

A Prayer of Blessing

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Date: 01 September 2013

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[0 : 00] If you're visiting, I just want to add my welcome to Jordan's. My name's Aaron. I'm the minister for this service. If you are new, you're new to the city, starting school or starting a new job, I'd love to say hi to you.

So after the service, would you just come and grab me and say hi? I know it's a bit weird, like, saying hi to a stranger, but I'd just love to say hi to you. So would you come and say hi to me? Also, I want to just...

The series on the church, which we're starting, I'm really excited about this. It is a topical series, but don't freak out by that. Like, I know we haven't done...

I don't think we've ever done a topical series, not in my living memory of St. John's. But it will be an exposition of a text every week. So it's... I like to call it topical, right?

And I'm really looking forward to it, because if somebody said to me, tell me about the church, theologically, I could talk for about 10 minutes maybe, and there's going to be 14 sermons, so I need to drag that out.

[1 : 05] Just check a couple of stories in there. So I'm really looking forward to it. I'm really looking forward to finding out, learning about God's church, because I know that when I think about it, I probably think about this big, and I know it's about this big.

All right. Psalm 67. Gee, what a cracker. Fantastic psalm. And we can so easily pass over it, I think, because it's the kind of one...

Imagine you come home late at night, and you know you should read your Bible, and so you think, well, I'm really tired, so you don't know what to read. You go to the psalms, right, and you're kind of flicking through, and you're looking for a short one.

I know. And you come across the psalm 67, you go, great, perfect, short. And you kind of read through it, and you go, yep, great. Bless us. Fantastic. Shine your face on us. Great. Love it. Don't know what it means, but love it.

Saving power. Good. Praise. Praise. Good. Increase. Good. Bless again. Great. Fear him. Unsure about that. Great. And you could do that, and you're missing something so spectacular, though.

[2 : 11] There is gold. There is gold in this psalm, because it reaches down into some of the most foundational of biblical ideas. And in it, even though it's short and it repeats itself a lot, in it, there is our meaning, our purpose, our hope in this life.

So let's just get straight into it. Verse 1. Huge verse. May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us.

So this splices together a couple of very important Old Testament concepts and events. Firstly, the benediction of Aaron, which is the blessing of Aaron from Numbers 6.

The Lord bless you. The Lord keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you. You've probably heard that before. It splices that together, mashes that up with the promise of God to Abraham from Genesis 12. I will make you a great nation.

I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. So obviously, blessing is really important in this passage. So let me talk about that just generally for a couple of minutes.

[3 : 21] We use blessing in sort of inane ways today. Somebody sneezes, bless you. I mean, it's nice, right? It's nice. I think it's got its roots in either in this idea that when you sneeze, your soul falls out your nose or something.

Or that's, which theologically is marginal. Or I think it's roots in the 6th century bubonic plague and sneezing was the first sign that you're going to get really sick and die.

So you'd sneeze and, oh, you're going to die. Bless you, you know. So it's not awful. I have another friend of mine that says, if I tell a cute story about my kids, she'll go, oh, bless.

You might say that. You know, that's fine. But it's a bit of a throwaway word sometimes. It's lost some meaning because of that, I think. So to get to the meaning of it, let's go right back to Genesis 1.

So God made everything. Lastly, men and women gave him dominion over the earth. And at each point when God created something, he said, it was good.

[4 : 25] And it's not like, oh, it's good. It's not like, oh, it actually worked. When you're omnipotent and omniscient, you're not surprised by your achievements, just so you know.

It's more about God enjoyed it. He made something and he enjoyed it. He loved it. It was great. We'll come back to that idea. And then it says in verse 28, it says, and God blessed them. Adam and Eve. God blessed them. Brilliant, right? Love it. Fantastic. What does it mean? Like, good question. Like, what does it actually mean?

When the psalmist says in 67, bless us, what is he actually requesting from God? Because we can use it.

It has the feel today of like a, like an incantation almost, that we can use it. Like, oh, you're going on a ship?

[5 : 23] Oh, bless you. Like we're kind of like with, you know, like we're throwing fairy dust on you and going, well, bless you. Like these magic words which will make everything okay. It's not that. It's rich and wonderful.

Helpfully, the Old Testament has some great stories to help us understand what blessing is. In particular, I'm talking about the stories of when fathers bless their children.

When a father is at a point of death, you know, he gathers his kids around and he blesses them. So there's a number of stories in the Old Testament. We don't have time to kind of specifically talk about them. I'll talk about them in general terms.

Generally, what happens at these kind of blessing events is that, you know, dad's lying on the bed and he might be blind at this point or whatever. So, you know, he puts his hand on his sons and it's usually sons here and he wishes them well.

