

A Blessing Well Spent

Psalm 67

My first job was cleaning my dad's office. I think I was probably 10, maybe younger. It was a team effort, first with my older brother and then later with my younger sister. I think he paid us \$10 each to empty the trash, dust the desks and counters, clean the bathrooms, and vacuum the carpet. Not a bad gig for a ten-year-old. It didn't take too long to save up a decent amount of money.

But then the question comes: *what will I spend it on?* What does a ten-year-old spend forty dollars on? That was like my first existential crisis. Kind of—the answer was clearly toys. But *which* toys? It wasn't quite enough for the new G.I. Joe fighter jet; but I could buy seven or eight action figures. Or, I could save up for the go-kart I really wanted. What will I do with this money I've been given?

I watch our kids go through the same existential crisis when they get money for their birthday or Christmas. There are so many options. But what's interesting is that, virtually by default, all of the options we tend to consider are all for us. What we want. What we dream about. What would improve our lives, bring us joy, make us feel complete. And I think most of us can identify with this. If you've ever played the game 'if I won the lottery' and thought about how you'd spend all that money, most of us, if we're honest, prioritize ourselves. Sure, maybe we'd pay off debt or put the kids through college, but after that it's the house and the car and the vacations, or the investments to make even more money. Of course we'd give something to the Lord or to charity, but that's rarely the first idea that comes to our mind.

And the reality is that we can have this same impulse toward the gifts that God gives us, the blessings we receive from his hand. Blessings like life, and health, and money, and possessions, and relationships, or education, job opportunities, talents and abilities—all that we enjoy in this world God made and rules over—our default is collect and spend all of these things on us.

But why does God bless his people? Why does he give us good gifts? Surely because he loves us. He cares for us and for our flourishing. But is there something more? Something bigger than our comfort, our safety, our success, realizing our dreams? Something bigger than us to spend his blessings on?

We find the answer to that question in Psalm 67, as we conclude our Summer in the Psalms series this morning.

The Blessings of God

Psalm 67 is all about God's blessing. Notice how it begins and ends repeating that word. It opens with a variation on the priestly blessing from Numbers 6:24-26. Back in Numbers, God instructed Moses to speak to Aaron and his sons—the priests of Israel, 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 [face] 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). Psalm 67 begins with a prayer requesting that very blessing from God: “May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us . . .” (v. 1).

And it ends by affirming God's ongoing hand of blessing in Israel's life. Verse 6: “The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, shall bless us. God shall bless us . . .” (vv. 6-7). God's vision for his people is one of blessing.

So what does that mean? In the context of Israel's old covenant, it means everything that makes human life under God's rule possible and full. It's both spiritual and physical. It's rooted in God's vision for creation, where “God blessed [humanity] . . . and . . . said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it . . .’” (Gen. 1:28). And it's detailed in Israel's law, where those blessings are set in the context of a covenant relationship with God. The God who rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt promises to be their God, and they his people. And to supply them with every blessing necessary for living faithfully under his rule and flourishing as his people. Blessings that include land and health, protection and material provision, the posterity of future generations, and most importantly, the very presence of God. That's what the language of God's face shining on Israel is meant to convey—the warmth and light of his presence in their midst. Relationship. Forgiveness. Worship. Glory. The blessings of the old covenant were both spiritual and physical. But they were also contingent on Israel's faithfulness to that covenant. For Israel to realize and enjoy the blessings God promised, they had to remain loyal and not give their worship to any other god. If they did, they brought upon themselves the curses of God in place of his blessing, so that they might repent and eventually turn back to him (cf. Deut. 28).

So how does that relate to us today, who are under a new covenant in Christ? The blessings God promises his people remain both spiritual and physical—that has not changed. But there are two important differences. First, those blessings are secured for us by Christ's obedience and loyalty, not ours. Jesus was faithful where Adam, Israel, and all of us have failed. We don't receive God's blessings based on our own performance—whether I read my Bible this morning, or went to church, or helped my neighbor. God doesn't love me more when I sing praise to him or obey his Word, or love me less when I have a lustful thought or speak a cruel word to others. He loves me as much as he loves his very own eternal Son, because it's through him that I have relationship with God—by trusting Christ and being united with him in his perfect life, his substitutionary death, and his powerful resurrection. As Galatians 2:20 puts it, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

If we are in Christ, then every blessing of God is already ours forever, both the spiritual and the physical. All that God envisioned in creation and detailed in his covenant; we are fellow heirs of all of it with Christ (cf. Gal. 3:29; 4:7).

But, second—and this is a critical difference to understand as well—there is an already and not-yet aspect to enjoying those blessings. That is to say that we experience some of those blessings today—both spiritual and physical—but we will not enjoy their fullness until the end when Christ returns and the redemption of God is complete in the restoration of all things, the new heaven and new earth. We live in what is often called “the meantime”—between the cross and the new creation.

