



THE BLESSING

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

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Ephesians 1:1-3
First Message
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Have you noticed that there is a deep ache in our world today? I call it the "Cain Syndrome." It seems people everywhere are under the curse of Cain. They have been cut off from something very precious, and they are wandering to and fro on the earth, like Cain, lonely, aimless fugitives finding no place to rest. Gary Smalley and John Trent in their book *The Blessing* feel they have discovered what these wanderers are so desperately seeking: it is love, acceptance, and approval from their earthly fathers. When we probe this generation's past, we discover that very few children received their father's blessing. Many have grown up under the curse of rejection or abuse.

I grew up in a loving home, but I am keenly aware of how much I missed that blessing when I fell out of my father's favor after I became a Christian. Seeking the blessing became a driving force in my life. At times I saw myself like the patriarch Jacob of old who would do anything, beg, steal or cheat, for the blessing. Seeing how prevalent this phenomenon is in our culture, David Roper asked, "Who will set us free from the tyranny of our father's love?" Our text this morning, from the opening verses of the book of Ephesians, answers this poignant question. If, like so many, you are wandering like Cain in search of the blessing, I pray you will receive it in full measure this morning.

The apostle Paul begins his letter with a greeting to the Christians at Ephesus:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus; Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Imprisoned in Rome in 60 A.D., Paul writes to the church which he founded in Ephesus. He begins with a typical greeting, identifying himself as the author, with his full apostolic authority. Then he addresses the recipients, whom he describes as "the saints in Ephesus." They are saints not because they are an elite group, but because they belong to Christ Jesus by faith. This is what makes them holy and set apart. Paul also describes these Christians as faithful.

Verse 3 begins the body of the letter with a Hebrew blessing:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens in Christ.

Verses 3 through 14 actually form one long sentence in Greek. Paul searches for words to describe the richness of the Christian's blessings in Christ. This sentence is really a crescendo of OT theology which reaches a climax in Christ. In a way, this is like the Hallelujah Chorus, which is the climax of Handel's *Messiah*. Like the Hallelujah Chorus, which we usually hear sung on its own and not as the climax to the oratorio, so too we hear these words from Ephesians in a limited context. This causes us to miss the full weight these words had upon the original hearers as the grand climax of Old Testament theology.

As I studied to preach on these verses, I decided to look up

every usage of the words "bless" or "blessing" in the Bible, and I found they are used a total of 379 times in the Scriptures. So this morning I would like to trace "The Blessing" from its beginning to its application in the church. We will seek to answer the following four questions:

1. What was the original meaning of the word "blessing"?
2. From whom is the blessing to be found?
3. How did Christ transform the blessing?
4. How is the blessing applied to us in the Church?

I. What was the original meaning of blessing?

Genesis 1:28

What exactly is Paul talking about when he says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens in Christ"? Let's begin by looking at the first time this word "blessed" is used concerning mankind in the Bible. Genesis 1:28 says: "God *blessed* them and said, 'Be *fruitful* and *multiply* and *fill* the earth and *subdue* it. *Rule* over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'" God's blessing originates from God's command, imparting fertility to mankind, granting them the ability to have many children; and their many children are to fill the whole earth, subduing it and ruling over it. The term subdue means

to "bring into bondage, keep under, ...by force if necessary." It "assumes that the party being subdued is hostile to the subduer, necessitating some sort of coercion if the subduing is to take place" (John N. Oswalt, *Theological Wordbook of the OT*, 1:430).

The blessing, therefore, is designed to make man king so that he rules like God rules.

So the blessing is two-fold: a) man is gifted with fertility leading to abundant life, and b) that life is to have dominion over the whole earth. We can see these same two ideas when God repeats the promise of blessing to Abraham. God promised, "I will greatly *bless* you, and I will greatly *multiply your seed* as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore [abundant life]; and your seed shall possess the gate of their *enemies* [his seed would have dominion and conquer evil]" (Gen. 22:17). So the original meaning of the blessing in the OT was God's gift of fertility that gave abundant life to conquer evil.

II. Where is the blessing to be found?

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with..." The blessing cannot be given by human fathers, it can only be bestowed by the heavenly Father.

Three things about God's character and this blessing are noteworthy.

(a) In a Father who longs to be gracious - Genesis 1:28

The blessing comes from a Father who is generous and longs

to give abundantly. From the creation account we learn that God blessed man before he had ever done anything to earn blessing. Man therefore cannot demand or earn God's blessing. This is hard for some who tend to think of the heavenly Father like they think their own earthly father. Some, like Jacob, may take a lifetime to learn that God is truly gracious. This was Jacob's experience in the OT. He tried to steal the blessing by deceiving his brother Esau; then he sought to acquire it by manipulating Laban. Even when he came face to face with God, wrestling with the angel of the Lord in the dust, he tried to gain the blessing in a violent confrontation. "Let go," demanded the angel of the LORD. "I won't let you go until you bless me!" responded Jacob. But ironically, Jacob could not have the blessing until he let go because the blessing is only acquired as a gift. So the angel touched the sinew of Jacob's thigh, dislocating his hip, and at that he was forced to let go. At last he received the blessing. At the end of his life we find him resting on his staff, worshiping God, and in that state of rest he imparts the blessing of grace to his sons.

