we prioritise, and may we be led and directed by you in the coming weeks and months.

We pray that you would provide for the congregation here and that they would know your presence, your blessing, and your spirit. If you think of the communion weekend approaching, we look forward to that very much. It may be a time of rich and abundant blessing.

We pray for Bob as we look forward to him coming and we pray that you would prepare him and help him and all those, all others who will be involved in the weekend, we pray for them. And we want to pray especially for those who may be not yet professed faith, who may be thinking about it, wondering about it.

We pray, Father, that they would hear your voice and that they would be sent by you to take that next step. And we pray that it would be a time of great encouragement for us.

[21 : 57] But we pray also, Lord, that we would see many, many more coming to church and many, many more coming to faith. We are so conscious of our helplessness in terms of opening people's eyes and softening people's hearts.

We can't do it on our own, but you can. And just as you have opened the eyes of so many of us here, we pray that you would open the eyes of so many more around us in the community.

Give people a thirst for Jesus, a thirst and a longing for you that nothing else will replace or match. We pray that you would be unsettling people from perhaps lives that are comfortable and successful in the world's eyes, and yet that are heading to a lost eternity.

And we pray, Father, that you would be drawing people with your loving voice and with your great command to come to you and that the truths of the gospel would be just so real and clear to people's eyes.

And so please be at work among this community. Please draw people to come to trust in you. And we want to remember those who are in need. Please comfort those who grieve. We pray for all those going through difficult times at the moment, those who are unwell, those who've recently lost loved ones, those who are under pressure or who feel tired or lonely or burdened.

[23 : 16] We pray that they would know your help, presence and strength. And we also want to remember people suffering and struggling in other parts of the world. We bring them before you, asking that you'd help them and uphold them.

And we want to pray, Father, that you would just continue to bless the work of your church across our nation. We pray for other vacant congregations. We pray that you would provide for them. And we pray that we would see the work of the gospel thrive and flourish across the length and breadth of our land, that many people would come to know you and to trust in you and to glorify and honour the name of Jesus.

So please bless us as we continue on together just now. Be with us and draw us closer to you and lead us in your ways we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to sing now from Psalm 27 and we're singing verses 1 to 4.

Psalm 27 From the beginning the Lord's my light and saving health who shall make me disillade?

My life's strength is the Lord of whom then shall I be afraid. We'll sing it down to verse 4 so that's going to be 5 stanzas. This is one of many examples in the Psalms that speaks in the language of conflict and of course for David that was a reality in terms of facing enemies both from other nations and even at times from within his own nation.

[24 : 49] But all of that like everything else in the Old Testament functions as a shadow. The physical military conflicts of the Old Testament are a shadow of the great spiritual conflict that we are all engaged in between the kingdom of God and the domain of darkness.

So as we sing these words as it speaks of enemies and foes and those who are against us in the light of the cross and in the light of all the fulfilment of the Psalms in Jesus that speaks of the opposition we face from our sin from the temptations and challenges in the world around us from the accusation and attack of the devil.

But singing these words remind us that though we might feel bruised and battered in that conflict. Our Saviour is victorious and the great promise is that we will be with him forever, gazing on his beauty, enjoying the total victory that Jesus has accomplished.

So we can sing these words with great joy and with great confidence and with great thanksgiving. Psalm 27, The Lord's My Light and Saving Hell. The Lord's My Light Saving Hell.

You shall make feats with me. My life's strength is the Lord's Father, then shall I be afraid.

[26 : 28] When as my enemies unfolds, most wicked persons all, to thee voyque voyque voyque!
yet come, my heart gets mere as this. Though what I experience right, I will be confident in this.

One thing I of the Lord desire, that will seek to obtain.

That all is all my life, I may within those streams.

That I, the beauty of the Lord, behold me, I admire.

[28 : 27] And that I, in his holy place, may rather be inquired.

Amen. Well, I'd like us just to turn back together again for a few minutes tonight to Numbers chapter 6.

And we'll just pick up the very last section, reading from verse 22. These famous words that are known as the Aaronic blessing.

And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto Aaron, and unto his sons, saying, On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel, saying unto them, The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.

The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee. The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace. And they shall put my name upon the children of Israel, and I will bless them.

[29 : 45] I've had a bit of a sort of unusual, strange experience over the past ten days or so, because a week last Friday I went away on holiday.

And back then it was still March, and it still felt dark, and it was cold, and not very nice.

