

CHAPTER 1

What it Means to be Blessed

We hear the word “bless” a lot—or some form of it. I’ve heard professional athletes talk about how “blessed” they are to play the game they love. We see the word “blessed” on T-shirts and ball caps. We hear politicians close their speeches with “God bless you” We say a “blessing” before our meals, and we pray God will “bless” those we care about.

This brings up a question though. Just what does it mean to be blessed? If we are going to live in God’s blessing, it only makes sense that we need to know what it is.

So where do we begin?

I don’t know of any better place than with the blessing God instructed the priests to speak over the Israelites during Old Testament times. We find this in Num. 6:22-26:

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Tell Aaron and his sons: This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

‘May the LORD bless you
and keep you;
may the LORD cause His face to shine upon you
and be gracious to you;
may the LORD lift up His countenance toward you
and give you peace.’”

God called Aaron and his sons (and their descendants after them) to serve as priests in Israel. This is why this blessing is commonly called “The Aaronic Blessing” or “The Priestly Blessing.” The role of a priest was to represent God before the people and the people before God. In this case, they were to represent God before the people. This was not a prayer the priests offered to God on behalf of the people; it was a blessing they spoke over the people on behalf of God. It’s important to make this distinction because this was not something the priests or the people had to draw out of God, as if He was reluctant to give it. It was initiated by Him, so it expressed the very longing of His heart.

What then can we learn from this blessing about what it means to be blessed? Let’s begin with the meaning of the word “bless” itself.

The Meaning of the Word “Bless”

In the original Hebrew, the word “bless” in the Priestly Blessing is *barak* (baw-rak’), which means “to kneel.” In Ps. 95:6 we read:

O come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel [*barak*] before the LORD our Maker.

This word is used to speak of a blessing God gives us and a blessing we give to Him. To give an example of each, in Ps. 29:11 we read:

The LORD gives His people strength;
the LORD blesses [*barak*] His people with peace.

And in Ps. 34:1 we read:

I will bless [*barak*] the LORD at all times;
His praise will always be on my lips.

This brings up another question though. How could God ever bless us in the sense of kneeling before us? We understand how we should kneel before Him, but for Him to kneel before us seems backward or even inappropriate to us.

One of the best ways for us to understand this is to go back to creation itself. In the very first verse of the Bible we read: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1).” Then, God fashioned everything He created (Gen. 1:2-25), and He did this to provide a habitat for us, those He created in His image (Gen. 1:26-27). Therefore, as hard as it is for us to fathom, when God created the heavens and the earth, He bowed low to bless us with the gift of our lives and the creation we live in. This is how we should see every blessing He gives, and this is what moves us so deeply to bless Him in return.

We see both sides of this blessing in the simple prayer the Jewish people have prayed before their meals for many generations:

Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who
brings forth bread from the earth.

This is not a prayer *to ask God to bless our food*, as is so common in our day; it’s a prayer *to bless God for our food*. He is the One who created the earth with the capacity to bring forth bread, and this prayer blesses Him for this great blessing.

If we struggle to understand how God could bow before us, we might think of a father who bends down to help his young children in some way. It may be to feed them, bathe them, clothe them, play with them, etc. Because God is so great, every blessing He gives requires Him to bow low. When we see Him this way, it changes everything about how we see His blessings—and how we see Him.

The Language of the Priestly Blessing

Just as there is much we can learn from the meaning of the word “bless,” there is much we can learn from the language of the entire Priestly Blessing. After the initial expression of blessing in Num. 6:24 (“May the LORD bless you...”), the blessing continues “and keep you.” The word “keep” is *shamar* (shaw-mar’), which means “to watch over” or “to protect.” As is the case with all protection, this includes not just protection *from*, but protection *for*. He protects us not just *from* harm, but *for* Himself. He literally longs to “keep” us.

Then, in Num. 6:25 we read: “... may the LORD cause His face to shine upon you...” In Scripture, light in one’s face expresses favor. We see an example of this in Pr. 16:15:

When a king’s face brightens, there is life;
his favor is like a rain cloud in spring.¹

The word “favor” in this verse comes from the Hebrew word *ratsab* (raw-tsaw’), which means “to be pleased with.” God’s favor includes His acceptance and His being entirely for us, but most of all, it’s the pleasure He finds in us. We find favor with God when He finds pleasure in us.

