

The Blessing of God

November 27, 2016

By John Ulrich, Lead Pastor

Psalm 67

As you can tell from our sharing time, we have a lot to be thankful for. We have all experienced God's blessings in many ways. For some of us, maybe it's been an encouraging year - a year where things just went well - with a new job - or a needed promotion - or a new circumstance that's been uplifting. So maybe for some of us, it's been a comfortable year.

Or maybe for others of us, it's been a little tougher. Maybe it's been a challenging year for you. 2016 was definitely one of the more difficult years of my life! But you know what? Like we just sang: God has been faithful, and we - all of us - have blessings to celebrate. Today I wanted us to look at kind of a Thanksgiving-y passage - a passage that is all about God's blessing. This is a nice passage! It's short It's clear. It's non-controversial (at least for us today!) It's a passage that really is about Thanksgiving.

This Psalm was probably read every year during the Feast of Tabernacles - also called "the Feast of Ingathering." That was an Old Testament Holy day that many people feel was the basis for our American Holiday of Thanksgiving. This is a Thanksgiving passage:

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, Selah that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you! Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth. Selah Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you! The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, shall bless us. God shall bless us; let all the ends of the earth fear him!
- Psalm 67:1-7 (English Standard Version)

As we look at this little seven verse Psalm, we're going to make three observations about God's blessing: One from the beginning of the Psalm, one from the end and one from the middle.

- * The Psalm begins with a request for God's blessing
- * The Psalm ends with an acknowledgement of God's Blessing
- * The Psalm majors on the purpose of God's blessing

Each one an observation about God's blessing. We're going to talk about God's blessing. I want us to:

- * Celebrate God's blessings. I want us to give thanks in our hearts for the many kindnesses that we have received from God. Whether it's been an easy year or a hard one, we are truly blessed.
- * Go beyond that and ask ourselves the question: "Why has God blessed us? Why has he been so good to us? And how should we as his people, respond to his blessing?"
- * Think about that today as we look at this Psalm.

The Psalm begins with a request for God's blessing

Listen closely to how this Psalm begins in verse 1: May God be gracious to us - and bless us - and make his face to shine upon us

If you are a Christian who knows your Bible really well or if you grew up in a more formal church, this verse may sound kind of familiar to you. If you were an ancient Israelite who worshipped at the Temple, this verse would sound very familiar to you. This verse is almost identical to the first Benediction - the first concluding word of blessing - in the Bible:

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. - Numbers 6:24-26

Compare this benediction with verse 1 of our Psalm. The words are in a slightly different order, but it's almost the same. How many of you have heard that passage before? At the very end of the church service – right? If you were a kid, this was probably your favorite verse! Because when you heard those words, you knew it was almost over - you had survived another church service!

But this benediction, which the Psalmist is quoting - and which is actually a beautiful, intricate piece of Hebrew poetry - was a tradition that Israel kept. Every time you went to worship at the Temple - as you departed - some of the Israel's priests - some of the sons of Aaron - would be standing outside and as you passed them - they would say these words:

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.

It was a request for God to bless you in three ways:

1. To protect or it says to "keep" you.
2. For God to be kind to you. The passage says "may he make his face shine on you." The idea is not just that God would be looking at you, but that he would be looking at you with a smile on his face. When Calvin was little, we used to say "when he's happy, he's happy all over and when he's mad, he's mad all over." This is a request for God to look at you and be happy all over! To be kind to you, and
3. It was a request for God to give you peace - peace with one another - and peace with him. So that benediction - and the first verse of our Psalm that reminds us of it - are a request for God's blessing.

God had them repeat that request for his blessing every time they went to the temple - and every time they sang this Psalm - for one simple reason: to remind them that the source of their blessing was ultimately God. He was reminding them that when you get right down to the bottom floor - the most important factor in the protection - and provision - and the peace of their daily lives - is not how much money they have in the bank - or how favorable circumstances look - or how clever they are. **The most important factor - is God's blessing.**

God wanted Israel to know more than anything else that he was the source of all blessing. God went to great lengths to teach Israel this truth in every aspect of their lives. That's why his name is repeated three times in the benediction: "The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you, the Lord give you peace." It's the blessing of the Lord that matters.

That's why God had Israel fight their battles the way they did:

- * Joshua marching around a city seven times without lifting a finger.

- * Gideon taking on 135,000 Midianites with 300 guys who were basically armed with flashlights and flower pots.

God didn't have them do those things because that was a great battle plan. He had them do those things because he wanted them to know that real protection was found only in the blessing of God.

That's why God sent Israel the Old Testament Prophets. The main job of a prophet was not really predicting the future. Rather it was helping Israel see how their present circumstances - good or bad - easy or difficult - were connected to God's blessing.

