

Benediction

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[0 : 00] Well, we continue tonight in our series on worship. And we're looking at the elements of worship each week right now. Last week, Derek introduced worship to us by talking about the call to worship.

God gets the first word in worship. He invites us into worship. And this week, we're going to the very end of worship, the benediction. So we looked at the first and tonight we're looking at the last. God invites us in the call to worship. God sends us in the benediction. We talked about the benediction. I preached on the benediction of Ephesians last June.

But we're going to look at it again tonight a bit more generally, and plus nobody remembers. So I can say the same things again. But it's an important topic, so it's worth visiting more than once every year.

The benediction is the final words of the service. Why do we do a benediction? And the question, why do we do a benediction is part of the question, why do we do what we do in worship?

[1 : 02] And that's the question that's driving this series. Why do we do what we do in worship? And one of the reasons we do a benediction is because benedictions are all over the place in the Bible. From start to finish, there's benedictions in every single book of the Bible.

And in our tradition, we want to take our idea of what we do in worship from the principles of Scripture. And Scripture does it, and so we think it's a good idea. But really, why do we do a benediction? That answer just pushes the question back a level.

Because the real question is, why does the Scripture give benedictions? What's a benediction for? Why does the Scripture even have benedictions? These pronouncements of blessing.

And what I want to say tonight, what I think we'll see is that benedictions are the fulfillment of the ultimate desires of every human being.

Contained in a benediction is the fulfillment of the ultimate desire of every single human being. So we're going to ask three questions. First, what's a benediction?

[2 : 09] Second, what's in a benediction? And then third, how can a benediction change you? What does it do to you? So first, what's a benediction? Now, the word benediction is not in the Bible anywhere.

The word benediction is a Latin word that we've transposed into English. Benediction, it's two Latin words put together, and it literally just means a good word.

Or to speak favorably is another way to think about it. But the little Latin or English word we use appears 78 times in the Bible in a different word.

And it's the word eulogia, right? And maybe you hear the English word in that eulogia, that little Greek word. Eulogia is the base for what the word we use for eulogies, that you will give it a funeral or something like that.

And all the eulogy means, or eulogia, is literally to speak well of, to speak endearing things about. The word we translate eulogia into in the English Bible is the word blessing.

[3 : 16] So 78 times in the Bible we get the word blessing, and that's the word for benediction. To speak well of. And the most famous benediction, the most famous blessing or eulogia, in the whole Bible we've read at the beginning in Numbers chapter 6.

And that's the eronic benediction. Now someone told me that because of my accent, when I say eronic benediction, it sometimes sounds like I'm saying ironic.

But if you keep hearing ironic, I'm saying eronic with two As, eronic benediction. It's the most famous in the Bible, and we just read it a moment ago.

This benediction would have been pronounced at every single tabernacle or temple service in the Old Testament all the way into the time of Jesus. So every time somebody brought a sacrifice to the

temple or tabernacle, or they held an assembly or a Sabbath worship service at the synagogue, the priest would pronounce the Aaronic benediction at the end.

In fact, by the time of Jesus' ministry in the synagogue, the Jewish priest were pronouncing 18 benedictions during the worship service at the end.

[4 : 28] So they would bless God for something, they would say a prayer and thank God for something, 18 times, and then they would give 18 benedictions and correspondence to those 18 prayers.

So Jesus knew benedictions very well. They were very much a part of his life. Now in Leviticus 9-22, it says that God tells Aaron, every time you come to deliver the benediction in the temple or tabernacle, you are to wash your hands, purify your hands before you pronounce the blessing. Before you pronounce the benediction. Now why? Why this symbol of purity before the priest pronounces a blessing, a memorized blessing from Numbers chapter 6? And the reason is because this is not Aaron's blessing.

This is not the blessing of the priest. And today when I pronounce the benediction at the end of the service, this is not my blessing to you. It's not my benediction. In Numbers 6, it says that God told Moses to tell Aaron to tell the people this benediction.

God told Moses to tell Aaron to tell the people it's God's benediction. It's God's pronouncement of blessing to the people. And that's why every time before Aaron was going to say it, he had to wash his hands.

[5 : 45] And it was a symbol of purity saying, I'm a sinner. This is not, this pronouncement of promise to you is not mine, it's his. It's God's.

And it's the same for us today. It's the same for any minister that stands up or person that stands up in our era and pronounces a blessing. The benediction in other words is God's speech.

