

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)
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Thanks for the Blessing

Genesis 12:1-3 (NIV)

12 The Lord had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

*2 “I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;*

*I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.*

*3 I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”*

Deuteronomy 28:1-14 (NIV)

28 If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. 2 All these blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God:

3 You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country.

4 The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock—the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks.

5 Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed.

6 You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.

7 The Lord will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven.

8 The Lord will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to. The Lord your God will bless you in the land he is giving you.

9 The Lord will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the Lord your God and walk in obedience to him. 10 Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they will fear you. 11 The Lord will grant you abundant prosperity—in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your ground—in the land he swore to your ancestors to give you.

12 The Lord will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands. You will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. 13 The Lord will make you the head, not the tail. If you pay attention to the commands of the Lord your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom. 14 Do not turn aside from any of the commands I give you today, to the right or to the left, following other gods and serving them.

Numbers 6:22-27 (NIV)

22 The Lord said to Moses, 23 “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;*

*25 the Lord make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;*

*26 the Lord turn his face toward you
and give you peace.””*

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

[Slide 1] *Opening*

Good morning church! If you’ve been attending or watching for any length of time at all, you’re familiar with—or at least aware of—something I do at the close of every service. I invite you to position yourself mentally and physically to receive a blessing, and then I pronounce a blessing on you. Whether this is the first time you’ve heard of it, or you’re quite used to it, there ought to be several questions that are coming up in your mind.

For instance—*What in the world is he doing?* That’s a fair question. *Why on God’s green earth is he doing that?* Another fair question—and surprisingly close to the mark. A third one might be: *Can somebody please tell me what this is supposed to mean?* I’m glad you asked. I’d like to help you with answers to those and some other questions about “blessing(s)” today.

We talk a lot about “blessing” in our culture, particularly in the church. We use the word pretty easily and somewhat casually. But I suspect that more than a few of us don’t really understand what it is we’re saying—or at least, we don’t take it as seriously as the Bible does, or think about the depth of what it means to be “blessed” or to receive a “blessing” or be a “blessing.” So let’s start at the beginning (“*in the beginning*”), with the creation.

[Slide 2] *Genesis 1: Creation Blessing*

The account of creation in Genesis, chapter 1, tells us that when God created humanity (Adam and Eve), he blessed them (Genesis 1:27-28, NIV).

27 So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. 28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

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God made the universe. He made this world. It staggers the mind of any thinking person to consider the number of features of the universe that must be exactly what they are for it to exist. Add to that the extraordinary level of fine-tuning of the characteristics of the universe as a whole, and of this galaxy and solar system and sun and planet in particular, that must be precisely calibrated in order for it to be possible for living creatures to exist and for human beings to exist as self-aware beings capable of developing a technologically sophisticated society such as we have today. God made a universe (fourteen billion light years across), all of which was necessary in order to have this planet situated perfectly in this part of the Milky Way galaxy, in this position in the solar system, with this age and type and size of a star, with one moon, oceans, tectonic plates moving at precisely the right amount of movement, and on and on—all so that plant life and animal life could flourish in order to make it possible for people to live here.

That in itself is an expression of the blessing of God—he prepared a place for human beings to live, one that was perfectly suited for them. That fact alone ought to draw thankfulness out of every one of us living on this planet today. But when it says that "*God blessed them*," that's not an evaluative statement about how God had situated them. It is telling us that God deliberately spoke a specific word over people—the apex of his creation—that constituted his blessing of them.

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That word of blessing was more than a ritual or religious action. It wasn't just a wish for some vague benefit or lucky outcome. Nor was it a bare command. God spoke an empowering and life-giving prophetic declaration of what he wanted for human beings. The creator of all things, the source of life and being itself, spoke, and when he did, all of the potentiality and purpose of what he had made humanity to be came into them. All that he wanted for them was given expression and possibility. God's favor was announced and our purpose for living was laid out for us.

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In his discussion of the theological meaning and significance of the Hebrew word *barak* (“bless”), Michael Brown says, “*That which is blessed functions and produces at the optimum level, fulfilling its divinely designated purpose.*” (Brown, *NIDOTTE*, 1:759). We were created to live in God’s blessing, and to realize—to bring into concrete reality—the potentiality of what he intended for us, the purposes he had designed for us and for this world.

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All people instinctively long for this. We naturally desire to fulfill God’s intentions for us, to live to the fullest measure possible. In the ancient world, even if they did not know the true God, everyone sought for, prayed for, did whatever they thought would bring the favor of God (or their gods) to their life. They sought the blessing of God—that which would bring them the good that God had designed for them, and which they desperately needed. To have God’s blessing meant fertility, prosperity, protection from harm, deliverance from danger, power to accomplish what was needed. God’s blessing was thought of as something tangible; its effects were perceivable and often measurable.

