

BLESSING

BIBLE STUDY



ALL
NATIONS
CHURCH





BLESSING

BIBLE STUDY 2021

The word “bless” (or blessing, blessed, etc.) appears over over 400 times in the Bible. It’s a word Christians often use, but we don’t often talk about what it means.

This study focuses on some (but hardly all) of the ways the theme/idea of blessing appears in Scripture. The goal is to provide a clearer understanding of what we’re talking about when we use the word - a clearer understanding of what it means for God to bless us and for us to bless others.

Ultimately our hope is that we will learn to see and experience that God has blessed us, and that God has blessed us so that we can bless others. Blessings are received in order to be shared. I hope that this study blesses you, blesses ANCL, so that we might increasingly be a blessing to the world.



BLESSING BIBLE STUDY

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GOD BLESSES CREATION

Week One

Genesis 1:26-31

26 Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

27 So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

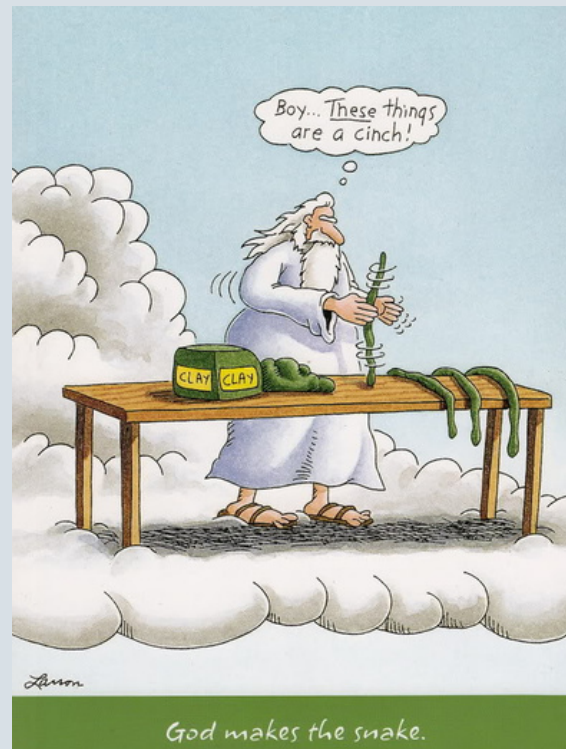
29 God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. 30 And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. 31 God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.



As we begin our study of blessing in the Bible, we're going to start at the very beginning. Blessing is present from the start in the initial chapters of Genesis, and this lesson is going to focus on the first three chapters of the book, with the passage above being the focal piece of Scripture.

Christians believe that God created the world (the "cosmos" actually); God created everything that exists, including especially our Earth and we humans who inhabit it. And we believe that God created *ex nihilo*, that God created out of nothing. This is a more important claim than we might realize. When we say that God created out of nothing, we are saying that God created without necessity, without limitations. Nothing forced God to create, and God isn't confined by any prior boundaries or restrictions. That God created out of nothing means isn't working with material that someone else provided. It's not like God is just trying to make the best of what he's been given to work with. No, God creates everything; the tablet is completely blank. In fact, there was no tablet before God created that too. The world that God created was the world God wanted it to be, without qualification.

Perhaps you've seen The Far Side comic titled "God makes the snake". God is standing on a cloud behind a table, on which there is a container labeled "clay". God rubs the clay between his hands until it becomes a long and slender: God makes the snake, and says, "Boy. These things are a cinch!"



It's funny in part because every child who's ever played with Play-Dough has had a similar thought. At least I did. Not to burst your bubble, but this probably is not how God creates. In fact, the picture might even mislead us in ways that matter. It depicts God working with clay, as if there is a material - clay - that God uses to create, as if God discovered the clay (which had to come from somewhere!) and then did his very best to make stuff with it. But God didn't inherit the clay, nor is God limited by the properties of clay. God is the potter, but he's not only the potter, God is the claymaker - the maker of everything, including all the immaterial things like spirit, soul, mind, etc.

