

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Worship Series		Pastor/Teacher
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The Lord's Binding Blessing

Introduction: In this series on worship, we have looked at each of the main elements of biblical worship in turn, to consider their purpose and place. The main theme throughout this series has been that if our worship is man-centered, we are all wasting our time. If we follow our intuition toward what tickles our eyes and ears, or what we think will please the largest numbers of people, we really should not call it “worship” at all. It is just self-indulgence. On the other hand, if we follow the patterns of worship given by God in his Word, we may trust that our worship honors the Lord and carries real power. Our task today is to see how this applies to the final words of our worship service: the benediction. Of all the benedictions in Scripture, Numbers 6:22-27 is undoubtedly the most famous, and the model for every later benediction.

1. As we begin to look at this well-known text, keep in mind how the priests were supposed to deliver it. Like ministers have traditionally done for thousands of years now, the priests were supposed to bless the people with their hands raised. Why? This is a way of laying one's hands, as it were, on the entire congregation. The laying on of hands, in Scripture, represents transferring something from one person to another.
2.
 - a. For example, on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest was supposed to place his hands on the head of a goat to transfer the sins of the people and send it into the wilderness.¹ This is the origin of the word, “scapegoat.”
 - b. Ordaining a man for ministry is another example of ceremonially laying hands on someone in order to transfer something, in this case spiritual authority rather than sin. This is such a weighty gesture that the Apostle Paul warned Timothy against doing it too hastily, because it can have terrible consequences if given to an unqualified individual.²
 - c. What is being transferred, then, in a benediction?
 - i. The short answer is a blessing. There are examples of raised hands used to communicate this in both the Old³ and New Testaments.⁴ The role of the priests was to bring blessings, not curses, upon the people by their faithful work in God's house.⁵ This is the purpose for which they were anointed. These blessings would

¹ “And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness.” - Leviticus 16:21

² “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure.” - 1 Timothy 5:22

³ “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 9:22

⁴ “And he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them.” - Luke 24:50

⁵ As Calvin says in his commentary on this blessing, “This doctrine is especially profitable, that believers may confidently assure themselves that God is reconciled to them, when He ordains the priests to be witnesses and heralds of His paternal favor towards them.

include all sorts of good things, both material and spiritual, to support and enrich their lives.

- ii. The even more profound answer is they are transferring *the Lord's name* to his people, as verse 27 says.⁶ We should know this is highly significant, just from the fact that the third commandment forbids taking the Lord's *name* in vain. If we ought not use his name lightly, we can be certain he does not *give* it lightly, either, and that this is the very greatest blessing imaginable.

d. What does it mean for the Lord to “put his name” on the people?

- i. It means essentially that he is renewing his special bond with them each time the priests restate this blessing. He is saying, “I have chosen to tie myself to you, *personally*, in a way I am not tied to others.⁷ I am yours and you are mine.” This benediction is almost like a wedding vow and should remind us of his promises to Abraham.⁸
- ii. Think of the power of saying the Lord “makes his face to shine upon you” and “lifts up his countenance upon you.” These are parallel ways of saying that the Lord, the King and Creator of the entire universe, looks at you with *joy* rather than ambivalence or wrath! It is one of the most beautiful and moving descriptions of fellowship with God that we find in all the Old Testament, and the priests were to say this *regularly* to all the people of Israel whenever they assembled for worship.
- iii. In each of the three lines of this benediction, the Lord explicitly uses his name, “Yahweh,” although he could have used a pronoun instead. So with each line, he is reiterating again and again that he is fully committed to this. He is signing the contract in triplicate, as it were; going above and beyond to reassure his people of his love.
- iv. To see how God's people relate to his name, consider how when Jonah tells the pagan sailors about the Lord's judgment on him, they learn his name and cry out to him as “the LORD.” This is “Yahweh” in Hebrew. Then turn from chapter 1 to chapter 2 and notice how Jonah's prayer is much more personal than the cries of the pagan sailors: “Then Jonah prayed to the LORD *his God* from the belly of the fish.” The pagans prayed to Yahweh in desperation, but they do not know him the way Jonah does, as *his God*. Even in the midst of his sinful rebellion, Jonah had a closer familiarity with his Creator than those sailors did. This is clearly not because of anything in Jonah that deserved this connection, but because God had bound himself to Jonah and was not going to let him go. This is the kind of saving bond we should think of when we read Aaron's blessing in Numbers 6: once the Lord has smiled upon you in his grace, he will pursue you to the ends of the earth!