It's God's communication. It's God's pronouncement. So just like Derek taught us last week that God gets the first word. He invites us with the scripture passage to worship. He also gets the last word.

He sends us out. He blesses us. It's his word. The Aaronic blessing is the most famous and maybe the most important blessing in the Bible. But it's not the first one.

Benedictions existed long before Aaron ever pronounced his benediction. There were benedictions to Abraham and to Moses before Aaron and to Jacob and Isaac.

[6 : 47] But even before them, the first benediction that we get is a series of benedictions that appears in Genesis chapter one. The first benediction is in Genesis chapter one.

And you see it in the chorus of Genesis chapter one, the song of creation. In Genesis one, there's a chorus and it repeats itself seven times. And the chorus after God does something in creation, he speaks creation seven times it says, and he saw that it was good.

He saw that what he had done was good. It delighted him. And so he pronounced his favor upon it. And it happens seven times in the very first chapter of Genesis. In other words, God literally speaks benedictions.

When God speaks, his speech is benediction. It's good words. When he speaks and things come into being out of nothing, when he creates out of nothing, this is good word.

And he looks at this good word, this speech that makes things and he says, it's good. It pleases me. Literally, it means that he's showing his divine favor to what he has done.

[7 : 56] It makes him happy. It gives him delight. And then we see this, his benediction, his good words going forth, turn the chaotic waters into order.

He takes a world that Genesis one, one says is formless and void. And he fills it. He orders it. He brings chaos into order. That's by his benediction.

And by his benediction, he says, and this is good. This is what goodness is. You see, his benediction is the pronouncement of his divine favor. And it's also the definition of what is good.

It's what he says is good. But the greatest benediction of all of creation comes in the seventh benediction in Genesis one. He gives six and he saw that it was good.

He pronounces it good six times. But the seventh is different. The seventh is different. And the seventh, it doesn't just say that God thought it was good, but that he thought it was very good.

[8 : 55] And what's the difference? The difference is that in the seventh, he's looking at the pinnacle of his creation, the totality of his creation. And that's the creation of human beings.

And it's not just the creation of human beings, but in Genesis chapter two, we get that what he's specifically talking about is that the highest benediction of creation is actually women.

That he says in Genesis two, it's not good for man to be alone. And when he creates Eve, he pronounces it very good. Not just good, but very good.

He pronounces the totality, the completion of humanity, male and female, as the very good, the ultimate benediction of creation. Women are the ultimate beauty of his creation.

And so it's when the woman comes on the scene that he says, finally, this is very good. It's total. It's complete. This is the way it's supposed to be. You see? So the first thing we see is that his benediction is the pronouncement of his divine favor.

[9 : 58] But even in the creation story, it's not just a pronouncement of divine favor, it delights him. It also comes with commands. In other words, God's benediction is his blessing.

This is good, but his blessing comes with blessings. His blessing comes with blessings. In other words, as soon as he creates human beings, it says that in verse 28 that he blesses them and that he gives them commands, things to do, which are blessings.

They're both commands and blessings at the very same time. So he says this, have dominion.

Adam and Eve, take dominion over this land. In other words, the first blessing is a home, a place to live, a place that's theirs, a home.

And then he says to them, fill the land up, till the garden, be fruitful and multiply. In other words, the second thing he tells them is that you have a job to do. He gives them a home, and then he gives them a vocation, a job to do in that home.

And then the third thing he says is be fruitful and multiply. In other words, be in relationship. Get married, have children, have friendship, be in relationship.

[11 : 14] You see? So God's great word of benediction, his good word in the beginning of all of existence in this world, is that he looks at creation and says it is good. He looks at humans, the totality of humanity, male and female together and says this is very good.

And then the final word of his benediction is now, hear my blessings. You have a place to live, you have a place to work, things to do. You have an identity, you are mine, and I am yours, and I'm giving you relationships.

You have relationships with God, with each other, and with creation, with nature itself. He's giving us relationships at all three of those levels. You see, the benediction is the pronouncement of what it is to be human.

He's told us the pinnacle of creation. What is it to be human? Who are we? We are God's creation. We are made to have homes, a specific home with Him.

We are made to be in relationship with one another, with God and with creation, and we are made to work, to do good work. These are the three things he offers in his first benediction.

