

The Lord Bless You And Keep You...
Numbers 6:24-27

As Christians, we use the word "blessing" very generously and freely. For us, it is often a Christian way of greeting each other. Or when we sign our letters and e-mails, and use the words "Kind regards" or "Faithfully yours", and for many of us, we use "God bless you" or "Many blessings" or simply,

BLESSINGS. I usually end my correspondence with the word – Blessings. Or if I'm ending a conversation with a Jamaican – I say Bless up!

The idea of blessing things and people is an ancient one – most of us have heard the Traditional Gaelic Blessing:

May the Road rise up 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 is important to understand that those are not merely nice words to say or to send someone on a note card. But by saying or writing those words we are in fact sending a supernatural blessing upon the person(s) we want to read those words. We are seeking for them to receive a supernatural

blessing through our words and actions. We are doing what we can to help them receive a real, transformative and existential blessing.

We are participating in the same spiritual exercise that we see the LORD GOD ALMIGHTY do and various people in the Bible do. Blessing others is a spiritual exercise that we can do to each and every day of our lives. The Bible is clear that we have the power to send someone a blessing that can help transform another person's life. The Bible is also clear that we have the power to help someone reach the next level in their lives, and that we have the power to help shape their future for the good.

Words are important. They can build others up and strengthen them.

1. Think about the times you've received positive words from others and how they made you feel.

2. How about the times that you have said positive words to others and how it made them feel? Words have a lot of power to build others up.

The blessing that God gives to Aaron to bless the people of Israel was intended to be deeply spiritual. In many ways it was very special. It was never meant to be taken lightly or even to be paraphrased. It was meant to be recited or sung word for word before the people with hands raised. That was a symbolic gesture to remind the people that the blessing came not from the High Priest but from God himself.

In the Bible there are several words that are translated in English as "blessing". There are ten Hebrew words in the Old Testament and another eleven Greek words in the New Testament that are all translated as "bless" or "blessing".

The Hebrew word used here in **Numbers 6** is "barak". It is used more than 200 times in the Bible. It may seem a bit ironic, that the first appearance of the word is in **Genesis 1:22**. There God blesses the fish in the sea and the birds in the air, and commands them to be fruitful and multiply. Then, a few verses later he bestows a similar blessing on mankind whom he created in his own image.

The word "barak" is used mainly as a sign of God's favor.

When blessing his people Israel:

1. God promises prosperity and health,
2. fertility and a large offspring,
3. success in work and trade,
4. victory in battle and much more.

In Deuteronomy, Moses says "The Lord your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you will be altogether joyful." That is not wishful thinking: it is a promise - be it a conditional one. Because it is dependent on their faithfulness, as the context of Numbers

6 clearly indicates. And it is backed up by God's power and his covenant of faithful love. Because when God blesses, things change for the better.

What is remarkable, though, is the original meaning of the word "barak". It literally means "on bended knee". It refers to the position, in which a person kneels before another on one knee. Think of the good old days when a man went down on his knee to propose to a woman or ask for her hand.

(Story of a wife with a dream...)

You have probably seen movies about days gone by long ago, where a king or knight goes out to conquer his enemies. Those who decide to follow the conquering hero, demonstrate their loyalty to him by kneeling down before him on one knee. That is barak. That is blessing.

And that is exactly what God's blessing of his people expresses: God himself kneeling down before his people; God offering to come to his people "on bended knee"—that is, to come to serve us, to love us, to share himself with us.

A little girl once described her experience in an elevator. She said, "I got into this little room and the upstairs came down." God comes down to meet us on the level where we are.

1. He did so at Christmas in the person of Jesus, his Son.
2. And he did so again at Pentecost in the person of the Holy Spirit.

Such is the love of God, that he bends down to bless us because we are unable to reach out to him.

The first stanza of the High priestly blessing says: "The Lord bless you and keep you." What does keeping mean?

The word used here is "shamar" which means to guard or keep. The picture that God uses here is that of a shepherd. When the shepherd was out in the fields with his flock, he would construct an enclosure of thorn bushes to protect the sheep from the wild animals at night. It prevented wild animals from outside to reach the flock to do them harm. But at the same time, it was also effective in keeping the sheep back from leaving the pen and going astray, away from the protecting care of the shepherd and an easy prey for the wild animals.

God promises to protect us like a shepherd protects his sheep in the desert. The thorn bushes can be painful when we try to leave the flock and go astray, but they are basically there to protect us and keep us safe from the danger that is all around us.

In **John 10** Jesus says: **"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand."**

In the first part of the blessing - God's promise to take good care of us: he kneels down before us to provide us not only with what we need, but with

plenty of it. And he builds a fence around us to protect us from all harm by keeping us close to him.

In the second part of the blessing Aaron is to tell the people: “The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you.” What does that mean: to make his face shine upon you?

Maybe we can get a first hint from the history of Israel during their forty-year adventure in the desert. Moses was the only one who was allowed to go up to the holy mountain and speak with God. He was not allowed to see God’s face, because it would kill him. After all, God had said, “No-one shall see my face and live.” But then, when Moses came down from the mountain, his face was shining so much—reflecting the glory of God—that he had to cover it when turning to the people.

The radiance of God’s face tells us about his glory. We cannot see that glory face to face. But we can sense it when God comes to us and speaks to us. God’s radiance is in his word—most profoundly in the Word that became flesh: **Jesus himself**. When Jesus went up on a high mountain one day with two of his disciples, his appearance was transformed, and his face shone more brightly than the sun. And God’s voice came down from heaven saying, “This is my Son, my beloved one, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.”

We are God's own, and he blesses us like a loving father blesses his children, letting us share in his abundant riches, and protecting us from danger and evil.

In Christ he speaks to us, lets his face shine on us, and bestows his grace on us, as we turn to him in repentance.

Through his Spirit he turns his face toward us in acceptance, making us whole—that is what peace, or shalom, really means.

And in all that he reminds us with the words of **Isaiah 43**:

"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."

Amen.