And just like the rest of the winter, cloudy, windy, unpleasant. And we went away for a week's holiday. While we were away, the clocks changed, and we returned to Lewis on Friday.

And it's a completely different place. The sun is shining. The wind has dropped. The days feel long. And I know that I'm getting ahead of myself, but it almost feels as though we've gone from winter to summer so quickly.

Now, I've lived here long enough to know that that's not going to be the case. And I'm sure it won't be long before it feels wintry again. But I think you all agree that weekends like this, and spells of weather like this, are those moments when you just instantly forget the dark, cold, windy weather of the winter.

[31 : 02] And you see the island at its most glorious again. And in many ways, the winters can be long in Lewis.

It can feel dark for a long time. The wind can feel relentless. Sometimes it feels like the rain never stops. And then you come to weekends like this, and it's so different.

It's so beautiful. It's so, so nice to see a cloudless sky, to enjoy a calm day, and to have a spell of such settled weather.

In many ways, the weather that we are enjoying at the moment is a beautiful opposite to what we are so often used to in the winter.

And it's that place, beautiful opposites, that I want you to have in mind as we think of these verses in Numbers chapter 6.

- [32 : 02] These are very, very famous words. Words that are often spoken, and words that speak very, very powerfully to us of so much that lies at the heart of the gospel.

And there's many things in here that are, many words and concepts here that are familiar to us. There's words and phrases that we will have heard many, many times.

But sometimes it's wise and helpful for us to stop and to think a little bit more about just exactly what these words mean, and just exactly what's being said.

And as we do that, what I want us to do is to actually think about how these words, we will get a deeper and clearer understanding of these words, if we see them as beautiful opposites, if we contrast them with everything that they are standing as opposite to.

So, beautiful opposites is our title, and we're going to just work through these words step by step together. And so, first of all, in verse 24, you'll see it says there, The Lord bless thee, and keep thee.

- [33 : 18] And both of these are familiar terms, but the word bless especially is one of those words which we hear all the time, and yet it can be quite hard to define. When you say, well, what does it mean to be blessed?

What does it mean to bless someone? It can be a wee bit hard. And even the word keep there, well, there's a few things that that could mean, I suppose. And so what I want to suggest is that both of these terms are maybe easier to understand if we think of their opposites.

So, the word bless is the opposite of the concept of being cursed. Now, that immediately, I think, makes it easier to understand, because a curse is something that we can understand and articulate quite clearly.

In many ways, a curse has just entirely negative connotations. It speaks of how perhaps somebody has been warned of the implications of their actions, and they've not listened, and negative consequences have come into their experience.

And to be cursed is something that nobody wants. To be cursed is to experience many things that are harmful and damaging and painful. And a curse is a very, very difficult thing for anyone to encounter, and you see that very much emphasised throughout Scripture.

- [34 : 40] To be blessed is the opposite of all of that. And I want us to think about the fact that in terms of being blessed, there's two things especially that are involved in that.

There's a declaration of specialness, and there is an outpouring of goodness. So, when we talk about being blessed, a key part of that is a declaration of specialness.

You're saying that something or someone is special in a particular way. You see that throughout the Bible. Right at the very beginning, the seventh day is blessed, and that's a declaration that that day is special, it's set apart from the other six, it's the day of rest, and it stands in a category of its own.

And throughout the rest of the Bible, you see the same pattern. So, you see children are blessed, declared special. You see it happening in friends and relationships. You even see it being spoken of, kings being spoken of as those who are blessed.

And in that blessing, there's a declaration of specialness. And that was particularly true for the people of Israel in the Old Testament.

- [35 : 58] They had been declared special, chosen by God as the people through whom his purposes would be worked out. And that's a key part of where we are in the story here of the Old Testament.

So, God had come to Abraham, and he had made that declaration of specialness, that Abraham was going to be blessed, and his descendants, his family, was going to be blessed.

That line came through Abraham's grandson, Jacob, who was given the name Israel, and it's the sons of Israel, the children of Israel, who have grown into this nation.

They had fallen into slavery in Egypt, but now they have been called out, and they have been prepared by God to enter the Promised Land. They are the chosen people, they are blessed, they are declared special.

And because of that, they had to be different from all the nations around them. And as you read through Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, you see loads and loads and loads of requirements being set before the people.

[37 : 04] Things that they had to do, things that they must not do. And one of the big, big reasons for all of that was because these blessed, special people of Israel were to be different.

They were to stand out from the rest of the world around them. Now, like everything else in the Old Testament, all of that functions as a shadow.