***We find favor with
God when He finds
pleasure in us.***

If we wonder how God could find pleasure in us, given everything He knows about us, it’s because of what comes next: “... and be gracious to you.” The expression “be gracious” is *chanan* (khaw-nan’), which also means “favor,” but it refers specifically to *unmerited* favor. This is the pleasure God finds in us because of *who we are*, apart from anything we do, simply because He is our Maker.

¹ Other examples of favor expressed in the light of one’s countenance include Ps. 44:3, 67:1, and 89:15-18.

It's important to emphasize though that God's grace consists of more than His attitude toward us (His unmerited favor); it includes what He actually does for us. The word *chanan* literally means "to descend,"² and throughout the Old Testament it is consistently used for the *mercy* God shows and the *help* He gives.³

The word we learned earlier, *ratsab* ("to be pleased with"), is the primary word used for *merited favor* in the Old Testament. This is the pleasure God finds in us because of *what we do*.

To be clear:

Chanan = "to descend to show mercy and to help" = *unmerited favor* (grace): the pleasure God finds in us because of *who we are*.

Ratsab = "to be pleased with" = *merited favor*: the pleasure God finds in us because of *what we do*.⁴

We experience God's favor in both, and there is a relationship between the two. God's unmerited favor moves us to live in a way that merits His favor. To illustrate this, suppose you come across a man living on the street, and you feel deep compassion for Him, so you show him *mercy*. Your primary concern is not whether he is in this condition because of his own choices. You simply want to *help* him, so you give him a place to stay, and you even give him a job in a business you own. This would be an expression of *unmerited favor* (*chanan*). Then, because he is so grateful, he works very hard for you, so much so that you are pleased and give him a promotion. This would be an expression of *merited favor* (*ratsab*).

² By comparison, *chanah* (similar to *chanan*) is used for pitching a tent or encamping (e.g., Ps. 34:7), which are acts of settling *down*.

³ For other examples of how *chanan* is used for mercy, help, or both, see 2 Kings 13:23, Ps. 4:1, 25:16, 26:11, 86:16, Pr. 14:21, and Is. 30:18.

⁴ For examples of how *ratsab* is used for merited favor, see Ps. 5:12, Pr. 8:35, 12:2, Mal. 2:13.

In no way could we ever merit (earn or deserve) God's *grace*, which is, by definition, "unmerited favor." However, the pleasure He finds in us because of who we are moves us to please Him by the things we do, and this only increases our experience of His blessing because of the great pleasure we find in pleasing Him.

The reason God is able to cause His face to shine on us and be gracious to us is because of the great pleasure He finds in us simply because of *who we are*. Thankfully, He is able to see beyond our outer conduct and into the inner person He made for Himself. This is what gives Him the ability to show us mercy and to help us.

The Priestly Blessing continues in v. 26: "...may the LORD lift up His countenance toward you..." The word "countenance" comes from the same word translated "face" in the previous verse: *panim* (paw-neem"). Not only does God want us to experience His face shining on us, He wants it to be like the light of the sun, lifted up over us and shining on us *always*.

The blessing concludes with "... and give you peace." The word "peace" is *shalom* (shaw-lome), which is more than the absence of conflict or trouble. It refers to "completeness" or "soundness." In the Bible, peace is a function of righteousness (Ps. 85:10, Heb. 12:11), which means to be "rightly aligned." Our peace comes from our alignment with God, and this carries over to our alignment with others and with the world we are blessed to live in.

What do we do then when we realize our lives are "out of alignment"? We tend to think we need to align ourselves before coming to God. However, He wants us to come to Him first. If we will, He will show us *mercy*. Then, He will *help* grow in our alignment with Him and in the other realms of our lives.

Our peace comes from more than alignment alone though. It comes from what we experience *from* Him when we are aligned *with* Him. Not only is grace what aligns us with God, it's what He pours into our lives through our union with Him. This is the true source of our peace. In the Priestly Blessing, the peace God gives flows out of the grace He expresses in the light of His countenance. One of the most common greetings in the New Testament is "Grace to you and peace... (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:3)." Our greatest peace comes from our deepest experience of His grace.