When we imagine God creating we can't help but think of it terms of how humans create. And we should, too. We are, after all, made in God's image, and that means we too are creators (although not ex nihilo!). God calls us to work in creation just as God worked in bringing creation into existence (and as God continues to work now). But, at the same time, there is no comparison between our work and God's work. We are fallible, finite, broken creatures working with what we've been given. God is perfect, infinite, holy, and God creates out of nothing. Our imperfect creation reflects who we are, and God's perfect creation necessarily reflects who God is. God doesn't make mistakes; God doesn't have bad days; God doesn't work with mixed motives. God is good, and God's creation is good.

Throughout Genesis 1, as God creates and looks upon that creation, we are told repeatedly that, "God saw that it was good." And, in fact, after God completes creation by adding humans, we read that, "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." God is pleased with creation; God recognizes the goodness of creation; and in so doing, God blesses creation. In particular, God blesses those created in his image to enjoy and thrive in the creation he has entrusted to them. Creation is where God's blessing occurs. And because there is creation, God blesses it.

In fact, I think it's right to say that this is why there is creation, why God created in the first place: because God desires to bless. God desires to share his goodness, God desires to love and be loved. Creation is a blessing. God wants good things for all of creation.

I want to make a simple but important point: Creation is good, not bad. The world is a good place, not a bad place. God saw that creation was good and blessed it. Likewise, we are to see all that is good in the world and to bless it. Everything that is good - however big or however small - is worth blessing. The world is full of goodness.

This point is complicated by the fact that those people made in God's image, who were entrusted with freedom - they disobeyed God and introduced sin into the world. The perfect creation became corrupted, broken, imperfect. Where there had once been no separation, now there was distance between creation and God. Before God has walked in the Garden with Adam and Eve, but because they disobeyed and ate the fruit, they were banished.

It's important to note that God never curses Adam and Eve. It's easy to mistakenly assume that God curses them - I did, in fact - because God explains to them the consequences of their sin. Life will be much harder now; childbirth will be painful, agriculture will be difficult, and death will come for all. But God never curses them. God still wants good things for them (God does curse the serpent, however. Poor serpents). Even after the fall, creation is a place of blessing, not a place of cursing, even if we are estranged from God. The remainder of the Bible is the story of God seeking to restore creation and his relationship with those creatures made in his image.

It's true, though, that there are passages in Scripture which seem to suggest that the world, having been corrupted by sin, is now defective. And many Christians assume (not without some justification) that to get to be with God means leaving, even escaping, this world, and going to be with God in heaven. In this way of thinking, the goal for Christians is to resist and overcome "the world" (which is shorthand for all this sinful.) And indeed there is much in the world that is corrupting, which should be avoided, from which we need to be delivered. But we should never look upon the world and think that the curse is stronger than the blessing.

Often this way of thinking is informed by Paul's distinction between "spirit" and "flesh" - a distinction which is widely (and often wildly) misunderstood. Paul is often misread to mean that "spirit" is good and "flesh" (or material/matter) is bad, but it's quite a bit more complicated than that. And, taken to its extreme, Christians can behave as if nothing that happens in the material world - nothing that happens in or to the "flesh" - is of ultimate importance, that material world doesn't matter, but only spiritual things. So, by this way of thinking, preaching the Gospel (and saving spirit/soul) is much more important than feeding the hungry and clothing the naked (saving the body) - never mind what Jesus said.

The world is corrupted by sin, and the flesh is indeed weak even when the Spirit is willing. This is true, and worth remembering, but it is a truth contained within a larger, overarching, ultimate truth: that Creation is good and God's good intention for creation will be realized.

While there are images in Scripture which depict God's faithful leaving the world and going to be with God, the more compelling images, to my mind at least, are of God coming to us, God meeting us where we are. This is the Good News of the incarnation, that God is with us, that God is Immanuel. Jesus, in the flesh, in the world, proclaimed the kingdom of God, not as a place to which we would one day go, but as a reality which was coming to us. He taught us to pray that the kingdom would come on earth as it is in heaven. And the final picture the Bible leaves us with in Revelation is of heaven descending to Earth, of a new heaven and a new Earth in which the separation between the two is eliminated, and God dwells with us - just as God originally dwelt with us in the Garden.