And so for example, we enjoy the blessing of being forgiven of all our sin already in Christ; we are justified by faith already. But we continue to fight against sin and temptation in our daily lives; the presence of sin won’t be removed completely until the end. God’s presence is already in us through the Holy Spirit, but we are not yet in his unmediated presence, before his throne—not until the end. Or take physical blessings like provision or health. In the end, there will be no more pain, no more sorrow, no more poverty, no more death. And sometimes God gives us a foretaste of that by supplying our needs, even abundantly, or by healing our sickness or diseases. We pray for him to do that, and we praise him when he does. He enjoys giving good gifts to his children. But that’s not always his plan. Sometimes he takes us through suffering and hardship instead. Because the “meantime” is often marked by sharing in the sufferings of Christ. As a means of transformation, helping us grow spiritually. And as a means of witness, showing the world what the love of Christ looks like. Such that whatever abundance, health, or healing we enjoy today is like a billboard along the roadside with a picture of a big juicy steak. It gives us a glimpse and whets our appetites for what’s to come.

And this is one of the critical mistakes the prosperity gospel makes. The prosperity gospel rightly recognizes that God promises to bless his children, both spiritually and physically, but it wrongly insists that all of those blessings can be ours right now. It has no theology of suffering. And if you don’t experience all of those blessings, then the fault lies squarely on you. You don’t have enough faith. You’re not obedient enough. It’s a toxic perversion of the gospel.

So God’s vision for his people is a life of blessing. Of giving us every good gift that makes life under God’s rule possible and full—some of which we enjoy now in part, but all of which will be ours fully in the end.

The Aim of God’s Blessings

But what do we do with the good gifts of God? How do we spend whatever blessings God does give us? Again, our temptation is to take whatever we receive and spend it on ourselves. To use God’s provision for pursuing our dreams, chasing our own desires, building our own kingdoms, making much of ourselves. But this psalm offers a powerful corrective to that impulse. Take a look again at the beginning and end of the psalm, where we see the aim of God’s blessings. Why he gives his children good gifts.

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, . . . *that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations.* (vv. 1-2)

The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, shall bless us. God shall bless us; *let all the ends of the earth fear him!* (vv. 6-7)

There's something bigger at work in the blessings of God than our dreams, our desires, our kingdoms. God blesses his people that he might realize *his* dreams, *his* desires, for the sake of *his* kingdom. He gives us good gifts in order that his salvation and glory would spread to all nations, that men and women from every people group on earth would be redeemed to fear and worship him.

We see this again when you look at vv. 3 and 5. Notice how just as the beginning and end of the psalm parallel each other, as you move toward the middle, the next level inward is a parallel as well. In fact it's a verbatim repetition. And it's focused on God's desire that all the nations would know and praise him. "Let the peoples praise you, O God; let *all* the peoples praise you!" (vv. 3, 5). Not just Israel, but *all* the peoples.

And this has always been the goal of God's blessing. We see it throughout Scripture. In Genesis 12 God reclaims the blessing he envisioned in creation by calling Abraham and blessing him. But notice the scope of Abraham's blessing: "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. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and *in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*" (Gen. 12:2-3). God blesses Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him.

The same is true for Israel. In Isaiah 42, God calls the people of Israel to be his servant. "I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light *for the nations*, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness" (Isa. 42:6-7). Israel was to live in such a way that the nations around them would see the glory of God in their midst, and give their worship to him.

But of course Israel failed to do that. God says later in Isaiah 42, "Who is blind but my servant, or deaf as my messenger whom I send?" (42:19). The people called to open blind eyes are just as blind as the nations around them. And so God raises up a new servant, who speaks in Isaiah 49:

And now the LORD says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him . . . "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Isa. 49:5-6).

The servant whom God calls to redeem Israel will at the same time be a light to all nations, that God's blessing might indeed result in his salvation extending to the ends of the earth.

And of course when you get to the New Testament, you realize that servant is Jesus. Jesus, the true King of Israel, who is the Savior of the whole world. Jesus, who, as Galatians puts it, "redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us . . . so that in Christ Jesus the *blessing* of Abraham might come to the Gentiles [the *nations*], so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith" (Gal. 3:13-14). Jesus, who sends his followers not just to the people of Israel, but to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19).

And when you get to the end of the story—the book of Revelation, what do we find, but the realization of God’s dream, the fulfillment of his promises, the fruit of his blessing in the worship of the nations.

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev. 7:9-10)

God’s desire is for people from every nation to know his salvation and glory, and he blesses his people to that end.

The God Who Blesses

But why is this his desire? Why is the salvation and worship of all nations the aim of God’s blessing? Isn’t that a bit self-serving on his part, to make everything about him?

