

What's in a Benediction?

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[0 : 00] At the end of every service of public worship, the presiding minister will raise his hands in the air and pronounce the benediction.

! The word benediction means blessing, or more literally to speak well or good words. So the minister, on behalf of God, dismisses the people of God with the blessing of God upon them. The service ends with God speaking well over his people. He is pronouncing his pleasure in them and his intention for them.

His pleasure in that they are the children he loves, provides for, and protects, and his intention to strengthen them for all the challenges that may lie ahead.

So the benediction is an essential element of every Christian service of public worship. It's the public announcement of God's blessing on his covenant people.

[1 : 06] As Christians, we're to carefully listen to God's benedictions, realizing they're for us. They are God's gift to us, his words of pleasure and intention.

Whatever issues we might be facing, whether it's grief or doubt, depression, joy, or thankfulness, be it peace and tranquility.

God wants us to experience his pleasure in us and his loving intention toward us. Now, the benediction that we most commonly use here in Crow Road is taken directly from this verse in 2 Corinthians 13 verse 14.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Now, we're tempted, are we not, because we've heard these words so very often, not to think so deeply about what they mean.

In truth, we're spoiled by them and take them for granted, because there's a richness in these words that goes beyond anything the world can offer us. Here, God is blessing us not so much with grace and love and fellowship, although these are wonderful things.

[2 : 23] God is blessing us with himself. And in essence, he's saying to us, I will know you, and you will know me.

I'll be with you through all the trials of this week. Know this, my beloved child, I take great pleasure in you, and I will be with you always.

Out of the many things we can say from this benediction in 2 Corinthians 13, 14, and there are many, I want to reflect on just three.

First, it tells us about God. First, it tells us about God. Then it tells us about salvation. And then it tells us about prayer. God, salvation, prayer.

At the end of our service this evening, let's listen carefully to the good words of the benediction. For me too. They're for us as a Christian church. And they're for us as individual Christians.

[3 : 25] First of all then, these words tell us about God. This benediction tells us about God.

Catherine and I were privileged recently to attend the celebration of the ministry of the Reverend Dr. Ian Hamilton.

Known to many of us here, Ian is an influential pastor, writer, and theologian. He's influenced many of us, myself included, for the good, and inspired us to be the best servants of Christ we can be.

At the celebration dinner, one of the speakers highlighted some of the distinctive emphases of Ian's preaching and theology. And he read something that Ian wrote many years ago.

Ian wrote, The chief doctrine of the Christian faith is not the doctrine of justification. The chief doctrine of the Christian faith is the doctrine of the Trinity.

The chief doctrine of the Christian faith is the doctrine of the Trinity. As Christians, we worship one God in three persons.

[4 : 32] Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is the chief and distinctive doctrine of the Christian faith. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity. It's a mysterious doctrine. It has no earthly pattern.

But it's a doctrine we must believe if we are to call ourselves Christians. It's a doctrine that's clearly taught in the Bible, even if the word Trinity is never used.

We serve one God. But the Father is God. But the Father is God. And the Son is God. And the Spirit is God. The fathers of the church, like Athanasius of Alexandria, stood firmly on the truth of the Trinity.

This year marks the 1700th anniversary of the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed is the fundamental confession of the Christian faith. We'll be studying the Nicene Creed a little bit later in the year.

Athanasius, this great African theologian, was the key figure in its formulation. We'll all be familiar with some of the language of the Apostles' Creed by virtue of the hymn, O Come All Ye Faithful.

[5 : 40] But in verse 2, we recite the Nicene Creed's teaching on Christ almost word for word. God of God. Light of light.

Very God. Begotten, not created. O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord. The Apostles' Creed, for as valuable as it is, does not definitively declare the divinity of the Son, nor of the Holy Spirit. And as such, a Mormon or a Jehovah's Witness can recite the Apostles' Creed. But not the Nicene Creed. Not the Nicene Creed. For in unmistakable terms, the Nicene Creed declares the Son is God, the Father is God, and the Holy Spirit is God.