So when we say that in the Old Testament, God's people are chosen, and God's purposes are accomplished through that nation, that functions as a shadow. And so that means that we no longer see Israel today in the same way that we see Israel in the Old Testament.

Instead, we see Israel in the Old Testament as the shadow of the fulfilment in the New Testament that comes through the Church of Jesus Christ. So just as you have Israel in the Old Testament as the collective people of God through whom God's purposes are going to be accomplished, that's a shadow of the ultimate purpose of God to establish His Church across all nations to be the chosen ones who are declared special, to be the ones through whom God's purposes are worked out, and the ones into whom all nations are now being invited.

To be blessed is to be declared special. Also, to be blessed involves an outpouring of goodness. So if somebody is blessed, it means that they're the recipient of something good.

[38 : 36] And again, you see that again and again and again in the Old Testament, that those who were blessed, whether it was individuals or families or even the nation of Israel, there was a bestowal of goodness upon them.

They were the recipients of great privilege. So those who were blessed, they experienced success, happiness, security, value, and they had an opportunity to thrive.

And that's really how we tend to use the term blessed today. So when we talk about being blessed, we don't tend to use it so much in terms of the language of being declared special. We definitely use it though in the language of having goodness poured into our lives.

So when things go really well in our lives, when things go well at work, when our families are doing well, when we're able to settle in the home that we long for, when things are good, we will say that we feel very, very blessed.

Because to be blessed is an outpouring of goodness. So it's the opposite of being cursed. It's an immensely positive thing to experience.

[39 : 47] But there's also this emphasis on being kept, the Lord bless thee and keep thee. Now this is the language of the watchman. It's the idea of being on guard, looking out over something, looking out over someone, so whether that's protecting a flock, or protecting a city, it's all the language of guardianship.

It's all the language of protecting. And that is the opposite of being careless. If you think about the careless guard, isn't really thinking twice, whether a threat is coming towards the city, or whether a dangerous animal might be nearing the flock.

They're careless. They're not paying attention. They're not interested. But the good shepherd, the good watchman, is vigilant, watching out to make sure that they're safe.

And again, that emphasises specialness. It highlights for us that God wants to guard and protect his people. And so when God speaks about blessing his people, he's wanting to emphasise how special they are.

He wants to pour his goodness into them. And when God speaks about keeping his people, he wants to protect them and make sure that they're safe. Now again, there's two sides to what that protection is going to involve.

[41 : 14] And so on many occasions, it's going to involve protection from external threats. And you'll see that as you read on through Numbers, you read into the later books of the Old Testament, many, many times, the Israelites are facing external threats, military conflicts, where they need God's protection and help.

So there's the protection needed from external threats. But I think even more so, there is protection needed from internal foolishness.

Because if you look at the history of the Israelites in the Old Testament, the majority of their problems don't come from out there. They actually come from within, from the choices that are made by the individuals in the covenant community, whether that's kings later on in the Old Testament, or individual members of families, whether it's people falling into conflict, jealousy, selfishness.

There is so much internal danger, and there needs to be protection. protection. And that again ties in with the fact that God is giving so many commands in this section.

Sometimes you read through all the commandments in these early books of the Bible, and you think, oh, it sounds so restrictive, it sounds quite heavy.

[42 : 48] And yet, we must always remember that these commands are always protective. These commands are always protective.

And sometimes that meant placing boundaries around what they could or could not do. And I remember this very, very vividly when my children were wee.

My children are much older now. But when they were small, I remember there were so many times you would have to say, no. There would be things that they wanted, and you would say, no.

There would be places they were trying to go, and you would say, no. There would be things that they would attempt to do, and you would say, no. And every single time you said, no, it was for the same reason.

it was because you wanted to keep them safe. And as a child, my children would be like, why are you doing this? And you wish you could explain to them, I'm doing this because I love you.

[43 : 51] I'm doing it because I want to protect you. And all of that is captured in this beautiful phrase that the Lord wants to bless us and keep us.

Now, two crucial things about the gospel are being revealed here. And they're very simple, but they're so important. We are being reminded in verse 24 that God wants to bless you and that God wants to protect you.

He wants to bless you and he wants to protect you. Now, it's absolutely vital that you recognise and remember both of these truths because so many people think that God doesn't want to do either of those things.

So many people think that following Jesus is going to spoil your life, that it's going to stifle you, that it's going to make things worse rather than better.

God's great desire is to bless you, to fill your life with all the wonder and beauty and joy of all that he has created.

