

To God Alone Be The Glory

You can sometimes hear young pastors having conversations like this. “Hey, does this ever happen to you? You lift your hands to speak the blessing over God’s people, and some of them start smiling, and others say the words along with you.” “Oh, yes. It happens during other parts of the service too, but especially during the blessing. I think it’s their favorite part of the service.”

Why not mouth your favorite parts of the service along with your pastor! You know the words well. You hear them regularly on Sundays. You realize from your Bible study that most of the words in our liturgies come straight out of the Bible, including these words: ²⁴ “*The LORD bless you and keep you...*” Great words, aren’t they? But why do you like them so much? Could it be that, as you face the future, you know the only thing you can’t truly live without is the blessing of your Lord?

²² *The LORD said to Moses,* ²³ “*Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites.’”* The Lord wanted his people to hear how blessed they were. He wants you to know how blessed you are! So the Lord spoke up. Just think: the Lord could have kept quiet about his love, and we would not have known how God feels toward us until we died. But instead, “*The LORD said.*” Through his words God makes his way into our minds and hearts. Whenever we hear the

phrase, “The Lord said,” or “In the Bible, it says,” may our ears perk up for a message from our people-blessing God.

Now, what were those words God wanted his people to hear? Oh yes! *The LORD bless you.* The LORD, that’s how we say God’s distinctive name. But when we say it this way, we’re not using his actual name. Many Jews, even from Bible times, considered God’s name so sacred, they would not speak it. In fact, to this day the Christian church on earth pronounces God’s distinctive name as, “the Lord,” often writing the word “Lord” in small caps: “LORD.” (Yes, I know, you can’t hear the difference between lord, Lord, and LORD, but it’s fun to see the difference in print.) If we were going to speak God’s distinctive name the way God revealed it, we would call him Yahweh (or Yahveh). This translates to “He is.” Of course, when God spoke his name, he said, “I am.” Does this seem strange? (“Hey, what’s your name?” “I am.”) Through his name the Lord is trying to communicate something important about himself.

Today many people in America choose names based on how they sound. For instance, the books on choosing baby names advise that ‘no child should have three names with the same number of syllables, especially if the accents for all three names fall on the same syllable.’ Why not? ‘It just sounds bad to modern American ears.’ So then “NA-than AL-vin COR-des” is not a good sounding combination!

But in Bible times they cared more about meaning than sound. They understood that a name is more than just the label you hang on someone. Names call to mind what you know about people, their reputation. Consider what comes to mind if I say the name ‘Jerry.’ Who are you thinking about? Your friend Jerry? The cartoon Tom & Jerry? The singer songwriter Jerry Garcia? The comedian Jerry Seinfeld? The wrestler from Minneapolis Jerry Lynn? The actress Jerry Hall? It’s just a name, but notice how your feelings changed when the name Jerry was paired with other names. Two entirely different reputations come to mind when I mention ‘Jerry Falwell’ and ‘Jerry Springer.’ So you see, also in our culture we have some understanding that a name isn’t just the label you hang on a person. A name includes everything you know about that person. That’s why so many parents struggle when choosing names for their children: “No, not that name: it reminds me of someone I once knew!”

In Bible times this understanding (that a name includes reputation) was much stronger. So they chose names which reflected a truth they wanted to remember. The prophet Elijah’s name means “Yahweh is my God.” Or they might give a person an additional name which reflected their strongest characteristic: “Barnabas” means “someone who encourages others” (literally: “son of encouragement”). God’s name, which we pronounce, “the LORD,” and which means, “He is,” reminds us that our God is eternal.

There never was a time when he was not, nor will there ever be a time when he will not be. Thus “He is” is the perfect name for the God with no beginning or end.

This is the God who blesses you, just like he’s been planning to do from eternity. That’s why he told Israel’s priests to say, “*The LORD bless you*”: the Lord put much good into your life. The verb “to bless” in this passage means “to bestow the power for success and prosperity,” as God defines prosperity. The Lord wants to fill your life with good. The only thing that ever gets in the way is sin—sometimes specific sins that we engage in, sometimes just sin in general. But then through Jesus all sin is removed from our record. This is success and prosperity from God’s viewpoint. With sin removed, the way is cleared for God to put much more good in your life.