They are not of a similar essence to God the Father. They are of the same essence. One essence. Later, the Nicene Creed says, I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son.

With the Father and the Son, He is to be worshipped and glorified. Now, people often ask the question whether Christians worship the same God as Jews and Muslims.

[7 : 05] The answer is an emphatic no. We believe in the divine trinity. It's the cardinal doctrine of the Christian faith. Both Jews and Muslims worship a God we may describe as a monad.

M-O-N-A-D. Monad. One God, one person, who alone eternally has been alone, and as alone, has had nothing else than himself to love.

For the Christian, because God is Trinity, love stands central to His being. The Father has always loved the Son and the Spirit, for they are not Him.

And the Son has always loved the Father and the Spirit, for they are not Him. Such a strong inter-Trinitarian love allows that infinite, eternal, and unchangeable love each person of the Trinity has for the other to spill over onto all that He has created.

So, it's the Trinity that allows the Apostle John to say in 1 John 4, God is love. So, to answer the question, do Christians worship the same God as Muslims and Jews?

[8 : 29] The answer is an emphatic no. There is no common ground between our gods. For their gods are monads, always alone.

For as our God is divine Trinity, three in one. The God who offers Himself to us in the benediction is the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the fullness of His Trinitarian glory.

The great Asian church father, Gregory Nazianzus, beautifully said, No sooner do I conceive of the one than I am enlightened by the splendor of the three.

No sooner do I distinguish them than that I am carried back to the one. It's just this beautiful mystery by which we are not threatened, but invited to participate in the overflow of each divine person's love for the other, and allowing that love to overflow into the life of the church and of individual Christians.

Every doctrine of the Christian faith is practical. The doctrine of the Trinity is the cornerstone of the Christian faith, so it's not surprising it's the most practical of all the doctrines of Christianity.

[9 : 54] What warrant do I have to believe that God loves me? When I've failed Him and become spiritually cold, or when I've sunk into pits of anxiety and depression where I cannot but hate myself, or even when I've fallen away from Him, what assurance can I have that God loves me?

It is because by virtue of Him being the blessed Trinity, God is love.

It is more natural for Him to love than it is for me to breathe. Among the many warrants that are, this is perhaps the most powerful, the eternal, infinite, and unchangeable inner Trinitarian love between Father, Son, and Spirit overflows into my daily experience as a Christian.

So, shall such love hate me now, which loved me before I was even born? Shall such love cast me away now, whom it has held close to its heart, since before the sun began to shine in the sky?

If I am in Christ, the Father cannot look upon me, yes, even the messy me, without seeing the glory of His Son, and He loves me.

[11 : 24] Furthermore, if that inner Trinitarian love of the Father, Son, and Spirit has overflowed into my life, surely that love should overflow from my heart into the lives of others.

Why do we bear with one another, and forgive one another, and comfort one another? We do it because the love of the Father for the Son and the Spirit, and so on, has flooded our hearts with the love of God, a love that must spill over into our love for others.

Again, the Apostle John writes, Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also then to love one another. So, this benediction, far from being an abstract theological doctrine, is the most practical of all Christian doctrines.

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity serves the foundation for all we believe concerning God and our life together as Christians. When hands are raised at the end of the service and the blessing is pronounced, it's as if God Himself is saying to us, Go and live in love, even as the Father loves the Son and the Spirit, and the Son loves the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit loves the Father and the Son.

Now you go and live in the same love. So, it tells us about God, first of all. Secondly, this benediction, these good words, tell us about salvation.

[13 : 05] Tell us about salvation. These words are remarkable on many accounts, chief of which is that it tells us about the source and the means and the purpose of our salvation, the source, the means, and the purpose of our salvation.

In these words, we have the Christian gospel in miniature, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The source of our salvation is to be found in the love of God the Father.

God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son. We wrongly attribute to God the Father the sternest of all the attributes, wrath, judgment, etc.