God wants good things for creation; always has, always will. This is why God created in the first place. And we have to trust that God knew what God was doing! God doesn't start off wanting good things and then, because of surprising events, change his mind and decide that he wants bad things for creation. God is a God who blesses, not a God who curses, and the world is the place that we get to participate in and experience that blessing. It's also the place that we get to share it.

And one more thing: Because God blesses all creation, it really does mean *all creation*. There is nothing and there is no one whom does not want to bless. God saw the world and declared it good. I think God still looks at the world, despite of all that is broken, and declares it good. There is much in the world worth blessing - much in the world we ought to be blessing.

GOD BLESSES CREATION

Week One Reflection Questions



1. What is the significance of the doctrine that God created “out of nothing”? Why do you think God created?
2. What does it mean for God to bless creation? What does God’s blessing look like?
3. Does God bless everything God creates? Could God possibly create something without blessing it!?
4. Do you experience the world more as a place that is blessed or as a place that is cursed? Is the world more filled with good things or bad things?
5. Which statement is more true: God is for the world (or) God is against the world? Does God still want to bless creation?
6. What does it mean for creation to be good, but broken? How do you experience that reality? How do you see it in others? - and in yourself?
7. If it’s true that God blesses all creation, and if it’s true that we are creatures made in God’s image, then who does God want us to bless? Is anyone outside of God's blessing?
8. How can we bless in the same way that God blesses? How can we bless what is good in the world?

Action for this week (and beyond):

Try to bless someone or something this week - and then share it with your group when you next meet (or via text. etc. during the week).

GOD BLESSES ABRAHAM TO BE A BLESSING TO THE WORLD

Week Two

Genesis 12:1-3

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2 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. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Genesis 22:17-18

I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, 18 and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice."

Genesis 26:3-5

3 Reside in this land as an alien, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will fulfill the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and will give to your offspring all these lands; and all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing for themselves through your offspring, 5 because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws."



Last week we focused on the opening chapters of Genesis and our belief that God created the world out of nothing and what that says about God and what that says about creation: that is, The God who is love made creation in love; creation reflects God's beauty and goodness. Creation is blessed because God created it, and God can only make good things. But we also considered that the world is broken place; everywhere it bears the effects of sin. While God intended it to be a place of blessing and life, now the world was also a place of cursing and death. The rest of Genesis, and the rest of the Bible tells the long story of how God sought to restore that original blessing, the original goodness of creation.

Following the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden in Genesis 3, the next few chapters portray a world that is ignorant of and rebellious toward God. Things get so bad that God sends a flood to cleanse the Earth and start over. When Abram (not yet named Abraham) is introduced at the end of Genesis 11, he's living in a world in which no one really knows God.

This presents a challenge to God. God wants to be known by his creatures, not so much because that's good for God, but because it's good for them (us). This is why God made us in the first place(!), to know God, to have a relationship with God. But how is God going to make that happen? How will God make Himself known?

As always, the ways God chooses to be known are not the most obvious or the ways that seem most effective. If God wants to be known, if God wants to bless creation and the creatures made in his image, shouldn't God do something dramatic and do it immediately? That's what we'd recommend, but that's not the path God takes. Instead God chooses a slow and subtle way to make himself known and to bless creation: God makes himself known to Abram and blesses him.

God appears to Abram, seemingly out of nowhere, and gives a command and makes a promise:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2 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. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

The word covenant doesn't appear (yet), but here God is making a covenant. If Abram obeys God's command, then God will keep his promise (and, as we know, Abram does obey and God does keep his promise). God commands Abram to leave his own country and people and to go to a place that God will show him. And there, cutoff from everything familiar, everything comfortable, everything that provided Abram his identity, God will bless Abram so that he will be a blessing, so that through him and his descendants, all the families of the earth will be blessed.

God chooses to bless all people by first blessing a single person. And it's worth noting that we don't really know why God chose Abram. Obviously God knows what God is doing, but the text never gives us any indication that Abram has any particular qualities or characteristics that commended him (1). In fact, throughout Scripture, God seems to deliberately choose people exactly because there's nothing about them (at least in conventional terms) that suggests they should be chosen. And it's not as if Abram believed God without fail. Immediately following God's promise, as he follows God's leading into Egypt, Abram becomes afraid and denies that Sarai (Sarah) was his wife because he feared what would happen to him if he acknowledged their marriage. And then she almost ends up one of Pharaoh's concubines! He had faith, but it was hardly perfect.

