

UNEDITED DRAFT

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Today we are looking at a really cool part of Scripture. It is the blessing you hear at the end of almost every service here at Good Shepherd. You've heard these words so many times, it's quite possible that your brain tunes out when I speak these words over you at the end of a service. The words I'm talking about are these: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace." We are not the only church to use these words. Many Christian churches around the world use the very same words to pronounce God's blessing over his people. It's used not just in Lutheran churches, but in Protestant churches of all kinds. And also in Catholic churches. And in Orthodox churches too. It's an ancient blessing that's been pronounced over God's people for 3,500 years. Isn't that amazing. When I end the service today with those words, I want you to imagine those very words being spoken around the world over people of different denominations and in different countries. And imagine them being pronounced over your ancestors 200 years ago... and 1000 years ago... and if you are Jewish, maybe even 3,500 years ago, because that's when God first gave these words to Moses.

So we want to talk about their significance and their meaning so that we don't treat these words as the bell or tone that signifies the end of a class. These words do NOT mean, grab your bulletin, start assembling your stuff, start opening up to the last hymn. They don't mean, "That it, we're wrapping this thing up!" They carry with them God's blessing. And that blessing is imparted to you. And you really need that blessing.

You need the blessing because you have needs that must be filled. So let me have you think about this. What are your needs, and where do you turn to have them met?

Our needs are many, aren't they?

- Basic food, shelter and clothing
- Protection and safety for life and property
- Health
- To meet many of our earthly needs we need resources: money, a paycheck.
- Supporting relationships: Family and friends
- Spiritually speaking
 - You need God's favor and acceptance.
 - Therefore you need his forgiveness... the guilt of sin removed.
 - You need a life after this life is done because you will die

I would imagine that every one of you is wrestling some form of need that's causing you unrest. You're not sure how a particular need will be met. What's yours? Health? Finances? A relationship?

Now here is our big problem. Where do we look for help in order to have our needs filled? Where does our help come from? Sitting in church it's easy to say, "Well, my help comes from the Lord." But in our daily life, how well do we live this truth? How often do we go to God first with all our needs? Or do we go to him later when we're starting to run out of options? Do we always acknowledge that no matter what the need, God is *always* the giver? Or do we

sometimes look at the gift as if it is the source. Health problems: my doctor can help. Food running out? My paycheck and trip to the grocery store will take care of it. Relationship problem? A friend, or a book, or a counselor will get me through. Roof get damaged in a storm? A roofer will help as will my insurance company who will pay for it. Do something wrong? I'll fix it... I'll make up for it.

In all of these cases, we're trusting in the gift instead of trusting in the giver. In every case when we have a need. It is God's blessing and only God's blessing that can fill that need.

So here is where the closing blessing of each service helps us out. The last thing we hear in the liturgy before we scatter is that for every need, it is the LORD who blesses.

My life without God's blessing equals disaster and emptiness.

My life with his blessing equals happiness and full life.

With that in mind, let's look at the particulars of Number 6:22-27.

BACKGROUND: The people had been delivered out of Egypt, but now they are a large nation without a home country. They are a people with great needs. They are wandering in barren places with insufficient food, clothing, shelter. They face disease and pestilence and poverty. They have inadequate defenses against enemies that might attack. They are heading to a country that is inhabited by heavily armed people in well-fortified cities who don't feel like turning it all over to the Israelites. These are a people with great needs. Should they despair? Should they channel their inner strength? Should they cooperate and work together to get through it all? No, none of these would meet their tremendous needs. Only God's blessing could do it. They needed it. They also needed to be assured that God's blessing was theirs.

22 The Lord said to Moses, 23 "Tell Aaron and his sons, 'This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

Aaron and his sons were the priests. They were the ones who were the mediators who would deliver God's blessing to God's people. However, the blessing did not come from Aaron and the other priests. The blessing came from God and wording came exactly from God. They were merely the ones passing it along. The blessing was to be given to the "Israelites." In other words, this was a corporate blessing... a blessing pronounced over all the people who were assembled. This presumes that the people would assemble before the Lord.

God continues to desire his blessing pronounced over his people today. We do so when we gather together as the body of Christ here at Good Shepherd.

24 "The Lord bless you and keep you;

25 the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;

26 the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."

There is so much packed into these verses. The name "Lord" is repeated three times. If you looked in your NIV Bibles you would see LORD (all caps.) In Hebrew, that is the word: Yahweh (Jehovah). There was another word that mean lord like a master. But this is God's personal name, not a title. It conveys warm intimacy. It is the name that calls to mind God's eternal and unchanging nature. It is the name given at the burning bush. It's the name God gave to bind himself to that people in an unbreakable covenant. It's the name associated with his deliverance and salvation. It's the name that emphasizes his independent love... love that does not depend on who I am or what I do, but a love that only depends on his desire to pour it out.

Note the three-fold repetition of “the Lord.” Our God is triune, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It’s natural that we would see a three-fold blessing from God. I’ll comment on that more as we look at each of the three parts of the blessing.