“*The LORD bless you.*” In English we can’t tell whether the Lord is blessing “all of you” or “each of you,” because in English the pronoun “you” can be singular or plural, and only the context clears up which is meant. But in Hebrew there is a “you” for an individual and a completely different “you” for a group of people. Because of the way we use this blessing in our church services, I used to think the Hebrew word meant (The Lord bless) “all of you.” But God told the priests of Israel to use the word for (The Lord bless) “each of you.” So if modern day pastors were to make clear just how God originally gave the blessing, they’d have to say something like, “The Lord bless you and you and you and you, and keep you and you and you

and you.” This blessing is for each individual assembled for worship. Hey! That’s one more indication that God wants us to be involved in organized religion: this blessing is for a congregation of assembled individuals. Fellow believers, keep participating in organized religion. Keep coming to God’s house Sunday after Sunday, unless prevented by reasons acceptable to the Lord, such as you’re too unhealthy to go anywhere.

May the Lord bestow on you the power to succeed, that is, the Lord bless you. And *the LORD keep you*. The Hebrew word here means “keep watch, stand guard, protect.” The same verb is used in Psalm 91:11 which says, the Lord “*will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.*” Just think about that: the Lord told the priests to say over the people, “*the LORD protect you.*” So then through this part of the blessing God is actually promising to guard and keep his people from many dangers. *Now, some skeptics will surely point to all the injuries that blessed people have had. But God wants us to think about all the injuries he’s kept us from having, injuries we don’t know about because they never happened. On every one of our pain-free days, God was keeping the promise which he tucked into the words of this blessing.

The blessing continues: ²⁵*The LORD make his face shine upon you*. Today a shiny face is a bad thing: we take it as a sign that someone needs to wash or to powder. But think how a person’s face often reveals what’s in the heart. If you don’t want people to know what’s in your heart, you

put on a “poker face.” *What’s in God’s heart? Since we can’t see his face, this blessing tells us what to imagine: God’s face shining on us. A shining face is a face that’s lit up. When we see someone we love, we break into a broad smile and they can see how we feel about them. “*The LORD make his face shine on you*” means “God’s heart is filled with love for you.” Why? Certainly nothing in us causes God’s face to shine. If he decided to look at our sins from just yesterday, his face would go from smile to frown. No, his face shines on us as a gift, just because of what Jesus did for us by his life and death. So when we hear this part of the blessing, *The LORD make his face shine upon you*, God wants us to think of him smiling a huge grin at us that says, “I love you in Christ.”

This fits with the next words: *and be gracious to you*. What good news for us who have misused God’s name! Maybe we profaned God’s name by saying “O my God” when we not praying. Or maybe we didn’t call on God’s name any time in the last month to thank him for various blessings. Nevertheless God’s heart remains gracious toward us because of Jesus.

The blessing continues: ²⁶*The LORD turn his face toward you*. Have you ever been so angry at someone that you couldn’t even look at them? Did you turn away from them? With all my sins I’m amazed that the Lord doesn’t turn his face away from me in disgust. How about you? This part of the blessing assures us that God

won't treat us as our sins deserve. No, he turns his face toward us because on the first Good Friday he turned his face away from Jesus instead.

Is there a famous person you'd enjoy meeting? How about the Queen of England? Imagine celebrating the Queen's recent diamond jubilee in London with a crowd of Brits waiting for the Queen to pass by. Everyone is so excited as she approaches. Everyone is waving and shouting: "Hello, your Majesty." As she passes, she turns her face toward you, locks onto your gaze, and nods, recognizing you. You'd probably mention it by whichever media you communicate with your friends back home: "The Queen turned her face towards me." When God turns his face toward you, he gives his attention to you. He is acknowledging you, recognizing you for Jesus' sake: "Oh, yes, I know you."

²⁶*The LORD turn his face toward you, and give you peace, and give you shalom.* In Bible times peace (*shalom*) was the combination of everything good in life. Peace was so important to God's people, they used *shalom* as their hello and their goodbye. When you're at peace, things feel just right. The apostle Paul wrote to one of the churches, "*We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*" (Romans 5:1). There's no strife or bickering between God and you believers. When your heart can calm down and have no worries because you

trust that God is working everything out for your good here and that he will bring you to heaven for Jesus' sake—that's peace.

²⁷*So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.* When you bought your last car, did you have it titled in your name? Why not title it in the name of John or Jane Doe? You know why. As soon as children learn how to write their name, they want to write their name on things. It's like saying, "This toy belongs to me!" "This bike belongs to me!" "This coloring page was completed by me!" To put your name on something is to claim ownership. ²⁷*So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.* God claims you. Every time this blessing is pronounced over you, the Lord is saying, "I want you for my very own prized possession. I put my name on you so you know nobody can take you away from me. You belong to me." Why does he do this? Because if we think of ourselves as belonging to him, we will act like we belong to him, which will bring his blessings to others.

The future can look scary. People can be mean. Temptations can get to you. Fear can sit down right next to you. Will you die too soon and leave a bunch of living on the table? Will you live longer than your good health lasts? Are you ever upset? None of this matters. **THE LORD BLESS YOU.**