And Abram/Abraham was a blessing to the world, not because he did anything extraordinary, but simply because he was faithful - even if that faith wasn't perfect. It's important to remember that when God promised Abram that he'd make a great nation of him, that Abram and Sarai didn't have any children - and they seemed too old for that change. When God told Abram his plan in greater detail, "Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" (Gen 17:17). Even when it was impossible to imagine a way for God to keep his promise, Abram trusted that God somehow would.

The rest of the story (as we'll see further next lesson) is that it was Abraham's grandson, Jacob (who God renamed Israel), who formed a great nation, which God delivered out of slavery to Egypt and into the Promised Land, with whom God made a covenant, gave the law - a people who would be a light to the nations. God kept his promise to Abraham. Through him all the nations were blessed, but that blessing was realized many years, even many centuries later. Abraham just had to be faithful to do what he was called to do. Simple, but not easy. And then, in the fullness of time, a child, the offspring of Father Abraham, came to the nation of Israel, he who was and is and will be the light of the world, through whom all creation will be blessed.

Through Christ, we are children of Father Abraham, heirs according to the promise, justified by faith just like Abraham before us. Part of our inheritance is that, the promises God makes to Abraham, God makes to us. Just as God promised to bless the world by blessing Abraham, so does God intend to bless the world by blessing us. All the blessings, all the good things we receive, are given in order that they might be shared. It is God's desire that all people might be blessed through Abraham's descendants - that is, through us. This is how God blesses the world.

So that sounds like a grand purpose - and it is! - but that doesn't mean that we necessarily need to be doing anything amazing. To be a blessing doesn't require special people to do special things. It simply requires ordinary people to do the things God has already asked us to do. It requires us simply to be faithful, confident that the "ordinary" work of faithfulness will, eventually, ultimately, lead to extraordinary outcomes.

The work of faithfulness for Abraham was to do the things God commanded him to do, and to trust that, if he was faithful, that God would be faithful too. God's commands to Abraham were often simple, but they were often difficult. He had to leave everything. The work of Christians is the same; we are to obey God's commands - especially as God has spoken to us directly in Jesus - and trust that if we follow Jesus that outcome is certain. *We will be blessed just as he was, is, and will forevermore be blessed. And so often, Jesus' commands are not complicated; they are simple but hard.*

(1) It's true that Abram obeyed God and proved himself to be faithful, but - surprisingly, even shockingly - the text gives the impression that God needed to find out if Abram really could be trusted, if Abram could really bear the weight of this burden. God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, and when, at the last instant, the angel prevents Abraham from slaying Isaac, the Lord calls to Abraham from heaven saying, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for *now I know* that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

The story of the Old Testament is that when God's people obeyed him, when they heeded his voice, when they followed the law, they were blessed, they were in right relationship with God, and therefore they then also blessed the nations by revealing God to them. This had to do with how they worshipped, but it had much more to do with how they lived their lives, how they treated one another, how they provided for those in need, how they welcomed the foreigner. Actually, this was their worship.

It is the same for Christians today. If we want to reveal God to the world, if we want to bless all nations, then we will devote ourselves to the work that Jesus has already given us. We will obey his commands; we will follow him.

Here's an example of something Jesus commanded his followers in Matthew 5:43-45:

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

Praying for your enemies (which is the opposite of what comes naturally to most of us) requires faith that Jesus knows what he's talking about as well as the faithfulness to actually carry it out. And when we do this, we will be a blessing to our enemies, and we will be blessed ourselves in the doing. The God who sends both sun and rain on everyone desires for all to be blessed.



