

²²The 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 upon 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.”

I was considering faking a sneeze to start the sermon this morning. But I’m not a good actor. So I’ll just ask the question: If I were to sneeze right now what would you say in response? That’s right: “Bless you.” Short for: “God bless you.”

Do you know when that custom started? It’s okay if you don’t; no one is really sure. Some say that it started in the first century. People then believed a sneeze could expel your soul from your body. “God bless you” was really, “May God put your soul back!” Others say it started during the Black Plague in Europe. A sneeze might be the first symptom you have it. So “God bless you” was “God save you from the plague.” Now-a-days, if we’re not just saying it be polite, it probably carries the same meaning: “God keep you from getting sick!”

Whether they come after a sneeze or not, those words - “God bless you” - what are they expressing? What do we mean when we say them? We’re expressing a hope or a desire that God would do something good for someone else.

And so maybe that’s how we hear the blessing at the end of each service. The sermon lesson today is from Numbers 6, the words you hear at the end of worship: “**The LORD bless you and keep you...**” I think that in our minds, we sometimes hear that as a wish or desire. We might even stick a mental “may” before each line of it: “May the LORD bless you...” As if to say, “I hope he will!”

But there’s no “may” in the Hebrew. It’s a future tense verb you could translate: “The LORD will bless you.” This isn’t a wish for God’s blessing...it’s the Triune God promising his blessing, the good he does, for believers. The last verse of our lesson affirms that: **So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.**

But could the fact we don’t hear it that way maybe mean we don’t always see it that way? God’s sure about blessing us, but there are times when we aren’t so sure he actually is. Maybe that’s one reason God wanted the Israelites to hear this twice a day – and why we repeat it at the end of every service. God wants you to be sure: This blessing is yours. 1) Because of God’s grace, 2) in spite of appearances.

The first reason you can be sure this blessing is yours is because of who it depends on. God repeats that three times, right at the beginning of each line: **The LORD**. Did you notice that's in all capital letters? That's that special name God uses for himself, Jehovah. And God explains what that name means in Exodus 34: "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness." In other words, he loves even though we don't deserve it. He's faithful to his promises even when we are unfaithful. And his gracious promise to every believer is this: **I will bless them.**

His blessing depends on him...not on you. Oh, you show up in these verses, too: six times, in fact! But did you notice? You're not doing anything – anything but receiving the blessings God freely gives.

I think this is a source of some of our uncertainty about this blessing. Our default mode as sinners is to want to deal with God on the basis of what we do; thinking this relationship depends on me. And so as long as we're doing what's right, God will be blessing us. But when we fail God, he might withdraw his blessing.

You find that attitude in your heart sometimes, don't you? When something bad happens in your life...it's the voice that says one of two things: If you think you've been pretty good, it says, "I don't deserve this!" If you realize the truth, that you're not good, it says with fear, "Maybe God is angry with me and finally giving me what I deserve."

God knows this about us. So what does he do? He shuts that voice up at the beginning of each line of this blessing. **The LORD, the LORD, the LORD** he says. It's as if he were saying, "You know what? You don't deserve this. You deserve my curse for your sins, not my blessing! But I am all about loving those who don't deserve it. And in my love for you, I gave my Son the curse your sins deserved on the cross. Through faith in him, it's gone, and there are only blessings left for you."

This blessing doesn't depend on you. It depends God's unflinching grace and Christ's unshakable work. Which means you can be sure: Through faith, it's yours.

So...what is it? God divides it into three parts – and on Trinity Sunday, we can't help but see why. Each person in the one true God is at work to bless you.

God the Father will **bless you and keep you**. The word bless in Hebrew is related to two others – getting on your knees and giving a gift. It's father's day, so picture a dad coming down to eye-level with his child to give them a present. That's what Father does for you! Although he is our Lord, he stoops down to serve us with every gift we need for body and soul. And he **keeps** us, too – like an overprotective dad watching out for the child he loves, God the Father zealously guards us from dangers to body and soul.

And God the Son **will make God's face shine on you and be gracious to you**. Because of our sins, God's face should flare with righteous anger when he looks at us. But God the Son became one of us and made our sins his own. On the cross, God the Father's anger burned against Jesus...in our place. Through faith in Jesus, our sins are forgiven and God's face shines on us. We still use the expression today: "His face lit up." That's God's face, beaming with delight, when he sees what Christ has made of you.

And God the Holy Spirit will keep the **LORD's face turned toward you and give you peace.** "Face turned toward" is the opposite of turning your back on someone. That's rejecting them, but turning towards someone is accepting them. When the Holy Spirit brought you to faith in Jesus, God accepted you as his dearly loved child. He keeps God's face turned toward you by keeping you in the faith. And he comes to you in word and Sacrament to give you peace – assure your guilty conscience your sins are forgiven and all is well with you and God.

This incredible Triune blessing: By grace, through faith, it's yours.

But it doesn't always seem that way. I studied this text with Nate Buege, our pastor in Katy. He had a member who was going through a particularly tough time in life. And when Pastor Buege reminded him of God's promise to use this as a blessing, the man said, "It doesn't feel like a blessing."

I bet Israel could relate. As their trip to the promised land turned into a 40-year wandering through a hot desert. As they prepared manna for dinner for the 1000th time. As poisonous snakes infested their camp. God told them he was blessing them, but in situations like that, I wouldn't be surprised if they thought, "This doesn't seem like a blessing."

Maybe you can relate, too. God says he's giving me all I need, but that can seem like an empty promise when he takes away something or someone we love. God says he's guarding and keeping us, but when the accident, or the illness, or the heartbreak happens...we might wonder about it. God says he's giving me peace, but when our hearts are filled with a worry we can't shake, we might wonder if God is really blessing us.

The problem in those situations isn't that God turns off his blessing. No, it's that we start trusting what we see and feel more than what God says. We have our own definition of what God blessing us should look like - usually a more earthly one than his. And when God doesn't bless by our definition, we can doubt whether he is or not.

Do you think that maybe that was why God wanted Israel to hear it twice a day? Why, even though it's the end of every service, we'd do well to listen as if for the first time? Because, like God says, this is him **putting his name** on us. God's name – that's the truth about who God is and what he does for us. The fact that he's the God of grace, who loves us with all of his heart, even though we don't deserve it. The truth that he didn't spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all...so won't he graciously give us every good thing? In this blessing, God takes the truth and impresses it on our hearts all over again...and leads us to trust that it's true.

That even when God takes what I love, he did it for my spiritual good and will richly provide all I need to endure it. That even when he allows some disaster to befall us, he's using it to guard and keep us close to him in faith. That even when I don't feel peace, I have it - my sins are forgiven and I'm at peace with God – because he says so.

So believe it. Even when it doesn't seem like he's blessing you, even when it doesn't feel like he's blessing you, even when you can think of a thousand reasons why he shouldn't, believe it – because God says it. This blessing is yours. Amen.