

The Blessing - but for who?

Darlington Christian Fellowship

24 May 2020

Numbers 6:24-26, Exodus 20:4-6, Psalm 67

Music and song are incredibly powerful. Often a particular tune or a particular song can bring up all kinds of memories and feelings. For some, the song they had as their first dance at their wedding will always make them feel warm and happy, for others the song that was played at a loved one's funeral will always make them shed a tear. It is not just in the area of memories that songs are powerful either, is it? The other day on YouTube, I was watching a video of Keith Getty, he was speaking about the importance of what we teach our children to sing, because what they sing about, shapes their view of the world and of who is God is. Why were hymns so rich in theology back-in-the-day? It was because people couldn't read and understand the Bible for themselves, it was a great way for deep theological truths to be taught.

As I said a moment ago, songs remind us of situations from the past, and I wonder in years to come, what songs you will hear that will remind you of the last few months and of COVID-19 isolation? For many, it will be the song "The Blessing", by Kari Jobe, Cody Carnes, Chris Brown, and Steven Furtick who is the pastor of Elevation Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. This is a song which has been a real encouragement to many people around the world during this time. The song was only written and released in March, I first heard it during a church service in mid-April, and since then it has been sung by a number of churches whose services I have joined in with online. Many versions of it have also been shared on YouTube and Facebook as Christians have created online choirs to bless cities or nations around the world. The Australian version is currently in production and the Perth version will be released at next week's *Pray Together WA* event which will be broadcast on Sonshine FM and as well as online <https://www.praytogetherwa.com/>. For anyone who hasn't heard the song yet, you can listen to one of many versions of it, by just searching "The Blessing" on YouTube, the UK virtual choir version is a good one to watch

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUtl3mNj5U&t>

When it comes to worship songs, I am someone who always likes to think about the lyrics before I join in and sing them. The first time I heard the song, The Blessing, it really got me thinking. The first verse was great, it was direct from scripture and was really uplifting, the second verse, made me think, and in the third and fourth verses I was wondering if the writers had actually missed a really good opportunity. So, this morning I would like us to explore the scriptures that this song is based on.

Let's look at the lyrics of the first verse:

The Lord bless you
And keep you
Make His face shine upon you
And be gracious to you
The Lord turn His
Face toward you
And give you peace

As I said before this lyric is taken directly from scripture, it is in fact the Aaronic blessing from Numbers 6:24-26. It is an often-quoted passage of scripture and is probably very familiar to many of us, you hear this blessing spoken out at wedding services, at funeral services, at a child's dedication or

christening, even simply at the end of a regular service as a benediction.

In its original context, this blessing can seem a little out of place. It follows the laws about the Nazarite vow, Numbers 6:1-21 and comes before the account of offerings being brought to the tabernacle by the heads of the Israelite Houses, in chapter 7. But it actually serves as a bridge between these two things. The Nazarite vow was a vow taken by an individual for a short time, it was to help that person focus themselves on God and draw closer to Him. The Aaronic Blessing was meant for all Israel as a permanent promise, a commitment from God to His people, and therefore the reaction of the heads of the families bringing their offerings to the tabernacle can be understood in terms of a response of worship to the blessing.

The key to understanding the Aaronic Blessing is that as it unfolds it leads you closer and closer into the presence of God. It starts with God blessing and keeping His people. In the Old Testament, blessing meant the gift of children, of land, and of health. The Aaronic blessing was given to the whole Israelite community, God's chosen people, so being kept by God, was a reminder to them that they are His people.

The second line moves to God smiling upon His people and being gracious to them. It was on Mount Sanai in the presence of God that Moses' face shone, his shining face was symbolic of being in the presence of God. The Aaronic blessing uses this symbol to show God's people basking in His presence; in the light of His face. And when in the presence of God, grace is experienced; more abounding, more staggering, more life giving than could ever be imagined.

The Aaronic blessing climaxes in the third line with God turning His face towards His people and giving them peace. To turn one's face is not merely to look in a certain direction, but more to pay attention and take pleasure in the moment. The sentiment here, is God smiling with joy as He pays attention to His people and then responds by giving His peace to them. And this is not peace as in the absence of noise or a feeling of calm, but Shalom which is so rich and wonderful, not merely a feeling, but so much more; a state of love and security that no fear or anxiousness can penetrate. God wanted His people to know He is not aloof and far off, but He chooses to bless them; to draw them in and give them His grace, His love, His protection and His peace.

What an amazing promise and blessing, in fact what a great thing for us as Christians, to be singing over each other at a time like this! Yes, this blessing was originally given to the Israelite community, but we can see how through the New Testament, this blessing is made true in Jesus, He after all is the Prince of peace. Therefore, it is right and good that we claim this blessing for the church today.

So on to the second verse of the song:

May His favour be upon you
And a thousand generations
And your family
And your children
And their children
And their children

Now again these lyrics may sound familiar, indeed they too are from scripture, in fact they make up part of the 10 commandments in Exodus 20. So, what was it I thinking about when I first heard this verse of the song The Blessing? Well, let's read together Exodus 20:4-6:

⁴ You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

As we look at these verses, we need to remember that they too were given to God's people, not to those in the unbelieving nations around. The scripture says God is a jealous God, He wants all their adoration and praise and He wants it for Himself alone. In fact, as the Creator, He doesn't just want it, but He deserves it! This commandment states there is only One who should be praised and adored, and that is God. It then goes on to state there will be consequences if they do or do not do this. The consequence of not obeying this command, but sinning through worshipping other things, will be punishment for generations. The consequence of obeying this command and loving the Lord, however, will be blessing for thousands of generations. Within a New Testament context, we too need to ensure that God and God alone is the one we love, praise and adore, and He has promised through

Jesus to bless us. The song The Blessing highlights this positive consequence, that God will bless His people for thousands of generations, however the way it has been written makes it feel as if this verse is a promise of grace without the need for obedience; without needing to put God first and love, praise and adore Him only.