GOD BLESSES ABRAHAM

Week Two Reflection Questions

1. Why do you think God chose to make himself known through a single person? What does this tell us about who God is, what God desires, and the way God works in the world?
2. Why did God choose Abram? Was Abram special? Or was he ordinary?
3. In what ways did God bless Abram?
4. What was Abram's role in God's purpose? Do you think others could've done what Abram did? Could you?
5. What does it teach us that God ultimately fulfilled his promise to Abram only many decades after Abraham had died? Does blessing others always lead to immediate results?
6. What does the way God used Abraham teach us about how God can use us? How does God bless us to bless others? How are we all like Abraham?
7. How does our faithfulness to Jesus bless the world? In what ways can we bless others by being like Jesus?

Action for this week (and beyond): Try to bless someone or something this week - especially by putting into practice something Jesus taught us or imitating something Jesus did - and then share it with your group when you next meet (or via text. etc. during the week).

ALL BLESSINGS COME FROM GOD, SO ALL BLESSINGS SHOULD BE SHARED

Week Three

Deuteronomy 15:1-11

Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts. 2 And this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbor, not exacting it of a neighbor who is a member of the community, because the Lord's remission has been proclaimed. 3 Of a foreigner you may exact it, but you must remit your claim on whatever any member of your community owes you. 4 There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, 5 if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today. 6 When the Lord your God has blessed you, as he promised you, you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you.

7 If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. 8 You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. 9 Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, "The seventh year, the year of remission, is near," and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. 10 Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. 11 Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."



After God was well on his way to keeping his promise to Abraham and after the Israelites had become a great nation, God gave them the Law. God delivered the Law to Israel through Moses so that they would know what it means to be God's people, what God expects from them, what they needed to uphold their side of the covenant, how to live in a way that pleased God, how to live according to God's design and purpose. Christians have learned to think of the Law largely in negative terms, but we shouldn't forget that God gave the Law because God wanted them to obey it! Following the Law was a good thing. Something better came later, yes, but there's still much to learn from God's law. It blessed God's people and instructed them to bless others in ways that still apply today.

One of the Law's commandments was that every seven years debts would be forgiven. Just as the Lord rested on the seventh day in creation, just as the seventh day is a day of Sabbath rest, just as the Israelites were told not to gather manna on the seventh day, the seventh year would be a Sabbath year, a year of rest for the land, and forgiveness of debts for the people. It was a great restoration (2). Creditors were not allowed to demand payment from their debtors because the "Lord's remission has been proclaimed". (Perhaps we should even understand the Lord not to have only commanded the forgiveness of debts but to also have paid those debts on behalf of the debtors?).

Before going further, it's worth observing that this command only applied to the community of Israel and not to the foreigners in their midst. One's brother and sisters amongst God's children were to be treated like family rather than as strangers. To our ears this kind of distinction sounds discriminatory - and it was - but later Jesus would reveal that the answer to the question "who is my neighbor?" was "everyone you meet". Jesus teaches us not to limit the scope of whom we blessed. As always, rather than negated the law, he took it a step further.

God promised his people that, "There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today. " The is a promise - but one with a condition that must be met in order for it to be kept. There will be no needy person if the people obey the commandment to forgive debts every seven years. God is declaring that this is the way the world works: if you bless then you will be blessed.

I'm sure that economists would tell us that forgiving debts every seven years is not a wise way to achieve communal prosperity, but God's economy works differently. God is basically saying, there will be no needy person if everyone shares their prosperity. Everyone will be blessed if everyone blesses others - even those who we think don't deserve it.

(2) And the Law actually went a step further in commanding the Jubilee year. Every 49 years (7x7) there would be a Sabbath of Sabbaths on the 50th year in which the land would lie fallow and property would be redistributed. See Leviticus 25.

Sometimes people are in debt because they've made bad decisions, and sometimes it's because of events out of their control. Likewise, sometimes people are successful because they've worked hard and invested wisely, and sometimes they've just had good luck. When we prosper, we tend to think we deserve it; if we have a good job and make lots of money, we tend to think that we've earned it all by ourselves.

God is trying to get people to see that, if they have prospered then ultimately this is a blessing from God. People should not think of their blessings as "mine" but rather as something which they've been entrusted in order to share with others. God shares blessing with us so that we will share them too. All blessings are ultimately "ours".

