

2 Chronicles 31:8

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[0 : 00] You'll find my text this morning in the portion of Scripture that we read together, 2 Chronicles chapter 31 and verse 8.

When Hezekiah and his officials came and saw the heaps, they praised the Lord and blessed His people Israel. And if you have another version of Scripture, you'll find that probably those final words are translated, they blessed the Lord and His people Israel. I'm told that the Italians have a proverb. Traditore, traditore. A translator is a traitor. And that proverb, that saying, reflects the difficulty that exists of conveying thought from one language to another.

It's generally possible to get across the basic idea from one language to another, but it's far harder to do justice to finer nuances of thought. It's far harder to bring them across because language structures don't precisely match the meanings of words. Their range of meaning isn't exactly the same in two different languages. And in this verse here, 2 Chronicles 31 8, we have a clear indication that the NIV translators were struggling with such a problem. Throughout the Old Testament, there's one Hebrew word, one Hebrew verb, to bless. But it's used with two quite different subjects. There are many places where we read that the Lord blesses people or the Lord blesses objects.

God speaks well of them. God indicates a benevolent disposition towards them, and God imparts to them something that enhances their situation so that they become blessed.

Now, at one level, we might very well think that's a fairly straightforward idea. God uses His wisdom and power to bless people. It isn't quite as straightforward as it might at first appear, but generally speaking, we think we can grasp the dynamics of the situation.

[2 : 59] But the problem that arises is in the other sort of use of the verb to bless, where the subject is a human being or a group of people, and the object is the Lord Himself.

They blessed the Lord. And inevitably, the question arises, how can this possibly be? How can a human being convey blessing to God?

Now, the NIV translators, along with many commentators, decided that this one verb, the verb to bless, in the second set of situations, is just equivalent to the verb to praise.

And so, in the NIV, when God is the object of blessing, they use the word praise instead. And there are two consequences of that. One is that there's a lot more praising goes on in the NIV, because there's five other verbs that they do translate as praise. One of them is very common.

It's the one that's behind the word hallelujah, praise the Lord. Quite a different verb from the verb to bless the Lord, praise the Lord. And there's yet another one that's there at the end of verse 22 in the previous chapter. They praised the Lord, the God of their fathers, which is much more they thanked the Lord, the Lord, the God of their fathers. So, in the NIV, because the same translation is being used for five different verbs, we don't immediately, in translation, get the nuances of thought.

[4 : 42] The translator is being a traitor to the full thought. The NIV translators obviously thought this was a fairly minor difficulty. But there's another problem, and it occurs here in this verse.

Where the one verb in Hebrew has got both the Lord and the people as its object. The NIV translators got round that by translating the word twice. They praised the Lord and blessed his people. But really, it's only there once. They blessed the Lord and his people. And you can see that in other translations.

So, here is a verse and here is a text that's bringing before us the idea of blessing. And that's what I want to explore with you today, just for a little. What is blessing? How is it secured? And how did, what did the ancient writers mean? What did they intend to convey when they used the same verb?

For both God blessing people and people blessing God. What was it that they saw in common between these two things so that they could, as here, quite happily use the same word?

So, let's begin with scriptural fundamentals. The number one basic perspective of the Bible, blessing comes from God alone. Now, you've got to be careful when you say that.

[6 : 28] Because we're talking about God's blessing. And we're apt to move a bit too fast. We're apt to start thinking about God's blessings. But I'm starting rather by talking about God's blessing. In the plural, blessings refers to various advantages, various gifts bestowed by God. That's what blessing is about.

It can be defined as an act or words that are conducive to happiness and well-being. But in the first instance, we're not to look at this as a matter of counting our blessings, having a long list that we can enumerate of specifics. To give us a biblical perspective, we've got to begin by asking what is God's blessing in general. And the key dimension of blessing occurs prior to the enjoyment of specific blessings. When God blesses, He creates or acknowledges a relationship with His love, He creates a relationship with Himself and bestows on people or objects the potential to realize all that He had intended for them in that relationship. And then there are specific gifts and openings and opportunities that allow that potential to be realized. It's a three-step process. It is, first of all, the Lord acknowledging a relationship. And then the Lord giving the potential to the person, let's just talk about people, to people, the potential to fulfill what's required in that relationship.

