

Numbers 6:22-27

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Preacher: Iain Hepburn

[0 : 00] Well, you'll have noticed that we had a very short reading indeed this morning.

My intention is that we go into as much depth as is possible in the time allotted. But as such, allow me to read it again to allow it to settle into our minds. So it's from number 6 verses 22 to 27, and this is what it said. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel. You shall say to them, The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them. Amen.

The opening here in verses 22 and 23 show that this blessing in number 6 is given to Aaron and his sons as a blessing for the people. The people of God are the focus of the blessings, not the priests, not the Levites, indeed, no one but the people as a whole. And what I find really interesting when I look at this, what I find quite striking when I've read this out a couple of times, is that it's not given in the plural. Now, this is quite important. Verses 24 to 26 are in the singular. They're not in the plural. Now, don't get me wrong, in other places in Psalm 67 verse 1, we have these very same words, identical words, except instead of it being to the individuals, it is said to the plural. So Psalm 26 verse 1 says this, may God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us. A very wonderful and momentous thing to be wishing and blessing, etc. A great thing. But there is a difference between what it says in the Psalm and the plural and this text in Numbers, which is being addressed to the individual. Well, why does that matter?

Well, you see, what we have here is not just simply a collective gift that God would bless Bon Accord, rather that God would bless Bon Accord because he blesses each of you. It is not that we're asking for God to send a blessing and therefore maybe the average in the church to be lifted up, and maybe he greatly blesses one or two, and the average is improved. We're actually asking that God would bless every single person, the whole body, because God looks at you. And he says here, I would bless you. It's not that he says, I'll bless some of you. God looks at you, and in fact, he is looking at you now, the circumstances of your life, the unique pains and difficulties and needs, and says, I would bless you. That's an important difference.

[3 : 05] The reason we can have assurance in this blessing is not just simply we have a promise of some good things from a man such as Aaron or another priest. Please remove from your mind the idea that there is this utterance by a human being and somehow your life improves. That's not what we have here.

There's something far greater going on here in this blessing, something which actually, when we grasp some of it, it should fill us with awe and wonder when we consider what is actually being said in these verses. So it is said to you as an individual, but the second most wondrous thing in the opening here is that the guarantor of this blessing is not the priest. It's not a set formula that compels God to act, to dole out some sort of blessing, however it is that we imagine that to be. Note that though the priest will say the words, it is not the priest who gives the blessing. It's not the priest who is the gatekeeper to blessing. He's not the arbiter of who will receive. Instead, as we see throughout the blessing in the three-part repetition of the name of God, the Lord, the Lord, the Lord, or Yahweh, Yahweh, Yahweh, Yahweh, we see exactly who it is who pours out as he sees you in your need.

So, I should point out in our Bibles, we normally have the Lord, it's in block capitals in most of our translations to remind us that here we are pointing to the very name of God, and that matters too. For now, it is enough to remind us that the use of the name of God here is no accident. It points to a person. It points to someone who would be known. It points to a relationship.

It points to a people that would know him as their God. What we have here, this benefit in the blessing, is a person. It says, I will bless you.

[5 : 04] So, what is in the blessing? What do we find in verses 24 to 26? The three verses are remarkable.

It is a beautiful poem. It is intricately created. It is a true wonder. When I look at this, I think it looks beautiful in English, but in the Hebrew, it is a piece of art.

And this helps us actually to understand what's going on. Let me point it out. So, the opening line that we have, this idea here of the Lord bless you and keep you, well, in the Hebrew, that's three words.

The next line about the face, that is five words. The next line is seven words. You have this perfect creation, three, five, seven, in this wonderful poem. In fact, it's so carefully created that even the number of consonants is counted out. 15, 20, 25 in the lines. Now, understandably, someone like me gets excited by that kind of thing, I'll warrant you. But actually, we should be excited, because this actually helps us understand how we read it. You see, there is a crescendo here. Although the three lines of the blessing work together, you have the opening line, which is breathtaking. You then have the next line, which goes beyond even that. And then, by the time we get to the third line, well, words fail.