So the Psalm starts with a request for God's blessing, so that his people will know that he is the ultimate source of all good things. And folks - I don't know how to say this - but let me just say it:

We are blessed. We are blessed. God has been so kind to us. We experience such incredible protection - and provision - and peace. Life is easy for us - in terms of basic necessities. So easy that we can tell ourselves that:

- * It's our right to live this way.

- * We did everything ourselves.

- * That we have what we have because of our hard work or because of our cleverness.

There are lots of hard-working people on the other side of the world who will be hungry tonight. There are lots of clever people on the other side of the world who won't have a place to sleep. The abundance - the safety - the health care - the comfort of living that we experience - is not a given. It's a blessing from God that is not guaranteed. There's a call for humility here. That's why the Psalmist begins with a request for God's blessing. He wants us to know that the ultimate source of blessing is God.

The Psalm ends with an acknowledgement of God's Blessing

The Psalm starts with a request for God's blessing and it ends with an acknowledgement of God's blessing. There's only one past-tense verb in the entire Psalm, and it's found at the end in versus 6:

***The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, shall bless us.
God shall bless us; let all the ends of the earth fear him! - Psalm 67:6-7***

He says "The earth has yielded its increase." If you're using another translation, it may read future tense "The land will yield its increase," but the Hebrew verb is actually past-tense.

The point of the verse is acknowledgment and gratitude for what God has done. The Psalmist is saying "We have asked for God's blessing - for his face to shine on us - and he has done it: the earth has yielded its increase - God has blessed us! Because of that past blessing that has already occurred, we can anticipate that he will bless us in the future. We - and all people - even to the ends of the earth - can fear God." Not have a terror of God because he's out to get us - but have a reverential respect - that comes when we stop to see things rightly. He's acknowledging that God has blessed them.

When we acknowledge that God is the source of our blessings - when we acknowledge that we are not enough on our own - and recognize what God has done - it changes our perspective. It has a way of right-sizing us - and God - and our troubles.

Judaism had this built into its faith - this principle of gratitude. If you were an Old Testament Jew, there were feasts of gratitude and worship that you could throw. If God brought you safely home from a journey - or healed you - or took care of you in time of need, you would invite your friends - and tell them what God had done - and you would worship together. There was also this yearly festival of Tabernacles. It was called "the feast of ingathering." It was held in the Fall at the end of the agricultural year. It was a time of gratitude and reflection - a time to adjust your perspective by recognizing what God had done.

The idea - the occasion for this feast - was very similar to what we do this time of year in our feast of Thanksgiving. Gratitude - gratitude that changes our perspective - is what their Tabernacles and our Thanksgiving are all about.

So let me ask you a question: How was your Thanksgiving?

- * Did you really pause to give thanks to God?
- * To acknowledge his blessing?
- * Did you stop to take stock of where your heart is really at?
- * To let gratitude adjust your perspective?
- * Or did you get caught up in the busy-ness of the season?

It's so important that we acknowledge God's blessings in our life. It can really change the way we look at our lives.

On my Thanksgiving Day, one of the things I did was call my Dad. Much of his health has been improving, but it's been a rocky road for him. He was back in the emergency room last week. He's home now, but as he has healed he's really, really been struggling with anxiety. We don't know if it is related to his heart - or if it's chemical - or what - but he's really been struggling. It was interesting - I prayed with him before I hung up - and as we were praying for his anxiety - I really just recalled some of God's blessings, The kindnesses he is experiencing from God right now, and the ways God has been faithful to him over the years. As we rehearsed those, I could feel his anxiety release a bit. I could feel his perspective change. I could sense he was taking heart and that he was looking at his circumstances from a different angle. That acknowledging of God's blessings re-framed his perspective in a good way. It gave him the strength he needed to make it through a difficult day.

It's so important that we acknowledge God's blessings. The Psalmist encourages us to do that! The Psalm begins with a request for blessing. It ends with an acknowledgment of blessing, but there is one very important factor that we need to look at - and it's this:

The Psalm majors on the purpose of God's blessing

This is the part that would have come as a surprise to Israel. They would have understood the need to ask God for blessing. They heard that every day as they left the Temple. They would have understood the need to acknowledge God's blessing. There were lots of Psalms and festivals about that. But history shows us that Israel missed one thing in a big way: that was the purpose of God's blessing. The purpose of God's blessing is really the point of this Psalm: Look at what the writer says:

*May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, Selah
that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations.
Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you!
Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon earth. Selah
Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you!
- Psalm 67:1-5*

The main point of the Psalm – four out of seven verses - is the purpose of God's blessing. Israel wasn't just blessed because God wanted them to be rich and comfortable. Their blessing wasn't an end in itself. Rather, they were blessed so that they could be a blessing to the nations. This started way back before this Psalm - way before Moses - even before Israel was ever a nation.