Defining the Blessing

Based on what we observe in the Priestly Blessing, here is a simple definition for "a blessing":

A blessing is a gift God gives as an expression of His favor.

In this definition, there are three keywords we need to highlight. First, every blessing comes ultimately from **God**. A blessing is more than a good thing that happens to us; it's a good thing we recognize as coming from God's hand. Many people possess much of what the world considers valuable, but they don't feel *blessed* because they don't see the good things they have as coming from God. On the other hand, many people possess very little in this world, but they feel greatly blessed because they recognize the good things they have as coming from Him.

Second, every blessing expresses God's **favor**. As we have seen, His favor can be *unmerited* or *merited*. We experience His smile in both, and it's important to remember the relationship between the two. His unmerited favor moves us to live in a way that merits His favor.

Third, every blessing consists of a **gift**. God's gifts are not limited to material things. We can experience His blessing through mere words

(as is the case in the Priestly Blessing) and through His presence alone. This is why we can experience God's blessing even in the midst of our greatest trials (1 Pet. 4:14). In the Priestly Blessing, the gift God gives is peace. *Any* gift God gives (whether material, relational, or spiritual) becomes a blessing to us when we experience His favor in it.

With this in mind, we can now add the following definition for “what it means to be blessed”:

To be blessed is to experience God's favor in the gifts He gives.

Both definitions are important because God's gifts don't become true blessings to us until we *experience* the favor He *expresses* in them.

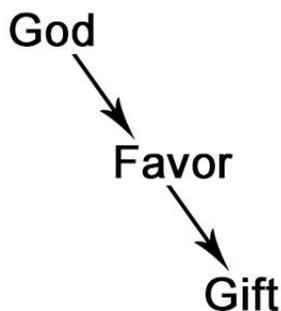
I remember one of the most distinct times I felt this sense of God's blessing. I had just been called to the church I served for over thirty-three years. It was all very new to me. I had never done anything like this before, and I was nervous about it. Would the people accept me? What would my relationship with them be like?

One of the first events at the church was their annual 4th of July picnic. At the time, my wife was expecting our first child, so they used the occasion to give us a baby shower. One of the gifts came in a small box. It was a picture of a rocking chair, which was their way of saying they wanted us to find whatever rocking chair we wanted, and they would pay for it. I know this may not seem like an extremely huge thing, but it was for us. It was as if they were saying, “We accept you. We are glad you are here.” But even more, we felt as if God was saying, “This comes from My favor.”

This is the true essence of God's blessings. The blessing is in more than the gift; it's in the favor we experience in the gift. It's just that He uses the gifts He gives to produce in us the experience of His favor.

And that's the blessing....

Every blessing *comes from God, expresses His favor, and consists of a gift.* These are the *essential elements* in every blessing. Here is a simple way to remember each of these elements using the keywords in the definitions above:



Let's move now to some very important *characteristics* of God's blessings. This will help us understand their true nature even better.

Primary Characteristics of God's Blessings

More than we can Accomplish

When God bows low to bless us, He does for us more than we can do for ourselves. We see an example of this in the words God spoke to the Israelites before they entered the Promised Land:

Now if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God and are careful to follow all His commandments I am giving you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings will come upon you and overtake you, if you will obey the voice of the LORD your God:

You will be blessed in the city
and blessed in the country.

The fruit of your womb will be blessed,
as well as the produce of your land

and the offspring of your livestock—
 the calves of your herds
 and the lambs of your flocks.

Your basket and kneading bowl will be blessed.

You will be blessed when you come in
 and blessed when you go out. (Deut. 28:1-6)

The important thing for us to see here is that God’s blessings would “come upon” them and “overtake” them. They had their part. They were to obey the voice of the LORD, but the blessing was in God’s part. Because of His pleasure in them, He would add to what they did to increase their experience of His favor.

And this doesn’t mean there was no blessing in what they did. For example, much labor was required to place bread on their tables. They had to prepare the soil, plant the seed, harvest the grain, etc. However, they realized they could do nothing apart from what God had already done. He is the One who created the earth with the capacity to bring forth bread. This is why, even after laboring greatly, they could feel overwhelmingly blessed.