I'll do my best, but it's impossible to really express what is on offer here. And so, we have a crescendo, as it were. It leads us to the last point. That's why it's important that all this poetry is there. That's why it's important to see it as it is. But it's also very vivid, what is actually said here, because it's a poem. It is incredibly vivid and strong, the sentiments which are put here. But we're to see this crescendo of actions of God. God acts, and there's a consequence. God acts, and there's a consequence. And the three lines, God does something, and there are repercussions to those actions.

[7 : 08] And that is what we're going to be looking at this morning. So, verse 24, it says, the Lord, or Yahweh, bless you and keep you. Well, as I was saying to the children earlier, the action of God here, the thing that he is doing here, is this blessing. And literally, that means, may Yahweh kneel or crouch down or sit down amongst us.

That's breathtaking. As the people of God, because we sing these sorts of things and read these sorts of things and hear these sorts of things, very often, we can become almost immune to that very notion that the King of Kings would be here amongst us. It's amazing what we can get used to. It's amazing what we can take for granted. Here, the blessing spelled out at the outset is that God himself would crouch down from the heavens and be with us. What a thing to ask. That the one who by right would sit on a throne in the heavens would come to the dust of the earth. That the one who by right lives surrounded by what is holy would come to us who are not. That the one who by right receives perfect praise would come to us, not just to receive the broken praise that we sometimes offer, but instead to give to us. What an incredible thing it is, this opening line. And the scale of the blessing, therefore, is breathtaking because we are asking that God would be amongst us. And there's an effect. That changes things. Things cannot remain the same when God comes amongst us.

You know, the amazing thing is that this word, *barak*, which means blessing, you know, sometimes that same word gets translated as curse. Same word. Because when God comes, that's either a blessing or a curse.

[9 : 10] For the people of God, that is the most wondrous blessing that could be imagined. But there are plenty of times where God says, when I come. And that is a very serious thing indeed. As a parent, I've begun to begin to understand that. There's been times when, for example, my boys might be through in another room and I can hear the noise through there and I'll say, don't make me come through there. It's the same idea. Don't make me arrive because you're not going to like it.

There are times when we are not people of clean hands and a pure heart. There are times when the very presence of God is a fearful thing. And it's the same word. Things do not remain the same when God arrives. And here it says that he will keep you. So for the people who, for whom it is a blessing, for the people who would cry out that God would be amongst them, he arrives and it says that he keeps them. Literally, it says that God would plant a hedge around us. So it's an interesting picture to try and give over this idea of this protection all around us. That we would be kept by God because when God is with us, what is there to be afraid of? What can possibly threaten us? Because when God is with us, really among us, even our own self-destructive tendencies are

diminished.

What an incredible thing this opening line is. What a wondrous thing it is to ask that Almighty God would be amongst us this morning. But what blows my mind is that that is just the opening line. That is the short line in the trio. That's the opening gambit. If it had stopped there, if that was all that was in the blessing, that would have been more than enough. That's more than I can get my head round as it is. That God himself would be amongst us. And yet there is more in verses 25 and 26. Verse 25, the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.

[11:28] The next action of God having come down to our level is for the face of God to be shining upon us. Commonly in the Old Testament, people like Moses, people like Hagar, for example, would be allowed to see a glimpse of the back of God rather than his face. To have God kneel down amongst us and to have his face towards us, that's a truly momentous thing. To this, we've got to notice that his face is shining towards us. The shining face is a very common Hebrew metaphor to describe having a good disposition towards somebody. That shining face, that grinning face, as it were.

When it comes to God, the shining face is even more important. It's very often equated with salvation itself. Psalm 80 talks about, make your face shine upon us so that we might be saved. I believe it's there on three separate occasions in Psalm 80. The idea here is that God is the source of life. I suppose like the sun and we are a plant and his face would shine upon us and without that there is no life.

