

Saving Power

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 0 0] St. John's Shaughnessy Church In the early 1800s, Australia was basically a prison colony.

This has had a profound influence on Australian self-understanding, but that is for another sermon. A great many of the children who were born in the first 30 years of the 1800s were born in prison to women who were prisoners.

And there was no uniform policy on how to treat those children. I want you to imagine that you're a young child who has been born in prison and that all you've known is that life and that community and that reality.

And one day someone comes into the prison and offers you freedom and security and a way of life that you don't have. And I want you to imagine how difficult it is that although it sounds nice, it would be hard to believe because it's so foreign to your experience.

It's a bad illustration, but I think it helps us to understand our problem with reading Psalm 67. See, Psalm 67 is all about the blessing of God.

[1 : 4 2] And we talk about God's blessing and we say, God bless you, but it's very difficult to believe because it's so foreign to our experience. And the truth is, of course, that we live outside the Garden of Eden.

Even on the best day in Vancouver, when the sun is shining and when everything is going right and I feel happy and healthy, I know that this is not it.

Well, if you look at the bulletin sheet, you can see that Psalm 67 is a big arrow in seven parts, beautifully balanced.

You see that? Verse 3 and verse 5 are identical with one another. And the psalm is dominated by blessing. I've underlined it in verse 1. May God be gracious to us and bless us.

In verse 7, God has blessed us. Let all the ends of the earth fear him. It is a deceptively simple psalm and part of me feels like we should spend this next 20 minutes learning it off by heart, which would probably be a more useful exercise than my preaching.

[2 : 4 9] I've got a sermon prepared, so I'll let you do that after the service. It is simple, but it's deceptively simple because it goes deep into the bedrock of scripture.

You see, the language of blessing takes us back to creation itself. Do you remember that when God created the world, his purpose was to embrace everyone in his blessing?

And he created us in three relationships. He created us to relate to him, to relate to one another, and to relate to his world, his creation.

He placed us in this world as his representatives. And he marked all those relationships by harmony and love and security and joy, and that is what blessing is, it's right relationships.

But we no longer live in the garden. And the story of disobedience and disbelief is the story of the reversal of creation.

[3 : 53] Instead of hearing God's word and gladly obeying, the man and the woman obey the voice of the creature and try and play God. And in doing so, they turn creation upside down.

And in rejecting God's blessing, every relationship is profoundly damaged. That is why there are fig leaves in the garden. That's the point.

You see, instead of openness and trust and love, we are afraid of one another and we hide from each other. And that is why when God announces the punishment in Genesis 3, it is in terms of curse.

Unless God now directly intervenes with blessing, there can be no return to the harmony of creation. And that is exactly what he does. I wonder if you would just put your sheet to one side and turn back to Genesis 12 in the Bibles for a moment.

Genesis 12, 1-3 Here is God beginning again with Abraham.

[5 : 08] This is the beginning of the history of God's people in some ways. 1-3 Now the Lord said to Abraham, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you.

And I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you. Make your name great so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you.

And him who curses you I will curse. And here is the end product. By you, all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.

Isn't that significant? Five times blessing is referred to. We cannot manufacture our way back to the garden. And the way that God intervenes is he speaks and makes promise.

And here is God's intention to create a nation, Israel. Not for their own sake. But that through him, sorry, through them, God would bless all the nations, all the families of the world.

[6 : 13] I don't know if you've ever thought about that. The reason God chose Israel is not because they're a fantastic group of people. It's not because he plays favourites. It's so that through them he would reveal his blessing to all the world.

The purpose of Israel's existence is to bring blessing of God to a fallen and broken world. At the risk of oversimplifying.

At the risk of oversimplifying. The story of Israel, the history of Israel is the story of how God's people resisted God's blessing for themselves and therefore failed to be a blessing for the world until the time of Jesus Christ.

And again and again and again God intervenes to establish his blessing amongst his people. Let's turn over to Numbers chapter 6 for just a moment.

On page 121. God is rescuing his people. Taking them through the wilderness to the promised land. Listen to how he instructs his priests.

[7 : 17] Numbers 6 verse 22. Verse 22.

In other words the blessing of God is meant for protection and for grace and well-being. It is salvation and it is peace. So by the time we come to Psalm 67.

Which means you can put your Bible away and just turn to the yellow sheet. By the time we come to Psalm 67.

We hear echoes of God's promise to Abram. And we hear echoes of God's blessing through Aaron. And we see them combined with God's original intention in Psalm 67.

To bless all the people of the world. But here is the problem. Because of the reality of the curse. Because of our deep seated resistance to God's will.

[8 : 40] God cannot just impose blessing on us and force us into blessing and friendship. What he has to do is undo the work of our disobedience and our disbelief.