[45 : 09] His great desire is that our hearts would be filled, that our joy would be complete, that every day we would wake up smiling, that we would go into our lives full of thanksgiving.

God does not want to stifle you. He absolutely does not want to make your life rubbish. But, one thing he does want to do is that he wants to steer you away from bad decisions.

And that's an incredibly important thing for us to remember because God has made us in his image which has given us an amazing capacity to make decisions. Sin has left us broken which means we now have the capacity to make some very bad decisions.

And, I can look back in my own life and see so many bad decisions that I've made and I'm sure you feel the same. And, as God wants to guard us and as he wants to protect us, a key way in which he does that is to steer us away from bad decisions or to call us back to him when we have actually made the wrong choice.

And so, it's so, so important to remember that God does not want to stifle you. He wants to bless you. And, nor does God want to restrict you, but he does want to guard you.

[46 : 38] And, and that's just such a wonderful reminder that God's voice is a voice that's worth listening to. And, every time you hear God speaking to you, as you read his word, every time you think about whether you should follow Jesus or not, you must remember that what you are being told comes from this motivation, God's desire to bless you and God's desire to keep you.

These are crucial truths that we must always keep in our minds. Then, in verses 25 and 26, we've got two very similar statements.

The Lord make his face shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee. The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee and give thee peace. Now, this is an example of a pattern that you see very often in the Old Testament.

It's a pattern called parallelism, which is a very common feature of Hebrew writing. You see it loads and loads and loads of times in the Psalms. Basically, what you have is the same thing said twice, but slightly differently each time.

And so, the structure of the sentences will be the same, the terms that are used will be very similar, the emphasis will be the same, but there'll maybe be slight differences between the two statements.

[48 : 03] So, you can see that very, very powerfully and clearly in 25 and 26, they both begin the same way, the Lord, the Lord. And then they speak of it as a verb, the Lord make, the Lord lift up, and in verse 25, you have the Lord make his face shine upon thee, and in verse 26, it's the Lord lift up his countenance upon thee.

Now, the parallelism is actually much tighter in Hebrew than it is in English, because in English, we don't like repeating the same words too much, but in Hebrew, the word for face in 25, and the word for countenance in 26, it's exactly the same word.

And so, we translate the word differently in English, because we like to kind of, it sounds better when you do it differently, in English it sounds more natural, but strictly speaking, it's just the word for face, exact word, that's repeated, the Lord make his face shine upon thee, the Lord lift up his face upon thee, and so, the pattern is very, very similar, very tight, and it continues into the final phrase of each verse, be gracious unto thee, and give thee peace, both speaking about some blessing being bestowed upon us from God, in verse 25, it's grace, in verse 26, it's peace.

Again, these are full of beautiful opposites. so we have that phrase, lift up, face to shine his face, and to lift up his countenance, and both of these are the opposite of a hidden face, a turned face, a hardened face, and it's so important to think about that because it's incredibly easy that that is what God's face towards you is like.

How many of you, you don't need to put your hands up, but you can put the hand of your heart up if you feel like this. How many times do you feel like God is frowning at you? How many times do you feel like God is just turning his face away and shaking his head because of your mistakes, your failures, because of the stupid things that you've said or done?

[50 : 14] It is so easy to feel like that. And yet what's been described here is the opposite. It's a picture of presence and beauty and intimacy.

And these words are especially important in terms of where we are in the narrative of the Old Testament because as we've been saying, Israel has come out of Egypt, they're in the wilderness, they're heading towards the promised land.

After they came out of Egypt, something massively important happened. They came to Mount Sinai, where the Ten Commandments were given to them. You can read that Exodus 19, 20. Now, if you read that description of Mount Sinai, what will you read about?

Well, you read about Moses going up to the top of the mountain and the people have to stay down. And God's presence comes down to the top of the mountain and it's described in the most dramatic, intense terms.

It's the language of smoke and fire and thunder and shaking. And the big message to the people is don't come near the mountain.

[51 : 19] And the reason for that is because God is holy and pure and majestic and glorious and they are sinful. And so as they are on their own, they cannot come near to God.

And so the separation that's caused between God and humanity because of sin is very, very vivid before us at Mount Sinai. God's at the top, in the cloud, the people are at the bottom, they cannot come near him.

And you have this image that that's where sin has, this very powerful image of the fact that that's where sin has left us. Sin has left us so that we cannot approach God, we cannot come near him.

And all you've got when you think of Sinai is the mountain covered in clouds, thunder, lightning, shaking, and the people just cowering, unable to come near.

