

## The Aaronic Blessing

Numbers 6:22-27 Psalm 73:25 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 4:4-6 Revelation 1:6 John 15:15 Mark 10:13-16

**I: --** Customarily we say it or sing it at a service of baptism. Frequently the minister concludes worship by pronouncing it as a benediction:

The Lord bless you and keep you;  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;  
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

What are we expecting? Are we expecting anything? Or do we repeat the words merely because they sound nice, merely because we are religious romantics at heart?

“The Lord bless you.” What’s the blessing? We are uncomfortably aware that in some church-circles the blessing people look to God for is wealth, or popularity, or success, or social advantage, or public adulation, or any other such thing that the North American Prosperity Gospel (so-called) keeps on trumpeting. Those who assume the blessing to be a magnified material emolument conveniently forget that Jesus, we are told, had nowhere to lay his head, and was so very unpopular as to incur rejection at the hands of government and church, friends and followers.

To be sure, there have been people unquestionably blessed by God who were indisputably wealthy. Abraham, for instance; or Joseph of Arimathea, who was wealthy enough to own a family-sized tomb he generously made available for the crucified body of Jesus.

While we are on this point we should admit that every person in this room is wealthy compared to the rest of the world. After all, 99% of the world’s people would trade places, materially, with any of us in a heartbeat. I live in a three-bedroom home, 1000 square feet, modest by Canadian standards; 99% of the world’s people would find my home a palace.

I cringe when I hear the North American Prosperity Gospel put forward. I recall the word from Proverbs 30:8: “Give me neither poverty nor riches...for if I am poor, I shall curse God, and if I am rich, I shall dismiss God as superfluous.”

Then what is the blessing? In the Hebrew Bible the blessing—ultimately—is God himself; our engagement with God, our immersion in God, our intimacy with God—ultimately, our transformation born of such intimacy. When we say, “The Lord bless you and keep you,” we are invoking God-given intimacy with him for the sake of God-honouring transformation of them.

As Jesus approached the cross he said to the disciples, “I no longer call you servants, because servants don’t know what their master is about. But I have called you friends, for everything I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”(John 15:15) In other words, Jesus Christ admits us, his followers, to the same intimacy with the Father that he has with his Father.

When I ponder this truth, I think of Proverbs 18:24: “There are friends who pretend to be friends, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.” Just as Jesus Christ is that friend who sticks closer than a brother, to be blessed is to be, or at least to aspire to be, as much to him. The blessing, then, is that transformative intimacy with him which is so very deep that no language can do justice to it; so very profound that while we may point to it and describe it we shall never be able to explain it; so utterly fathomless that we shall know it unshakeably as surely as it transcends all attempts to articulate it.

When I was learning Greek (without which I’d be a much weaker preacher) my mother gave me, as a gift for my 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday, a book by Ronald Ward, *Hidden Meaning in the New Testament*. The book discusses the theological significance of Greek syntax. For instance, where and why do New Testament writers use a particular compound verb; why do they use this preposition instead of another; and when they use a past tense (called the aorist), what is the force of an ingressive aorist rather than a punctiliar aorist or a gnomic aorist? Because of Ward’s book my Greek New Testament lit up for me (and has informed my preaching throughout my ministry).

Ronald Ward taught New Testament at Wycliffe College, University of Toronto, for eleven years. Then he became a pastor in New Brunswick. I used to visit him, Greek Testament in hand, and let him immerse me in it. In the words of the apostle Paul, Ronald Ward himself was ‘aglow with the

Spirit' (Rom. 12:8). Unselfconsciously he exuded intimacy with our Lord; transparent, uncontrived, real. One day as I struggled with the force of a subtle grammatical point he said, "Victor, think of it this way. To the unbeliever Jesus Christ says, 'Come'. And to the believer he says, 'Come closer.'"

What is the blessing?—it's to find ourselves able to embrace and wanting to embrace ever more ardently the One whose crucified arms have embraced us from the day we were conceived.