So the heavenly Father longs to bless you without any manipulation, begging, cajoling or vain achievements on your part. And you don't have to wait until he is in a good mood before you approach him.

There is a second thing about God's character.

(b) In a Father who is uncompromising - Deuteronomy 28

The blessing is granted by grace, but it is maintained by obedience. God blessed Abraham, saying, "I will bless you and make you a great nation..." It took 600 years for God to complete that promise by grace, but then he told the nation Israel through Moses that the blessing, though granted as a gift of grace, could only be maintained by obedience. Listen to these words from Deuteronomy: "All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you *if you obey* the Lord your God" (Deut. 28:2). "You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock...your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed... 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" (Deut. 28:3-12). But if Israel failed to obey, then the curse, not the blessing, would be theirs. Their prosperity would be dismantled and their land would dry up. Instead of victory over their enemies, their foes would enter their gates and take them off the good land which they had received as a gift. Instead of being many in number they would be few.

God is not only gracious in his demeanor, he is also uncompromising in his holiness — and he leaves reminders to us to attest to that fact. In the British Museum in London a month ago, I saw an entire room dedicated to the siege of Lachish by the Assyrian king, Sennacherib. Lachish was the most fortified defense post in Judah, but Solomon did not trust the Lord to deliver him fully in battle so he made the city into a chariot horse center contrary to the Lord's warning in the Law: "*He [the king] shall not multiply horses for himself...*" (Deut. 17:16). Rather than trusting the God who had given them the blessing, the Jews put their trust in an idol. Today, 2,500 years later, you can view God's wrath carved in stone by Sennacherib, detailing the fall of Lachish. Though the blessing was given by grace, it can be lost, and the proof of that can be seen in the British Museum. The holy God will not compromise his holiness.

So the blessing is received as a free gift of grace, but it is to

be maintained by obedience.

But if that were the sum and total of God's character, the blessing would be lost forever. There is something deeper in the Father's character, however, that makes this blessing possible.

(c) In a Father whose loyal-love is unending - 2 Samuel 7

God is gracious and uncompromising, but he also is tenacious in his love. He is determined to bless us no matter how many times we fail. On every occasion when man loses the blessing because of disobedience, we find God faithfully judging man, but afterwards he recommits himself anew to bless him.

We find the climax to God's determination to bless man in the oath God makes to King David in 2 Samuel 7. There God promised David that he would have a son who "shall build a house for me and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me...but My *loyal-love shall not depart* from him...and your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me *forever*; your throne shall be established *forever*." (2 Sam. 7:13-16.) Now the blessing is secured forever through God's commitment to the line of David.

Oh how God the Father is determined to bless us! His tenacious love will not end with uncompromising judgment, but with a renewed commitment to ensure we will be blessed in the end. What a great principle this is for parents in the raising of children. Parenting begins with a demeanor of grace toward the child, granting him privileges and blessings. But this must also be coupled with uncompromising discipline. If it ends there, however, our children are doomed. Each time the child fails the parent must not only discipline, but renew their love commitment to the child. Our love must be tenacious despite their failures. Ray and Elaine Stedman modeled this kind of tenacious love in many wonderful ways. The greatest example of this, perhaps, was that after 40 years of ministry, Ray could have built his own empire, but instead he quietly walked off the worldwide stage. He and Elaine wanted to spend their last years with their children and grandchildren in a small town in Oregon, just to make sure the children received the blessing.

III. How was the blessing transformed?

Not only was this blessing promised and secured by an oath of God, it was taken to a transcendent new level in Christ. We see hints of this in the Psalms.

(a) Hints of a transformation - Psalms 16, 17

Here is what David wrote in Psalm 16:

The LORD is the portion of my inheritance and my cup;
Thou dost support my lot.
The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places;
Indeed my heritage is beautiful to me.
I will bless the LORD who has counseled me;
Indeed my mind instructs me in the night.
I have set the LORD continually before me;
Because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.
Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices;
My flesh also will dwell securely. (Psa 16:5-9)

In the words, "I will be a father to him, he will be a son to me," we find a new spiritual dimension to the blessing. David would have a deep intimacy with God, the same as a son does with his father. He would be counseled and instructed by him, and flooded with spiritual life. David says that this inheritance is so beautiful and pleasant it rejoices the heart, bringing a security that surpasses any earthly pleasures.