I think we are also reluctant to share our blessings - especially our financial blessing - because we assume that then we will necessarily be less blessed. If we have €20 and give it away, that's €20 less we have. We might look at blessings as a zero sum game. We might think that a blessing shared is one no longer possessed. And it's true that if you give away your €20, you will have less money; your reserve of financial blessing will be less. But there are many kinds of blessing, and financial blessings are only one. We tend to focus on money because it can be quantified, but there are many kinds of blessing. And the lesson here is that blessings multiply as they are given and given again. The more you give the more you will be blessed. "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (3)

Here's a thought experiment: Would you rather live in a world where you have riches, fame, and power, where people praise you - where you are "blessed" as much as person can be - but where the people around you are distrustful, dishonest, selfish, etc., where culture is fearful and society is broken.... Or would you rather live in a world in which you are less "blessed" in conventional terms, but where everyone shares what they have with those who are in need, where there is a culture of grace and society is generous? In which of these two worlds would you actually be more blessed? The answer is obvious, and yet most of us live as if we are in the first world, as if we have no choice in the matter, as if we just have to play by the rules of a game we didn't make.

I imagine that many of the Israelites, when they first heard this particular commandment in the Law, thought it was unrealistic. Likewise, there are many Christians who, when they hear Jesus' words, think it's just too realistic. And in a sense, that's true: Jesus describes a very different reality than the one we live in. He says repeatedly, "Blessed are the...." but in our experience those people don't actually seem to be blessed; quite the opposite, in fact. Jesus describes how things work in the kingdom of God - how things will one day be, yes, but also how they can be now wherever the kingdom comes on Earth as it is in heaven. The kingdom of God does not seem "realistic", and yet Christians are called to live as the kingdom really has come, as if Jesus really is the king, as if this the real reality. We're called to live in the world as it will be, not just as it is.

And this means we should go about blessing people even if it seems like we'll get nothing in return. We can give away money and resources even if we don't think we'll get them back. We can give people our time and attention who we think have nothing to offer us. We can be kind to the unkind, generous to the stingy, forgiving to the unforgiving. When we bless, we will be blessed. And, as we do, in small ways, the world will become more the place of blessing it was always meant to be - and which it one day will be in full.

(3) In context, this statement is made by Paul quoting Jesus in the book of Acts 20:35: "In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" Paul pointed out that he has continued to work hard to support himself and to provide for the needy. Rather than seeking to receive - which some would've thought was the "right" of an apostle - Paul has instead sought to give.

ALL BLESSINGS COME FROM GOD

Week Three Reflection Questions



1. Why did God command the people to forgive the debts of their neighbors? What does this command teach us about why we receive blessings? And what we are to do with them?
2. Do you tend to think that you've earned or deserve the good things you have? Does that make it harder to share them? If we recognize our blessings, does that make them easier to share?
3. Does it sometimes seem that, in giving a blessing, you'll lose something? When you actually do bless someone (whether or not you're even aware that's what you're doing), what does it feel like? In your experience, is it truly "more blessed to give than to receive"?
4. Would you like to be surrounded by blessed people? How can you help make that happen? What does this passage teach us about what Christians would want for society? - and how we can bless the world?
5. Does it seem "realistic" to forgive debts every seven years? Does it seem "realistic" to follow Jesus? How do we learn to live as giving blessing is the surest way to receive blessing?
6. Should we ever make blessing contingent on whether or how much a person deserves it? Should we only bless those who can bless us?

ALL BLESSINGS COME FROM GOD

Week Three Reflection Questions Continued



Focus Questions:

7. Does this week's lesson further inform how you can bless others?
Does it inspire you to bless others?
8. How have you given and received blessing in the past week (or beyond)? Share your stories

Tasks for this week:

Pray for opportunities to bless people around you.

Pray and ask God to bring to mind 5 people you know who you could seek to bless on an ongoing basis.

Things to think about when we are considering blessing people:

B – Begin with Prayer: Who should I bless on an ongoing basis (your 5) and open my eyes to see others around me who I can bless spontaneously.

L – Listen with care: When engaging with people, really listen and pay attention – seek to remember details they talk about.

E – Eat/meet/connect (covid compliant of course!)

S – Serve them: Remember people are not projects(!), they are people who Jesus calls us to serve and love

S - Share your story: When people ask you, are you ready to share part of your story?

