

Numbers 6:22-27 (Trinity 2019) **The LORD said to Moses, “Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them: 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.’ So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”**

Introduction: How long has it been since we gave God thanks for our nose? The one in the middle of our face. We’d all agree it is something worthy of our gratitude even though we might think it’s too large, too small, or “funny” in some way. Without it we’d all look worse and we know it. And it’s practical, offering the ability smell and influencing taste and providing a drainage system for overflowing sinus cavities. Why don’t we thank God for the nose very often? It’s “ordinary” so we take it for granted. It functions when we don’t even think about it. It’s kind of like the words of blessing often used at the end of our worship assemblies, the words given in today’s text. Since first given over 3,400 years ago, the spoken blessing (benediction) has been repeated in many languages, cultures, and generations of believers. Today is a great opportunity to take a fresh look at it and be reminded of its blessing for us.

The Lord’s Blessing is a Big Blessing!

- 1. From a great and gracious Protector**
- 2. With great and gracious promises**
- 3. For great and gracious purposes**

Part 1: The Lord’s Blessing is from a great, gracious Protector.

1. Who is talking here? It’s clear: **“The Lord said to Moses. . . The Lord bless & keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you. . . The Lord turn his face toward you . . .”** This is the God who reveals himself as the **“I am who I am”** and who is, never changes, and loves to enter relationships with people. This is the “covenant” God who made promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – and now the Israelites. When he spoke these words to Moses, the Israelites were camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai in the Sinai Peninsula, straight south of Palestine. Behind them were centuries of slavery in Egypt. Fresh in their memory was the miraculous release from slavery, the walk through the parted waters of the Red Sea, and the daily gift of “bread from heaven” that they called manna. Everything points to the Lord who loves to stoop down to bless people, the “merciful and mighty” God we still sing about in our hymns.
2. Who is God talking to? What else can we say about these former slaves who has been set free and guided by the covenant Lord? Although on the receiving end of the Lord’s mercies, they showed themselves to be a fickle, faithfulness people all too often. They had the habit of griping, complaining, and murmuring against the Lord’s guidance. Already by this time they had worshiped the infamous golden calf and very soon they would reject the Lord’s encouragement to enter the Promised Land and take possession of it. In short, they deserved so little but needed so much! The Lord knew well they were a bickering and backsliding group – yet he speaks to bless them, put his name on them, claim them as his own, and love them!

3. Who is God still talking to? Parallels between Israel and us are often highlighted in the Bible. They were slaves; we were slaves [to sin, death, Satan]. They were set free; we were set free [redeemed and released by Christ's perfect work for us]. They didn't deserve God's love; we don't either. They were nevertheless chosen to be God's people; we are chosen, all by grace. The Lord knows this better than we so. The point is that he chooses to bless us not because we've done so well in our worship lives, Bible study habits, or kind or generous behavior toward gospel work or each other. He loves and delivers us for his own sake, 100% by grace.

Part 2: The Lord's Blessing comes with great, gracious promises

1. Note the progression and promise given. "Tell Aaron and his sons, **This is how you are to bless the Israelites. . . So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.**" Aaron, the brother of Moses, and his sons were the Levitical priests, designated to serve as go-betweens between God and the people (teaching) and the people to God (sacrificing, praying). The point he makes here is that they (Levitical priests) do the talking/blessing, but God himself does the blessing. It's likely that many heard the words over the years and thought, "What good does it do?" By ancient Jewish tradition the blessing was spoken daily, and more than once a day on festival days. So in a lifetime (70 years) the words were heard about 26,000 times. Such familiarity could breed contempt. But the promise remains: "**I will bless them.**"
2. Note to whom the promise and blessing is given. The priests were to put God's name on "them" (plural), the people, but the pronoun used in the blessing is "you" singular. Each one is addressed individually, one by one. No person is overlooked, ignored, or swallowed up in the crowd. The promise, then, comes from a real personal God and is directed to real people, individually as well as everyone in the group. These are the promises and they invite trust. We do the right thing to respond to the benediction with the word, "Amen." Yes, it is truth! It will be so! We know that the Lord's putting his name on his people is not something magical or superstitious. We recall the godless priests Hophni and Phinehas, sons of the high priest Eli, whose hearts and lifestyles were far from God. They superstitiously thought carrying the Ark of the Covenant into battle against the Philistines would guarantee success or victory. They lost the battle and their lives – and for a time, the Ark itself. They were very familiar with the Blessing but did not hold it in faith. Someone has said that when the "good news" is not believed, it becomes a "good noose" for our own hanging. Let us receive the promises with trust in the Giver of the promises, as God's truth and good truth.