And that is why when we speak of God's blessing there are deep tensions. And Psalm 67 draws us into the two key tensions of God's blessing.

And the first tension is this. It is the tension between our mission and our message. To put most simply, our mission as God's people is universal, total and all-embracing.

That our message is specific, individual and particular. Look at the way verse 2 follows verse 1. You see verse 1, may God be gracious to and bless us and make his face shine upon us.

So that thy way may be known on earth. Thy saving power among all nations. There is nothing wrong with praying that God would bless you.

[9 : 50] That is where the psalm starts. And God's blessing always begins with his people. But that cannot be the end of it. Because the blessing of God is meant to spread to others.

Verse 2 is not a separate request. It is part of verse 1. We pray that God would bless us. In order that he would bless other people through us.

This is difficult for us to understand. God's blessing is not, I pray for God's blessing, not so that I might be happy, healthy, well-adjusted, patron of religion. So that God would bless other people through me.

The blessing of God is never meant to be kept for ourselves. If we hold it in our hands to ourselves, it spoils. Like the manna in the wilderness. If God's blessing terminates on me, it will be lost.

So you see, when we enjoy God's face shining upon us, the primary way that we give evidence that God's face is shining upon us is in concern for other people.

[10 : 57] And not just a general concern, in a very specific concern. It is for their salvation. That they may know the saving way of God. So if God has given to you a glimpse of his face, if you've been blessed with the knowledge of his salvation, the way it will demonstrate itself is in your concern for the eternal well-being of others.

Let me put it to you this way. If you have no desire or no concern for the eternal welfare of other people, you must question whether you understand or know the blessing of God in the first place.

The mark of the person who has seen the saving face of God is that they don't come to church and ask, what's here for me? But they come and they ask, what can I do to help others eternally?

It's a very important question. In my family and in my place of work and in my place of leisure, the fundamental question is, what can I do for others to help them eternally?

This is part of God's blessing for his world. For we are. It is through us. And the purpose of this church and the purpose of every church is to spread the light of God's face.

[12 : 15] God have mercy on us if we hoard it to ourselves. And when you come to the end of the Bible and you read the letters from Jesus Christ to the church in Revelation, he warns the churches that if they hold the blessing to themselves, they will no longer be a church.

You see, the problem that God has in blessing his world is not that his desire is limited. It's not that his message of salvation is defective.

It's not that he doesn't have the right technology. The biggest problem is the resistance that he finds in his own people to sharing the blessing that we've received. So I want to say, if you're a member of this church, it's not enough to give emotional and mental assent to the concept of outreach.

It's not enough to give your general approval to the fact that we have outreach courses. God's desire is that we be specifically and personally committed to passing on God's blessing to others and doing what we can to share others eternally.

I'm not saying we get up on the street corner and beat people over the head. Although it is tempting to make reference to our family arts festival and cantata next weekend.

[13 : 32] You may not have family to invite and all your friends may be grunge fanatics. I was going to say country and western, but I've learned my lesson.

Perhaps your concern might be expressed by praying for those who do come. See, our mission is to the whole world.

Again and again and again through the Psalms. We read this, Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the earth, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

Or this, from Psalm 99, The Lord reigns. Let the peoples tremble. He sits enthroned upon the cherubim. Let the earthquake. The Lord is great in Zion.

He is exalted over all the peoples. Let them praise the great and terrible name. Holy is he. When you become involved with God, you suddenly get driven to a wider circle than just your family or your friends.

[14 : 37] It's about letting all the ends of the earth fear God. Many of us over the last years have learned to sing that song, Shine Jesus, Shine. And in one of the verses we sing, Fill this land with your Father's glory.

And that's fine as far as it goes. But that is not the spirit of the Psalms. The spirit of the Psalms is, Let all the ends of the earth fear the Lord. But here is the tension.

While our mission is universal, our message is very particular. You see in verse 2, the Psalm teaches us to pray that thy way might be known.

Thy salvation. The blessing of God is not a do-it-yourself religion. The blessing of God comes from obeying and following the way of God.

And that should be no surprise to us. Do you remember the first Psalm, which opened the book of the Psalms? It contrasted the way of the wicked with the way of the righteous. And it says, The way of the righteous, God knows that way.

[15 : 41] The way of the wicked will perish. Salvation is only found in the way of God. He has chosen the way in which he will communicate and give his blessing to us.

As Jesus says, Enter by the narrow gate. And I think this is a great tension for us as the people of God and as followers of Jesus Christ. The love of God is broad enough for all of us to say, for all of us to come.

But God doesn't just say, Come in, everything will be fine, come as you are, all will be saved. No, he says, There is a certain way and there are boundaries.

And it is a desperately costly way. It meant the cross for Jesus Christ and it means repentance from sin for each of us. Salvation is not just an open door.