REPAYING EVIL WITH BLESSING = PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL

Week Four



1 Peter 3:8-15

8 Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. 9 Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing. 10 For

*“Those who desire life
and desire to see good days,
let them keep their tongues from evil
and their lips from speaking deceit;*

11

*let them turn away from evil and do good;
let them seek peace and pursue it.*

12

*For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their prayer.
But the face of the Lord is against those who do
evil.”*

*13 Now who will harm you if you are eager to do
what is good? 14 But even if you do suffer for
doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear
what they fear, and do not be intimidated, 15
but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always
be ready to make your defense to anyone who
demands from you an accounting for the hope
that is in you;*

Throughout the New Testament Christians are told to bless their enemies. Jesus told his disciples (and anyone who would listen) to bless those who curse them and to pray for their enemies (Matthew 5: 43-45 and Luke 6:27-31). Paul told the Roman Christians to bless, not curse, those who persecute them (12:14). Peter wrote that Christians should repay evil and abuse with blessing. Three different messengers but the same message. It's an important, even essential one.

For one thing, the first hearers of the message were people who already had experienced such persecution. They were very familiar with what it meant to suffer abuse, to be the target of evil attacks. In the first century, Christians were widely regarded a dangerous sect that threatened the stability of society and thus needed to be resisted (often violently). The irony is that these persecutors were right - Christians did threaten society. They threatened to bring the kingdom of God, which was a threat to earthly kings everywhere.

But the repeated message to bless our persecutors and enemies is always, whatever the circumstances or situation, a call to be like Jesus who, even as he hung on the cross prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do". One of the remarkable things about Jesus' life is that no one had ever suffered such injustice and at the same time no one had responded to injustice with such grace. The distance between what Jesus received and what he deserved was vast - infinitely vast - and yet he blessed his enemies rather than cursing them. In all things we are to imitate the Lord Jesus, but the New Testament urges us to imitate in this way especially.

When modern Christians read passages about persecution, we often remark that the persecution we encounter is hardly worth comparing to the perfection faced by Jesus and his disciples. And that is largely true, which means we ought to find it even easier to bless their enemies than they did! But we still find it hard to bless our enemies - and we do still have enemies. We might not think of them as "enemies", but really an enemy is someone who opposes you, who stands in the way of you getting what you think you deserve.

We might not have enemies because we're Christians, but all people have enemies. For instance, you might see your boss at work as an enemy, as some who makes your life unnecessarily difficult, who blocks your advancement, who denies you the appreciation or recognition you deserve. And you may resent your boss for that. The boss is the enemy, and our natural inclination is to curse them. But Scripture tells us to bless these bosses and to pray for them!

Another example: These days many people seem increasingly hostile toward those who don't share their politics. People "on the other side" are not just mistaken about the best way to achieve worthy goals, they are evil people who want power for themselves and to make everyone else suffer in the process. Nowadays we're likely to regard our neighbors as enemies if we know that they don't share our values, and we go looking for enemy strangers on the internet. And our inclination is to curse these enemies, But even if these people and their ideas are worth opposing, we are still to bless them and pray for them. Such a simple, straightforward command that we so seldom obey.

If we are called to bless those who we would otherwise curse - that is, if we are called to bless the very last people that we want to bless - then we should take that to mean that there is no one we shouldn't be seeking to bless. There is no one who falls outside the boundaries of those God wants to bless and who God wants us to bless. The repeated emphasis on blessing our enemies forces us to recognize that following Jesus and imitating him in our lives means that we are to bless everyone - everyone! There are often people we think we are justified in denying blessing, those who have made bad decisions and forfeited the right to anything good, or those who are so evil that we want them to suffer rather be blessed. But Jesus blessed the very worst of people, and we should too.

This passage contains a well-known verse: "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you;" Typically this verse is taken to mean that we should be prepared in advance to share the Gospel whenever the situation arises. Someone might ask us about the Gospel and we need to be ready with a good answer. That's true, but there's more to the story.

