

# Numbers 6:22-27

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] We are blessed. We are the blessed people of God. God has blessed us. And today we will be celebrating one aspect of God's blessing, the gift of family. And in particular, we will be exploring the covenant promises of God concerning our children and their identity and place in God's covenant community, a place or belonging that is symbolized by the sacrament of baptism.

So, I want to consider this theme of blessing or being blessed by reference to the benediction or blessing that we read there in the book of Numbers, in Numbers chapter 6, commonly referred to as the Aaronic or Priestly blessing. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn His face towards you and give you peace.

And I want us to consider this blessing as it applies to us as God's people, but with particular reference to our children and God's purposes for them. And we can order our sermon with the aid of four headings. First of all, we want to think very briefly on the theme of God's heart for blessing, God's heart for blessing. Then move on and think a little bit about God's blessed people who are the objects of God's blessing. So, God's heart for blessing, God's blessed people. Then thirdly, we'll think about God's way of blessing, the manner in which He blesses. And then finally, we'll think about God's beautiful blessing and give some thought to the nature of God's blessing as it is spoken on in this priestly or Aaronic blessing. But we'll start more generally by giving some thought to what we're calling

God's heart for blessing. This is our starting point, the heart or nature of God, what God is like and how what God is like finds expression in what God does for us. God is love. God is gracious. God is good.

God is generous. God is giving. And because God is all these things, He is committed to blessing His people.

[ 2 : 5 2 ] We can be so taken, and understandably so, with the nature and vocabulary of the benediction that we lose sight of this fundamental truth. Our God is a blessing God. It is God's desire and purpose to bless His people. And so, as we've read, He instructs Moses, who then in turn instructs Aaron and his sons to bless the Israelites. The Lord said to Moses, tell Aaron and his sons, this is how you are to bless the Israelites. It's God's desire that the Israelites be blessed. It's God's initiative to bless the Israelites. Blessing is not wrested from a reluctant God unwilling to bless.

God's desire is to bless. His desire is to bless us and our children. God's heart is a blessing heart. Because that's really the foundation for everything, really, that we're going to be thinking about this morning, the very nature of God and how His nature finds expression. We might even say necessary expression in blessing His people. So, God's heart for blessing. Well, let's move on and think about God's blessed people. Who does God bless? Who are the objects of God's blessing? Well, in a very real sense, God blesses all His creatures, but very especially those created in His image and likeness.

But then, as we hone in more particularly, there can be no doubt that there is a particular quality of blessing reserved for God's own chosen people. In verse 23, we are told who Aaron and his sons are to bless. The Lord said to Moses, tell Aaron and his sons, this is how you are to bless the Israelites.

And so, the identity of those who are going to be the objects of this very special blessing is identified. It's not all the peoples of the world. It's not the Egyptians. It's not the Moabites, but it is the Israelites. God states very particularly who are those who will be the recipients of this blessing, the Israelites, His own people. Israel was, as we know, God's chosen people, chosen on the grounds of grace and grace alone. We remember the words of Moses directed to Israel and recorded in Deuteronomy 7, where Moses really is explaining to them why it is that God has fixed His eyes on them and not on some other people. And we read there in Deuteronomy 7, it was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set His love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples.

But it is because the Lord loves you. Why does God bless His own people? On what grounds does He bless us? Well, what does He say there in Deuteronomy? He set His love on you because He loves you.

[ 6 : 19 ] People might say, well, that's a bit of a circular argument. Why does He love you? Because He loves you. But that's exactly what God is saying. I love you because I love you. It has nothing to do with anything in yourself, not because you were a greater people than others, not that you were more worthy or more meritorious, more likable than any other people. No, I set my love on you because I loved you.

I was thinking about this idea of what motivates loving. In a rather strange way, when I was over in the States this past week, in the course of my travels, the kind folks at Southwest Airlines gave me some pretzels as a snack. So, I was on a flight and you know what it's like. You get your drink and your little snack. So, I was getting this little packet of pretzels. But I was intrigued by the packaging or what was written on the packaging and it said this, pretzels, just because we like you.