The word to bless is often used to pray for blessings, which is the common duty of all pious persons; but this rite (as we shall see a little farther on) was an efficacious testimony of God's grace; as if the priests bore from His own mouth the commandment to bless. But Luke shews that this was truly fulfilled in Christ, when he relates that ‘He lifted up His hands,’ according to the solemn rite of the Law, to bless His disciples. (Luke 24:50.) In these words, then, the priests were appointed ambassadors to reconcile God to the people; and this in the person of Christ, who is the only sufficient surety of God's grace and blessing. Inasmuch, therefore, as they then were types of Christ, they were commanded to bless the people. But it is worthy of remark, that they are commanded to pronounce the form of benediction audibly, and not to offer prayers in an obscure whisper; and hence we gather that they preached God's grace, which the people might apprehend by faith.”

⁶ “So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.” - Numbers 6:27

⁷ Consider, for example, how God's name on his people is a warning to the other nations, in Deuteronomy 28:10, “And all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they shall be afraid of you.”

⁸ “And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” - Genesis 12:2-3

- e. The last word of the benediction is especially significant: “peace,” which many non-Hebrew speakers know is *shalom* in Hebrew. This is such a famous word because it is such an important concept in the Old Testament, as it summarizes all our hopes in a single word: we need peace with our neighbors, peace among the nations, peace in our families and workplaces, peace within ourselves, and above all else peace with our Creator who justly hates our sin.
3. This blessing of peace is not cheap. Look at all the rules and regulations surrounding this short section in Numbers, laying out just how difficult it is to be worthy of God’s presence.
 - a. Just before this famous blessing are the rules for those who take a Nazirite vow, setting themselves apart from the rest of the people to be especially holy before God. This required them to abstain from wine, cutting their hair, and even funerals for family members, lest they become unclean.⁹ This is all to show that God’s blessings require perfect purity, and yet somehow they are not only for the most pure but also the people as a whole.¹⁰ This implies they must come through a pure *mediator*, if they are to be applied to all the people. In this case, Aaron and his sons are to be these pure mediators, and keep vows very similar to the Nazirites, but as part of their lifelong vocations and not just for a time.¹¹
 - b. Immediately following this benediction are the rules and regulations for consecrating the tabernacle with numerous sacrifices. Just notice how long chapter 7 is: 89 verses! Like the Nazirite vow, the level of detail here is another reminder of just what it takes for sinners to come before the Holy One of Israel. In this case, an extraordinary number of animals must be slaughtered, in very specific numbers to stand in for all the tribes of Israel.¹² This is the price of peace with a holy God: Without life-blood to pay for their sins, they could not live so near the Lord, much less be blessed by him. But because he does graciously provide sacrifices for his people, he can be near them and does bless them.

⁹ “All the days that he separates himself to the LORD he shall not go near a dead body. Not even for his father or for his mother, for brother or sister, if they die, shall he make himself unclean, because his separation to God is on his head. All the days of his separation he is holy to the LORD.” - Numbers 6:6-8

¹⁰ “[This benediction’s] introduction (verse 22) links it with the regulations designed to purify the camp (5:1ff., 5ff., 11ff., 6:1ff.), and thereby to prepare the people for the great act of worship, the march towards the promised land. The blessing which invokes God’s protection on the people comes at a very apposite moment. It also serves to show that God’s permanent purpose is to bless all his people, not merely those who undertake the Nazirite vow. Whereas Nazirites generally undertook their vows for a short period, the priests were always pronouncing this blessing at the close of the daily morning service in the temple and later in the synagogues.” - Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction & Commentary*, 91.

¹¹ Note that in Leviticus 10, Aaron is expressly forbidden from mourning his sons’ deaths (verse 6), and he and all his sons are forbidden from drinking alcohol when they come near the tabernacle (verse 9), because the corruption of death and drunkenness have no place in the presence of the Lord. These requirements come very close to a lifelong Nazirite vow.