The lyrics of verses three and four are as follows:

May His presence go before you
And behind you
And beside you
All around you
And within you
He is with you
He is with you

In the morning
In the evening
In your coming
And your going
In your weeping
And rejoicing
He is for you
He is for you

Now again, much of these verses are based on scripture. The writers have picked up on imagery from Exodus 13, where the pillar of cloud went before the people by day and the pillar of fire by night. They have picked up the New Testament imagery of Colossians 1:27 having Christ in us, as well as the promise to Joshua that I will go with you wherever you go Josh 1:9. You can also see parts of Psalm 121 in verse four with references to morning and evening and coming and going, finally then again heading back to the New Testament and the promise in Romans 8:31 that God is for us. None of this is wrong, in fact it is all scriptural and it is all good.

As I said before though, I wonder if there wasn't an opportunity missed, and these verses, two to four of the song The Blessing, could have been based on another part of scripture, with a much clearer parallel to the scripture that the first verse is based on. Since Number 6:24-26 is what the first verse is based on, then Psalm 67 could have been what the second and subsequent verses of the song were based on. Let's read it together now and as we do, have the Aaronic blessing in the back of your mind:

- ¹ May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face shine on us
- ² so that your ways may be known on earth,
your salvation among all nations.
- ³ May the peoples praise you, God;
may all the peoples praise you.
- ⁴ May the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you rule the peoples with equity
and guide the nations of the earth.
- ⁵ May the peoples praise you, God;
may all the peoples praise you.
- ⁶ The land yields its harvest;
God, our God, blesses us.
- ⁷ May God bless us still,
so that all the ends of the earth will fear him.

There is a clear connection and the same use of imagery between verse 1 of Psalm 67 and the Aaronic blessing from Number 6:24-26. The key difference between the Aaronic blessing and this Psalm is that in the Psalm the people are calling for God's blessing, for His grace, His favour, His glory and His presence. Why?

Has ever a two-letter word been so important as the “so” at the beginning of verse 2? The whole understanding of this Psalm is held in this two-letter word. The word *so* carries a consequence with it. Part A happens *so* Part B can happen, without Part A there will be not part B and likewise without Part B the whole remains incomplete. God’s grace, blessing, glory and presence coming on His people is Part A. But again, why? What is to happen when God’s people receive God’s blessing?

Verse 2 continues, *so that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations*. The Psalmist is exclaiming here the thing that the Israelites so often forgot in the Old Testament, and as hard as it is to acknowledge, we so often forget in the church today. That we are blessed in order to be a blessing to the nations. We are blessed so that all may come to know Jesus the risen King and to know salvation through Him. Being blessed is not about selfishly enjoying the presence of God and all that He gives, but it is so that others too may come to know God in an intimate way; to have a relationship with Him through Jesus and to know His rule and His reign in their lives as verse 4 of the Psalm explains.

If this happens there will be a further consequence. If those who are blessed go on to be a blessing, and all the nations of the world come to know God through Jesus, then what is written in verse 3 and verse 5 will also come true; all the world will praise God’s name! The original point of creation, as Isaiah 43 tells us, was for God to be glorified and worshipped, for God to be praised! Yes, God blesses us because He is kind and generous and fully of grace, but also because He wants all the world to come to know Him and praise His name.

This is the true verse two! This is what I would love to sing as part of the song *The Blessing*. Asking for God’s blessing in order that under the rule and reign of the King; of King Jesus, all the ends of the earth will fear Him; all the ends of the earth will praise God’s holy name.

The sad truth is, as I eluded to earlier on, that all too often we sing the likes of verse one and then stop. Or we sing verse one and then get diverted in that moment, as I believe the writes of the song *The blessing* did, never reaching the Biblical verse two of Psalm 67.

Do you know that *Globally, 81% of all non-Christians do not know a Christ-follower*. Now, I don't know whether that surprises some of you, I am certain that it is not the case here in Australia, but globally it is true! I will say it again, *Globally, 81% of all non-Christians do not know a Christ-follower*. God is a God of grace who loves to bless us, but He also wants to bless those who don't yet know Him. He is a God of relationships, and He works through the relationships we have. We are blessed, we know and have a relationship with King Jesus, we know the Prince of Peace, and we know what it is like to have God smile upon us. What a privilege it is then, to be trusted by God to share His love, and the peace of Jesus with others. Whether that is the person next door, whether that is someone at work, or whether that is to going to somewhere where there is a significant number of people who do not know a Christ-follower. And to be honest more of us need to be doing that, because the majority of people here in Australia who don't know Jesus, actually know more than one Christ-follower! As the statistic indicates, there are many parts of the world where those who don't know Jesus, don't know anyone else who knows Him either! But whoever it is you share with, the challenge from Palm 67 is to make sure that you are not being selfish with God's blessing, but are sharing God's bless with others.

The song The Blessing has blessed many around the world over the last few months, but I would have been much happier if the lyric of verse two has been along the lines of:

May God be grac-ious
tous and bless us
Make His face shine up-on us
Soall the world will know
Your saving power
Among all nations
And turn in praise!