

Holy Trinity Sunday, June 12, 2022

**NUMBERS 6:22–27.** (EHV)

The LORD told Moses to speak to Aaron and to his sons and to tell them to bless the Israelites with these words:

The LORD bless you and keep you.

The LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you.

The LORD look on you with favor and give you peace.

In this way they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.

If you were charged with composing a blessing, what would you write?

The blessing most familiar to pop culture is the one from *The Hunger Games* series of books and movies: “May the odds be ever in your favor.” But that hardly measures up to the divine blessings found in the Bible. First, who can say they have control over the odds, so that wishing such a thing would have any effect?

Second, even if you did have control over odds, wishing them ever to be in someone’s favor is hardly the best you could do. If the odds are 50:1 that someone will trip over a cord, the odds are in his favor. However, there is still that 1 in 50 chance that he will in fact trip over the cord and embarrass himself. It’s not a very reassuring blessing.

But that’s probably a bad example, since it was likely the author’s intention to compose a bad blessing, since it’s given by representatives of a corrupt government in the fictional future. There’s another popular non-biblical blessing that’s been around for much longer. It’s called a traditional Irish blessing. The first stanza of it goes like this:

May the road rise to meet you,  
may the wind be always at your back.  
May the sun shine warm upon your face,  
the rains fall soft upon your fields.  
And until we meet again,  
may God hold you in the palm of his hand.

It’s actually pretty good as far as non-biblical blessings go—I myself have sung this blessing before—but it does begin to illustrate the problem that crops up when we begin to compose blessings instead of leaving that job to God. It’s the same problem that appears when we compare our prayers to the Lord’s Prayer. The Lord’s Prayer says, “Heavenly Father, may this happen for you, and this happen for you, and this happen for you. Oh, and as for me, if you could give me just the bread that I need, just for today, that would be great.” Our prayers tend to go, “May this happen for me, and this happen for me, and this happen for me. Oh yeah, and may this happen for Grandma, and may this happen for me.”

“May the road rise to meet you, may the wind be always at your back. May the sun shine warm upon your face, the rains fall soft upon your fields.” That’s a lot of kingdom of earth stuff, and not a lot of kingdom of heaven stuff, a lot of temporal stuff, and not a lot of eternal stuff. Not to mention that, again, we have no control over which direction the wind blows or how softly the rain falls.

How wonderful it is to have *biblical* blessings! How wonderful it is to have blessings that *God* has composed! How wonderful it is to have blessings that actually work! And that's what our triune God wants to impress on your heart with this blessing today: Here is a blessing that actually benefits.

### **1. Composed by the LORD**

The first and primary reason that it actually benefits is because it was composed by the Lord: "The LORD told Moses to speak to Aaron and to his sons and to tell them to bless the Israelites with these words." Notice that the name LORD here is in all capital letters. This is the special name for God, the name that identified him as the one true God. It may have originally been pronounced Yahveh (YAH-vay). The Israelites also had a more general name for God, which could also be used for false gods, just like our word *god*. But the name translated as LORD, in all capital letters, was like our name Trinity. Today the name Trinity identifies the one true God, and that's what the name Yahveh, the LORD, did back then.

This special name looks and sounds similar to the Hebrew word that means *he is*. And that makes sense, since when Moses asked the LORD at the burning bush what his name was, the LORD told him, "I am who I am." The LORD is who he is. That means he does not depend on anyone for his existence. He is existence and life, and all existence comes from him. It means he does not change. It means he is faithful, faithful to his law and its threats and punishments and faithful especially to his gospel and its promises and blessings.

So unlike if we were to compose our own blessing, the composer of this blessing actually has the power to bring about what he wishes upon us. "The LORD told Moses to speak to Aaron and to his sons and to tell them to bless the Israelites with these words." In other words, these words are actually the Lord's words, and the Lord's words are where power and life and blessing come from. When God created the world, he didn't shut his eyes, concentrate really hard, and will the universe into existence. He spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm (Psalm 33:9). When the true God speaks, stuff happens. Stuff gets done.

And not only does the composer of this blessing have the power to bring about what he wishes upon us, the name LORD assures us that what he wishes upon us is good. This is "the LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin." This is the One who, before he pronounced curses on Adam and Eve for their sin, pronounced a curse on the devil and a blessing on Adam and Eve, saying that a special male offspring of the woman would crush the devil's head and do away with mankind's sin. This is the One who then ruled over all of history so that more than 4,000 years later, his Son took on human flesh, was born, lived, and died not only for Adam and Eve, but also for you and me.

The One who speaks this blessing has both the power and the desire to bless you.