We still do the same things today, even in a culture that ignores God or denies his existence. We still are trying to find his blessing—that which makes us function and produce at our optimum level, not just in terms of commerce and industry, but relationally, socially, personally. We were created to live in God’s blessing—to know him intimately and enjoy the results of that intimate relationship: favor, peace, fertility, empowerment, protection, goodness. Blessing.

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But after God created a world for people; after he pronounced his intention for humanity, and gave his empowering blessing to us, after Genesis 1 and 2, Genesis 3 happened. Genesis 3 describes humanity’s abandonment of God and the vain attempt to secure blessing on our own apart from him. Such a thing does not exist. And Genesis 3 points out in very deliberate language what is the result of choosing to walk in disobedience to God’s ways. God created us to live in his favor, to enjoy his blessing in every aspect of life. But when sin entered the world, not only did we become spiritually estranged from God and cut off from the source of life (“*dead because of our sins,*” in the words of the apostle Paul), we also were cut off from God’s blessing. We were now—all of us, every human being in the history of the world—living under a curse, the opposite of blessing.

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God's curse is his expression of judgment. It is not what he wants for people, not what he intended for people, not what he created us to experience. It is, however, real, authorized and empowered by his judicial decision. It is the sad realization of what was potentially possible from the instant God created anything—the possibility that free beings might choose themselves instead of choosing God. And having chosen, they brought a curse on themselves and on the earth itself. Instead of everything functioning the way it was supposed to, so that work brought fruitful abundance, and peace was normal, everything is harder, trouble abounds, and strife and war are the common denominator in human history. Crops are ravaged while weeds proliferate. In the words of the title of the brilliant novel by the Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*.

[Slide 9] *Genesis 12: Abraham inherits a blessing*

The language of blessing and cursing reappears again in a particularly important passage in Genesis—chapter 12, where God reveals himself to Abram and calls him to leave his family and their gods in order to inherit a blessing: to become the father of a people, God's people.

12 The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

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and I will bless you;*

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God's promise to Abram is filled with the language of blessing. What is crucial for us to understand is that at its core, "*blessing*," or being "*blessed*," is not about "*blessings*," but about the one who "*blesses*."

We tend to think about "*blessing*" in terms of the good stuff that comes our way. So, for instance, we think of a nice financial windfall as a blessing: finding a quarter in the pop machine, or getting \$1200 back from the government that you can use to pay your taxes. We don't have COVID-19 (or we had a mild case and recovered)—that's a blessing. Or we're able to have the family visit for Thanksgiving safely—that's a blessing.

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All of these, and more, are, in fact, blessings. That is, they are expressions of God's goodness and his favor toward us. Some are little (or we think of them as little, because they are so common and "ordinary" that we think of them as part of normal life). We don't consider them blessings, until we lose them—a job that pays a livable wage, a home we can afford, time with friends, the ability to breathe without an oxygen tank. Others are huge—an unexpected gift that arrives in time to pay a bill for which we didn't have enough money; an organ donation that means the difference between life and death for a loved one; a specific answer to a specific prayer, offered up in secret desperation and trust in God.

But what we need to see is that these singular expressions of God's favor, the good things that come our way and enrich our lives or empower us in ways we especially need, are the signs of what it looks like to live in right relationship with the God who created us to receive and live in his blessing. Fundamentally, and most important of all, "*blessing*" comes from God. And being blessed is more about that relationship than about the stuff that comes our way as a result. Stuff doesn't last. But relationship with God does.

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Just think of your own family. Most of you, I expect, want to be with your family this Thanksgiving. If you had to choose, you could give up the turkey, the feasting, the comfort of sitting in your own recliner without a mask watching the Jayhawks play Gonzaga; you could give that all up, if making that sacrifice meant you could be with your family.

And even those of you for whom family is a wreck, and the thought of being with them fills you with dread and disgust—deep within you, what you wish is that it wasn't this way. You wish your family was different, that being with them would be joyful and encouraging, because all of us want to be loved and to be with those who love us. That is far more valuable and more important to us than having stuff. Even if I'm sick, deathly ill, desperate for something that will cure me—if I'm given the choice to be sick with my family or to be well without them, I'm taking my family. That's what makes these holidays this year so horribly difficult, because we're having to make those kinds of choices. For the health of those we love, we're restricting what we desperately want—to be with them.

Our own lives point to the reality of what it means to seek for the blessing of God, to live in the blessing of God. Just as we want and need our relationships with our family more than the good stuff we enjoy, so too it is with God and the blessings he gives us. To be blessed is more than having a life that is crammed with good things. It is being connected to the one who created us, who made us for

blessing, who ordained blessing for us, and who wants to see us enjoying all that is good, all that comes from his hands to us for our good. The only way to reap all of the good of those tangible blessings is to be connected to the living God through Jesus Christ, being rightly related to the source of all blessing.

