

Numbers 6:24-26

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] Neymar's World Cup was brought to a shuddering end by a spine-fracturing impact of a Colombian knee in the small of his back. And if you're interested, or even if you're not interested, in the World Cup, that can't have escaped your attention. And in a subsequent press conference, he seems to be a little bit better. He was on the subs bench last night, not that he had any prospect of playing, but he was at least able to be there. But in a press conference where he was being asked about this injury that he had suffered, he spoke quite emotionally and quite chillingly about what might have been the consequences of the impact that he suffered. Seemingly, the doctors had explained to him, we take it at his word in this regard, that had it been, I think, two centimeters to the right, it could have resulted in paralysis. Well, Neymar, in speaking of his escape from more serious injury, declared in the midst of all that he said, God blessed me. God blessed me.

He protected me. He blessed me in the midst of this accident, if we want to call it an accident. Different opinions would be held on that matter. God blessed me. Now, it's not language that we hear used often in our own context, in our own country, in similar circumstances. To Neymar, we might hear a footballer or a sports person speak of being very fortunate if they'd escaped serious injury. They might speak of being grateful for a lucky escape. That's the kind of language that we would ordinarily hear being used. It would be unusual to hear people speaking of being blessed even in the midst of an injury being suffered, even if it was less serious than it might have been.

Well, what about you and me? What is our place in this matter of being blessed or otherwise? Well, we certainly are blessed. We are the blessed people of God. God has blessed us. And today, we will remember, we will celebrate one aspect of God's blessing with regard to the gift of family, and particularly the covenant promises of God concerning our children and their identity and place in God's covenant community, a place, a belonging that is symbolized by the sacrament of baptism. And I want to consider this theme of blessing or being blessed by reference to a benediction or blessing found in the Old Testament, commonly referred to as the Aaronic blessing or priestly blessing. And we've read it already this morning in Numbers chapter 6. And let's turn to the verses there, and that's where we're going to be concentrating our time and our attention this morning.

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn His face towards you and give you peace. I want us to think about this blessing as it applies to us as God's people, but with particular reference for obvious reasons to our children and God's purposes for them. And we can order what we want to say. We can order the message with the aid of four headings that will develop in turn. The first thing we want to notice and stress is God's desire to bless.

God's desire to bless. But then we'll go on to think about the objects of God's blessing. Who are those blessed by God's blessing? So, God's desire to bless the objects of God's blessing. But then the instrument of God's blessing. By what means does God bless His people? Through whom does God bless His people?

[4 : 38] Particularly in reference to our passage, obviously. And then finally, in a sense, this, you would imagine, would be the heart of the matter, though probably it will be what we give less time to, and that is the nature of God's blessing. And that's found largely in the words of the benediction, though not solely in the words of the benediction. Well, we'll hopefully make all that clear or a little clearer as we proceed.

So, the first thing we want to notice and highlight and celebrate is God's desire to bless. And this is our starting point. Our starting point is the very nature of God, what God is like, and how what God is like finds expression in what God does for us. The Bible assures us that God is love. In His very nature, He is love. God is gracious. God is good. God is generous. God is forgiving. All of these things. All of these things belong to the very nature of God, of who God is.

And as such a God, He is committed to blessing His people. All of these truths concerning God find expression in His desire to bless. We can be so taken, but with the nature and vocabulary of the benediction that we've been blessed. And the language is beautiful. And it's understandable that we would want to quickly turn to, well, what are all these blessings with which we are blessed?

But before we get there, it is important to grasp this fundamental truth that our God is a blessing God. It is God's desire and purpose to bless His people. And so we read in our passage that He instructs Moses, who then in turn instructs Aaron and his sons, that is the priests of Israel, to do what? Well, to bless the Israelites. In verse 22 we read, the Lord said to Moses, tell Aaron and his sons, this is how you are to bless the Israelites. This is what I want for Israel. It is my desire to bless them. And this is the way in which I am going to bless them. This is how you are to bless the Israelites. It is God's desire that His people be blessed. It is God's initiative to bless the Israelites. Blessing is not wrested from a reluctant God unwilling to bless.

God's desire is to bless. It was so at the time which God spoke to Moses and instructed him to go on and instruct Aaron and his sons, and it remains so, for God is the same. And as His desire then was to bless His people, so His desire today is to bless His people. His desire is to bless us. His desire is to bless our children. There is at the very heart of this matter and the point at which we begin a recognition of God's desire to bless. But then we can also think about, as the passage very clearly highlights, the objects of God's blessing. Objects is a rather cold word. We're talking about people here. Who are the people blessed by God? Who does God bless? Now, we certainly can declare and recognize in the light of the whole of God's Word and the teaching within God's Word that in a very real sense, God blesses all His creatures. And in particular, those created in His image and likeness, men and women, boys and girls, are in a multiplicity of ways blessed by God. But while we recognize that and gladly recognize that, there can be no doubt in the light of the Scriptures that there is a particular quality of blessing reserved for God's own chosen people. In verse 23, we've read it already. We'll read it again.

