



Blessing ⁱⁿ the wilderness

By Mark Ross

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them" (Num. 6:22-27).

(This is the third article in the Living by Numbers series.)

These are perhaps the best known words of the book of Numbers. The Lord prescribed this benediction to be given as Israel prepared to leave Sinai and begin the march into the wilderness. It would become a regular part of the priests' ministry to Israel (Deut. 10:8, 21:5).

These words are familiar to us because they are a regular part of Christian worship in many places, often spoken at the close of worship services, weddings, funerals, and other special gatherings. But the very repetition which makes them so familiar, as well as their placement at the end of the service, can easily dull us to their significance, cause us to take them for granted, and treat them with indifference. By the time they are pronounced, we might already have disengaged from the service, allowing our hearts and minds to begin focusing on things that will be happening later. Indeed, by this

time in the service, some have already departed, thinking that the important things are now finished, and this is just the spiritual-sounding "you are dismissed" conclusion.

Yet the words were spoken to Israel as powerful words of blessing. The formula is bounded on both sides with statements of its purpose and effect: "Thus you shall bless the people of Israel (v. 23) . . . So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them" (v. 27). This blessing, as James Philip has said (*Mastering the Old Testament: Numbers*, p. 88), "is not the mere expression of pious hope." It is not a prayer offered by the priest on behalf of the people. It is not, therefore, a word to God from us, or from one of us on behalf of all. It is a word from God to his people, a royal proclamation in fact, spoken through his appointed representative, declaring that the Lord's blessing is given. The blessing of the Lord's name then rests upon the people as they go from Sinai into the wilderness. Derek Kidner has appropriately

commented (“Leviticus,” *Daily Devotional Bible Commentary*, p. 116), “The blessing of the people was no empty gesture but an effective transmission of power.” If we had that view of the benediction, we would certainly not allow our minds to wander off to some earthly concern while it was pronounced. It would be eagerly awaited, and we would receive it as rain falling on thirsty ground.

But surely, you say, it can’t be that simple; it just can’t be true that any person at all, believer or not, present in a church and hearing the benediction pronounced, walks out with a blessing. Indeed, it is not that simple. As we can see in the Scriptures, these words were given during a remarkable period of Israel’s faithfulness and devotion (Num. 1-10). They had sinned greatly at Sinai, but Moses interceded and God showed amazing grace in the forgiveness of that sin (Ex. 32-34). Israel responded to that grace with love and devotion. What God commanded for building the tabernacle, Israel did; and God responded with a gracious descent from heaven, taking up residence in the tabernacle, to dwell among His people (Exod. 35-40).

Now Israel is preparing to leave Sinai and journey into the wilderness, just as the Lord commanded (Num. 1-6). The presence of the Lord, which Israel had known at the foot of Sinai when the tabernacle was erect, would also be known when the tabernacle was packed up and carried. The words of the benediction were to encourage them in the wilderness trek, to assure them of the Lord’s presence and blessing. These words provided no assurance for a rebellious and disbelieving people. There was no mechanical blessing for them then as there is no mechanical blessing for us now. Without faith, it is impossible to please God, then as now (Heb. 11:6).

At the same time, though these words are not a mechanical formula for bestowing or receiving blessing, neither are they an empty ritual or a mere expression of good will. They are powerful words of blessing. The New Testament continues this aspect of Old Testament religion. Our Lord Jesus Christ gave such a benediction as He ascended into heaven (Luke 24:50-51). Nearly all the New Testament epistles close with benedictions. When spoken to a believing people, whose faith works through love (Gal. 5:6), benedictions provide comfort and assurance that God’s grace and blessing rest upon us as we leave our gathered assemblies and resume our own wilderness journey. They assure us that as we present our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, He will never leave us nor forsake us (Heb. 13:5). For those of faith, the blessing empowers and sustains, refreshing faith and renewing hope, so that we can meet the challenges of life. Don’t leave church without it. **ROC**



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