And call me a British cynic, but I thought, really? Do they really like me? Is that why they're giving me pretzels? Pretzels, just because we like you. I thought, well, I'm sure they're very nice people at Southwest Airlines, but they don't know me. They don't really like me. Why are they giving me pretzels? Well, they're giving me pretzels because I've paid good money to go on their flight and they're hoping that I'll pay good money to go on further flights, whether I will or not. Who knows?

They're very nice pretzels, but that wouldn't really be a deal breaker in terms of what airline I use. But it was just curious, you know, this suggestion that the motivation for them giving me pretzels is just because we like you. What about God's motivation for blessing His own people? Is it because He likes us or because of anything likable in us? Well, no, as we've seen, His blessing is because He set His love on us. And He set His love on us because He loves us. If we want to call that a circular argument, well, it's the circle of God's grace towards His people, God's blessed people.

But notice what God said to Aaron and his sons through Moses. They were to bless the sons or children of Israel. Notice there in verse 23, it says, tell Aaron and his sons, this is how you were to bless the Israelites. And that little expression translated the Israelites, and really across the different Bible versions, it tends to be translated in that way, the Israelites. What literally is said there in the Hebrew is, B'ni Yisrael. So, there are two words. And B'ni Yisrael simply means the children of Israel. The Lord said to Moses, tell Aaron and his sons, this is how you are to bless the children of Israel. And when we understand that expression, or when we take it in that way, I think it more clearly captures a reality that we need to firmly grasp. All those who belong to God's chosen people were the objects of God's blessing. Young and old, boys and girls, ancients and infants, the children of Israel, B'ni Yisrael, all were the objects of God's blessing. As Aaron and the priest pronounced this blessing, it was directed towards and for the benefit of all the people of Israel, including those still incapable of understanding the words of the benediction. Just imagine if you were there on that occasion. The people of Israel are gathered, Aaron and the priests have gathered them, and they pronounce this blessing. Can you imagine the parents there saying to their younger ones, oh, this isn't for you. You know, you're too young. You don't understand. This doesn't apply to you yet. When you put your trust in Yahweh, then that will be true of you. No. It's inconceivable that they would have, even for a moment, considered that somehow that this blessing was reserved for those who could comprehend what was being said. The blessing was for the children of Israel. All of God's people gathered.

[ 10 : 31 ] The blessing was directed to and belonged to all of them. And 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. They do belong. Of course, we do acknowledge that it is necessary for them in due course to embrace their identity, to embrace the Savior, to live the life of God's covenant people.

They have to take those personal decisions in due course. We clearly recognize that. But they do so as those who already enjoy the privilege of being part of God's people. They belong now. Our children are holy now in the sense of set apart or consecrated by and for God. And it's for this reason that we believe it is right and necessary for them to receive the sign of belonging to God's people. In the Old Testament, that was circumcision, which was applied to newly born male infants. And in the New Testament, it is baptism, the sacrament that we will be participating in and witnessing this morning.

So, God's heart for blessing. It is in the very nature of God to bless. But then God's blessed people, His children, those upon whom He has graciously fixed His eye and affections.

The third thing we want to think about is what we're calling God's way of blessing. And again, we're still limiting ourselves to what we find almost in the introduction to the benediction in verses 22 and 23. The Lord said to Moses, tell Aaron and his sons, this is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them, this is how you're to do it. This is the means by which the blessing will be conveyed, God's way of blessing. And God's blessing was mediated through the priests, Aaron and his sons. It was God who was blessing His people. In verse 27, at the very end, God is very explicit on that. So, they will put My name on the Israelites, and I will bless them. I will bless them. God says, this is Me blessing My people, but the manner in which I will bless them is through Aaron and the priests. His blessing mediated through these appointed priests. God's blessing, it was conferred through the instrumentality of the priests called and appointed by God. And this arrangement that we have outlined here in