But time and again, the Bible wants us to understand the source of our salvation is found in the infinite, eternal, and unchangeable love of God the Father for us.

God, understood God the Father, demonstrated His love for us in this. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. God the Father is filled with love.

[14 : 21] Again, 1 John 3, verse 1, see what kind of love the Father has lavished upon us that we should be called children of God. It's a love with no beginning and no end.

A love for us which is infinite, even as God Himself is infinite. It can't be measured, it can't be limited, not even by our actions.

It's an unconditional love. No human love is unconditional, but God's love for us carries no condition. If you were to ask me today, why am I a Christian?

I can only answer, I love Him because He first loved me. And then if someone was to try and explore with me why God loved me, all I can say is that God loved me not for any qualities I have, and not for anything He can make me into, but because it is in the nature of God the Father to love. We sung this together, the Christian songwriter Stuart Townend, he nails it. How deep the Father's love for us, how vast beyond all measure, that He should give His only Son to make a wretch His treasure.

[15 : 44] If the love of God the Father for us is why we are Christians, the source of salvation, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is the how of our becoming Christians.

The mechanism of our salvation is the grace of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. 2 Corinthians 8, verse 9, You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich.

When we think of Jesus, we cannot but think of the grace of God toward us. Because of Christ Jesus, we did not receive what we deserved, punishment, but we received what we did not deserve, blessing.

On account of our sins, we deserved the condemnation of death, but on the cross, Jesus was punished for our sins and died to bear our condemnation. On account of our sins, we did not deserve the riches of the glory of God, but on the cross, Jesus earned them all and freely gave them to us.

Our salvation may cost us nothing, but it cost the glorious Son of God. His lifeblood shed at the cross for us. We sang this last Sunday evening, but again, the Australian Christian group, City of

Light, have it right.

[17 : 15] What gift of grace is Jesus, my Redeemer, that is no more for heaven now to give? Because of Jesus Christ, I, who deserved to die eternally, now by faith in Him, shall live eternally in the glory of my Father.

Because of Christ Jesus, I, whose sins, what is crimson as blood, now by faith, wear the white robes of Christ's spotless righteousness. If the love of God the Father is the why we are Christians and the grace of the Lord Jesus is the how of our becoming Christians, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is the purpose of our being Christians.

It's the purpose. In His upper room discourse in John 14 through 17, Jesus tells the disciples what will happen to them after His death and resurrection.

resurrection. Jesus says, And I will ask the Father and He will give you another helper to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees Him nor knows Him.

You know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. And then later Jesus says, If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word and My Father will love him.

[18 : 43] and we will come to Him and make our home with Him. In other words, the Holy Spirit whom, when we believe, the Father sends to live within us, Father and the Son send to live within us, is the presence of the fullness of the triune God with us.

In and through the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, we have fellowship with the Father and with the Son. Here then is the purpose of our salvation that we may know God as He is and have fellowship with Him.

In His great high priestly written in John 17, 23, Jesus describes the nature of eternal life. This is eternal life.

That they know you, the only true God. That they know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. When we read these words, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, we're to think of how the Holy Spirit brings the glorious knowledge of the fullness of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit into our daily experience.

This is why this is a benediction which offers us Father, Son, and Spirit, one God. For here, God Himself is offering us in love, fellowship, and grace.

[20 : 12] He's saying to us, I will know you and you will know me. I'll be with you through all the trials of this week. Know this, my beloved child. I take great pleasure in you and I will be with you always.

In the raising of hands at the end of this service, God reminds us all of the purpose of our salvation. That He Himself will be our inheritance, our reward, and our portion.

Not what He gives us, but He Himself. What does any lover want but His lover?

He doesn't want her money. He doesn't want her gold. He wants her. And the triune God in the fullness of His mysterious glory says to us, you can have my grace and you can have my mercy and you can have my fellowship, but more than anything, I give you Myself.