And yet God's desire is not that they would cower before him. God's desire is not that we would maybe get a glimpse of him in the distance while we feel that we actually can't dare step any closer.

[52 : 29] God's desire is that you would feel the warmth of his face shining upon you. And you need to compare these words, God's face shining upon you, God lifting up his kindness upon you, to compare those words with the inaccessibility of Sinai, with the fact that the curtain of the temple meant that nobody could come near the presence of God, and yet actually God's great goal is that we could just run into his arms, and the light and beauty and smile of his face would shine upon us.

That's how close God wants you to be, and that's what the gospel gives us. There's another beautiful opposite in the word gracious.

This is a word that we have to always keep on emphasising, because it's the opposite of being legalistic, and it's massively important to recognise this, because from the shadows of the Old Testament to the fulfilment in the new, God's love and presence and blessing is never, ever earned.

And yet, again and again and again, humanity thinks that the way to restore our relationship with God is for us to make ourselves good enough for him. That has never, ever been the way it works with God.

God does not ask us to reach a standard, and God does not respond to our goodness and our impressiveness by giving us blessings in return.

[54 : 04] instead, everything that we receive from God is by grace. Everything is by grace. And every person here who's a parent or a grandparent will know that this is true.

If I ask you the question, when you think of when your children or your grandchildren were born, what did they have to do for you to love them? The answer is nothing.

You love them from the moment that they were born. And that's a picture and a glimpse of what grace looks like.

Nobody needs to earn the love of a parent or a grandparent, or certainly nobody should ever have to earn that. And it's definitely the case that no one needs to earn the love of God.

Instead, it's gracious. It's a beautiful opposite to the legalistic mindset that we so easily fall into. There's another beautiful opposite in the word peace.

[55 : 18] And that's actually the Hebrew word shalom, which is a word that you've maybe heard. And it's often translated peace, but it's really a bigger term than that. It's a word that means wholeness, completeness, fulfillment.

And it's the opposite of feeling empty. It's the opposite of feeling insecure. It's the opposite of feeling uncertain.

And yet, that's so often her life leaves us feeling. We go through life and we feel unsettled, we feel uncertain, we feel anxious, we feel insecure, we feel unfulfilled.

so often that's what life, and so often we go chasing after things thinking that's going to make me feel complete. If I just have that job, or if I just get the house a wee bit better, or if I just earned a little bit more money, or if I just found somebody who would love me, or whatever it might be, if I just got those grades in school, just got the pension, whatever, we think that'll make me feel complete and yet it doesn't.

And so often life actually leaves us feeling empty. And often the things that we do love and cherish, we're anxious that we're going to lose them. Whether that's the people in our lives that we love so dearly, or the possessions that we have, or the success that we've accomplished, or the reputation that we've built up, so often we feel anxious, so often we feel uncertain, so often we feel empty.

[56 : 42] God's desire is to exchange all of that unsettledness for peace. And I think that that is one of the things that I can tell you that I've experienced, but I can't describe just what it's like.

But I think every one of us can say the same. As Christians, we don't always feel at peace, sometimes we feel unsettled, and we struggle, but there are moments in our walk with Jesus where we feel an amazing sense of peace, of completeness, of security, of wholeness.

And that peace is indescribable. It's so precious. It quenches our deepest thirsts.

thirsts. That's what God wants us to have. As he lifts his countenance upon us, it's in order to give us peace.

So there's a beautiful opposite in face shining and in countenance being lifted up, beautiful opposite compared to a hardened, turned face.

[58 : 06] Graciousness is a beautiful opposite to legalism. Peace is a beautiful opposite to the emptiness and unsettledness that we so often feel in life. But there's one more beautiful opposite in these verses.

It's the word you, as we have in this version, the word thee. And you think, well, what's that the opposite of?

Well, it's the opposite of someone else. And what I mean by that is that it's so easy to look at verses like this and to think of God's face shining, of God being gracious, of God lifting up his countenance upon someone, of God giving peace, and thinking of all these beautiful blessings being described, and then to think, it's for someone else.

It's not for me. it's so easy to think I've made too many mistakes, I've missed my opportunity, I've not responded as I should, I don't know enough, I've let God down too many times.

It's so easy to think that blessings like this are for the person beside you, and yet the word you, the word thee, is the opposite of someone else.

[59 : 45] Because you is just you. It's you that God wants to bless. It's you that God wants to keep. you're the one that he wants to shine his face on. Never, ever, ever, ever think that these promises are for someone else.