### **2. Conveying the Best Gifts**

Not only that, but what he conveys to us in this blessing isn't something mediocre or unexceptional, like the odds being ever in our favor, or something that only has temporary benefit, like the rain falling soft upon our fields.

"The LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you. The LORD look on you with favor and give you peace."

First, notice the threefold repetition of the name LORD. That's no coincidence, just like it's no coincidence that Deuteronomy 6:4 says, "Hear, O Israel: [1] The LORD, [2] our God, [3] the LORD is one." Just like it's no coincidence that the seraphs flying above the throne of God call out to each other, "[1] Holy, [2] holy, [3] holy is the LORD of Armies." God is one, and God is three. God is tri-une, three in one, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So the fact that the Lord speaks a threefold blessing here assures us that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are kindly disposed toward us in equal, infinite measure. They each wish to carry out their particular work for our benefit.

What is that work? "The LORD *bless* you and *keep* you." This first blessing both sums up all the others and stands on its own. Certainly if we were to ask, "What does it mean to bless? How does the LORD bless me?" we could easily answer our own question by looking at the next two blessings. "Well, he blesses me by making his face shine on me and being gracious to me, by looking on me with favor and giving me peace."

But the word *bless* is also used of God in the Scriptures to describe physical blessings, like the rains falling soft on our fields and the sun shining warm on our face, like having a loving spouse and loving children and food and clothing and property. God wants to give us these things too, not all in the same measure, not all in abundant measure, perhaps not any in abundant measure, but all in the *right* measure, in the measure that is best for us.

But whether we're talking about the spiritual blessings that follow or earthly blessings, God must also *keep* us if we're going to *keep* those blessings. If he simply gave them to us, and then withdrew his hand of blessing, we would lose all of these blessings immediately. Not a one of you had or has the power to make or create so much as a speck of dust in your possession without God's blessing, not to mention keep it. And note: God does not say, "The LORD bless you with provisions and possessions" and "the LORD keep your provisions and possessions," but, "The LORD bless you with provisions and possessions" and "the LORD keep *you*." If God takes some of the provisions and possessions away, it's because he wants to keep and preserve *you* as his own.

"The LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you." Luther summed up the problem with this blessing when he said, "In German it doesn't sound like anything at all when I say, 'God make his face shine on you.' Yet there's not really any other way to translate it or put it into good German." We have the same problem in English. The closest expression I think we have is when we say that someone's face is radiant or beaming, meaning that they're intensely happy or proud. That begins to help us understand this phrase, but we need more.

From other places like Ecclesiastes 8, Proverbs 15, and Psalm 80, we understand that the Lord's face shining on us means that he is acting wisely toward us, that he is smiling on us and is happy with us, and that he saves us. More important than the sun shining warm on our face is the Lord's face shining warm on our hearts and souls.

And just as when we pray, "Thy kingdom come," we are also praying a curse on the enemies of the Lord's kingdom, so also here the Lord is saying that his face will be dark and menacing toward all our enemies, especially sin, death, and the devil. We might think of when the Israelites left Egypt and God led them with a pillar of cloud. When the Egyptians changed their minds about letting them go and came after them, God moved in the pillar of cloud and went back between the Israelites and the Egyptians. To the Israelites, the cloud was bright. They

were able to cross the Red Sea on dry ground and be safe. To the Egyptians, the cloud was dark and menacing. Their chariots fell apart as they were crossing the Red Sea and they perished.

The Lord then connects the idea of his face shining on us to this phrase: “the LORD be gracious to you.” Grace—the love of God that has as its cause not some quality in us, but a quality in God. Grace—God’s undeserved love. Grace—the love of God we can still depend on even though we are always less than lovable. Grace—the love God can and does show us because Jesus his Son destroyed sin, death, and the devil in the sea of his blood on the cross. Grace—our assurance that God makes his face shine on us.

“The LORD look on you with favor and give you peace.” What the Hebrew actually says is, “The LORD lift up his face toward you.” Again, we don’t really have that expression in English, but it’s somewhat similar to the expression “to look someone in the eye.”

The Bible tells us about one man, Asahel, running after another man, Abner, in order to kill him. The man who was running away was running not so much because he was afraid of his pursuer. He was running because he respected his pursuer’s brother, who was the commander of David’s army. Abner yelled at Asahel as he ran from him, “Stop chasing me! Why should I strike you down? How could I lift up my face to your brother?” He was saying, “If you keep chasing me, Asahel, I will be forced to confront you and kill you, and then how am I going to look your brother in the eye?”

What a powerful thing eye contact is. Eye contact expresses integrity, honesty, genuineness, a clear conscience, a good relationship, interest, fondness. One of the worst things a spouse or parent or friend can say to you is, “Get out. I don’t even want to look at you right now.”