And it's not just potential, it is accompanied by the realization of specific gifts so that their potential is fulfilled. And you can see that back in Genesis 1. On the fifth day of creation, God blessed the creatures of the sea and the birds of the air and said, be fruitful and multiply. On the sixth day, God similarly blessed mankind saying, be fruitful and multiply. Now that's not God just expressing good wishes. That's not God merely saying, this is a good idea, or why don't you run with it. Those are divine commands.

Those are divine directives as to how the relationship God intended for His creatures should be played out.

And when God directs, He also bestows the means and the capacity to realize what He mandates. He's saying to them, this is the purpose I have in mind for you. This is your destiny. Receive empowerment from on high to achieve my purpose, my goal for you.

[10 : 01] And that way you'll find satisfaction. That way you'll find fulfillment for yourselves. And not only will you find fulfillment for yourselves, you'll bring honor and glory to me by living out the way I intended you to live.

And how much frustration, vexation, bitterness would have been avoided had humanity maintained that fundamental perspective on who we are and how we can achieve true, deep, lasting satisfaction.

If only we'd continued to acknowledge our subservience to our Creator. If only we'd used the potential He bestowed to achieve His purposes and not goals of our own devising.

And it's that fatal flaw that still warps human existence, that still deprives so many of the happiness they seek because they define it in terms of earthly goals, immediate satisfaction, and are blind and deaf to what God is saying.

So there in Genesis 1, there is God creating the animals, creating mankind, and blessing by setting out a program based on a relationship with Himself, based on the potential to realize what should be involved in that relationship and bestowing also the actualization of the gifts that are needed.

[11 : 59] And there are many who make the mistake of thinking that's all. They come to the end of Genesis 1, and they forget that the first three verses of Genesis 2 are also part of the narrative of God's creation.

And if you define God's blessing simply in terms of what is said in Genesis 1, oh, it's great, it's marvelous, it gives a panorama of what human existence should all be about, but it's still lacking, it's still partial. It's still just a matter of the ability to procreate, and of the giving of life to enjoy the created realm.

But there's also in the first few verses of Genesis 2, a further blessing.

God blessed the seventh day and made it holy. Made it holy, He set it apart from the others. It had a special role, and that role is in terms of blessing. God endowed that day with a special potential to achieve something in His purposes.

Now, days as such cannot be blessed. The blessing of the seventh day is a blessing that can only be understood in that it is a means in God's purposes to bless humanity.

[13 : 40] God blessed the seventh day. He endowed it with the potential to draw mankind into closer fellowship with Himself, to give a foretaste of the consummation of the whole of the created realm that will still be.

The seventh day was set apart to show that life is not just a matter of material blessings provided by God, that life is not just a matter of enjoyment of the earth mandate that God gives to fill the earth full, to subdue it, to rule over the animals. Oh yes, that's there. But there is this deeper dimension without which true satisfaction will not be achieved. The satisfaction that comes from the closer fellowship that can be developed on the seventh day, the day when mankind are called to imitate God, to become more like Him, to rest from all their endeavors. So divine blessing is not just a matter of the physicality of the physicality of this world. It has an underlying spiritual dimension.

And that in this fallen world is renewed in covenant relationship with God. A God through Moses said, if you pay attention to the laws and are careful to follow them, the Lord your God will keep His covenant of love with you and will love you and bless you. He gave the promise to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 7, you will be blessed more than any other people.

The potential of mankind is greater than the animal kingdom, is greater than just a matter of population increase or enjoying the resources of the earth. It is a matter of enjoying the God of the earth.

And God's blessing of mankind, in Psalm 29, the Lord blesses His people with peace. He will receive blessing from the Lord, righteousness from the God of His salvation, Psalm 24.

[15 : 59] It extends in Psalm 133 at the end, the Lord bestows His blessing, even life forevermore. And if you look at the prophet Isaiah, I will pour out my spirit on your offspring, my blessing on your descendants.