God’s blessing may be in *what He adds to what we do* or in *what He does before we do anything*. It may also be in *what He does when we can’t think of anything we have done*. He causes the sun to rise and the rain to fall on us all (Matt. 5:45). In every case though, God’s blessing is in *what He does*,

When we are blessed, we never have any inclination to say: “Look at what I did!” We always have to say: “Look at what He did for me!”

and it’s always *more than what we can do*. This is why, when we are blessed, we never have any inclination to say, “Look at what I did!” We always have to say, “Look at what He did for me!”

More than we can Deserve

I remember teaching on this subject one evening when a woman in our group raised her hand to ask: “But what if I don’t deserve to be blessed?”

What did she need to hear?

Did she need to hear someone say: “Just keep on trying. You will eventually deserve God’s blessing...” No, that’s the last thing she needed to hear. What she needed to hear is precisely what God expresses in the Priestly Blessing. He is a gracious God, and if we will come to Him, He will show us *mercy* and *help* us.

Grace is the heart of the Priestly Blessing, and it’s the heart of every blessing God gives. His blessings come from His heart of grace, and grace is what we experience in His blessings. We have to ask then: How can we live in God’s blessing if we are not able to receive His grace in the first place? This is where we have to remember that grace is *unmerited* favor. It’s not that we don’t deserve it; we *can’t*. And because we can’t deserve it, we must rely on Him to give it—and we do this by faith (Eph. 2:8-9).

Why is it so important for us to understand this? It’s because this reveals the basis by which we must seek God’s blessing. His blessing is not just more than we deserve; it’s more than we *can* deserve. If we seek God’s blessing on the basis of our ability to deserve it, we will always find multiple reasons we don’t. This is why we must seek His blessing on the basis of His grace to give it.

What then was the solution for the woman who didn’t believe she deserved to be blessed? In a word, it was faith. The same faith she needed to receive God’s grace is the faith she needed to receive His blessing. If only she could find the heart she needed to receive God’s grace, she would possess the heart she needed to live in His blessing.

Then, as we have seen, when we receive this grace, we are moved to live in a way that merits His favor. Even when this happens though, we can never forget the unmerited favor that first gave birth to it. And the truth of the matter is there will never come a time, in this life, when

When we are blessed, we are never moved to say: “Look at what I deserved!” We can only say: “This is far more than anything I could have ever earned or deserved.”

we stop needing His grace. This is why, when we are blessed, we are never moved to say: “Look at what I deserved!” We can only say: “This is far more than anything I could have ever earned or deserved.”

God’s blessing is in the “more than”—more than we can *accomplish* or *deserve*. This is what produces in us such a deep sense of His favor in the gifts He gives.

More than we can Contain

When God blesses us, we simply can’t keep it to ourselves. We have to respond somehow, and there are two ways we do this. We respond *upwardly* in the praise and thanksgiving we give to Him, and we respond *outwardly* as we become instruments of His blessing in the lives of others. These are the ways we bless God, which will be our focus in the next chapter. For now, here are two primary applications to take with you from this chapter.

First, would you see your blessings in a way you may not have seen them before? See them as coming from the eternal God who bows low before you. See all of creation this way. See the individual aspects of His creation this way, including the things you may take most for granted: the light by which you see, the sounds you hear, the air you breathe.... See *every* blessing this way, even something as simple as the bread on your table.

Second, allow your heart to experience God's favor in the blessings He gives. Again, this is the true essence of His blessings, so let your heart *receive* His heart in the blessings He gives. This doesn't mean your response doesn't matter (both upward and outward); it's just that you can't *respond* to what you haven't *received*, and you can't respond *fully* to what you haven't received *fully*. If you will receive God's blessing, you won't have to produce the response, because the response will be produced in you.

Now, there is one more thing I feel the need to communicate in this chapter. As we have seen, grace is the heart of every blessing God gives, and this reveals the heart we must have to receive His blessings. We must have hearts that are able to receive His grace. Receiving is not always the easiest thing for us to do though. Where then can we go to find this kind of heart?

