

“A Blessing from the Desert”

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It's the Name of God that blesses his people.

Numbers 6:22-27

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Unexpected treasure

Yesterday morning a one-day reminder titled “Israel 2020” popped up on my calendar. Linda and I, along with Pastor Paul and Danielle and 46 others were due to board Lufthansa Flight 429 at 6:30 PM tonight for Munich with a connection to Tel Aviv. Thanks to the coronavirus, well, maybe next year.

One site we missed on our previous trips but I'd like to see is Ketef Hinnom. It's an old burial site near Jerusalem. Archaeologists dig through places like this routinely, finding nothing more exciting than a clay pot.

In 1979, archaeologists working on Ketef Hinnom found a treasure better than a chest of gold. They found two silver scrolls, about the size of a credit card, which had been rolled up as an amulet (charm) about the size of a cigarette and buried with someone's body. The ancient scrolls were so delicate it took three years to unroll and decipher them.

Their discovery altered biblical studies. On those scrolls were two different versions of the priestly blessing in Numbers 6:24-26. This is the oldest written quotation of any part of the Bible ever found. What may be even more significant is that it is the oldest inscribed name of God, Yahweh, ever found. Who could have known something that significant would be uncovered while digging through a graveyard?

I find it just as surprising to discover the priestly blessing in the book of Numbers. The Israelites are in the desert, literally and figuratively, and unbeknownst to them early

in the book they'll be there forty years. Much of the book will be about their sin and unbelief, resulting in God's judgment.

In that unexpected place we find one of the most beautiful treasures in all of Scripture: "The LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace."

The words are probably familiar, but I'm not sure most of us have pondered them from two angles that have given me greater appreciation this week: context and content. As for context, remember this is a blessing from the desert. You don't expect a flower this beautiful in a hot, dry climate.

Nor do you expect it here at the end of chapter 6. This is like driving from Phoenix through Flagstaff to the Grand Canyon. Nothing along the way prepares you for the jaw-dropping expanse and beauty that the Colorado River and its Creator carved.

If you're casually reading through Numbers, this blessing seems completely disconnected from what precedes it. But it actually makes sense if it concludes what's called the "first cycle" in the book. The first cycle functions like a prologue or introduction to the desert wanderings. We find out where the people are – in the desert of Sinai. We have a count of the various tribes and find out how their camp is arranged. At the center of their layout is the Tent of Meeting, or Tabernacle. The Levites are given specific roles to administer and protect the Tent. Most tribes produce soldiers to fight wars; the Levites produce priests to connect the people to God. But anyone, man or woman, can take a Nazirite vow if they want to be specially consecrated to God.

At the end of the first cycle, the priestly blessing now transfers the special attention and favor of God from the chief Levite (Aaron, the high priest) to the people. The Levites were a favored bunch. Now they will share that spiritual wealth.

That's context. Now let's look carefully at content. In some ways this might be like dissecting a flower, which seems to destroy its beauty. But stay with me.

The Blessing

The introduction to the blessing finds Moses meeting God one on one, as he often does, for detailed instructions. This will be an extension of these private words between Moses and God to the people through Aaron and his sons. Notice how important *words* are: "The LORD *spoke* to Moses, *saying*: '*Speak* to Aaron and to his sons, *saying*, "This is how you will bless the children of Israel, *saying* to them..." (22, emphasis added).

This is not only about the power of words, but of specific words. God doesn't say, "Moses, tell Aaron to bless the people," but "This is *how* you will bless them...." This isn't a blessing for common use. Most Jews would find it strange that we use these

words as often as we do and that any common believer would adapt them for random occasions and in random locations.

In Jewish practice this passage is called *Birkat Kohanim*, which means “Blessing of the Priests.” It’s popularly known as “duchening,” which comes from a word for “platform.” The Temple Priests in ancient Israel would mount a platform to bless the people with these words. The priest forms his hands in the shape of the Hebrew letter shin, which is short for Shaddai. Still today the most common use of this blessing is by priests *in Jerusalem* who speak this blessing daily. Around the world in the diaspora many Jews only hear this blessing on high holy days and special occasions, such as weddings. It’s not for common days or common people.