[9 : 19] We're told who Aaron and his sons, the priests, were to bless. The Lord said to Moses, tell Aaron and his sons, this is how you are to bless the Israelites. He doesn't say this is how you are to bless all peoples.

No, he says this is how you are to bless the Israelites. And so, it's very clearly identified who are to be blessed in this way by God through Aaron and his sons, the Israelites. Israel was God's chosen people, chosen in the grounds of His own sovereign grace. In the words of Moses, directed to Israel and recorded in Deuteronomy chapter 7, we read, it was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set His love on you and chose you, speaking of Israel, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it is because the Lord loves you. A reality or a truth that has been pithily summarized, and I think legitimately summarized, as being God saying, I love you because I love you. I have chosen to love you, and therefore I love you. God chose Israel to set his affection on. But notice that what God said to Aaron and his sons through Moses, that they were to bless the Israelites, is a translation of a Hebrew phrase very often found in the Bible that literally is two words, or in English if you were to translate it literally, it would be three words, sons of Israel or children of Israel. Now in our Bible the chosen translation, an entirely valid one is Israelites.

This is how you are to bless the Israelites, and we find that again in verse 27, so they will put my name on the Israelites. But the actual Hebrew there literally would be rendered the sons of Israel or the children of Israel. And that reality or that recognition of the actual words that are being used captures a reality that we must be very clear on. Who were the objects of God's blessing? Well, all those who belong to God's chosen people. All of them, young and old, boys and girls, ancients and infants, the children of Israel, the sons and daughters of Israel. All who formed part of his people were the objects of the objects of his blessing. They were to be blessed by God through Aaron and his sons.

As Aaron and the priests pronounce this blessing, we can just imagine the scene. They've been given these instructions, and you can maybe imagine the very first time when they would have pronounced these words, having received these words from God through Moses, and they gather the people and they pronounce these words of blessing upon the people. Who would have been there? Everybody would have been there. All the people of Israel, all the children of Israel, men and women, boys and girls, young and old, all gathered, and all the objects of this pronouncement, of this blessing. And indeed, many there are no doubt incapable of understanding the words of the benediction. And yet, the benediction was for them. The fact that they couldn't understand the words didn't make it any less real, didn't make it any less true, didn't mean they were any less blessed. They were blessed because they formed part of God's covenant people.

The words were directed to all the children of Israel. Now, as we think about this morning and what we are about this morning in the matter of baptism, we are persuaded that as believers, as God's people, our children belong to the family of God. We don't just hope that one day they will come to belong.

[13:32] They belong now. In a very real sense, they are, even as infants, they are holy. Holy in the sense of being set apart for and consecrated by a God. And for this reason, we are persuaded that it is right and necessary for them to receive the sign of belonging to God's people. Now, in the Old Testament, that sign was circumcision, which was applied to newly born infants. And in the New Testament, we are persuaded that it is baptism. Now, it's not my purpose this morning to set out all the reasons for that, simply to state the case. But we say that in the context of this passage and this recognition of who are they, who are the objects of God's blessing, the children of Israel, the Israelites, all who were formed part of God's chosen people. So, we've begun where I think it's right to begin, a recognition of God's desire to bless. But then also clarifying and highlighting who are those who are so blessed. But then we need to move on to a third aspect that we've already touched on or referenced, but now I want to think about a little bit more carefully. And that is the matter of the instrument of God's blessing.

And we're still in verses 22 and 23. We haven't got to the body of the text, in a sense, the actual benediction. What we notice there in reading these verses is that the blessing of God was, to use this word, was mediated through the priests, through Aaron and his sons. The Lord said to Moses, tell Aaron and his sons, this is how you are to bless the Israelites. Aaron and his sons were instruments of God in pronouncing and in conferring this blessing upon the people. Now, it's very clear that it is God who is blessing them. Indeed, in verse 27, that is made explicitly clear. So, they will put my name on the Israelites. This is God speaking about this blessing. So, they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them. But how? How was God going to bless His people? Well, He was going to bless them through Aaron and his sons, through the priests who would mediate God's blessing upon His people.