[Slide 13] *Genesis 27: Jacob steals the blessing*

We can see this in a crucial episode in the story of Abraham's family. In Genesis 27, Isaac, Abraham's son, realizes he is nearing the end of his life. The blessing that God made to his father must now be passed on to his son. This is not just a family heirloom—this is the promise that will overturn the curse of sin, that will bring the blessing of God to the whole human race. Isaac's son must enter into the covenant that God made with Abraham so that he can receive God's blessing.

The story is worth going through in detail, but today I am simply going to summarize it. Isaac calls Esau, his first-born, who is the rightful heir for whom the blessing is intended, and sends him out to hunt for wild game. The plan is for Esau to prepare a meal they can share before Isaac blesses him. But Isaac's wife, Rebekah, arranges things so that Jacob, the younger son, is able to trick his father into blessing him instead. Consequently Isaac gives Jacob the blessing intended for Esau. In that blessing, Isaac announces a prophetic declaration of what God will do for and through this son whom God has now blessed. By blessing Jacob, Isaac certifies Jacob as the one through whom God would fulfill his promise to Abraham. As the son who now stands in the line of the Messiah, Jacob will be the recipient of God's favor and blessing.

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When Esau comes later and finds that his brother has stolen his blessing, he cries out to his father, begging for a blessing (though his interest is primarily in the family wealth, not the family connection to God and his promise). But what is so very interesting is this: when Isaac learns that he has been tricked, he doesn't say, "*Oops, my mistake. Let's fix this.*" No—Isaac knows that what he prayed in blessing Jacob had divine empowerment in it. Just as God's pronounced blessing over Adam and Eve gave them the power to live in the fruitfulness that comes from being rightly related to God, so too would Isaac's spoken blessing have its fulfillment. It could not be unsaid. It could not be set aside, or taken back. Isaac's blessing would stand. The only thing that could invalidate the promise of God would be if Jacob or his descendants abandoned the covenant. Isaac could not give to Esau what God had given to Jacob through the spoken blessing. Instead he speaks a lesser word for his oldest son: still a blessing, but one offering only a greatly diminished measure of the favor of God.

[Slide 15] *Deuteronomy 28—God’s blessings for Israel*

God’s promise of blessing for Abraham and his family eventually led to the creation of Israel, God’s covenant people. Part of God’s promise to Abraham was that he would give to Abraham’s descendants the land of Canaan. The setting for Deuteronomy 28 is on the plains of Moab, just east of the Jordan River, the boundary for the promised land of Canaan, at the time when Israel is preparing to cross over and begin living in the land God gave them. In the earlier part of Deuteronomy, Moses is rehearsing the history of the Israelites after they came out of Egypt. Then comes chapter 28—the first part of the chapter is what we read this morning, a listing of some specific examples of the kinds of blessings that would come from living as God’s people. The rest of the chapter (about three times as long!) is filled with a list of curses—the results of living in disobedience to God, living like all the rest of the nations of the world who don’t know the true God.

Both the list of blessings and the list of curses contain tangible, measurable results or consequences, even though they are presented as general statements rather than precise quantities. But again, what is most important is the fundamental assumption that governs the entire speech Moses gives. If the Israelites want to enjoy the blessings of God, the good things that come from him, such as peace and protection, plentiful harvests and fertile livestock, the “good life” and its tangible, measurable results, they must understand that it only happens through being his covenant people, who live in accordance with God’s covenant, who have committed themselves to be his people, to live as his people, and not as the other nations all around them. The blessing that came from God’s promise to Abraham is not separable or distinct from the covenantal relationship that defines being God’s people.

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When God called Abraham, he was setting in motion a grand plan to restore blessing to the human race. Through Abraham he would bring an heir, even though Abraham and his wife were childless—symbolic of the curse upon Adam and Eve (fruitlessness). That heir, Isaac, would be a blessing to his parents. More than simply a child for a couple, the way all children are a blessing; more even than a baby for a childless couple and an end to the heartache of being without children; Isaac was the fulfillment of God’s promise, a blessing that indicated God’s favor was upon Abraham and Sarah and the nation of people who would come from their son.

But Isaac was just the first heir of Abraham—a much more important heir was still to come. For the promise of an heir for Abraham was a promise that Isaac

would have an heir, and Jacob, and Joseph, and on until Israel was a people. And from Israel would come the Messiah, the one who would take on himself the curse that was placed on Adam and this creation.

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What had been lost when Adam sinned was being regained. The promise God made to Eve of salvation from the curse, that her offspring (“*the seed of the woman*”) would crush the head of the serpent, was now being extended to Abraham, whose offspring (“*the seed*”) would bring God’s blessing to all the nations. That descendant of Abraham would bring about the new creation, a new people, freed from the curse, living in the favor and blessing of God. That new people is the church, the heirs of the promise to Abraham through which God would bring blessing again to the world. He would bring the blessing of life lived in right relationship to God—being fully justified, put right, and empowered again to be fruitful, prosperous, functioning as we were intended to function, as those living under God’s rule, in his kingdom. The curse is reversed! The blessing of God is poured out now upon his people. A promise to Abraham is fulfilled, and a people is born, first Israel, and then the church.