Not if there’s no greater gift he can give us than himself. And that’s what the center of the psalm emphasizes—the unique worthiness of God. The structure of the psalm from beginning to end pushes us toward the middle in v. 4: “Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, *for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth.*”

That might strike us as an odd reason for the nations to rejoice in God: *he’s a really fair judge and guide.* You expect to see here that he’s a merciful Savior or a loving Father. “He judges the peoples with equity and guides the nations upon earth.”

But what is it that the nations, that all peoples, ultimately long for? Justice. For the world to be made right. To work the way that it ought to. And direction—to know what to do about it, how to live rightly in it.

Because this is what the nations and the peoples of this fallen world are so often deprived. As one author describes,

Countries invade other countries and get away with it. The rich use the power of their money to get even richer while the poor, who can’t do anything about it, get even poorer. . . . Innocent people get convicted; guilty people are let off. The bullies, and those who can bribe their way out of trouble, get away with wrongdoing—not always, but often enough for us to notice. . . . People hurt others badly and walk away laughing. Victims don’t always get compensated. Sometimes they spend the rest of their lives coping with sorrow, hurt, and bitterness.¹

And who’s going to do something about it? We get our hopes worked up over this political leader or that one, but they all ultimately let us down. Is there any trustworthy guide? Is there any righteous judge? Who will rule with equity, with both righteousness and compassion? Who will decide for the victims, and defend the downtrodden, who will bring lasting peace and bring every wrong to rights—including the insurmountable wrongs we all have committed against heaven? When we find that judge and guide, will we praise him? Absolutely we will praise him!

¹ N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian* (New York: Harper One, 2006), 4-5.

And that's who God is. That's what God has accomplished by sending his eternal Son, Jesus Christ, to be our great King and Judge and Savior. That's the hope and joy of the cross and resurrection, where God's justice and mercy come together to redeem broken sinners and make all things new.

And he wants all the world to know this! He wants people from every nation to experience his salvation and the wholeness and redemption that he alone can provide. And so he *blesses us* to that end.

How Will We Spend Our Blessing?

So how will we spend our blessing? Whatever we receive from God's hands, what will we do with it? The life in your body, the breath in your lungs, the knowledge in your mind, the strength in your hands, the words on your tongue, the love in your heart, the money in your wallet, the relationships in your circle—how will you spend the good gifts of God for the sake of his kingdom?

That's a question that each one of us will have to answer personally in our relationship with God. I can't tell you what that means for you.

I can tell you a few things it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean that the way you spend your blessing has to look just like the way someone else spends theirs. Perhaps there's someone you respect, maybe a spiritual mentor, and they do this, so if I'm going to make my life count, I have to do the same thing. No that's their investment. You have to ask God, what's your investment?

Nor does it mean that if I really want my life to count for God's kingdom, I have to go into fulltime ministry. God may call some of you to the mission field, or to ministry, and I pray that he does. The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few (Matt. 9:37). It is a beautiful joy of this church to be able to send out our own to the nations. But it's not a varsity/junior varsity thing, where the full-time servants are the varsity, the really spiritual ones, and the rest of us are minor league. How is God calling you to spend your blessings for him?

Nor does it mean that if I have less than what others have, if the gifts of God I have received and enjoy are not as many or as much as someone else, then I can just sit this out, or at least wait until they get in the game. They can spare it. We're not called to measure out our investment in God's kingdom in comparison to others, but based on the value of the King himself. We're all called to be involved. Not out of guilt, or duty, but the humble delight of having been redeemed by Christ and called to lay our lives down for others as he has laid his life down for us.

What that looks like for you personally is something you have to ask God about. 'Lord show me how you want me to take the good things you have given me, and use them for your name, that your saving power might be known. Show me how to spend my money.' Am I using it all on my needs and my wants, or am I investing some in your kingdom? 'Show me how to spend my time.' Maybe I use part of my vacation for a short-term missions trip this year. Maybe I get up early one day of the week to meet with someone to read the Bible and pray together. Maybe instead of watching Netflix each night, we open the Word as a family once a week.

‘Lord, show me how to spend my energy. My talents. My dreams. Help me desire what you desire. Help me long for what you long for, and live my life accordingly. Help me, as Paul puts it in Philippians 1, to live my life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.’

I want to encourage each of you to set aside time this week and ask God that question. What does this mean for me? For us? Give yourself time before the kids get up or after they go to bed; find a corner in a coffee shop or a quiet bench in a park, and ask God with an open Bible and a pen in your hand. Write it down. Journal about it. And share it with someone else. A friend. Your home group. Drop me an email. I would love to hear how God is leading you to spend what he’s given you for the sake of his kingdom and glory. To be able to pray for you specifically and encourage you as you follow him.

Because the desires of God will be realized one day. This prayer and the vision of this psalm will become a reality, when heaven is filled with praise of God and of the Lamb in every language on earth. What role will we have played? That’s something to dream about.