God blesses people. And that is a basic challenge to the thinking of our age.

What our society values above all else is success. The number one goal of so much living is getting on in this world, a successful career, a successful marriage, a successful endeavor.

And Scripture doesn't talk that way. The scriptural priority is not success, but blessing. Not earthly, personal advancement, but having in first place in our hearts and lives, enjoyment of what God alone can provide. The fullness of the blessing of a relationship with Him, a lasting and a permanent endowment. Oh, other things follow. But first place is not success, but blessing. So when we say the Lord blesses people, we are actually giving first priority. We've been called on to give first priority to seeking in our lives the touch of the Most High, to bless, that we can realize the potential He's given us, that we can realize it in a way that honors Him, that we can realize it in a way that conduces to our satisfaction.

Give happiness first place in your life and you'll find you can never grasp it. Give the Lord first place and you'll find all else added beside. So there's the first dimension of blessing. God blesses people.

[18 : 23] Can I then briefly mention a second dimension? People may bless one another. There's an instance of that here in the text. Hezekiah and his officials blessed the people.

What does that mean? I suppose in the context, it's quite possible to say the expression really just means they praised them. The whole passage is about the tremendous achievement, the generosity, the giving of the people.

Their gifts are there in heaps. They're so abundant worthy. And so it's not at all implausible to think that blessing was saying, we commend you for your tremendous liberality. This is great.

And that's an element of the situation. But the word bless adds something more than that. It's not just that they were commending the people for the way in which they'd conducted themselves.

Blessing the people, they were calling upon God to be mindful of how the people had devoted their resources to him.

[19 : 40] Blessing the people was pleading with God to respond to what had been done. And that's why I read other verses in this passage because there's a very clear illustration here of how this second level of blessing operates.

You'll see it in the last verse of chapter 30 of 2 Chronicles. Now this was a duty assigned to Aaron and his sons.

They were to bless the people. But it wasn't something that they were able to do because of a power that was inherent in them themselves. It wasn't as if they had some sort of stock of blessing that they could parcel out amongst the people.

The potential sought, the realization of that potential was utterly dependent on God, who alone can give it, who alone can withhold it.

The blessing was more than a pious wish or a vague aspiration. It was a solemn prayer to God Most High to bestow what was needed and appropriate to these people so that they could enjoy fully the relationship they had with God.

[21 : 13] Their prayer reached heaven. That is the heavenward side, heavenward dimension of an individual blessing another. And you can see that in many of the other blessings of the Old Testament.

Especially poignant are those where near the end of their lives one of the patriarchs would bless their offspring. What were they doing? It wasn't magic.

It wasn't transferring some sort of invisible charisma or manna or something. It was a solemn committal of the next generation to the Most High himself.

The party being blessed is commended in prayer to God who alone can furnish the blessing. And over the generations how much good has been wrought, how much good has flowed from the blessings of a father or a mother for the well-being of their offspring.

Jacob put it to Joseph, did he not? May he bless thee with the blessings of heaven above. That was the fervent desire that the next generation would enter into the covenant relationship that the patriarch himself had enjoyed with God.

[22 : 39] It was the relationship that was the primary objective. Material blessings, worldly prosperity, they were at most consequences. But what had to be got right was divine bestowal of what God alone can give.

So when we read in Scripture of one party, one human being blessing another, we've got there a specific form of prayer. A specific form of prayer to God to bestow on the individual who is being blessed the potential and the opportunities, the faculties and the gifts and the openings that they can achieve all that God wants them to achieve in his sight.

And that brings us back thirdly to the possible conundrum that we began with. In what sense, then, is it possible for mankind to bless God?

If God's the source of all blessing, if human blessing for another human being is in effect a prayer to God to look with favor on the party to be blessed, how can we understand what's said here where Hezekiah and his officials blessed the Lord?

It's the same verb. They blessed Israel, they blessed the Lord. One word is used. What is it that Scripture is saying to us? Remember, perhaps, the passage in Hebrews where it says, it is beyond dispute that the inferior or the lesser is blessed by the superior, by the greater.