The blessing itself is three lines in Hebrew.

First, “The LORD bless you and keep you.” The word “bless” has a range of meanings in Hebrew as it does in English. We say anything from “God bless you” after a sneeze to “Count your blessings” to “Please say the blessing” to “Bless the Lord, O my soul” to “He really blessed that guy out,” which probably doesn’t mean saying anything nice. The same range of meanings exists in Hebrew, including the negative one. The word can mean “to curse” in Hebrew.

The root of “bless” in Hebrew means “to kneel,” so to bless God is to kneel before him with reverence and awe. That part’s easy. But what does it mean when God blesses us? It may carry the idea that God is figuratively stooping down to our level.

As we’ll see later in Numbers (in the story of Balaam), the idea of “blessing” in this time period had almost a magical or superstitious form to it. The words themselves had an objective effect, almost like a wizard’s incantation. This may well be why someone had those amulets buried with them at Ketef Hinnom. It may have been like a good luck charm intended to accompany the person to Sheol. Was that God’s intent?

The form of all three lines here is a wish or prayer – “May the Lord bless and keep you.” In other words, it’s not a promise. The priest isn’t guaranteeing any result. The priest is asking God to stoop down and attend to “keep” you – which means to protect and guard you.

The second line is, “The LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you.” Don’t get hung up on God’s face – or do, if you understand it figuratively. It’s a beautiful thing, really, and often repeated in the Old Testament, that God’s nonverbal expression is kind and good – or that his people pray for his kind face (Psalm 80). So the prayer here is that God will light up their lives “and be gracious.” If you think grace is only a New Testament concept, you haven’t paid enough attention to the Old. God’s covenant love means that he regularly and overwhelmingly extends kindness – not because people deserve it but because of his own character.

The third line carries a beautiful word picture. The NIV says, “The LORD turn his face toward you,” but the word is “lift up,” and that’s the way it reads in more literal translations. The picture seems to be of God holding you up and delighting in his child.

It’s no accident that the blessing ends with “peace.” Shalom in Hebrew is not just the absence of conflict. It is wholeness, life, goodness, health, prosperity – what life is intended to be in God. The entire blessing is a crescendo prayer building toward peace.

As we look at the blessing in its entirety, we can make some other observations.

It’s artistic. There’s a shape to Aaron’s benediction and not surprisingly in this book it has to do with the numbers. In Hebrew, there are three words in the first line, five in the second, and seven in the third. There are ten syllables in the first line, twelve in the second, and fourteen in the third. Believe it or not, there are fifteen consonants in the first line, 20 in the second, and 25 in the third. If you think I’m really smart because I noticed that, I have to tell you I read it in a book. Almost every book that comments on this blessing notes the numbers. This can’t be accidental. It’s certainly going to help Aaron and each successor memorize the blessing, but it’s God’s word art and it’s beautiful.

It’s personal. The “you” in each case is singular. Some say that means Aaron is speaking to Israel as one person, but I don’t think so. Aaron is to bless the “children of Israel” (22). When he does he’s to address them as if God is speaking individually to every one of them: “The LORD bless you and you and you and you and you and you...”

Some also see this personal attention in the blessing as covering God’s people around the clock. The Hebrew day begins at sunset, so each line covers a different part of the day – May the Lord keep you (through the night), shine on you (at dawn) and give you peace (throughout the day to come).

It’s God-focused. Every line begins with the personal, covenant name of God. Grammatically that’s unnecessary. It could say, simply, “The LORD bless you...shine on you...lift up his face and give you peace.” But the name of God is central to every line: “The LORD bless you...the LORD make his face to shine...the LORD turn his face...”

If you think that’s not intentional, read verse 27, which follows the blessing and gives its purpose. God says, “So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.” It’s the Name of God that blesses his people. Aaron and his sons are to speak the name of God over the people and the result will be blessing.

What's the use?