It is also a demand from God. It is God's way that we leave off all that he calls to be sin and turn to him in forgiveness.

[16 : 45] And I think the temptation for us is to naturally think that God will just open heaven to everyone. It doesn't matter what they believe or what they do. But the Bible says that God has opened one way to himself.

It is Jesus Christ. And this psalm teaches us to pray not just that peoples will come to praise God, but they will come to praise God by knowing his way and his salvation because to know him is eternal life.

You see, that is the first tension in blessing. It is the breadth of mission and the specificity of our message.

But there is a second tension and it is the tension between joy and judgment. See, if you look at the shape of the psalm, the heart and center of the psalm is verse 4.

And verse 3 and 5 surround verse 4 with four calls that all nations will praise. Now why?

[17 : 50] What does the blessing of God look like? Let's read verse 4 together, shall we? Let the nations be glad and sing for joy for thou dost judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth.

It comes as a bit of a surprise, doesn't it? That the core of God's blessing and the heart of our longing and joy is judgment. Throughout the psalms we find this.

Judgment is the occasion for great rejoicing and happiness. Let the earth rejoice. Let the sea roar and all that fills it.

Let the field exult and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the wood sing for joy before the Lord for he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness and his peoples with truth.

C.S. Lewis has a wonderful explanation of this. And you'll forgive the legally clumsy way of expressing it.

[18 : 58] There are two kinds of court, he says. There's the criminal court where the accused is found guilty and judged. And there is a civil court where you go, not for condemnation, but you go hoping for restoration and compensation.

And if all goes well, the judge will give heavy damages to you. And when the Bible speaks about the coming judgment of God, it means both. But when the psalms speak about rejoicing in God's judgment, it primarily means the second.

It's speaking about the restoration and the restitution. We live outside the Garden of Eden and our lives are touched by sin and the sin of others and there is loss and evil.

And when God comes to rule this world, the blessing of judgment will mean the restitution and the transformation of every grief and every loss. And that is why we so desperately need a judge who is righteous and just, who cannot be bribed or cannot be influenced.

And that is why we sing for joy because God will judge with equity. The word means flat, level. What a glad day that will be when Christ returns. He will punish those who disobey him and he will reestablish his blessings by redeeming and restoring all who belong to him.

[20 : 25] And I think it's vital for us, as followers of Jesus Christ, to take joy in God's judgment. If we do not, we can't sing vast tracts of the Bible, the Psalms, the book of Revelation.

You see, God's patience is only a virtue if it is exhaustible. It is a very good thing to be slow to anger. It is a terrible thing to be incapable of anger.

If someone is incapable of anger, it is not a sign of moral character, but of moral cowardice. And you see, God perfectly combines the moral strength of being a judge with the deep tenderness of a shepherd.

You see the last phrase in verse 4, he will guide the nations upon earth. And I think our temptation is to emphasize one so that we forget or minimize the other.

And history shows that when we forget one, we are of no use to the world in passing on God's blessing. And history shows that the church does. In times past, the church has forgotten the tenderness of God.

[21 : 37] And when the church has done that, we become a contradiction to our message. I think what is harder for us to see is that when we forget God's judgment, which is much more our temptation, it makes us no different from our world and no help to our world.

And that is why verse 4 is placed between verses 3 and 5. Because the peoples only properly praise God when we acknowledge that he governs and guides together.

It's exactly the same balance that we find in Jesus Christ. He comes as the one who will not break the bruised reed, but he also rules with a rod of iron. And that is why the blessing of God brings these tensions.

Tension between mission and message and the tension of joy and judgment. Now let me finish. As we leave the psalm, there's one verse that I haven't referred to.

It's verse 6. And it says this, The earth has yielded its increase and God our God has blessed us. I think this is about more than food.

[22 : 47] The earth yielding her increase is the fulfilment of God's blessing. And it reminds us of creation. And if you read through the psalms around about Psalm 67, you will see that the harvest is a metaphor for something more wonderful.

A more wonderful harvest based on the true blessing of God available to all through the death of Jesus. because in his death, Christ became a curse for us.

It is the harvest of men and women and boys and girls who come to know the saving way of God and give glory to him for his power and love and acknowledge him as the sole and rightful Lord, their king and only ruler.

And I think it is these words that Jesus was meditating on when he taught us to look up at Vancouver and say, the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few.

Pray therefore that the Lord of the harvest will send out labourers into its harvest. It was true then and it is truer now. Amen.

[23 : 58] This digital audio file, along with many others, is available from the St. John's Shaughnessy website at www.stjohnschaughnessy.org That address is www.stjohns.org On the website, you will also find information about ministries, worship services and special events at St. John's Shaughnessy.

We hope that this message has helped you and that you will share it with others. Thank you.