This arrangement, if we can call it an arrangement, this God-ordered arrangement speaks of and points to a fundamental need of all men and women, the need for a mediator to stand in the breach between a holy God and a sinful people. And in so pointing us in that direction, in so highlighting this reality, this also points ultimately forward to God's own Son, the one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. Or in the words of the writer to the Hebrews, describing Jesus as the mediator of a new covenant. God's blessing on His people mediated through Aaron and his sons, through the priests, pointing to our need of a mediator, but pointing ultimately to the one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

The priests that we read of here in verse 22, they were sanctified or set apart for the purposes of mediating between God and His people. And in like manner, Jesus was sanctified or set apart as our perfect and eternal mediator.

Indeed, when we think of Jesus in the shadow of Calvary, as He looked at the prospect of what lay before Him there in the Garden of Gethsemane, and He contemplated His handing Himself over to death and His ultimate saving work on our behalf, He declared in His great high priestly prayer, For them, for your people, I sanctify Myself.

[18 : 06] But this priestly theme, or the implications of this priestly theme, are not exhausted in identifying Jesus as our great high priest and one mediator between God and men, though this is central.

Not exhausted because we can listen to what Jesus went on to pray in that same high priestly prayer recorded for us in John's Gospel in chapter 17.

We repeat what we've just quoted and then continue listening to what Jesus said, For them, I sanctify Myself. But then what did Jesus pray? That they, the people of God, may be truly sanctified.

You see, we as God's redeemed people have also been sanctified or set apart for a ministry of blessing.

In the passage that we've read, we are introduced to this special class of people, the priests, sanctified, set apart to be of blessing to the people, to mediate God's blessing to the people.

[19 : 17] But in the new covenant, today, we don't have a special cast set apart for that task. No, we are all priests of the Most High.

We have all been sanctified for this ministry of blessing others. We think of the words of Peter in his first letter, and in chapter 2 and in verse 9, as he speaks of God's people today in the light of Jesus and His work.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood. Each and every one of you. A holy nation.

A people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. Today, we as God's people are called to be His instruments of blessing in and for the world.

We are blessed to bless. And of course, that takes us back to the very beginnings of God's covenant with Abraham. What did God say to Abraham?

[20 : 25] I will bless you, and the nations of the world will be blessed through you. We are blessed indeed, but we are blessed in order that we might bless others.

And of course, this is our prayer for our own children. We thank God that they are the objects of His blessing. We thank God for their place, their belonging to God's people.

But we pray to God that they might be, and increasingly so, also instruments of God for the blessing of others.

I say that is our prayer, that that is our desire. It's maybe worth us asking the question, those of us who have been blessed with children, and particularly if we still have responsibility in the upbringing or rearing of these children, is that what we most desire for our children?

Yes, that they would be blessed by God. They are blessed by God. But that they would, in turn, be a blessing to others. Just as the priests mediated God's blessing, just as Jesus, our great high priest, is our mediator, mediating God's blessing to us, so we as God's people, a royal priesthood, instruments of God in blessing others.

[21 : 49] But then that brings us to the final thing that we want to think about here in this benediction, and that's what we're calling the nature of God's blessing. And we arrive, finally, at the words of the benediction.

Well, I say we arrive at the words of the benediction, but not quite yet. Because what I want to do is to distinguish between what I'll call or what I'm calling our ultimate blessing and what we will call the accompanying or contingent blessings.

So I think we can understand that distinction, and hopefully it will be clear as I explain it. Our ultimate blessing, and then what I'm calling accompanying or contingent blessings that depend on the ultimate blessing.

What then is the ultimate blessing that we enjoy? Well, the ultimate blessing is not, intriguingly, to be found in the benediction, at least not explicitly, but is found in the words of explanation that follow the benediction that we've already touched on as we spoke to the children, and I think also in the sermon, fleetingly.

Notice that verse there, verse 27. The benediction, as we call it, is concluded. The words have come to an end, the words that the priests had to pronounce.

[23 : 09] And then God explains what it is that the priests would be doing in pronouncing that benediction. And we read, And this is the ultimate blessing.

God places His name on us. That name of all majesty and glory and honor, the name that will live forever, the name that is above every other name, the name that saves.

This name placed on us. This is the blessing. This is the ultimate blessing with which we are blessed.

And that name, that name belongs also to our children. We baptize them in the name, in the triune name, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

We place His name on them. Now let's be very clear that in doing so, in the actual conducting of the sacrament, we are not conferring on our children this status.

[24 : 50] No, they enjoy the status already. It's their birthright. We're not conferring anything in some mystical way. We're celebrating and acknowledging a reality that they already bear the name, that they are part of God's people, that they belong to God's family.

