

The Benediction of the LORD

In the worship life of the Israelites, the Lord wanted to be known as a gracious and merciful God. Therefore, He gave the priests the words of the Aaronic benediction, or blessing, words we heard earlier from our Second Reading. Because the words of this benediction so clearly present God as the God of free and faithful grace, this blessing is also gladly used in the New Testament era. As Christians we choose this blessing to close our worship services.

In referring to Himself, God here uses the special name that He has chosen for Himself, and therefore each letter of the word LORD is capitalised. Through this name the Lord presents Himself to us as the *“compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin,”* (Exodus 34:6-7). As such a compassionate and gracious God, the Lord reaches out to us to bless us.

Because the word LORD is repeated three times, we also perceive a reference to the Trinity. Though we, as creatures, are limited in our ability to probe the depths of the Trinity, we can appreciate the truth that the triune God acts on our behalf. As each of the divine persons carries out His work, the triune God reaches out to bless all those who believe in the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ. All three were involved in creation, and all three are involved in our salvation.

The first phrase refers especially to the work of God the Father. The blessing from the Father includes all aspects of our life. Wherever we look, we can see how the Lord blesses us through the physical, material possessions that He gives us. Luther’s explanation to the First Article of the Creed summarises these blessings very concisely, noting that the Lord *“has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my mind and all my abilities... richly and daily providing clothing and shoes, food and drink, property and home, spouse and children, land, cattle, and all I own.”*

We need only look about in our homes! Look at the food and furniture, the children and cars, dishes and dresses, the suits and sofas, and even the electricity mysteriously present in the wall sockets. Count the many ways in which the Lord blesses us with temporal gifts. Just as surely the Lord blesses us with talents and abilities. With mind and hand, we can indeed make a living. With the same mind and hands, we can serve Him.

Further, our heavenly Father blesses and keeps us as He answers our requests when we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, *“Lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.”* How often

the Lord keeps us by preventing problems and dangers from overwhelming us! How zealously the Lord works to keep us from going to those places where we will be tempted to sin! Yet, on the other hand, how loving the Lord is when He allows tests to come into our lives, for He promises that He will also make a way of escape and that all things will work together for good to those who love Him. Ultimately the richest way in which the Lord blesses us is that He keeps us faithful to the gospel to the end of our lives. It is also His blessing that He will deliver us from this present evil world into the perfection of His glory in heaven. All these blessings the Lord gladly includes in the benediction: *“The LORD bless you and keep you.”*

The second phrase of the benediction addresses the fact that human beings are sinful. By birth man is in rebellion against God. The only hope for such rebels lies in the fact that God is gracious to us. How clearly we see God’s love for us in the work of our Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Using Luther’s explanation of the Second Article of the Creed, we note that God is gracious to us in Jesus, who *“has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death. All this He did that I should be His own, and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.”* That is God’s grace - God’s undeserved kindness to us. It is grace in Christ. For in Christ, God shows His love to us - a deep, profound love that loves us also when we deserve it least because of our sin. In such love God makes His face shine upon us. Just as the face of a proud, new mother radiates love, so God looks at us, covering all our sins with the perfect redemption that Christ has purchased for us. All these blessings the Lord gladly includes in the benediction: *“The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you.”*

In the third phrase of the benediction, we see the work of the third person of the Trinity: God the Holy Ghost, or Holy Spirit. The phrase *“look on you with favour”* indicates that the Lord gladly looks upon each of us as individuals. By contrast, how sad it would be if God would turn His back on any of us, ignore us, and leave us to the lot that we deserve. How wonderful this work of the Holy Spirit! He turns rebels into His children by leading them to faith in Christ Jesus! He makes the blind to see by leading them to Christ, the Light of the world. As the giver of life, He gives life to those who are dead in trespasses and sin. Every believer is a miracle of the Holy Spirit! It is He who has *“called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith,”* (Luther’s Catechism, Third Article). In the miracle of conversion, the Holy Spirit gives us peace because we know that through Christ we are reconciled to God. We also know with the certainty of faith that as long as we are right with God through Christ, everything in our life will also work out right for us. The believer enjoys a peace that stands up in the fiercest trials - yes, even in the face of death. What peace there is to know that whether we live or whether we die, we are the

Lord's. Anchored in this faith, we can exclaim with Saint Paul: "*Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord,*" (Romans 8:38, 39). Angels proclaimed this peace at the first Christmas Eve: "*Peace on earth, good will to man.*" Jesus promised the peace from the Holy Spirit when he said, "*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you,*" (John 14:27). Your pastor prays that you may enjoy this peace each time after the sermon when he uses these words: "*And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,*" (Philippians 4:7).

What marvellous blessings the Lord gives to every believer! His divine power and love stand behind each of the words in the benediction: "*In this way they will put My name on the people of Israel, and I shall bless them.*" The name of God was indeed on the Israelites, for in the name Israel is the meaning "man of God." In the New Testament that name is also on us as we claim the name Christian, which really means that we are followers of Christ. Of such believers the Lord gladly says, "*I shall bless them.*" This promise makes the benediction far more than mere words or a pious wish. The Lord stands behind each word. As the triune God, He gladly grants these blessings to each of us.

To such a benediction, believers in all ages have gladly said, "*Amen. So be it.*"