¹² Notice the dishes and animals are all in multiples of twelve: “This was the dedication offering for the altar on the day when it was anointed, from the chiefs of Israel: twelve silver plates, twelve silver basins, twelve golden dishes... all the cattle for the burnt offering twelve bulls, twelve rams, twelve male lambs a year old, with their grain offering; and twelve male goats for a sin offering; and all the cattle for the sacrifice of peace offerings twenty-four bulls, the rams sixty, the male goats sixty, the male lambs a year old sixty. This was the dedication offering for the altar after it was anointed. And when Moses went into the tent of meeting to speak with the LORD, he heard the voice speaking to him from above the mercy seat that was on the ark of the testimony, from between the two cherubim; and it spoke to him.” - Numbers 7:84, 87-89

4. We know that ultimately, all these purity regulations and sacrifices failed to maintain God's blessings on this people. Their priests¹³ and their Nazirites failed to keep their vows¹⁴ and the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were both sent into exile. All the curses of the Law came crashing down upon them, rather than blessings, but this doesn't mean God's plan failed. He still aimed to bless his people, through an infinitely greater high priest who sacrificed his own life-blood to pay for them.
- a. Think about it: when does God put his name on you, publicly, to claim you as a Christian? It is first of all in baptism, when you were washed "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."¹⁵ Baptism signifies the beginning of your saving bond to the Lord, and of his covenant commitments to you.
 - i. Baptism only has this effect because it represents our union with Christ in his death and resurrection.¹⁶ Apart from his work, spilling his life-blood to consecrate us as God's new tabernacle like the sacrifices in Numbers 7, baptism would have no power at all. But because of the redemption Christ has accomplished for us, the Holy Spirit now applies it to us in this way.
 - ii. If you really do trust in what your baptism represents, then you shall surely be saved. The Almighty Creator has publicly marked you as his own in the midst of hostile nations, and has tied you to the name of his son when you are called a "Christian."
 - b. After you have been baptized, the Lord reaffirms his name upon you again and again each week when an elder pronounces the benediction. This is much more than just saying, "you are dismissed." It is saying, "Go your way in the blessed peace purchased for you by the life of God's own Son. He has bought you for his own and nothing can separate you from him."
 - i. Notice how the benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:14 follows the threefold pattern of Numbers 6, but makes it more explicitly Trinitarian: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."
 - ii. Notice how the benediction in 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 focuses on themes of peace and God's keeping his promises, "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it."
 - iii. Hebrews 13:20-21 is very similar, and uses even more Old Testament references: "Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with

¹³ In Ezekiel 8, shortly before the glory of the Lord departs the Temple, God shows the prophet how the chiefs of the tribes have all perverted the worship of God toward paganism: "And he brought me into the inner court of the house of the LORD. And behold, at the entrance of the temple of the LORD, between the porch and the altar, were about twenty-five men, with their backs to the temple of the LORD, and their faces toward the east, worshiping the sun toward the east. Then he said to me, 'Have you seen this, O son of man? Is it too light a thing for the house of Judah to commit the abominations that they commit here, that they should fill the land with violence and provoke me still further to anger? Behold, they put the branch to their nose. Therefore I will act in wrath. My eye will not spare, nor will I have pity. And though they cry in my ears with a loud voice, I will not hear them.'" - Ezekiel 8:16-18

¹⁴ "'And I raised up some of your sons for prophets, and some of your young men for Nazirites. Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel?' declares the LORD. 'But you made the Nazirites drink wine, and commanded the prophets, saying, 'You shall not prophesy.'" - Amos 2:11-12

¹⁵ Matthew 28:19

¹⁶ "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." - Romans 6:3-5

everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

- c. The benediction, therefore, is the final proof of how good and beautiful a biblical worship service is. Because we have not invented or written these blessings ourselves, we can be confident they really do come from our Creator and he will make good on them. If we instead filled our worship with our own ideas and what feels good in the moment, we would miss out on this assurance that God has made a covenant with us.¹⁷ We must receive the words of the benediction as if we were hearing them from God himself, and believe these blessings are fully paid for by his Son, Jesus Christ.

¹⁷ This is similar, I think, to the point of Jonah’s statement in Jonah 2:8, “Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.”