When I was a postgraduate student at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, I was asked to preach at the mid-week meeting of the Women's Auxiliary of the Royal National Mission to Deep-Sea Fishermen. The women supported the mission (a Christian outreach) to deep-sea fishermen, including North Sea fishermen from foreign countries who came ashore occasionally in Scotland. Many women in the meeting had lost their husband in North Sea tragedies. Several women had lost more than one relative in ocean mishaps. Before I preached, the leader of the service asked if any worshipper had a hymn in mind she especially wanted the congregation to sing. A radiant woman whose radiance was uncontrived and undisguised—she had lost both her husband and her son to the cold North Sea—she beamed, "Let's all sing, 'With Christ in the vessel I smile at the storm.'" You know how the hymn reads:

Be gone, unbelief, my saviour is near,  
And for my relief will surely appear.  
By faith let me wrestle, and he will perform;  
With Christ in the vessel, I smile at the storm.

What's the blessing? As usual, Charles Wesley said it superbly for all of us when he wrote,

Thy name to me, thy nature, grant;  
This, only this, be given:  
Nothing beside my God I want,  
Nothing in earth or heaven.

**II: --** How is the blessing bestowed? "The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you." We are blessed as God's face shines upon us.

What is God's face? And how is God's face related to God's heart?

God's **heart** is who God is in himself, his innermost truth and reality and character. God's **face** is who God appears to be to us. Question: Are God's heart and God's face one? Or might there be a discrepancy between God's face and God's heart? The face God displays to us in Jesus Christ; is it one with God's heart, and necessarily one with God's heart, or might it be a false face? Face and heart *must* be identical or else God can never be known or trusted.

We all know that humans traffic in false faces. We can despise someone in our heart even as we put on a face, a false face, that suggests we're the best of friends.

Are God's face and God's heart one, and *necessarily* one? In other words, is it the case that God *cannot*—not merely does not, but cannot—put on a false face? If so, then God can be trusted. The face that shines upon us in Jesus Christ reflects God's heart and only his heart. The face that shines upon us is the face of him whose heart can always be trusted.

God himself blesses us as he makes his face shine upon us. Shining entails light. When God's face shines upon us we are bathed in light.

In the Hebrew Bible, what shines so very splendidly as to leave no one doubting that light is bathing us, our minds are illumined, our hearts are aflame, and our way through life is brightened? In the Hebrew Bible what light shines incomparably like this? It's the glory of God. Everywhere in Scripture the glory of God is glorious; the splendour of God is splendid.

Then is the glory of God short-lived light, like a camera-flash or a lightning-bolt, here now and gone next instant?

No. The chief Hebrew word for 'glory' is *kabod*. And the root meaning of *kabod* is weighty, heavy, dense, substantive, opaque, solid, thick. The glory of God is at once brighter shining than the sun and denser than lead.

The glory of God is the face of God shining substantively upon us so as to brighten our heart and illumine our mind and clarify our way—and all of this so very thick as to be undeniable. God's glory, everywhere in Scripture, is God in his inherent splendour shining his face upon us so as to

render himself unmistakable and undeniable.

Now think upon Paul's word to the congregation in Corinth: "It is the God who said, 'Let shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." It is the apostle's conviction that the face of God shines gloriously upon us in the face of Christ, even as the same glory shines correspondingly in our hearts—and all with the result that God thereby renders himself **unmistakeable** and **undeniable**.

The glory of God is a huge category in Scripture. One aspect of it is the beauty of God. "Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness," cries the psalmist, meaning, "Worship God in the beauty of God's inherently glorious Godness."

God's glory is always and everywhere beautiful. What is beautiful is inherently attractive, isn't it? No one ever beheld beauty and pronounced it ugly. To apprehend beauty is to be drawn to it. In other words, just as God's glory (God's splendour, God's shining face) renders God unmistakable and undeniable, God's beauty renders God **irresistible**. When we apprehend beauty can't we only fall in love with it?

In John's gospel Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd." The Greek language has two words for 'good.' One word, *agathos*, means 'proper, correct, possessed of rectitude.' The other word, *kalos*, means 'winsome, attractive, compelling, inviting, comely.' Isn't calligraphy beautiful handwriting? When Jesus says, *Ego eimi ho poimen ho kalos*, "I am the **good** shepherd," he means he is winsome, inviting, attractive: "I am the *fine* shepherd." That's it: Jesus isn't merely upright. (Lots of upright people are repugnant.) Jesus is the good shepherd in that he's inherently attractive: rightly to apprehend him is to love him. As surely as God's *glory* shines in the face of Christ so does God's *beauty*, an aspect of glory. As surely as God's face shining upon us renders God *undeniable* the selfsame face shining upon us renders God *irresistible*.