You may imagine that the opposite of a shining face, that grinning good disposition, would be a frowning face. You may imagine that to be the case. The opposite of the shining face would be the frowning face, but that is not the case here. I would rather the frowning face of God, what the Hebrew says, a face like thunder. Proverbs 16 verse 15. I would much rather have God's face like thunder than not facing me at all.

The thunder can bring the rains, the thunder can bring growth, the thunder can correct me where I'm going wrong. But when it says that God hides his face, that is a truly, truly dreadful and desperate thing.

To have God's face hidden from us is to live as those in Micah 3 verse 4. Then they will cry out to the Lord, but he will not answer them. At that time he will hide his face from them because of the evil that they have done. To have God's face hidden from you is to invite death.

[13:51] So to have the face of God, to have God himself crouching down amongst us, what does it bring? It brings life. It brings rescue. And as we have in this verse here, we have his grace. Now this is the Hebrew term *chanan*. It describes the mercy of God that comes from pity. There are other words for grace which come from compassion and various things. *Chanando* is a remarkable word because it's from the greater one to the one who is inferior. God who crouches down amongst us, who shows his shining face, who provides his protection, he then shows his grace. He shows his mercy born out of pity because of where we are. The mercy of God because his heart is rendered by the plight that we find ourselves in.

It is a love that will not let us go that drives this grace and mercy. We see it elsewhere. We see it in places like Psalm 51 verse 1. *Chanan me, have grace upon me, have mercy upon me, God of gods, according to the love that will not let me go. I love this. Chanan, in its literal sense, this grace and mercy. In its literal sense, it means to have the compassion of the womb.*

Hebrew loves its pictures. But I find this one very striking, to have the mercy of the womb. David in particular in Psalm 51, when he's crying out for this mercy from God, he is a guilty, guilty man. He doesn't cry out for justice. He doesn't cry out for what is fair. He doesn't say, God gave me what I deserve. That is not what he is wanting at all. He says, show me your mercy.

Show me your grace. Show me the kind of grace that a mother would show to an errant child. Not a judge. Not someone fair. Show me your compassion. Show me the compassion like that mother who sees that child and that child is turning around and saying, I am sorry.

[16:02] Show me that. Show me *Chanan*. Show me your grace and your mercy. Born out of that. A mercy founded on a love that cannot be broken. Show me that.

That's what David cries out for, and that is what we have here in our verse. The fact that God's face is shining upon us means that he is showing us his grace and mercy that comes from that unbreakable love.

It's incredible. I mean, what we're asking for there is simply incredible.

That God would look at us like that. That God would look at every single, each and every one of us, each individual in this place right now and would look at us like that. Would come down to us. Would shine his face towards us.

Showing us that grace and mercy. Giving us that protection. That is a remarkable thing. And yet there is more. There is yet another line to go. There is still the largest of the lines.

[17:04] The line to which this all is pointing towards. The height of the crescendo, as it were. There is yet more in this text. In verse 26.

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. The word countenance is simply another way of saying face.

And indeed, it's the same word in Hebrew. Only here the face does not simply shine. It is lifted up. And so there are three things to note in this line.

This line is so huge we need to break it down into three pieces, as it were. We'll add this to what we already know in the previous lines. Firstly, the lifting up of the face to you serves to remind us that we have a God who is willing to be seen.

Now, that's a remarkable thing. We have Yahweh, the one who is willing to be face to face with us.

[18:03] There's a big difference here. Simply between the God who sees everything and the God who is willing to be seen.

There is a Hebrew title for this that expresses this very thing, El Royi. It's a title that is used by Hagar to encapsulate this notion, this idea. That here we have a God who is willing to be seen. When this is revealed to her, she comes up, you truly you are El Royi. Genesis 6.13. Now, the back story to her is that childless Abram and Sarai, who at the insistence of the wife, they go ahead and they adopt the local custom.