Now of course God isn’t running any risk of having a bad conscience so that he can’t look us in the eye. No, the problem is with *our* conscience. Isaiah prophesied, “It is your guilt that has separated you from your God, and *your sins have hidden God’s face from you*, so that he does not hear. Look, your hands are polluted with blood, and your fingers drip guilt. Your lips speak lies. Your tongue mutters dishonesty” (Isa. 59:2–3).

So if God himself is going to bless us by promising to lift up his face toward us and look us in the eye, that means that he must remove everything in us that would force him to tell us to get out of his sight. That’s exactly what the Holy Spirit does for us through God’s word, through the gospel of Jesus Christ. God looks us in the eye through the preaching of his Word. God deals with us face to face at his altar by putting his very Son’s body and blood on our lips. He does this, even though his eyes can see into our hearts. He sees the greed and the hatred. He sees the lust and the pride. He sees the doubt on this Trinity Sunday, the sentiments our old Adam expresses when it treats the teaching that God is three persons in one God as a children’s fairy tale or as utter nonsense. He sees when we’d rather be the ones to invent God according to our own reason, rather than the ones to be invented by One beyond our reasoning.

Yet he still looks us in the eye, because he must. He has given his Word that he will do so, and he has given his Word because through the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, through faith in Jesus, when God looks us in the eye, he is not looking into our own eyes, but into the blameless eyes of his Son, whose righteousness covers our iniquities.

So he must also “give you peace.” *Peace* comes from a Hebrew word meaning *to be complete*. If we have peace, we have everything and are content. We are not plagued by guilt, but

are reconciled with God and, as far as is possible with us, reconciled with our neighbor. We have what we need in this life—and are astounded and overwhelmingly grateful if we have anything beyond that—and we know where we are going in the next life. True peace is something that’s still firmly in your possession when a tornado two miles wide rips through your house. It’s yours even when those closest to you despise and forsake you. It’s yours even as a pandemic sweeps across the nation. It’s yours even when the earth gives way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea. It’s the attitude of Asaph in Psalm 73: “If I only have you, O Lord, then I ask for nothing else neither in heaven nor on earth.”

The fact that the Lord looks on you with favor and gives you peace in this blessing is what allows every one of you to leave church a mere five minutes old every Sunday, no matter how old and worn out your body may be. This is eternal stuff, not temporal stuff. This isn’t anything you can get from a doctor or a friend or a sunny day or a breathtaking scene. You can only get this from God.

### 3. For Each One of You

And yes, each one of you can get this from God.

If I were a German and I wanted to tell you “God loves you” to all of you, I would say, “Der liebe Gott liebet *euch*.” If I were just with one of you and I wanted to tell you “God loves you,” I would say, “Der liebe Gott liebet *dich*.” I could make the same distinction in Spanish—“Dios ama *usted*” to all of you, or “Dios *te* ama” to just one of you. There’s no distinction like that in English. If I simply said, “God loves you,” you would need to know from the context whether I was talking to all of you or just one of you.

So I simply have to tell you that when it says “the LORD bless *you* and keep *you*,” in fact, whenever the word *you* appears in this blessing, it is the singular version of the word *you*.

Isn’t that amazing? God is instructing Aaron and his sons how to bless the *Israelites*, plural, how to bless *Christians*, plural, those who believe in the promise of the Messiah or Christ. And he instructs them to do so by saying, “The LORD bless *you*,” singular.

I suppose there are any number of responses to the blessing spoken at the end of the service that you could have, but here is one that God will not allow: “He doesn’t mean me.” No, God says he means exactly you, not you (all), but you. God didn’t just have “humanity blob” in mind. He had a person with a specific name, address, phone number, social security number, height, weight, shoe size, 109,402 hairs or fifty hairs and falling fast, a specific marital status, age, and a favorite activity in mind. He had *you* in mind.

That’s not an assurance you get with any blessing but one that comes from God.

“In this way they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.” When I, a mere sinful mortal, or any other man speak these words upon you, collectively and individually, in God’s name and by his command, I am not merely expressing a pious wish. I am basically telling the Lord of all the universe, the one true God, what to do. That would be arrogant and impudent, except for the fact that he tells me to tell him what to do. Not only that, but he has to obey, not because I have any right to boss God around, but because he himself has issued this blessing, and he must be true to his Word. He is the LORD, after all.

This is a blessing unlike any other. It’s a blessing that actually benefits, because it’s composed by the triune God, it conveys the best gifts, eternal gifts, and it is meant for each one

of you, without exception, to receive in faith. I look forward to giving it to you at the end of this service, and I pray you all look forward to receiving it. Amen.