And believing is receiving . . .

Part 3: The Lord's Blessing is given for great, gracious purposes.

1. What precisely is promised in the Blessing? There are three distinct sentences, known to us by heart, burned into our memory. So we use this three-fold structure to highlight three special kinds of blessings promised to each of us. First is **the promise of protection.** *The LORD bless you and keep you.* This protection is not limited to but certainly includes our physical lives

and material goods. The Lord is our “Keeper” as he assumes the serving role of a Shepherd caring for his flock, a watchman guarding a city, or the Creator caring for his creation. For Israel, about to enter a large wilderness or desert, such a promise meant a lot. It still does. And inevitably we think of God the Father, whose providence guards and keeps us day by day.

2. *The next purpose is to affirm the promise of pardon.* The familiar words are **the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you.** The “face” reveals and expresses personality, and God’s gracious face reveals a smile of acceptance and favor. Picture this! Perhaps a parent reading the newspaper, preparing a meal, or fully occupied – until a child enters the room or comes near. The face turns and a smile appears! The Lord, with beaming face, is saying, “I love you! I am gracious to you! Your sins are forgiven!” How much this must have meant to the guilty Israelites who had sinned in idolatry with the golden calf and repeatedly in their complaining and whining. Sunshine not only warms and brightens our lives, but also leads us to be active, to walk, work, and use our energy and abilities. God grace energizes and enriches our lives as people raised from spiritual death to life. And perhaps we think especially of the work and blessings given by and through God the Son, our Lord Jesus.
3. *The third promise in the Blessing is that of peace.* And the words are **the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.** The words intensify promises of grace and peace for us sinners who daily sin much and daily need the assurance of ongoing pardon and peace of conscience. We often grow discouraged, are very much aware of our weaknesses and failings, and tremble at the thought of dark clouds that seem to come between us and the gracious God. So what does he do? He turns his face, literally “lifts up” his face, toward us. He looks us in the eye with continuing love, acceptance, and peace. Here we may think primarily of the work of the Holy Spirit as he comes to us, pointing us to Christ’s perfect work, guiding and counseling us in our walk as forgiven sinners. We tend to fear the return of darkness and guilt, the loss of grace, the prevailing storms of temptation and opposition from the world. God says, “My face remains uplifted toward you; my smile endures; I give you peace.” Just like the Israelites at Sinai, we head out each day into the wilderness to face unknown burdens, but we continue the pilgrimage with God’s promises intact and repeated for emphasis.

Conclusion: Earlier we observed that an Israelite, after hearing the words perhaps over 25,000 times, might have said, “There’s old Aaron (or Eleazer or Ithamar or Phineas) lifting his arms and repeating the words; **What good does it do?**” May that not happen with us! Rather, let us say, “This is God my Lord speaking to me, personally! Here are divine assurances of protection, pardon, and peace. He (not the pastor) is putting his name on me! Some pastors still (as done historically) speak the words with **three fingers up and two down on each hand.** This was to picture the Triune God blessing the person, body and soul. Whether symbolized like that or not, that’s what’s happening! And how do – should we respond? Amen. Amen. Amen. That fits perfectly.