Something which was very common at the time, which was that they would have a surrogate mother. In this case, Hagar. In order to provide an heir for Abram. Now, the custom of the time would require that the surrogate place her head on the lap of the adoptive mother as she is essentially dehumanised to being a baby incubator.

In this case, though probably not a unique occurrence, there is a degree of tension that arises once the baby is conceived. There is downright hatred between Sarah and the surrogate.

[19:17] And for Hagar, it results in this pregnant woman being forced out, fleeing the jealous wife and residing alone in the desert ready to die. It is while she is in the desert, utterly abandoned, utterly alone, utterly desperate, that God comes to her.

When no one else loves her, God comes to her, proving that she is not abandoned. And it is in this context that hope is provided. He gives promises about her future.

The future of her descendants. At the end of it, the passage concludes with this remarkable insight into the nature of God. Hagar names him based on her experience.

She says, The idea that God sees everything is something of a given.

She is already crying out to him. She already appreciates the fact that he will be able to see and hear. But what prompts her, what prompts her to then name the place, I have seen God and lived, which is how she names the well.

[20:39] What prompts her is that here we have a God who is willing to be seen. Be'er l'ha roi, so she calls the place. I have seen God and lived. That is a momentous revelation for this unloved, unwanted woman.

For God comforts this one. He crouches down to where she is, abandoned in the desert. God is shown to have a heart, a heart that is moved by her plight and says, Hagar, I care.

I am here with you. No, the God who sees everything, that is great. But the God who is willing to crouch down, the God who is willing to be moved by our plight, a God who is willing to be seen, a God who is willing to be with me and with you, nothing can compare to that.

So that's the first point about having a face lifted up. A second point would be this, that as well as that close proximity of a relational God discovered by Hagar, the lifting up of the face to you is the crescendo of these actions.

There's three actions, as I said at the beginning, the two that we've already looked at in this one, the crouching down, the showing of the face, and the lifting up. Well, you see, when I think of those three actions, I can't help but think of my daughter.

[22:02] She's the youngest one at the moment, and so I think of her. And there are times that when I come in at the end of the day and she's there, she sees me, her wee face lights up, and she

runs the length of the corridor to me. And of course, I crouch down.

And I am grinning from ear to ear, and I lift her up. It is no accident that these three actions are put in this order because we are supposed to see in this poem this notion of God Almighty reaching out to his child like that.

to reach down, to crouch down, to pick them up, and to be smiling into their face. It's one of the best images that we have for love.

It's one of the best images that we have, and it is no accident that here, in this poem, we have Almighty God portrayed like this. Lifting up of the face can mean to approve, smile, and so this action here is of a parent scooping up the child to whom he smiles.

That's the second thing, but the lifting up. There's more. A third point to be made, but the lifting up of the face to you. Well, because of this proximity of God in conjunction to his blessing, we see this as important.

[23 : 24] But as I was speaking earlier to the children, and this is really important, all too often when we pray for a blessing, we do imagine that God sends it to us in the post.

Some sort of special delivery. Some sort of heavenly messenger will deliver a blessing, and somehow our lives have been improved. And that is not what we are given here. I am not willing to settle for something so small as that.

What we have here instead is that this idea of God who comes. Not some sort of vain, small thing, but God himself coming and arriving.

And like a whirlwind, he sweeps in, and he sweeps up his child. Changing everything. The Aaronic blessing, it's not wondrous because we might get a nice thing or a good thing at the hand of God. It is a wondrous thing because this blessing is told that the source of all blessing would be amongst us and would give us peace. And that peace is the last part of this blessing.

[24 : 33] The part that we've been pointing towards. The consequence of being lifted up in the arms of God is shalom. It is a word which describes the antonym of suffering, the very opposite.

And so that sense of being safe, that sense of being healed, that sense of having the tears wiped away as we are promised in Isaiah and in Revelation, that is what it means to have shalom.

