

The Triune God's Threefold Blessing Upon His People

Texts: Numbers 6:22-27; 2 Corinthians 13:14

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Congregation of Christ: Today, we come to the end of our series on the study of our worship service: the Benediction and the Amen.

Our worship service begins and ends with God's Word. He has the first word, the Call to Worship, and he has the last word, the Benediction (see our bulletin). We can look at these as “divine bookends” of our liturgy. And then we say or sing “Amen!” to indicate our approval of the whole service. We do not end our service with “You're dismissed!” or “See you next week!” or “That's all, folks!” as if we just went to a musical event or watched a TV program.

In the original Hebrew, the benediction has a poetic structure. The benediction begins with the LORD's “blessing” and ends with the LORD's giving of “peace to his people. There is also a crescendo that builds up. In Hebrew, there are three lines of 5, 7 and 9 words, a total of 15 words. The number of syllables also increase from 12 to 14 to 16 syllables. The name of the LORD, YHWH, is mentioned three times, and if these are removed, there will be 12 words left, most probably to symbolize the 12 tribes of Israel.

Numbers Chapter 6 begins with regulations about *Nazirites*. Jesus was not a Nazirite, but a Nazarene since he was from Nazareth. Nazirites are those who dedicate themselves wholly to the LORD for life or for a time. Samson, Samuel and John the Baptist are the best examples. They have special vows of being set apart for God: no cutting of hair, no drinking wine, and no contact with any dead body, man or animal. So the blessing is not only for Nazirites, but for all Israel.

In Leviticus 9:22, we read “*Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them, and he came down from offering the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings.*” Leviticus 8 and 9, as we studied before, give us regulations for, ordination, and duties of priests, and also a description of the worship service of Israel. At the end of the service, Aaron pronounces the benediction, so it is called “Aaronic Benediction.” This worship ending continued into the New Testament times in the synagogues. As well, Aaron and his sons, and all his priestly descendants, were tasked to “*pronounce blessings in his name forever*” (1 Chr 23:13).

Our text this afternoon is about the Aaronic and the Pauline benedictions as prototypes of Trinitarian benedictions by our God, “**The Triune God's Threefold Blessing Upon His People,**” under three headings: first, **The LORD Blesses and Keeps His People;** second, **The LORD Shines His Face and is Gracious Toward His People;** and third, **The LORD Lifts Up His Face Upon and Gives Peace to His People.**

The LORD Blesses and Keeps His People

The first line is the LORD's pronouncement of blessing upon his people. This is different from his people giving blessing upon the LORD, to adore, praise and thank him for his steadfast

love and mighty deeds in creation and salvation. “*Bless the LORD, O my soul*” (Psa 103:1), or “*all your saints shall bless you, [O LORD]!*” (Psa 145:10)

During the time of Israel, the LORD blessed them by them giving good harvests and sufficiency, peace with their pagan neighbors, children, and his own presence (Gen 39:5; Lev. 26:3–13; Psa 127:3–5). A lack or absence of these things were taken as God's disfavor against them. Much like today when we receive good gifts and all kinds of prosperity from God, we say God has “blessed” us. And we praise God and thank God for all these things. But we are sinners, so that we forget to thank God in our bad circumstances, when the Lord seems to have forgotten us.

But the LORD never forgets. He not only promises to bless us. He also acts to “keep” us, to guard and protect us. Hear, O people of God, these beautiful words from Psalm 121:3–8:

He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.

Jesus is our Keeper. He is our Refuge, Fortress, Rock and Hiding Place in our troubles and afflictions, from our enemies. He keeps his sheep in his sheepfold, and the devil cannot snatch anyone away from his flock. All are safe in his hands, not one will be lost. Peter says that “*by God's power,*” we “*are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time*” (1 Pet 1:5).

In Matthew 5, Jesus pronounces his nine blessings upon us in the Beatitudes, or “blessings.” God's people are blessed as citizens of the kingdom of God living under his kingship. Even in sufferings and persecutions, we are blessed and kept by God in the kingdom of heaven (Mat 5:1–12).

The LORD Shines His Face and is Gracious Towards His People

In the next blessing, the LORD will “make his face to shine” upon us, and he will “be gracious” upon us. Psalm 67:1, our call to worship, uses this benediction. What does “make his face shine” upon us?

Children, does your Mom or Dad's face shine on you when you have done something wrong? No, they have a bad look on the face. You know exactly how they feel. And you know what's coming to you: “You're grounded!” Sometimes, they won't even look at you!

But Christ's eyes are “*like a flame of fire*” and his face “*like the sun shining in full strength*” (Rev 1:14, 16), lighting up our eyes, saving us, giving us joy (Psa 13:3). What does his shining face do for us?

His shining face means salvation, “*Make your face shine on your servant; save me in your steadfast love!*” (Psa 31:16). It also means restoration of our communion with God: *Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved!* (Psa 80:3, 7, 19). As God looks at us with his shining face, he teaches us, “*Make your face shine upon your servant, and teach me your statutes*” (Psa 119:135). His shining face also means he is listening to our prayers, for example, Daniel's prayer in exile,

“Now therefore, O our God, listen to the prayer of your servant and to his pleas for mercy, and for your own sake, O Lord, make your face to shine upon your sanctuary, which is desolate” (Dan 9:17).