Numbers 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 doing, this arrangement points forward to God's own Son, the one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. Or in the words of the writer to the Hebrews, the mediator of a new covenant. In Numbers, or on the occasion that we're reading of this morning, the priests spoken of were sanctified or set apart for the purpose of mediating between God and His people. And in like manner, Jesus was sanctified or set apart as our perfect and eternal mediator. Indeed, you'll remember how Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane contemplated His ultimate saving work on our behalf. And as He did, He declared in His own words, for them, I sanctified myself. I set myself apart for this purpose of securing the bridge between

[ 14 : 37 ] God and men. But the priestly theme or the implications of it are not exhausted in identifying Jesus as our great high priest and one mediator between God and men. Because listen to what Jesus went on to pray in that same high priestly prayer recorded in John chapter 17. Having declared, for them, I sanctify myself. He then goes on to say, for them, I sanctify myself that they may be truly sanctified. So, I sanctify myself with the end and with the goal and view that they would be truly sanctified. We, as God's redeemed people, have been sanctified or set apart for a ministry of blessing. In the New Covenant, this is a ministry no longer restricted to a priestly caste, but is the calling and privilege of all God's people. We read in 1 Peter chapter 2 and in verse 9,

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful 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 this, of course, is our prayer for our children. We thank God that they are the objects of His blessing, and we pray to God that they might be, and increasingly so, instruments of God for the blessing of others. Is that what you most desire for your children? Not only that they be blessed, wonderful though that is, but that as they are blessed, so they would be of blessing to others. That is God's purpose. That is God's desire for His people. So, God's way of blessing is blessing mediated through the priests, and for us in the New Covenant, mediated through His Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. But that takes us to the fourth aspect of this that I want us to think about, what I'm describing as God's beautiful blessing, or in what does the blessing consist?

Because we really haven't said anything as yet of what the blessing consists. We haven't even come to the actual benediction. And so, now, finally, we come to the words of benediction, but in fact, not quite yet. Because I want to, as I think about God's beautiful blessing, I want to distinguish between what I'll call our ultimate blessing and what we will call the accompanying or contingent blessings, all of which together constitute God's beautiful blessing. So, first of all, what is the ultimate blessing that is being conferred by this blessing that we're reading and considering? What is the ultimate blessing? And, curiously, the ultimate blessing is not to be found in the benediction itself, but in the words of explanation that follow. You see, you have the benediction, the Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn His face towards you and give you peace. But then, notice what it says, so they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them. The ultimate blessing, the foundational blessing, the blessing from which all the other blessings flow is what God says here is, so they will put my name on the Israelites. This is the ultimate blessing. God places His name on us. He declares, you are mine. You belong to me. You are my family. I am your father and you are my children. I put my name on you. This is the heart of it, the foundation of God's blessing. You are my sons and daughters, and you bear my name. This is the ultimate blessing. The Lord God Almighty places His name on us, that name that will live forever, that name that is above every name, the name that saves. As we've been making our way through revelation in the mornings. We've encountered this aspect of God's blessing, of how as God's people, we have been sealed with God's name. We've noticed how in chapter 7, the protection that was afforded to those who had been sealed by God. And then in chapter 14, it makes clear to us what that seal involved. We haven't reached chapter 14, but we have made reference to it, and let's just remind ourselves what it says. There in Revelation chapter 14 and verse 1, we read,

Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him 144,000, who had His name and His Father's name written on their foreheads, sealed by God, sealed with His name.

[ 20 : 10 ] And of course, what we read there in Revelation is simply another way of saying what is being said here in the Aaronic blessing, and what God describes as His putting His name on His people, on the Israelites. And that name, the ultimate blessing, that name belongs to our children.