To experience it is to know what it is to be complete. Though the world that we live in does not know what it is to be complete. They dare to tell us these lies.

They try and tell us, buy this, do that, and then maybe you will know what it is to be complete. You might know what it is to be happy. Every time I walk along Union Street, I'm bombarded by all these different adverts that tell me, do this, buy that, then you will find completeness and it is a lie.

When I believe them, when I go and purchase whatever it is, I might have a moment of joy and then what happens? They tell me, oh well there's a new one. You have to buy this now. And forever you're chasing that mirage after completeness because we are desperate to be complete.

[25 : 48] And you see it on the sides of buses and shop windows, bus stops, newspapers, television. You see it all the time, bombarded. And yet, the lives that we are told to live, that constantly consuming, moving from experience to experience, it never satisfies.

But instead, here, in the one who would pick us up in his arms, who would be smiling into our face, he is the one that will give us peace.

He is the one that will let us know what it is to be complete, what it is to be content. And so here, we are promised that in the presence of God, we can have this shalom.

Now there is a future, there is a distant future where one day, all the tears will be wiped away for good. But the one who wipes away those tears is said to be here with us now.

And so we can have a taste. We can have the opportunity to be lifted up and to be content. Now there is a postscript in verse 27 when it says, so shall they put my name upon the people of Israel and I will bless them.

[27 : 05] That is, I will crouch down amongst them. But notice that God does not simply stamp his name as an owner on the people, which he would have been allowed to do. Instead, his precious name is associated with these people.

He identifies with them and as such, the blessing is not some sort of vague wish. It is real. It is seen because the people, and I include ourselves in this, we as the people of God wear the name of God.

We can live in the presence of God. Now, when Moses came down from meeting with God on the top of a mountain, he couldn't hide it.

There was no way to hide the fact that he had been in the presence of God. His face shone. Which, to be honest, actually really disturbed everybody who tried to look at it.

So how can it be any different for us? We who are scooped up to see the shining face of Yahweh, Elohim, the one who would give us shalom.

[28 : 22] Those of us who have experienced that real blessing. How can it be any different for us? As we go out as the people of God, stamped with the people of God, stamped as it were, with the very presence of God, as we go out there, we go out as the hands of God, as the mirror reflecting God.

It's quite a thing. It's quite a blessing. Now in a moment we'll be singing again and a benediction will follow. At the end of this service, the benediction which is going to follow is actually going to be the Aaronic blessing.

And I will say the Aaronic blessing at the very end. I want us to be very conscious of what it is that we have. We're conscious very much of what it is to be blessed by God, to have the presence of God, not just here, not just safe together, but in our real life.

To have a blessing that doesn't mean that the tears stop but that the tears will be wiped away. To have a blessing that means that when we go out there we should not or could not be able to hide the fact that we have been in the presence of God.

To disturb people like those who looked at Moses when he had met with God. But it's a wonderful thing and I ask that you would be mindful of what you've heard when we sing.

[30 : 02] That we'd be mindful when we hear of a God who would crouch down, who would be moved by us, who would scoop us up and protect us to know what it is to live in the blessing of his presence, to have the shining face of God lifted like when I pick up my little girl.

Let's pray. Gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you and yet that is too small a word.

We praise you and that's too small a deed. Lord, let us live a life which reflects having met with you, Lord.

In the darkness of our lives, let us know what it is to have your shining face. In the tears, oh Lord, let us know what it is to be comforted, to have the one who sees and is willing to be seen, the one who is willing to bring us peace.

Let us know what it is to be protected by the Almighty. Let us know, oh Lord, that hedge grown around us let us know, oh Lord, what it is to have you shine right into our face and for us to be your people going out there undeniably yours, marked, stamped with your name and with your presence, we pray in Jesus' wonderful name.

[31 : 37] Amen. Amen. H H H H