When God shines his face upon you, you can be sure that he will be gracious to you. He is sure to save you from sin, from your enemies, from troubles and from sickness. Surely, he will answer your prayers. How comforting and reassuring must be these words from the Aaronic Benediction and from the Psalms to our brothers and sisters in Christ all over the world who are facing all kinds of troubles! Let us always remember to pray that God will always shine his face upon them and be gracious to them.

The LORD Lifts Up His Face Upon and Gives Peace to His People

Whereas the second blessing says that the LORD will “make his face to shine” upon us, the third blessing says that he will “lift up his face” upon us. What's the difference?

The first, as we have seen, means that God looks at his people with pleasure and favor. The second means he pays attention to or takes notice of us, as when you come to a store salesperson and you start asking questions, he/she lifts up his face towards you, looks at you, and answers your inquiries. So we read the psalmist's lament that no one shows good to the people, and so he prays, *“Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD!”* (Psa 4:6).

When God is pleased with the righteous, he turns his face towards them and looks at them, *“The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous”* (Psa 34:15), and, *“For the LORD your God is gracious and merciful and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him”* (2 Chr 30:9). But when God is displeased and angry, he “hides” his face or turns his face away (Psa 27:9; 132:10).

After God lifts up his face toward us, he gives us *peace*. The Hebrew word *shalom* involves more than a nation being at peace with other nations, or being at peace with our husband or wife, children, parents, friends, or neighbors. When a Jew greets his neighbor, “Peace be with you,” he wishes him total well-being, health, prosperity and salvation. An example is David's greeting to Nabal, *“Peace be to you, and peace be to your house, and peace be to all that you have”* (1 Sam 25:6). So the LORD's “peace” given to God's people means that he gives all of the good things or blessings he has in store for them. Often, these are material things; but not only material things, but also all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places (Eph 1:3).

Our Lord Jesus Christ knew his mission in coming down from heaven: to save his people from sin, Satan and God's righteous wrath. After he finished his preaching and teaching ministry in Galilee, he started on his way towards Jerusalem. He knew he would face death from the Jews. Still, he *“set his face to go to Jerusalem”* (Luk 9:51, 53). He makes his face shine and lifts up his face towards his people to give them grace and peace: saving grace and peace with God.

Conclusion

Dear Congregation of Christ: Paul also uses benedictions at the end, or sometimes even in the middle, of all his letters. The best and most well-known Trinitarian example is, *“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”*

Just as we are baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit, the Aaronic blessing is also Trinitarian. Three times, the name of the LORD is invoked. It is God the Father who blesses us and keeps us. It is the Son of God who lifts his face toward us to be gracious to us in his life, death and resurrection; he alone saves us by his grace alone through faith alone. And it is the Holy Spirit who indwells us and gives us peace that surpasses all understanding. *“To set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace”* (Rom 8:6), and one of the fruits of the Spirit is peace (Gal 5:22).

Therefore, God *himself* is his blessing upon his people. He gives himself to his people through the grace of Christ and the indwelling Spirit.

The last verse says, *“So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.”* All the peoples of the earth saw that the Israel was called by name of the LORD, and they feared them (Deu 28:10). After the dedication of the temple, the LORD appeared to King Solomon and said that *“the people who are called by my name”* must humble themselves and repent of their sins to be heard by God and be forgiven (2 Chr 7:14). In the Babylonian exile, Daniel prayed to God to forgive and restore Israel, the the city and the people that is *“called by your name.”*

So every time the pastor pronounces the Benediction upon you, remember the great blessing to be called by God's name, that you are part of God's covenant people, his chosen nation, a people holy to the Lord. It was used first for Abraham's descendants, but now used for us Gentiles also, *“so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles”* (Gal 3:14). But with this great blessing comes great responsibility of bearing his name. As citizens of the kingdom of heaven who bear Christ's name, we are to show ourselves to others as “people who belong to Christ” in our daily lives.

The last clause puts the emphasis on “I,” like our modern use of emphasis, “I myself.” Literally, we can read it as, *“I, I myself, will bless them.”* God himself will give all these blessings to his people.

The benediction, therefore, is not a wish by God for you. It is not even a prayer. It is a *declaration* of blessing upon you. You are blessed and kept by our Father. He shines his face upon you, giving you his saving grace in Christ. And he lifts up his face upon you and gives you peace.

What is the meaning of the minister pronouncing the benediction with upraised hands, as when Aaron blessed the people *“Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them”* (Lev 9:22). Jesus himself, after the resurrection, when he blessed his disciples, did the same thing, *“Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them”* (Luk 24:50). In this act, Jesus fulfills his mission as our Great High Priest. As Christ's ordained and appointed representative, the minister raises his hands towards heaven. In this gesture, he shows that it is God who blesses his people, not the minister, and that the blessing flows from God in heaven.

What should be our response to it? We do not make the sign of the cross, but as a gesture that we are receiving the blessing, we can open our hands as it is pronounced. Finally, our response is praise and thanksgiving for and approval of all that we have heard and witnessed. Then with abundant joy in our hearts, we sing or say, “Amen!” not once, not twice, but three times, signifying our thanksgiving to our Trinitarian God.