These words are beautiful words. They're beautiful opposites. And they are spoken to the people of Israel.

And I want to close by highlighting the fact that the people of Israel are going to need everything that's contained in these verses.

And the reason for that is because as the Old Testament progresses, Israel is going to feel like the opposite of everything that we've looked at in these verses. And that's going to happen in two ways.

[60 : 51] The first is that Israel, if you read on the Old Testament, you'll see that they're going to wander off from God. And so rather than feeling like they are those who have been blessed and declared special and provided for by God and who are being kept by him as they follow his commandments, they're going to think, we should be like everybody else.

And again and again and again, this is what happens. They look at the nations around them and they think we should be like them. We'd be better off like them and they wander off from God and instead of being the people that God is calling them to be, they are tempted again and again to be the opposite.

And so that's the first way in which they feel like the opposite of everything that these verses contain. means. But as they make that mistake again and again and again, there'll also be moments when they realise their mistakes.

And in those moments they feel very different because they're not wandering after the nations around them. They're realising the mistakes that they've made but they still feel the opposite of everything that's in these verses.

Because instead of feeling like the people upon whom God's face is shining, they feel so ashamed and so broken and so full of regret.

[62 : 31] Again and again and again in the Old Testament, Israel is going to feel like the opposite of these verses. and exactly the same happens to us. And so we wander off, we drift from God and we see people around us at work in our families and our communities and we think we'd be better off like them.

And we follow their influence, we chase their approval and we push God to one side. And whatever else is being chased by the people around us, we want to chase them as well.

And we make the massive mistake of thinking that we'll be better off being the opposite of everything that Jesus is calling us to be. And maybe you struggle with that today or maybe you've struggled with that in the past.

Maybe there's times when you really have felt I don't think it's worth it being a Christian. And maybe even right now you're in the midst of that struggle to think I've just been lured away and drawn away.

My faith feels like it's hanging like a thread. And so we can wander off just like the Israelites. We can make bad choices just like the Israelites.

[63 : 58] And those moments will come when we bitterly regret our mistakes. and we realise that we've made such an idiot of ourselves that we've done things that we never thought we would do.

And we feel so frustrated and so disappointed and we think that God must be totally fed up of us.

and maybe that's how you feel today. Maybe you feel like you've just made too many big mistakes and you think when I read numbers 23 to 27 I feel like the opposite of you.

if that's how you feel you need to keep coming back to these beautiful beautiful words. Because the world around us will make us empty promises that will leave us disappointed.

it. And the devil will keep on accusing us of all the mistakes that we've been made, keeping up our guilt and making us feel like God could never forgive us and never love us.

[65 : 22] The gospel meets us with beautiful opposites. And so if you feel like you've wandered off, if you feel full of regret and if you feel like you are nowhere near good enough to come to God, then he is saying to you again, I want to bless you and keep you.

And I will make my face shine upon you and be gracious to you. I'm lifting up my countenance upon you and you can know my peace.

These are beautiful opposites and this is everything that Jesus wants us to have. Amen. Let's pray.

Father, thank you so, so much for these words, these beautiful words of blessing that we read in number six.

Thank you that you are the God whose great desire is to bless us, to keep us, to shine your face upon us and be gracious to us, to lift your countenance upon us and give us peace.

[66 : 54] We've done nothing to deserve that, but how we thank you that in Jesus you poured it out upon us beyond measure. You are so good and so kind and may the great beautiful opposites of these words fill out hearts with joy and peace and assurance and you today and may these words stay with us as we go into the week ahead together.

We ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to close with Psalm 16 and we're singing from verse 8 to the end of the Psalm.

Psalm 16 Before me still the Lord I said, still it is so that he doth ever stand at my right hand, I shall not moved be.

Down to verse 11 which speaks of the ultimate goal of the gospel that before God's face at his right hand we will experience immeasurable pleasure forevermore.

So Psalm 16, 8 to 11 to God's praise. Keep on me still the Lord I said that this is so that he does ever stand on my right hand I shall not move with thee I shall not move with thee because of this my heart is glad and joy shall be expressed in by my glory and my flesh!

[69 : 15] In confidence shall rest in confidence shall rest because my soul in grave to dwell shall shall not be left by thee nor with the gift thine holy one corruption to see corruption to see thou wilt sure the path of life of joy stead is full store before thy face!

at thy right heart our pleasures ever more!

our pleasures! ever more! our pleasures ever more!

may of our Lord Jesus Christ the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all! Amen!