Here’s another interesting thing to note: The “you” in each of the three phrases is singular. In English, we don’t have a singular or plural form of “you.” Unless you live in the south, in which case there’s “you” and there’s “y’all.” And then there’s also the all inclusive: “All y’all.” But in formal English, we just use “you.” Hebrew uses the singular “you” meaning the blessing, though pronounced over all of Israel is being pronounced to each individual. The Lord bless you (point at one) and keep you (one person... personal.) And so the blessing balanced the truth that we are individuals with a relationship with God, yet we are a group who form a single body in Christ... we are not alone, we are together. 4

One more general comment: This blessing is Hebrew poetry. You don’t catch that in English. Hebrew poetry doesn’t rhyme or have meter, although these verses do seem to have a certain cadence to them when read in Hebrew. But what’s neat here is the expanding nature of the verses. In Hebrew, the first verse has 3 words. The second has 5 and the third has 7. The blessing is growing, it’s snowballing, and that gives us an image of God’s blessings increasing upon us. Also in the Hebrew if you don’t count the repeating word, Lord, the total number of words amounts to 12... the number of tribes of Israel upon whom this blessing of the Lord was being pronounced. Could be coincidence. I think it is clever poetry.

Now let’s look at each of the three lines:

24 “The Lord bless you and keep you;

Bless: Happiness, well-being, prosperity. If we are to enjoy it, God must give it. Blessing ultimately only can come from God. He blesses, and he keeps. Or it could be translated “guard” or “protect.”

If my wife and I were going to go away for the weekend, and we called one of you and asked if you would “Keep” our children, we’re not saying that you should stop in every evening and see how they’re doing. We don’t mean you should lock them in a closet for safe keeping until we return. We mean care for them, protect them, do for them what we would do for them.

In this first blessing, God is declaring that he is the one to provide all we need for body and life, physical and spiritual.

You have real needs! God declares he will provide them. He blesses. He keeps you.

Which person of the Godhead do we usually think of when it comes to providing? Isn’t it the Father? **“The Lord bless you and keep you”**

The second line:

25 the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;

The Jewish people were very literal and vivid in their thinking and speaking. We would say, “I hope he is favorably disposed toward me.” The Hebrew person would say, “I hope his face will shine upon me.” You’ve seen the difference between a shining face and a darkened face. Or an angry, red face. Eyes bugging, veins bulging. That’s a scary thing. How much more if it’s God’s angry, red face looking upon you.

Because of our sins that’s what we deserve, isn’t it. We trust things other than God for blessing... we look to the gifts for blessing instead to the Giver who gave them... and we certainly could expect God’s red face with a vein bulging in the middle of his forehead. How could we trade the Creator for created things? Yet we do it. And God is understandably angry.

Yet the blessing is God's shining face and grace... undeserved kindness... to you. How can he possibly do it?

Through Jesus. His perfect trust in the Father in all circumstances... by faith is credited to you. His death on a cross isolated from the Father... by faith God considers that payment to be for you and all your sins. All the things that make God red faced toward you, instead went to Jesus. And God's anger was poured out on him instead of you.

Sin removed, God's face when he looks at you is beaming, bright, smiling, and happy. He is gracious toward you because of his Son, Jesus.

So, this second pronouncement of blessing? It makes us think of Jesus, doesn't it?

26 the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."

This one is all about relationship with God. If you are not getting along with someone, you avert your eyes, don't you. You turn away from them. You don't want to talk to them. There is strife between you. This is the way it is by nature between us and God. There is war and strife because trust is broken by sin. Without trust in God, there is no connection with God.

But when Jesus went back into heaven he promised that he and his Father would send the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit would give faith... that is, trust in Jesus and his atoning sacrifice. He would give understanding. He would comfort us with the knowledge that our sins are forgiven. He would fill us with fruits of faith that are pleasing to the Father. In short, the Holy Spirit reconnects us to God by faith. He is the reason you can say, "Jesus is Lord" and thus have your sins forgiven as you trust in him. He's the reason you are here today, growing in your relationship with God. He is the reason that Christ's death for the sins of the world belongs to you personally. Where there was hostility between you and God, through the work of the Holy Spirit, you have peace.

Do you see the Trinity clearly portrayed in this three fold blessing? And some people say you don't see the Trinity taught in the Old Testament!

Final verse:

27 So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.

God's name is placed on us when that blessing is pronounced. This blessing is GOD's blessing! God's name was first placed on you in your baptism. You were baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. You were declared a child of God, connected to Jesus, forgiven of sin. His name was placed upon you then. And his name is placed upon you at the end of every service when the blessing is pronounced over you. You are tattooed with the name of God when that blessing is pronounced. That is a name that blesses. It protects. It bestows God's grace. It changes his attitude about you. It restores a peaceful, right relationship between you and God.

Isn't that a great way to end our service? It's not an "Amen." It's not "let's start packing up." It's not a wish and a hope. It's a statement of fact. The Triune God's name is placed upon you and although you leave his house, you leave with his blessing upon you.

Friends, your needs are many! Concentrating on them can really get a person worked up. But today I want you to remember the blessing that is upon you. And never forget this truth: God's blessing fills all your needs. Amen.