

### **“Benediction – What Does This Mean?”**

Unless it is a Marvel Movie, how many of you sit through the credits at the end of a movie? Chances are you don't. As soon as the credits start rolling that's usually when we gather our coats and our popcorn buckets and start making our way toward the aisle. The credits seem like a waste of time. The print is small and hard to read. And unless we are related to them, we don't really care who the camera operators, stuntmen, audio people, makeup artists, key grips, and even the catering service people are. That's why we leave the theatre long before the credits are done. Perhaps one of the last things we do in worship feels a bit like the rolling of the credits after a movie. When I speak the Benediction or blessing, **“The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord look on you with favor and give you peace,”** are you listening to what is said or are you mentally and physically positioning yourself for a quick exit to whatever post worship plans you have? The goal for today is to help us slow down and take note of what God is trying to say to us through the Benediction. God doesn't want us to treat it like movie credits.

It's important to know that the Benediction is not something the Christian church made up. These words were given by God himself to Moses. God said: **“Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them: 24 “The LORD bless you and keep you...’ 27 “So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them”** (Numbers 6:23, 24a, 27). It seems that Aaron was supposed to speak the Benediction at the end of worship, just like we do. In other words, God wanted this to be his last word to his people. With that in mind, isn't the content of the Benediction surprising? Wouldn't you expect God to send us on our way as a teacher might? “OK class, that was the bell. But before you get up and leave, write down your homework assignment: read chapter 10 and do the worksheet!” Shouldn't God's last words to us also be about the work he wants us to do? Nor does God sound like a parent who barks out the door to their child who is going out with friends: “Behave yourself!” God doesn't even sound like a coach who, in the pregame pep talk, will remind his players of all the things he taught them in the previous week and say something like: “It's up to you guys now. If you hustle and play hard, we can win this game.” No. God doesn't say anything like that. He doesn't burden us but blesses us as we go on our way.

Look at the first blessing. If we translated the Benediction literally it would read: **“The Lord will keep on blessing and protecting you.”** The Israelites must have especially appreciated this promise. They had seen God do amazing things like part the Red Sea so they could escape slavery in Egypt. They had eaten bread that had miraculously fallen from heaven. They had followed God through the wilderness as he led them as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. That was great, but would God continue to be with them even after they entered the Promised Land and faced well-fortified cities and a warlike people? Yes! That was God's enduring promise conveyed through the Benediction.

We're in a similar situation when we get to the Benediction in worship. Like the Israelites, we have had the opportunity to witness and experience some amazing blessings from God in our day to day lives. And he blesses us during our time spent together in worship connected to Word and Sacrament. He reassures us of his love and forgiveness. He strengthens us. He listens to our prayers and praises. Now we're ready to leave God's house and enter "the real world" once again where we face temptation and heartache. But before we go, God promises continuing protection. But is this promise of protection really kept? Did everyone who received the Benediction last week make it through these past 7 days without sickness, suffering or hardship? If not, does this mean that the Benediction is nothing more than a pious wish? No. A gardener may protect their garden by building a mesh fence around it so the deer can't get at the tasty plants within. Likewise, God does keep harm from us by surrounding us with his holy angels. But keeping a garden doesn't just mean shutting pests out, it also means getting rid of pests within. So just as a gardener will use a sharp spade to attack weeds, God sometimes uses sharp tools like hardships to dig below the surface and to get at our self-sufficiency and pride. He does this because he loves us and wants to weed out that which would choke our trust in Jesus.

But when God lets hardship into our lives it's easy to think that he's mad at us. That's why it's worth calling to mind the second part of the Benediction: **"The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you"** (Numbers 6:25). This may have surprised Moses. After all, God had once told him that no one may see his face and live. It's true. We sinners can never stand in the righteous light of God any more than you can stand in the middle of a raging campfire without getting seriously hurt. So why would we want God's face to shine on us if we are sinners? How can God grin when he sees and knows all the rotten things we do in a week? Our loved ones certainly wouldn't crack half a smile if they knew the sinful thoughts we entertain. But God does smile when he looks at us. He smiles because standing at our side he sees his Son Jesus who paid for our sins. It's a little like how the restaurant owner of a five-star establishment would smile at the shabbily dressed man standing in his foyer because with him is a regular customer, a customer who makes it a habit of buying lunch for people living on the street. Of course most restaurant owners might only smile briefly at the shabbily dressed man and then spend the rest of the time talking to the regular customer. Not God. That truth is brought out in the third part of the Benediction: **"The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace"** (Numbers 6:26). God doesn't just tolerate us for Jesus' sake. He really loves us and so he turns his face, his full attention to us. Picture a father lifting his toddler in the air and looking up at him with a broad smile. The child squeals with delight because the child has Dad's full attention.

You too have God's full attention. You really do. What you don't see from the English translation is that the word "you" throughout the Benediction is singular. Although Aaron the high priest was to speak this blessing to the whole Israelite nation, all two million of them, God thought of them as individuals. This is why I look around the church when I speak the Benediction. I want you to know that God is speaking directly to you. God wants to bless you,

he wants to protect you, be gracious to you, and give you peace. Peace? God wants you and me to be at peace? So why doesn't he just give us each a million dollars and be done with it? Wouldn't we be at peace then? That's what the world thinks. But those who already have a million dollars are not so much at peace as they are on edge. What if the stock market crashes and they lose their wealth? Or what if they get sick so they can't enjoy their money? Money does not give you peace, nor does good health. Real peace comes from knowing that a loving God is in charge of your life. Real peace is knowing that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has made things peaceful between a sinner like you and a holy God so that eternal life in Heaven is in your possession. And that's the promise God gives you each time you hear the Benediction. It's a promise that brings calm to our life even if we're in the midst of a physical, emotional, spiritual storm. Just as Jesus could sleep soundly in a storm-tossed boat, so you and I can go to sleep tonight without any worries because our loving God is in control and we are at peace with him. And since we're at peace with God, we can also be at peace with one another. How can I bask in God's love and in his smile but scowl at others around me...no matter what it is that they have done? The peace we enjoy with God that we are reminded every week in church that we enjoy; it's meant for all. And we who have experienced that peace will want to be the first to share it. Through your words, actions, and attitudes you can carry God's benediction outside these walls to your families, to your classmates, to your neighbors, to everyone.

Shortly you will hear the Benediction again. Don't treat these words of God like we do the end of the movie credits – the signal that it is time to leave. These are words that have been spoken for 3500 years! But they're not just ancient words; they are divine promises. God has something important to say to you as you leave his house. He gives you a promise of protection, grace, and peace. Believe those promises and leave his house with joy confident that his blessings will continue to follow you. Amen.