So it's the first thing that happens. He wishes them well. He longs that they prosper. And he says things like, you know, may your lands be fertile and you have lots of kids. So he gives them his kind of objective for their life, like their goal, like the thing he wants to happen for them.

[6 : 35] Secondly, though, the father divides up his property. So he goes, I want you to do well. I want you to prosper. And then he divides up his property. And so he tries to, he gives them the resources to help them achieve that thing that he wants them to do.

That's what blessing means, in part. So when God says, I bless you, he is saying, I delight in you. I wish you well in terms of what humanity is created for. My favor is on you.

And I'm committed to using my resources to help you in achieving that good. You know, I will pay a price to see that you do well.

Now, as I say that, your minds should go to Jesus. We'll come back to Jesus in a moment. We can actually see this idea played out in the Old Testament, the rest of the Old Testament.

God blessed Israel through Abraham, through Aaron. And a commitment, that commitment that God had to them is seen through his continual intervention.

[7 : 47] When they would constantly kind of stuff it up. So that's blessing. It's promise. And it's provision. But it's not just that.

To fill this idea out, we're going to look at the face shining bit. Because remember, verse 1 says, bless us. And make his face to shine upon us.

What does that mean? I mean, it sounds lovely. Okay. God is present everywhere. True? True. Correct. The face of God, though.

What that's talking about? That's talking about God's relational presence with us. Let me give you an example. So some friends of mine back in New Zealand.

It's kind of like a New Zealand thing. I don't know if you do it here. But they would have these things called cold start dinners. So like five male friends would throw a dinner party.

[8 : 43] And they'd invite dates. And it was called a cold start. Because you had to invite somebody you did not know. Like you literally, you don't know them. So you might meet somebody in the shop and say, Lady, girl, whatever, stranger, I'm having a cold start dinner.

Would you like to come? And people know about these things, right? So it's kind of like not completely weird and random. And so they'd have these dinner parties with, say, ten people.

Five guys are all mates. And five random girls. And so, you know, hilarious, right? All right. So forget about that as a strategy, guys, for the moment.

And come back to Jesus right now. Come back to Jesus. Because I'm just trying to paint a picture that I can now say something helpful to you. Although that might be helpful and you should.

So at this party, right? At this dinner party, each guy, like if I'm at this dinner party, I am present to everyone in this little dinner party.

[9 : 48] I'm present to them all. But to the person that you're trying to chat up, you know, your face is turned to them.

You're focused on them. And you're like, oh, so tell me about yourself. Really? You like stuff too? Great, you know. So you are intimately present with that person.

You're present to everyone, but your face is turned to that particular person. This is what this is talking about here. God's face talks about God's, his intimate presence in your life.

Now the shining part, what's that about? That's a smiling face. That's a face that's enjoying that intimate presence. My youngest daughter, Bea, she's 14 months old.

If I smile at her in about three or four seconds, she'll start smiling back at me. Now she's not mimicking me. She's not just copying me because she can't see her face and sort of compare it, right?

[10 : 48] She perceives that I'm enjoying her and it fills her heart with gladness. It does something in her heart. And we both enjoy that.

So, make his face shine on us. That's the prayer. That's the prayer of the psalm. God, smile on us. God, be present to us.

God, be intimate with us and enjoy that presence. Isn't that wonderful? So, face, shine is part of the blessing.

And it's a really important part. Because blessing is not just God resourcing you. And it's not just God giving you good things. It's God giving you himself.

And that's the great gift. That's what we want. So, blessing is promise. It's provision. And it's presence. Verse 2.

[11 : 47] The purpose of that blessing. Verse 2. Look at that there. That your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations. Do you see that? That your.

So, this means that what follows is the purpose of blessing. Bless us so that your way may be known on earth. Here's the implication. God never blesses you except that you might be a blessing to others.

I'll say that again. God never blesses you except that you might be a blessing to others. This idea of blessing and intimate presence is not just to fill up your love tanks. It's so you can go out in the world and live lives of sacrificial love.

That you'll go out. That you'll be on mission. That you will share your faith. The story of how Jesus has changed your life. See, blessing is like manna. You know manna from heaven? You know when the people of God were in the desert.

And there's nothing to eat there. And so, God would send this manna. This stuff which we collect on the ground. And they would collect it up. And they'd make stuff they could eat out of it. But the rule was that you couldn't take more than you actually needed for that day or whatever.

[12 : 55] Because it was like if you did, you weren't trusting God. So, people would try and take it and store it. And it would rot. It would go stale. It would smell. And blessings are like that.

You hold on to them. You don't share them. They rot. If a blessing terminates with you, it's lost. Christians who don't pass on the blessing of knowing God.