Earlier, we learned that grace consists of more than God's attitude (heart) toward us; it includes what He actually does for us. We also learned that His heart for us (His unmerited favor) is what gives Him the ability to do what He does for us: to show us mercy and to help us. And here is what is so important for us to understand: Our experience of God's heart for us is what give us the ability to receive what He does for us. To say this another way, the pleasure He finds in us because of who we are is what gives us the ability to receive all that He does for us. Where then can we go to experience this pleasure He finds in us simply because of who we are?

Let's go back to the picture we used to see the eternal God who bows low to bless us—the picture of the father who bends down to help His children in some way. Why is it so important for us to see Him this way? It's because it helps us see ourselves as He sees us.

In Heb. 4:16, we read:

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

This verse confirms that God's grace includes His mercy and help. And what gives us the ability to receive this grace? It's how we see Him. His very throne is a throne of grace. This is what gives us confidence to approach His throne, and this is the very reason God reveals His heart of grace to us, both here and in the Priestly Blessing. It's because He knows we need to know He is a God of grace.

Above all, living in God's blessing begins with seeing God as He is. This is what gives us the ability to receive the grace He gives (both His heart for us and what He does for us). And this is what produces in us the hearts we need to live in His blessing.

With these things in mind, would you be willing to receive the words of the Priestly Blessing?

I can't think of a better way to begin this journey than by receiving the blessing that serves as the model for every blessing God gives. If we will receive this blessing, it will help us grow in our experience of God's heart for us, and it will help us gain the heart we need to receive every blessing He gives.

And would you receive *this* blessing just as you would receive *any* blessing? See it as coming from the eternal God who bows low before you. Then, allow your heart to experience His favor in it.

Thankfully, God's heart never changes. The same heart He had for the Israelites when He gave them the Priestly Blessing is the heart He has for you. In order to know His heart though, you must present to Him a heart that is able to receive His grace.

Would you do this now?

Then, hopefully with a better understanding of the words, but most importantly with the heart to receive them, *just receive* the blessing that comes from Him and expresses His heart *for you*:

May the LORD bless you,
and keep you.

May the LORD cause His face to shine upon you,
and be gracious to you.

May the LORD lift up His countenance toward you,
and give you peace.

Summary

- The word “bless” in the Priestly Blessing comes from the Hebrew word *barak*, which means “to kneel.”
- Every blessing *comes from God, expresses His favor, and consists of a gift*.
- A blessing is a gift God gives as an *expression* of His favor. To be blessed is to *experience* His favor in the gifts He gives.
- God’s blessings are *more than we can accomplish, more than we can deserve, and more than we can contain*.
- God’s blessings move us to respond *upwardly* (in praise and thanksgiving) and *outwardly* (as we become instruments of His blessing to others).
- We are unable to *respond* to God’s blessing until we first *receive* His blessing.

Primary Applications:

1. As you count your blessings, see each one as coming from the eternal God who bows low to bless you.
2. Allow your heart to receive and experience the favor of God in the blessings He has given you.

Assignment:

1. Memorize Numbers 6:24-26.
2. At the next meal you share with others, pray the Jewish prayer of blessing. Be careful to see the meal as God's way of bowing low to bless you. Then, allow yourself to receive His favor in it. Share with the others at the table the difference this makes for you when you see God's blessings this way.

Discussion Questions

1. Are there specific ways God spoke to you through this chapter?

2. What is the meaning of the word “bless” (*barak*) in Num. 6:24?

barak = _____

3. What definitions were given in this chapter for “a blessing” and “what it means to be blessed”?

A blessing is a _____ God gives as an
_____ of His _____.

To be blessed is to _____ God’s _____
in the _____ He gives.

4. What are the three *essential elements* in every blessing?

More than we can _____.

More than we can _____.

More than we can _____.

8. What are the two ways we are moved to respond (“more than we can contain”) when we receive a true blessing from God?

9. Do you find it difficult to receive God’s grace? If so, why is this?

10. Why is it essential for us to be able to receive God’s grace?

11. What difference does it make for you to see your blessings as coming from the eternal God who descends low to bless you?