In Psalm 17, David unveils the gateway through which this blessing is given.

Deliver my soul from the wicked with Thy sword,
From men with Thy hand, O LORD,
From men of the world, whose portion is *in this life*;
And whose belly Thou dost fill with *Thy treasure*;
They are satisfied with *children*,
And leave their *abundance* to their babes.
As for me, I shall behold Thy face in righteousness;
I will be satisfied with Thy likeness when I awake.

(Psa 17:13-15)

David says that he entered into this new spiritual dimension of blessing as he lost the old earthly blessings which are described in the Old Covenant. In this psalm he describes the wicked as receiving those blessings — treasure, children, an abundance which they leave to their children, etc. But, having lost those things, David inherited God himself — and that was infinitely better.

And he understood that he would receive his final inheritance beyond the grave, in the resurrection. This is what he foresaw in Psalm 17:15, and, as he wrote in Psalm 16, referring to one of his future sons, the Holy One of Israel:

For Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Sheol;
Neither will Thou allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay.
Thou wilt make know to me the path of life;
In Thy presence is fulness of joy;
In Thy right hand there are pleasures forever. (Psa 16:10-11)

Now I understand Elaine Stedman's comment to me after we lost a second child, our baby daughter, in 1976. She said, "God must really love you." It has taken me 16 years to comprehend the full meaning of those words. I thought I had lost the blessing, but she knew I had gained it. My children were living beyond the grave, and losing them made me more intimate with Christ.

(b) The life of Christ: A blessing or a curse?

Without this understanding of the transformation of the blessing you will never appreciate the teaching or the life of Jesus. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, ...those who mourn, ...the meek, ...those who hunger and thirst, ...blessed are the persecuted..." Some blessing! you say. Hearing this "blessing" of Jesus, a rabbi might well retort, "If that's the blessing, smite me with the curse!" But Jesus went on to talk about the curse, too: "Woe to you who are rich, who are full, who laugh..." Jesus was turning the notion of blessing upside-down!

Under the old definition we have to ask was the life of Jesus blessed? Did he have any physical seed? The answer, of course, is, no. He died barren. Yet Isaiah said of him, "He will see His seed" (Isaiah 53:10). Did Jesus enjoy a fertile inheritance in the land? No. He had no place to lay his head, says the NT. Hear the poignant words of the gospel writer, "Everyone went to his home, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives (he had no home)" (John 7:53-8:1). Did Jesus possess the gate of his enemies in Jerusalem? When Jesus entered their gates, his enemies did whatever they pleased with him. There are paving stones engraved with a crown of thorns dating from the first century, still visible today in Jerusalem as a testimony to his torture.

But, following the Davidic tradition, he lost earthly blessings to gain the heavenly blessing — the blessing of an intimate relationship with the Father, and being flooded abundant spiritual life He conquered the ultimate enemies of life — the world, the flesh, the devil and death itself. Thus after the resurrection, the

apostles describe Christ as having received and secured the blessing once and for all.

(c) The blessing fulfilled and transformed - Acts 13:32-34

"And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that *God has fulfilled this promise* to our children in that He raised up Jesus... And as for the fact that *He raised Him up* from the dead, no more to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: 'I will give you the holy and sure *blessings of David*...'"

Jesus received the "sure blessings of David" in the resurrection. God is gracious in demeanor, uncompromising in his holiness, and his love is so tenacious he is determined to bless in a new and transcendent way those whom he loves.

Now we come to our text, Ephesians 1:3, where the apostle Paul applies this Messianic blessing to all who believe in Christ.

IV. How is the blessing applied? (Ephesians 1:3)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies, in Christ.

As we read this wonderful Hebrew blessing we can begin to feel the wonder and awe Paul felt as he understood the amazing work of Christ toward us who believe. There is no blessing like this anywhere in the Old Testament!

He says three things about it.

(a) The blessing is applied in full measure

If you believe in Jesus, you get the full blessing. And that full measure is possible because Jesus took the full measure of our curse, becoming a curse for us. So the entire package, the full blessing promised to the seed of David that was given to Jesus at the resurrection — abundant spiritual life to conquer enemies and reign over evil — is given to everyone who believes in Jesus. God's tenacious love guarantees that you get the whole blessing. There is no second blessing. It may, however, take a lifetime of wonderful experiences to learn to appreciate, comprehend and appropriate the love of Christ which has already been given. At times your spirit may become so enlivened you may feel as though you were dead before in comparison, but the text is clear: the full measure of the blessing has already been given by the Father; it is an already accomplished fact.