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So what does all of this have to do with what I say and do at the close of our services? It goes back to a pattern that God established for Israel.

When God gave Israel the Law, one of the instructions for Aaron and his sons was a blessing that they were to pronounce over the people. We read it this morning in Numbers 6:22-27. As mediators, the priests represented God to the people, and the people to God. They were authorized to speak God’s words to his people, to declare what God was saying to and about his people.

God wanted Israel to live in and know his blessing. He wanted Israel to remember that all of the good that they experienced as his people came from him. But the blessings weren’t a separate thing that you could get apart from living as his people. The priests, whom God selected to represent him to the people, were to pronounce this blessing over the people. It was a way to declare God’s intentions, to remind them of who God was, what he wanted of them, and to pray for his good to come to them as they lived out their lives under his covenant. They spoke the word over the people, according to what God had instructed them to do. That spoken word announced God’s promise to bring good to his people, and declared what God had promised, so that the people could hear it, acknowledge it, remember it, and see those blessings realized in their lives as they continued to live in a covenant relationship with God.

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That's why we say, "Amen" at the close of prayers and after the blessing. "Amen" is a Hebrew term that means, *"Let this be so—for me, for us."* It means, *"Yes, I affirm that I believe this to be a true word from God, one that I want to see realized in my life."* "Amen" means *"I will walk in accordance with the demands of the covenant through which this blessing comes to me."* It means, *"I will hold fast in my faith, expecting good to come to me from the hand of God."* It means, *"I will acknowledge with my lips and with my life my praise and thanks to God for the gifts that he has given me."*

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The words of this Aaronic blessing, as it is known, or of any spoken blessing, aren't a magic incantation. If the person speaking the blessing isn't authorized to speak for God, then the words have no force, no empowering ability to bring about God's fruitfulness. And if the people who hear the blessing don't live in relationship with God, then those blessings don't just come automatically because someone spoke them into the air. (There were seven Jewish exorcists in the time of Paul who learned a scary and painful lesson about trying to speak in God's name without actually being connected to him through Jesus.) Speaking blessing over God's people isn't magic and God isn't the vending machine in the sky waiting for us to say the right things to get what we want from him.

But when someone authorized to speak for God pronounces God's blessing on people, there is power in those words—enabling power, life-giving power, transformative power—because the Spirit of God, the creator and sustainer of life is speaking his intentions to bring good to those whom he loves, so that they can flourish and thrive as they were created and meant to do. God is announcing what he intends to do, what he plans to bring about, what is available for those who believe his words.

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And guess what? You're authorized to do the same thing. As a believer in Christ, you're a priest in his church, an ambassador of God who represents God to other people, and other people to God, with your prayers, your intercession, your witnessing, your prophetic blessings—on your children and your grandchildren, your neighbors, your employees, your co-workers, your friends, your enemies (!). You are authorized to bring the blessing of God and to speak the blessing of God, as God's "sent ones." There is power in your words when you declare the truth of what God has said, when you believe it, and live according to what God has said.

And all God's people said, *"Amen!"*

[Slide 22] *Transition to communion*

[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]

The gospel announces the ultimate blessing of God—the death of the Messiah on our behalf, to bring us back to God. When we take communion, we are announcing the gospel to all who are here, and we are announcing our decision to believe the gospel and stand in it. Jesus’ death on the cross is the only way for anyone to be made right with God, to be a part of the covenant people of God, part of that family promised by God to Abraham. Our celebration of his death and resurrection through communion is a way for us to say again with cup and bread that we hold to the message of Christ and that we belong to his people. We proclaim the gospel with these elements, and with our personal and corporate acknowledgment that we are his disciples.

That is our message to you who are here, and to you who are watching. If you belong to Jesus, this table belongs to you. If you don’t yet know Jesus as Lord and Savior, you can today. . . . God sent his Son to die in order to reconcile us to himself and give us eternal life. He is the only way to be reconciled with God, the only way to be delivered from evil. He bore your sins, paid the price that you owed, so that you could be forgiven. His death is the only sacrifice that can pay for your sins, your rebellion. He loves you and he will freely pardon you, if you sincerely repent from running your own life and living by your own rules, and come and surrender your life to him. You can commit your life to him right now.

If you are making that commitment to Jesus now, please let us know. We’d like to help you in your walk with Christ, and we can’t unless we know who you are and what you need. [END]

Benediction /Blessing

Please be careful to maintain our safe distancing practice as you leave.

[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]