Peter makes the exhortation to, "Always be ready...", within the context of the command to bless those who curse and to respond to abuse by doing good. Peter hopes that Christians will not suffer for doing good, but he knows that sometimes - possibly oftentimes - Christians will suffer for doing what is right. Suffering is discouraging(!), so Peter offers the encouragements that those who suffer for doing good are blessed even as they suffer, just like Jesus himself was.

So Christians need not fear or be intimidated, but rather they should, "Sanctify [set apart as holy] in your hearts Christ as Lord." If we really do trust that Jesus is Lord, if this truth reaches to our very hearts, to the core of who we are, then we need not fear or be intimidated, and we can do good whether we are rewarded or whether we suffer, trusting that we are following the way of Jesus, the blessed one, who likewise suffered for doing good. When we suffer we naturally question if we are on the right path. When we suffer for doing good, for trying to be like Jesus, we can be confident that we are on a blessed path, that we are on the path Jesus himself walked.

Peter tells Christians, "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" because he knows that if Christians really do bless their enemies and do good to their abusers - if they really are Christlike - then people are going to ask questions. How is that these Christians, rather than being discouraged and defeated by suffering (often suffering deliberately inflicted by their enemies), that they keep on doing good? How is it that in face of cursing they continue blessing? How is it that when there's apparently no reason for hope that these Christians are instead filled with hope!? How do you explain that?

There has long been tension in Christianity between those who emphasize doing good and loving their neighbor and those who emphasize preaching the Gospel. This tension often runs deep, reflecting a fundamental theological division. But in many ways, Peter's words eliminate that distinction.

To those who just want to live the Gospel without having to ever talk about it, Peter is telling them/us that, if you really do live the Gospel, if you really are Christlike, then people are going to ask why you are filled with hope - and then you should be ready with an answer. We need not be shy about proclaiming the source of our hope, especially when someone has asked the question!

To those who just want to show up and preach the Gospel, Peter is telling them/us that you need to do the hard work of being Christlike. There is no greater witness to the power of the Gospel than a life lived filled with the hope made possible that Good News. The Gospel is not just words, it is always embodied; the Word takes on flesh.

We should be sharing the Gospel in both word and deed. The two necessarily go together, but it's probably always been the case - and I think it's particularly true of our age - that preaching should follow living. You get to speak once it's apparent that you might have something worth saying. And when we get that opportunity, we should be ready.

This means that our emphasis needs to be on blessing people - perhaps especially those people who we'd rather curse. The God who wants good for the world wants us to do good in the world, and as we follow Jesus the Blessed One, we can take confidence that we will be blessed, even in the midst of suffering, and as we live in that hope, day after day after day, we believe that we will be a blessing to our neighbors, to our community, to the world.



REPAYING EVIL WITH BLESSING

Week Four Reflection Questions

1. Who are your enemies? Do you think/feel you have some enemies because you are a Christian?
2. Why does cursing our enemies come more naturally than blessing our enemies? What are some practical ways that you can bless them anyway?
3. Does it matter how people respond to being blessed? Should we ever decide whether to do good based on the anticipated results? - or should we just bless people and let the consequences take care of themselves?
4. Has anyone ever asked you to “give an answer” for the hope that is in you? How did that question come about? How did you respond?
5. Are we better able to witness to the Gospel when we are suffering? When is “the hope that is in us” most clearly revealed?
6. Are modern people more impressed by words or deeds? How do we earn the right to be heard? What if they never ask why we bless, why we are filled with hope?



REPAYING EVIL WITH BLESSING

Week Four Reflection
Questions Continued

Focus Questions:

7. How did Jesus bless people? Can we do the same?
8. Does this week's lesson further inform how you can bless others?
Does it inspire you to bless others?
9. How have you given and received blessing in the past week (or beyond)? Share your stories
10. How can we as a church (not just as individuals) bless people?

Things to think about when we are considering blessing people:

B – Begin with Prayer: Who should I bless on an ongoing basis (your 5) and open my eyes to see others around me who I can bless spontaneously.

L – Listen with care: When engaging with people, really listen and pay attention – seek to remember details they talk about.

E – Eat/meet/connect (covid compliant of course!)

S – Serve them: Remember people are not projects(!), they are people who Jesus calls us to serve and love

S - Share your story: When people ask you, are you ready to share part of your story?



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