It's beautiful, isn't it? When you take it apart, it's like watching "How It's Made." That's a television show about manufacturing everything from pencils to watches to sticky buns. In 32 seasons they've shown how 1,664 things are made. In each case taking it apart is interesting, but it's not a thing of beauty until you use it, whether you write with a pencil, check the time on your watch, or pull apart that sticky bun and put it on your tongue. How a thing is put together is interesting, but its true beauty is its function and usefulness.

What's the proper use of the priestly blessing for Christians today?

Let me begin with the negative. Don't use the blessing as a charm. Although I think it is a gift of God that the Ketef Hinnom amulets were discovered – it's faith-building and inspiring; I really don't believe God intended Aaron's blessing to be tucked into one's pocket at death to guide one safely to Sheol. By contrast, the Third Commandment is "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God." You don't carelessly speak it.

The theology that is grounded in Numbers 6 with Aaron and his sons giving the blessing is not intended to limit perpetually who can use words of blessing. Lots of other people in the Bible bless and are blessed. It is intended to warn against casual, flippant use of God's name or his power to keep, to give grace, to grant peace.

In the same way, I don't think God intends crosses or rabbit's feet or whatever to bring good luck or prosperity. The same is true of verbal charms. There's nothing magical about saying certain words, Scripture or otherwise, as if a word of blessing has power in itself. That's paganism, not faith. The New Testament knows nothing of superstitious use of rites, objects (even crosses), and words. The power to change lives is the power of the Gospel.

Be someone's blessing in the desert, an unexpected flow of refreshing water in their dryness that conveys the heart of God. One of the most beautiful examples that comes to my mind is an oasis called En Gedi near the Dead Sea in Israel. David fled from Saul into the wilderness of Judea because the hiding places were ubiquitous in the caves and the hills. In that dry and barren place, David would sometimes come to En Gedi for a drink or a bath. He wrote several psalms there as his thirsty soul was refreshed.

Someone you know is in a desert right now. Maybe you are. Even if your soul is thirsty, you can bless someone else in the desert. Aaron was in the desert. Moses was in the desert. But they were still told to bless the others who shared the experience with them. We're getting such nice feedback from teachers who are working harder than ever with less appreciation from students and parents. Why? We're praying for you. Here's an Amazon gift card. Here's a word of encouragement that you are loved and appreciated.

Remember that words are how God told Aaron to bless others. Send a hand written note. Make a phone call. Speak to someone who has withdrawn from you. As teachers like to say, “Use your words.”

Finally, speak the Name of Jesus. Remember that this blessing is not just about words; it’s about the personal attention of the Living God who has revealed himself with a personal name. Sometimes the first five books of the Bible call him “God” (Elohim), which is a comprehensive name for deity even used by other cultures. Sometimes there’s an additional description, such as El Shaddai (God Almighty), revealing his power. This blessing is a blessing of the Name revealed only to his people: Yahweh. Jews, as you probably know, don’t speak this name out loud out of reverence for God. I get it, but I don’t see that instruction in the Old Testament. What I see is the instruction to use the Name intentionally and carefully, not casually.

This God has come to us in the Person of Jesus, whose name means Yahweh saves. God wanted to be sure there would be a Name connected to a human face and personality and story – but still the Name of Yahweh. No Christian movement has ever said, “Don’t speak or write Jesus’ name.” We’ve made many errors in the history of the church, but that’s not one of them.

Speak the Name of Jesus – not like a good luck charm but as the song by a group called We Be Lions says,

*I just want to speak the Name of Jesus
Over ev'ry heart and ev'ry mind
'Cause I know there is peace within Your presence
I speak Jesus*

*'Cause Your Name is power
Your Name is healing
Your Name is life
Break ev'ry stronghold
Shine through the shadows
Burn like a fire*

Don’t force his name into every conversation or situation, but do remember that it’s not some vague general sentiment about “blessings” that changes lives. Live in Jesus’ name. Pray in Jesus’ name. Bless in Jesus’ name.

God told Aaron, “put my Name on the people.” We have so much more clarity about the Name that is above every name. At the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that he is Lord. Speak the Name of Jesus. Amen.