[24 : 30] blessing comes down from the superior, the greater, towards the lesser. So how can frail, finite human beings bless God? And there are many from whom that seems inappropriate, irreverent.

And that certainly seems to have been the view that prevailed in the pagan theology of the nations that surrounded Israel. Many of the nations around Israel spoke a language very similar to Hebrew.

They had this word to bless and they used it in terms of how they thought their gods would convey benefits to their worshipers.

But there's no attested instance of the surrounding nations using the word bless the way the Old Testament does of individuals blessing God.

This is a specific, this is something that is specific to the revelation of Scripture. So people have struggled with this notion of giving to God.

[25 : 40] If God is the giver of all, is it not absurd to talk about giving to God? C.S. Lewis, some years ago, in his book, Mere Christianity, illustrated the situation in this way.

He said, it's like a small child going to its father and saying, Daddy, give me sixpence so I can buy you a birthday present.

And Lewis commented, it's all very nice and proper, but only an idiot would think that the father is sixpence to the good once he's got the present.

We cannot give God anything that is not in a very real sense already his. Remember how Paul asked the humbling question in 1 Corinthians, what do you have that you did not receive?

And yet, for all that, the giving is an expression of love and devotion. If the child was not giving the birthday present, it would be saying something quite significant about the relationship between that child and the father.

[27 : 01] Even though the child has to ask for the, which shows how old the story is, the sixpence. You'll not get much for sixpence nowadays. But he has to ask for the sixpence. It still reveals the heart attitude, the inner disposition, the real perception of the relationship with the father.

Remember how Paul sets out the matter at the beginning of Ephesians when he says, blessed be the God and Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in heavenly places.

You don't get praise there in the NIV, it's praise. But praise is more general. You can praise something that's admirable in another person without there being any real impact on yourself.

Last week, I was standing in Durham Cathedral and praising the marvelous architecture that was there, the craftsmanship that had spent so many years building that massive edifice.

But that praise was not blessing. Blessing God is praise that is an echo of the blessing he has already conveyed.

[28 : 24] That's where the words of Psalm 103 come from. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.

the blessing that individuals are permitted, like the young child giving the birthday present to his father, the blessing that individuals are permitted to give to God is a blessing that is the echo, the reflex of what God himself has already bestowed.

And it looks as if the Old Testament writers brought these two things together because they saw blessing as having at its core speaking good things about another.

The essence of blessing is speaking good things about another. When God speaks well of a human being, he thereby indicates his attitude towards that person and what he is going to convey to that person in terms of that relationship.

When we bless God, we speak well of him, attributing the gifts he's given to the good qualities that are in him himself. And on that basis we acknowledge what he has done and declare him to be blessed.

[29 : 51] Yes, the word praise is getting largely there, but it's losing that element of reciprocity, that element of the echo effect, that element that the action of blessing is one that is stirred up within us because of what God has already bestowed.

It's not that we're able to make God different from what he is. We say, I will magnify the Lord and no one suspects that we're trying to make God bigger.

We say, let us exalt the name of God and no one argues that it's trying to make God higher. Similarly, when we say, let us bless the Lord, we are realizing all that is admirable and praiseworthy in God, but stirred up to do so because of what he has done for us.

Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord, my God, you are very great, clothed with splendor and majesty. And then the psalmist in Psalm 104 goes on and speaks of all that God has done.

So here we have presented to us a chain, a chain of blessing. It starts with God, starts with God conveying blessing to us.

[31 : 22] God and we'll never find true happiness. We'll never find true fulfillment and satisfaction unless we know the hand of God in our lives, blessing.

And when that happens, not only are we able to reach out towards others and pray to God our Father that he bless them also, that we tell of his marvelous works among all the peoples, blessing his name, but it's also the case that we have the highest privilege of coming back towards God himself, of reflecting back to him the wonder of the goodness and the inherent benevolence that is his alone, that benevolence that is supremely seen in the utmost gift that he gave Jesus' son.

don't go looking for success, go looking for blessing, go look for blessing where alone it can be found in the supreme gift of God's giving, even Jesus' son.

Let us pray. heal real love thing, pause, not food.

Yea, gab