God goes with us from this place into the week that lies ahead. God in the fullness of all He is. He goes with us and He'll never leave us nor forsake us.

[21 : 28] It tells us about salvation. Well, finally and briefly, this benediction, among other things, tells us about prayer. Tells us about prayer. Bill Dunlop recently gave me a book to read.

He always gives me good books to read. It's entitled Distinct Communion and has been written by Dan Peters, Isaac's dad. Isaac's one of the students with us here.

Building upon the English Puritan John Owen's famous work, Communion with God, Dan suggests and proves from Scripture and historic Christian theology that we as Christians can enjoy communion with each person of the Holy Spirit, each person of the Holy Trinity distinctly.

But depending upon our circumstances and the situations we find ourselves in, we can pray to the Father or we can pray to the Son or we can pray to the Holy Spirit.

Dan's saying something very important in this book, something that I know I want to work on both in my private prayers and in my public prayers. Well, in this verse we read, Here the triune God three in one is inviting us to enjoy His grace, love and fellowship.

[22 : 51] But under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul chose his words carefully, attributing to the Lord Jesus Christ grace, attributing to God the Father love, and attributing to God the Holy Spirit fellowship.

Now, it's not as if we cannot attribute love and fellowship to the Lord Jesus Christ. And it's not as if we can't attribute grace and fellowship to God the Father. And it's not as if we can't attribute grace and love to the Holy Spirit.

But under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in this verse, Paul is attributing grace to Jesus, love to the Father, and fellowship to the Spirit.

Remember, the love of the Father is the source of our salvation, the grace of the Lord Jesus is the means of our salvation, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is the purpose of our salvation.

Surely, the exactness of Paul's words, together with their meaning for our salvation, open up a new dimension for us to understand how we can enjoy distinct communion with each member of the Trinity, each person of the Trinity, rather.

[24 : 07] Shouldn't call each person a member. Each person of the Trinity. If I feel rejected, if I feel unloved, not at all sure whether God loves me at all, I should address my prayers to God the Father because love comes from Him.

If I feel guilty and ashamed, not at all convinced of my right to eternal life or my warrant to believe, I should address my prayers to God the Son because grace comes from Him.

If I feel very distant from God and all alone, not at all sure whether I'll ever feel close to Him again, I should address my prayers to God the Holy Spirit because fellowship comes from Him.

If my problem concerns the source of salvation, take it to God the Father in prayer. If it concerns the means of salvation, take it to God the Son in prayer.

If it concerns the purpose of salvation, take it to the Holy Spirit in prayer. It's not wrong to pray just to God for He is one and three.

[25 : 27] But for our benefit, Paul allows us access into the contributions of each person of the Trinity to our salvation. So, I'm going to challenge each of us on a practical level.

Let's practice this in our prayers. Now, I can't say that I'm a great fan of sci-fi, but I know enough about it to have learned that in the very near future, spacecraft will all have shields to defend them against the laser beams of enemy ships.

There's a sense in which when the minister raises his hands at the end of a service of public worship and on God's behalf proclaims the benediction, God is placing His shield of protection around us so that whatever may happen in the week ahead, we shall not merely cope.

We shall overcome. The blessing, in a sense, is placing a shield of God's protection around us. But ultimately, as I said earlier, the benediction is the glorious, triune God's gracious offer, not just of the virtues of love and grace and fellowship, but His offer of Himself to us.

The Lord of heaven and earth who made the sun of the stars, the sovereign God on the throne, He offers Himself to us and He pours Himself out like a mighty waterfall, baptizing us with His glorious and gracious presence.

[27 : 16] The only remaining question is this, is this benediction for you? Is God's gracious offer of Himself and the blessing enough for you to respond to Him in faith and trust?

Lord, I can't do life by myself. I need You. Will You forgive my sins even as I turn away from them? Will You grant me eternal life even as I commit myself to always following You? Will You do now even as in a moment this minister raises his hand to bless God's people here, will you pray that God Himself would come into your life?