This is *how* the blessing is bestowed.

**III: --** What is the result? As the Lord lifts up his countenance upon us he *gives us peace*.

‘Peace’ translates ‘shalom.’ Shalom is the creation of God healed. Shalom is the creation of God rendered the kingdom of God. God has appointed the entire creation to be restored to wholeness and holiness. Shalom, peace, kingdom of God—it all means that what is now out of order, counter-productive, dysfunctional, even deadly—it’s all been appointed to be put right.

The universe (including us) was created to be a cosmos. The Greek verb *kosmeo* means both to order and to adorn. The universe was created to be orderly and to adorn the God who made it. Right now, however, in the wake of the Fall, the universe is disordered. The cosmos is threatened with chaos. Chaos is creation de-creating. Chaos is the world on its way to uninhabitability.

If chaos is to be checked and cosmos restored, then shalom must be rendered operative; peace must prevail. Shalom means what is disfigured, warped, bent, broken, dysfunctional, is going to be rendered whole. Shalom also means what is unholy, sin-infected, an affront to God: this is going to be rendered holy.

Make no mistake: chaos laps at the creation at all time. We need think only of terrifying earthquakes and treacherous tsunamis. We need think only of pestilential disease. In 1349 bubonic plague overtook Europe, and in a few years one-half of Europe’s people had succumbed helplessly to it. In 1665 a huge fire consumed the greater part of London; one year later, 1666, the plague claimed thousands who had managed to survive the previous year’s fire.

World War I, ‘The Great War’, as it was called, was ‘great’ inasmuch as it was the most hideous spectacle, the most monstrous spectacle, the world had seen to date. And it was hideous: 20 million dead. It can be blamed squarely on human depravity, sin. As soon as The Great War ended in 1918, Spanish flu appeared. Spanish flu killed 50-to-100 million people. It can be blamed squarely on evil.

Whom did Spanish flu kill? Epidemics customarily kill the most biologically vulnerable; that is, the very elderly and the very young, old people and infants. Spanish flu was different: it killed the 30-to-

35-year-olds, with the result that millions upon millions of children were orphaned. Chaos compounded!

It's little wonder Paul writes to the Christians in Rome, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now, and not only the creation, but we ourselves (Rom. 8:22)." The entire creation is twisted by evil; and we humans are disfigured by sin.

But not forever. The day has been appointed when the creation, together with God's people, already reconciled to God at the cross, will be restored definitively. And on that day the creation will no longer be molested by evil nor God's people disfigured by sin.

Let's move from the larger picture of the cosmos to the smaller picture of you and me particularly. All of us are wounded, and are wounded for reasons we could list for the rest of the day. To say we are wounded is to say we are victims of victimizations great and small, inner and outer. To say we are wounded is to say **we lack wholeness**.

At the same time, all of us are sinners. We are people of depraved hearts. As loudly as we like to complain that we are wounded inasmuch as we are victims, the Hebrew prophets keep reminding us that we are sinners inasmuch as we are victimizers, characteristically victimizing God and neighbour through our spiritual treachery. To say we are sinners is to say **we lack holiness**.

We have been appointed, however, to a glorious end: we are going to stand before our Lord, our wounds healed and our depravity remedied. Which is to say, we are going to know and enjoy shalom, peace, eternally.

No book of the Bible says as much about the restoration of the cosmos and the healing of Christ's people as the book of Revelation, the last book in Holy Writ. The man who wrote it insists that he has been visited with a vision of our risen, victorious Lord, and therein given what he is to say. He speaks of his vision at considerable length, spelling out detail after detail, only to wrap it all up climactically, "And his face was like the sun shining in full strength (Rev. 1:16)."

As the writer apprehends the victorious One whose face is like the sun shining in full strength he knows that the shalom of God, the kingdom of God, the creation healed, the cosmos restored—peace—can be counted on.

You and I can count on it too. For to know ourselves visited with God's blessing; to know God's face shining gloriously upon us thereby rendering Jesus Christ undeniable and irresistible; this is to know that he who began a good work in us will certainly bring it to completion on the day of our Lord's appearing. (Phil. 1:6)

The Lord bless you and keep you;  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;  
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.