You become a contradiction. The headlines over the last year, just to illustrate this.

The headlines over the last year have been filled with famous young people making terrible, terrible decisions. And why is that? You'd think some of these guys just have everything, right? Their looks and wealth and fame, etc.

There's a study in New York following the massive increase in suicides amongst teens of very wealthy parents. And here is a paraphrase summary and sort of conclusion from that study.

[13 : 56] They said when kids have complete financial security and provision and an exhaustive range of opportunities for recreation and pleasure, leads to apathy and a sense of entitlement and insecurity.

See, the problem is you pile these kids high. These kids have been piled high with prosperity and they're never taught sacrificial service. They're never taught to be committed to something bigger than themselves and their souls rot.

They despair. All that to say, folks, when you ask God to bless you, the goal is that others would also know that blessing through you.

And it's not even just a goal. It should naturally flow out of your heart because you are so thankful to be in God's presence. And why wouldn't you want other people to know that? And we see this, this thankfulness and this great desire for others to know God in verses 3 to 7.

Do you hear, just slide your eyes over that 3 to 7 there. Do you hear the yearning in the psalmist's heart for the world to know about God? Verse 3, let the peoples praise you, all the peoples. Let the nations sing for joy.

[15:06] Let all the ends of the earth fear him, which means be in awe of him. Folks, I think one of the primary ways we demonstrate that God's face is shining on us and we have experienced that is through our concern for others, particularly their salvation.

One more point before finishing up. Verses 3 to 7. And the other thing I want you to notice about it is a yearning not just for people to praise God, to be in right relationship with God, but do you also see this great desire for things to be made right?

Look at verse 4 here. Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon the earth. There is this real future element to the grammar here.

And do you notice also that these two identical verses are either side of it? It's like a Hebrew sandwich, okay? It's a literary device. What it does is it points to the thing in the middle. It kind of draws your eyes.

It zooms your eyes into the thing in the middle and says, this is really important, this middle bit. I think another mark of a heart, a heart that knows God's face, is a heart that hopes for justice and for things to be put right.

[16:26] And so the psalmist prays for a judge and a guide, someone who will mete out justice and guide us. That guide word, that's a shepherd word. This is an Eden hope.

What I mean by that is that humanity, as you know, was bumped from the garden and we desire to get back where there's a problem. And the problem is us. We can't get ourselves back there. And I hope you know that we can't get ourselves back there.

I hope you're not a utopist. So the psalmist prays for the world. He hopes for the world. And God answers that prayer with Jesus, who fits this description, the judge, the shepherd, who has conquered the us problem, the you and me problem, the sin problem.

Folks, this great hope for things to be put right. If this is not the hope of our hearts, that God, through Jesus, will put things right. Then, you know, we are, what are we?

We are, what are we? We are patrons. We're patrons of religion. And that's such a small thing compared to what a Christian is, isn't it?

[17:38] Finishing up. Tolkien. I love Tolkien. I read through Lord of the Rings every sort of 18 months or so. And just love it. He wrote an essay called On Fairy Tales.

Perhaps you know of it. Where he defends the genre. He wrote this in, I think, early 30s, I think. And basically, the fairytale genre was just getting slammed by the critics.

It wasn't regarded as high literature, et cetera. And people were saying it's going to fade away as a genre. So Tolkien writes this essay saying it's always going to be popular. Now, I'm going to paraphrase a quote here.

Well, it's more of a paraphrase of a quote of a description of the essay. But forget that. That's unhelpful. And I wish I could rewind what I said. But here we go.

Here's the quote. Fairy tales move us in a way that realistic fiction does not and cannot. Because fairy tales speak to us of several deep human longings that we are almost afraid to admit and that we can never discard.

[18:38] We long to survey the depths of time and space. We long to get outside of time altogether and escape death. We long to hold communion with other living things like angels.

And this is the bit I really like. We long to find a love which perfectly heals and from which we can never depart. We long to triumph over evil finally and totally.

When you're in the middle of a great fairy tale. The fairy tale lets you live even briefly with the dream that love without parting, escape from death, triumph over evil are real and realizable.

That's why the stories stir us so deeply. And why we'll go on reading and writing them no matter what the critics say. Team, this is the hope of this psalm.

That through Jesus we have a love from which we can never depart. We will see an absolute triumph over evil. There is a prince who will save us.

[19 : 41] Who will transform us. Who will love us even in our bestliness. And there will be a happily ever after. But let's not hold on to that hope just for ourselves.

Share that hope. And if that sounds just completely terrifying to you. That idea, every time I've said that and mentioned. Sharing your faith. If that sounds completely terrifying to you.

Then pray this. Lord, shine your face upon me. And go from there. Amen.