

Water from Rock, June 27, 2017, Tim Smith

A BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

The Hebrew title for the Book of Numbers is Bemidbar, “In the Wilderness”. It was in the wilderness that God gave to His people what is commonly called “The Aaronic Blessing”, or “Priestly Blessing”. As the people prepare to move toward the Promised Land, Yahweh gave this beloved blessing to be spoken over His people for their well-being in the wilderness.

NUMBERS 6:22-26

²²The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ²³Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them,

²⁴ The LORD bless you and keep you;

²⁵ the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

²⁶ the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

²⁷ So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.

1. The Blessing is located in a middle of a major section of Numbers (1:1-10:10). Israel is making preparations to leave Sinai where they have camped for almost a year. The Blessing is intended for Israel’s use throughout their journey. It is a blessing for journeying through the wilderness.
2. This Blessing is highly stylized, coming in three lines; each line is made up of a pair of verbs with a connective (“and”). The Hebrew connective translated “and”, is best translated as, “that is”. Rather than the blessing containing six actions (*ble*ss, *keep*, *make his face shine*, *be gracious*, *lift up his face*, *give peace*), the blessing contains three actions, each described by a pair of verbs:
 - The LORD bless you, that is, keep you.
 - The LORD make His face shine upon you, that is, be gracious to

you.

- The LORD lift up His face upon you, that is, give you true peace.
3. The blessing is three-fold, and each clause contains two parts. In each clause the second part is a particular application of the first part.
 4. The structure of the blessing in the Hebrew text is artful. Each line of the blessing increases by words (3, 5, 7) and letters (15, 20, 25):

XXX

XXXXX

XXXXXXX

(words)

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

(letters)

5. The effect is emphatic as the blessing crescendos to the highest, i.e. “peace” (shalom). Each clause gives expression to God’s purpose to bless His people.

FIRST BLESSING: The LORD bless you, that is, keep you

1. The word for “bless” (barach) is related to the word for “knee” (berech), and can mean to bend the knee, or to adore on bended knee. It is common to hear this word barach at the beginning of most every Jewish blessing. *“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name”* (Psalm 103:1).

2. The blessing of God is summed up by his keeping power: *“Behold, he who keeps Israel neither slumbers nor sleep”* (Psalm 124:1). The word “keep” means, “to guard, protect, be in charge of”. As we journey through the wilderness our lives are kept by the hands of God. This is true blessing!

THE SECOND BLESSING: God’s shining face gives grace

1. A “shining face” is idiomatic in Hebrew speech for “to dwell with”, to be friends with”, “to be at peace with”.
2. To the Hebrew mind “the face of God” speaks of His presence. In Genesis when Adam and Eve were hiding from the presence of God, it literally says that they were literally hiding from His “face” (Genesis 3:8). We are to come to His presence or “face” with thanksgiving (Psalm 95:2). The “Bread of the Presence” in the Tabernacle” was “Bread of the Face” (Exodus 25:30).
3. To “hide one’s face” is associated with anger, abandonment, and punishment. In Psalm 27:9, David prays: *“Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger”*. To hide one’s face is to remove one’s presence.
4. To show one’s face is to be in open-faced relationship; to hide one’s face is to withdraw one’s presence.
5. The “shining of God’s face” is His presence, like the sun illuminating our lives in times of trouble (Psalm 22:24), working deliverance (Psalm 31:6), bringing salvation (Psalm 89:15), and teaching us (Psalm 119:135).
6. The shining of God’s face is making His presence known, dwelling with us as a friend, engaging us in open-faced companionship.

THE THIRD BLESSING: God’s face lifted up brings peace

1. To “lift up one’s face/countenance” is idiomatic for smiling at someone, or looking on someone with favor. Compare with this the “fallen face/countenance” which denotes a frown or anger. In Genesis 4:6, the LORD said to Cain: *“Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen?”* See also Jeremiah 3:12, for the LORD’S promise to Jeremiah: *“I will not look upon you in anger”* (literally, *“I will not cause my face to fall against you”*), *for I am merciful declares the LORD; I will not be angry forever.*
2. In Psalm 44:3 the psalmist reminds the people of how God brought them to the Promised Land: *“For not by their own sword did they win the land, or did*

their own arm give them victory; but your right hand, and your arm, and the light of your countenance for you delighted in them”

3. God’s lifting his face/countenance as a favorable gesture can be seen in Psalms 4:6-7; 33:18-19; 34:15-16. With this third blessing we see that God smiles on His children as He delights in them. He is pleased with them as they come into His presence. This is a relationship, which nourishes peace.
4. Peace or shalom means far more than the cessation of hostility. Shalom is based on the verb shalam which means to be “finished” or “completed”. Shalom or true peace means to be “complete”, “whole”, and “lacking in nothing”. And His name shall be called “Prince of peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

CONCLUSION

1. The Blessing is more than a pious wish as it manifests the power of God’s blessing. This assurance closes with the divine command: *“So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”*
2. The priests themselves have no power to bless. They can only remind the people of what God promises and what He does.
3. The Blessing in some form was widely used in ancient Israel, especially at the conclusion of worship (see Leviticus 9:22; Deuteronomy 21:5; 2 Chronicles 30:27; Psalm 67:1; 121:7-8).
4. The Blessing teaches that we are blessed by knowing the Lord, understanding His character, and trusting in His ways.
5. In the three elements of the blessings the Church Fathers and early theologians saw an allusion to the three-fold mystery of the Trinity.
6. The two main elements of the Blessing are God’s grace and peace. The apostle Paul perhaps based his salutations of “grace and peace” upon this.
7. The Blessing perhaps carries over into the blessing of 2 Corinthians 13:13: *“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”*