(b) With total acceptance: Father, Son and Spirit

Notice that there are three persons, Father, Son and Spirit, involved in this blessing. We are blessed with the full acceptance of every family member. Imagine if you had been born with AIDS and you were given up for adoption by your parents. After you were adopted you learned that your new father had to give up his pension to pay your medical bills; your new mother had to leave her job to care for you; and your new teenage brothers and sisters gave up their sports and extracurricular activities to care for you around the clock. What a heavy price everyone had to pay because they had adopted you, yet they felt privileged to do it. How blessed you would feel. This is the Christian's blessing: God places us in a family where every family member gave his all to redeem us and accepts us fully.

Finally, the blessing is given, not in its old dimension, but in its new spiritual dimension in the heavenlies.

(c) In its new dimension: spiritual in the heavenlies

"God...who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies, in Christ."

There was a time when I read this blessing and I would say to myself, "What a gyp!" It was because I wanted earthly blessings. My reaction would not have made any sense to these early Christians in Ephesus. They lived under the shadow of the glorious temple of the cult of Artemis, the seventh wonder of the world. They had no political power and no legal sanction. They were for the most part poor in comparison to the venture capitalists of their day. They were tiny in numbers, their founder was crucified, their present leader was in prison. Yet, says Paul, they were "blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ." First century believers may not have had many earthly blessings, but they were so spiritually fruitful they had dominion over the whole earth. How else can we explain the fact that following the preaching of one sermon, three thousand spiritual sons were born into the kingdom at Pentecost? How could a sexually abused woman, an outcast of Samaria, become so flooded with spiritual life following her encounter with Jesus that she gave spiritual birth to her whole town in three days? Rachel never did anything like that in the OT. It was because this Samaritan woman had received the spiritual blessing. How do you explain the countless Christian martyrs slaughtered in the 300-year blood-bath? It was because they had gladly received their blessing.

No one taught me more about the full measure of our spiritual blessings in Christ than Ray Stedman. And it was not just through his teaching that I came to know this, it was because he loved me like a son. Twenty years ago, when my wife and I were first married, I spent many evenings playing chess with him. When I got home, my wife would ask me, "What did you talk about for all those hours?" "Nothing," I would reply. I just took great joy in being in the presence of a father who loved me and accepted me. This was what I was seeking.

Yet if we were to evaluate Ray's life, would we say he was blessed? He did not receive his father's blessing. His father abandoned him when he was a youth and Ray never saw him again. World War II interrupted his studies so he never graduated from college. He went to seminary, but they wouldn't give him a degree because he hadn't graduated from college. He did not have many material possessions. When he died, he left his wife a tiny plot of land in Oregon. He had no earthly sons, yet this orphan of old possessed the blessing. Through suffering he found a gateway to intimacy with God. He had more spiritual sons than could be counted, and he traveled the whole of this earth subduing the world, the flesh and the devil through mighty spiritual weapons.

In his last days, our beloved patriarch Ray sought seclusion to be alone with his wife, his children and grandchildren, to gather them, like Jacob, and pass on the real blessing. At the end, as he lay in a coma, his daughter Linda was reading to him Psalms 40 and 23. Linda asked her mother what was the section of Scripture that her father loved so much, a passage that Handel had used in the Messiah. They found it in 1 Corinthians 15 and they began to read, "But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your victory? O Death, where is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." As Linda read the word "victory," Ray awoke and opened his eyes. He looked at his family gathered around his bedside, and breathed his last. He had inherited the

blessing.

"When Jacob finished charging his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and breathed his last, and was gathered to his people. Then Joseph fell on his father's face, and wept over him and kissed him." (Genesis 49:33-50:1)

O Ray, you were the good scribe
Who took out of your treasure
Things old and made them new,
And Glorious as Emmaus!

You were the loving disciple
Whose warmth could disarm
The most awkward legalist, and rebuild
From that ancient rubble a heart of flesh.

You were our bright illumined star,
The Luther of our generation,
With earthy genius removing the papal scepter,
And fearing none, returned it to the saints.

No rank of man was able to stand
Before your penetrating eye,
Nor was there a garrison strong enough
To protect one's heart from your piercing gaze.

You were the orphan of old
Who sang in the cave of Adullum,
And in that cave gathered
The outcasts of a new age.

You transformed us
By the simplicity
Of the Sacred page
Into a multitude of Royal sons.

Now we say, "Everything from Him,
Nothing from me!"
Yes, any old pot will do,
But it first must be broken.

And in the end, when you could have had it all,
When all others were playing the role of King,
You arose and said, "It shall not be so among you."
And taking your towel, sat down as a brother.

Now the dream of life is over,
Morning of eternity doth succeed,
Away the shadows of time
To eternal substance - Yeshuah.

And while we remain our tears
Shall bear constant witness,
That it was you who faithfully taught us
The New Covenant.
We love you, Papa.

*In appreciation of Ray C. Stedman
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