We baptize them in the name, in the triune name, in the name of the Father, and in the name of the Son, and in the name of the Holy Spirit. We place God's name on them. Now, in doing so, we don't confer status, but we recognize the status that they already enjoy by birthright. Of course, it's the case that the children of believers who are not baptized are equally the children of God. They're no less children of God. They equally bear the name. But why would we deprive them of the symbol that announces the reality? With the name, with the status, with the identity and familial connection enjoyed by the verbatim. And the verbatim of the name, there follow multiple contingent or accompanying blessings.

And some of these are described in the benediction. Indeed, the very benediction or the vocabulary of the benediction, the architecture of the benediction revolves around the name, Yahweh.

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn His face towards you and give you peace. You might say that in terms of understanding what has been said, the repetition of the Lord, the Lord, the Lord is unnecessary. It would have been sufficient for the Lord to have been mentioned once and then all that follows. We would have understood. But there is this deliberate emphasis and repetition of the name. The Lord bless you.

The Lord make His face shine on you. The Lord turn His face towards you. There is richness in the words, even in the poetic composition that we cannot do justice to this morning. But we can identify the three great blessings that come with the name. And let's just notice what they are. And really all we're going to be doing is taking what we read there and presenting it in other vocabulary to capture the sense of it. I think the first thing we can say about one of the contingent or accompanying blessings of belonging to God is this, that we are kept by God's power. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord bless you and keep you. The nature of the blessing is identified by the second verb. How does God bless us? Well, He blesses us by keeping us. The Lord bless you and keep you. We are kept. God watches over us and protects us. His eye is ever upon us. At every moment and in every circumstance, we are kept by God. And so, despite ourselves often, we persevere. We are kept by Him to the end to, on that great day, be received and embraced by Him. We read Psalm 121, which again, in very beautiful language, describes the manner and the quality of God's keeping. So, first of all, we are kept by God's power.

[ 23 : 56 ] But there's a second blessing that goes with owning the name. It comes with receiving this name that is placed upon us, and that is that we are smiled on by God's grace. 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.

And this is language that speaks of God's kind favor that is both assured and demonstrated to us. So, we are kept by God's power. We are smiled on by God's grace. But then thirdly, we can say this, we are embraced by God's peace. The Lord turn His face towards you and give you peace, give you shalom. God's shalom, or the all-encompassing well-being that is the inheritance of those who bear the name.

Kept by God's power. Smiled on by God's grace. Embraced by God's peace. These are the blessings that accompany belonging to God, being part of God's people of bearing His name. Blessing indeed, but blessing that is only fully realized and understood in the light of the person and work of Messiah Jesus and our place in Christ. You see, 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, 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, and He is our peace. And these are blessings for today.

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

And a day when we shall see the Lord whose name is the Lord. And a day when we shall know peace flowing like a river over and around us. And so we cry, even so, come, Lord Jesus. Well, let's pray.

[ 26 : 42 ] Heavenly Father, we thank You that You are a blessing, God. We thank You for Your heart of blessing. We thank You that Your blessing of Your people flows from Your very nature and character.

We acknowledge that we are the objects of Your blessing on the grounds of grace and grace alone. There is nothing deserving or meritorious in any of us. And yet, You have set Your love upon us.

And for that reason, You love us. We don't begin to understand how that is so.

But we acknowledge it to be so. And we are thankful and grateful that it is so. We thank You that You are the one who has set Your name upon Your people. That we have been sealed as those who belong to and are protected by the Most High.

And we do thank You for all the blessings that accompany that status that we enjoy. We thank You that we are indeed kept by Your power and smiled on by Your grace and embraced by Your peace.

[ 27 : 55 ] And we thank You that these blessings are for us and for our children and our children's children from generation to generation. And we do pray very especially for our children and our children's children.

That they would recognize and appreciate and be grateful for and embrace their privileges and status and responsibilities as God's covenant people.

We pray that especially for Abigail, who we will be baptizing in just a few moments. And we pray for her and her parents as we pray for all of the children and families of our community.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.