And in baptizing them, we acknowledge that and celebrate that and recognize that and give thanks for that. And with the name, and this brings us on to what we're calling the accompanying blessings or the contingent blessings, with the name, with that status, with the identity, with that familial connection enjoyed by the bearer of the name, there follow multiple accompanying blessings.

And some of these are described in the benediction. Indeed, it's interesting, and I think significant, that the benediction itself revolves around the name.

Even linguistically and poetically, at the very heart of the benediction is the name, the name of God, Yahweh. It's at the very heart of the benediction, certainly in two ways.

I'm not going to go into details of poetry, largely because of a lack of understanding that would allow me to do so. But let me just highlight two aspects of even the construction of the benediction that further emphasizes how the name representing the person of God himself is at the very heart of this matter.

[26 : 28] In the first place, we notice how there is this threefold repetition of the name. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.

Now, grammatically, it would be unnecessary for the name to figure more than once. If it began at the beginning, the Lord bless you and keep you, it would have been perfectly adequate in terms of conveying an understanding of what is intended to no longer repeat the name.

But there is this deliberate repetition of the name to further emphasize that all the blessings are contingent on the name and our relationship to the name, the name that God places on us.

But then also, there is certainly in the Hebrew form of the poem, a centrality even in the location of the name. Now, for the purposes of translation, what we have is we have in each of the three statements, if we can call them that, of the benediction, they begin, the Lord, and then we're told what the Lord does.

Blesses, keeps, makes his face shine upon, is gracious to you, and so on and so forth. So the sentence begins with the Lord, and then these two statements concerning what he does. But in the Hebrew, the Lord is in the very middle of the sentence.

[27 : 45] And so there's one thing said about him, and then the Lord, and then the second, and that follows that pattern in these three statements. So even visually, if you were looking at the poem, what would stand out at the very center of the benediction, at the very center of the poem, is the name.

The name that God is saying, the priests place on the Israelites, and in that way they are blessed.

And so what surrounds the name? These are what we're calling the accompanying or contingent blessings, contingent to this great ultimate blessing of bearing the very name of God.

What are they? What are these contingent blessings? Well, there's a richness in the words used that we cannot do justice to, but we can identify three great blessings that come with the name.

First of all, we can acknowledge and be grateful for the reality that we are kept by God's power. The Lord bless you and keep you.

[28 : 51] I think when we see in each of these statements two things said, so for example here, the Lord bless you and keep you, I don't think we're to understand them as two separate blessings, but rather two that go together.

And in this case, the nature of the blessing is what follows. The nature of the blessing is that we are kept. The Lord bless you by keeping you. The Lord bless you in keeping you.

The Lord bless you and keep you. This is the first great blessing that accompanies belonging to God. We are kept by God's power.

God watches over us in the manner described in the psalm we were looking at last Sunday morning. Both now and forevermore. He never slumbers nor sleeps.

He is ever looking upon us with care and concern and protection. We are kept by God's power. But then also we can say that we are smiled on by God's grace.

[29 : 51] The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you. This is the manner in which God is gracious to us by making His face shine upon us.

This is language that speaks of God's kind favor that is both assured to His people and also demonstrated to His people in a multiplicity of ways.

We are smiled on by God's grace. But then, thirdly, we can say we are embraced by God's peace. The Lord turn His face towards you and give you peace.

God's peace. God's shalom. The all-encompassing well-being that is the inheritance of those who bear the name. Three great blessings that accompany our belonging to God, our having God's name placed upon us.

Blessing indeed, but blessing that is only fully realized, only fully understood in the light of the person and work of Messiah Jesus and our place in Him, our place in Christ.

[31 : 03] You see, think of these three great blessings in the light of Jesus. In Jesus, the good shepherd, we are kept both now and forevermore.

In Jesus, our Savior, the forgiving and restoring grace of God smiles upon us. In Jesus, our peace, our shalom, we know and experience the peace of God.

It is only in Jesus that the full meaning of peace is revealed. He gave peace. He made peace. He is our peace. And so, the richness of this blessing is only comprehended in the light of Messiah Jesus, certainly in the measure that it is to be comprehended.

And these are blessings that we enjoy now. These are blessings for today. We're very clear on that. But it's also worth recognizing that though they are blessings with which we are blessed in the heat and now, they are also blessings that point forward to a day that is approaching when we shall know and experience this blessing in a measure that we cannot begin to adequately conceive.

A day when we shall indeed see the Lord whose name we bear face to face. A day when we will be embraced and enveloped by His favor.

[32 : 28] And a day when we will know peace flowing like a river over and around us. And so, we rightly cry out, even so, come, Lord Jesus.

We are a blessed people. Let us pray. Let us pray.