When God first chose Abraham way back in Genesis, listen to what he said to him - these are his exact words:

"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great - so that you will be a blessing - and in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed." - Genesis 12:2-3

From the very beginning, Israel was blessed so that they could bless the nations. Look at the Psalm. Look at how God wants to bless the nations through Israel:

In versus 2: "that your way may be known." God wanted the nations to see in Israel how he called his people to live. What was right, and what was wrong - what true worship looked like - how to love your neighbor - how to live in faith. He wanted the nations to see that he rewards that.

In Versus 2 again: "That your saving power may be known among the nations." He wanted them to see that he was a God that could be trusted to rescue his people when they were in danger.

In Versus 4: "for you judge the peoples with equity." God wanted the nations to see that he was a God of true justice - not a God that judges selfishly or chaotically or unjustly.

In versus 4 again: "That you guide the nations upon the earth." God wanted the nations to see that we're not out here alone - that God is involved in the events that befall us - that history has

meaning. God wanted Israel to show these things to those on the outside of his covenant - to the nations - so that they would come to him and know health and sanity and life. That's why he:

- * Blessed Israel
- * Gave Joshua a land flowing with milk and honey
- * Expanded David's territory and gave him rest from his enemies
- * Gave Solomon such great wealth and wisdom that dignitaries came from other continents to see for themselves what it was like.

It wasn't just because he wanted them to BE blessed - not just because he wanted them healthy, wealthy, and wise. Nor was it just because he wanted them to acknowledge his blessing, as important as gratitude really is. That's not the main reason he blessed them.

He blessed Israel so that they could be a blessing - so that they could call people to him - so that in a world gone mad - they could show the surrounding nations that there really is a God:

- * Whose way is what we were made for
- * Who delivers his people in dark moments
- * Whose judgments are not biased - and are right.
- * Who guides and shepherds the nations, so that what befalls them isn't random, isn't meaningless, and isn't just a triumph of darkness. It's instructive to those who can see it.

God blessed Israel not just so they could absorb it, but so that they, in turn, could bless each other - and the surrounding nations - and the ends of the earth, as the Psalm says "all the peoples" - with the knowledge of him.

And church - I have to tell you today that what was true of them - is true in a greater way of us. We are blessed. We live in one of the most comfortable, most desirable parts of the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth. We are blessed.

But our blessing is not an end in itself. We are blessed to be a blessing. We are blessed so that we can reach out to this neighborhood - and to our co-workers - and to the triangle - and to the nation - and ultimately to the whole world - and share the knowledge of God with them.

I don't know if you've read the news lately, but it seems that we live in a world gone mad. People need to hear and see, in the way we live our lives - that there is a God:

- * Whose way is what we are truly made for
- * Who delivers his people in moments of need
- * Who judges not according to skin color - or income bracket - or political party - but who judges with true equity.

They need to know that there is a God who is involved in the affairs of nations - guiding and shepherding them so that even crazy unexpected political moments - are not meaningless and out of control. They need to know that. They need to see it in us as we ask for and receive and acknowledge the blessings of God.

One last thing: This is why I said “What’s true of Israel is true in a greater way of us” - All these things that we see in this Psalm - all these things that the nations really need to know - are most clearly seen - in Jesus. He is the fulfillment of this passage. It’s in Jesus that we most clearly see the way that God has made for us to live - with truth in our hearts - with love for our neighbor - with trust in our God. It’s in Jesus that we most clearly see God’s equitable judgment. He’s not a respecter of persons. He judges with no regard for social standing - or skin color - or income - or popularity. He judges only according to God’s truth and mercy. It’s in Jesus that we see God guide the nations. Isaiah tells us that he will shepherd the nations - that he will decide between them - that he will care for the needy - that he will lead the nations to a time of peace.

It is in Jesus that we most clearly see the deliverance - the saving power - that the Psalmist speaks of in verse 2. It is through Jesus - and through his death and resurrection - that we have salvation from our greatest enemy. In fact if you were to look at the Hebrew of this Psalm, you would see something very interesting: What in our Bible is two words “saving power” - is in the Hebrew text just one word - the word Yeshua - the name of Jesus.

I say this is true of us in a greater way because it is in Jesus that we receive God’s greatest blessings. We are never meant to keep Jesus to ourselves.

Advent starts today. And it starts with the candle of Hope. It is in Jesus that we have the hope that our neighbors - and our nation - and all nations, need. He is God’s greatest blessing.

- * We have asked for God’s blessing.
- * We have acknowledged God’s blessing.
- * Now let’s be a blessing to those around us.