[12 : 32] All of this together forms a human identity, our identity, who we are, we're his. Now, this human need for blessing and for the blessings, it doesn't just end at the point of sin.

When sin comes into the world, when the curse and the fall comes into the world, the need for divine blessing, divine favor, the need to hear God's favor pronounced upon you is still there. It's just constrained.

One of the great examples of this in the Old Testament is the example of Jacob and Esau. Now, in the Ancient Near East, the time of the Old Testament, it was very typical that the way blessings would get transferred, or the way land or anything like that would get transferred to the next generation was through a benediction.

So at the end of a clan leader's life or something, he would bring in his first born son, and he would offer that son certain blessings, land, all the things we talked about, home and identity, a job to do, leadership, typically a marriage would come along with that, relationships, all this sort of thing.

And it was all based on the father giving the first born son a benediction. And since creation, this was the pattern. This was the pattern in all of history, up till fairly recently, actually, and still is going on in some cultures.

[14 : 06] What does it mean to be the first born? And to get the benefits of the blessing, the benediction of being a first born son. Being the first born, what's a first born? Being the first born is about being born first, right?

If you're a first born son, that means you're a son that was born first in the family, literally. But the funny thing that's different about the Old Testament from the rest of the Ancient Near East is that

you can be the son that was born first and not be the first born son.

In the Bible, you can be born first and not be the first born son. And the great example of this is the example of Jacob and Esau. You guys will remember that when it came time for Isaac to die, and he was going to give his blessing, Esau was the first born of the two twins.

But at the time of the blessing, Jacob comes in and dresses like his brother. He cooks up a meal like his brother. He comes in and he tricks Isaac, who's blind, and he takes the blessing that Esau deserved in trickery.

And in Genesis 27, Esau finds out about this, and he comes to his father and he says, What have you done? You've given the blessing. My right is the first born son.

[15:26] You've given it to the wrong son. He's not the first born. I'm the first born. He says this in Genesis 27, Father, bless me. Even me also, Father, bless me.

But Isaac said, Your brother has come deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing. Do you have but one blessing, Father? Can you not give another blessing?

And Isaac said, Your brother is now your Lord over you. You see, even in the midst of trickery and deceit, the first born blessing, the benediction that he pronounced over Jacob cannot be taken back.

It's too late. The first born son is no longer the first born son. The second born son has now become the first born son. Why? Why? What is it that's changed his status?

And it's simply a pronouncement. It's just a benediction that the Father has come and said to the son, May the Lord bless you and keep you. You are my first born.

[16:26] You see, words create realities. Words are powerful. Words change things.

Words have the type of power in the Bible that we don't quite know of in the modern day to day.

Words create realities. God spoke nothing into being.

God spoke creation. Words create realities. And the same pattern follows throughout all the Bible.

That when someone pronounces a benediction, even in the midst of deceit and trickery between Isaac and Jacob, the Word has created a very specific reality.

You can't go back. It can't be undone. What's happened has happened. It is the way it is.

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. That's the old saying. But the Bible says something more like this.

[17:32] Sticks and stones may indeed break our bones, but words have the power to create nations and to destroy empires. Words are much more powerful than sticks and stones.

The benediction is the tool in the Bible. It is the Word of power. It's a Word that creates realities. It's a pronouncement.

Once it goes forth, it cannot be taken back. It's a mysterious power of Word that we don't quite recognize today.

Its power is in that it has a legal status about it. It has a legal status to confer favor, identity, homes, relationships, jobs, all these types of things we were created for.

A benediction has the power to confer all of those things. So that's the first thing. What is a benediction? The second thing is what is in a benediction.

[18:38] Now, the New Testament benediction we read from Ephesians has two items in it. Grace and peace, or peace and grace is the order.

But this is nothing new. This is the same exact two ideas that are present in the Aaronic benediction. So in the Aaronic benediction it says, May God make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you.

There's grace. And then he says, May he lift up his countenance to you and give you peace.

There's peace. And in the two phrases, may he shine his face on you and may he lift up his countenance upon you.

In Hebrew, it's actually saying the exact same thing there. Literally, the only reason it says countenance in English for the second time is just to change it up a bit.

But it literally says, May he lift up his face to you in the second command. So it literally says, May God shine his face on you and be gracious to you.

[19:40] May he lift his face towards you and give you peace. And you see the real substance of the blessing in both those is grace and then peace. And it's the same thing in Paul.

He promises or blesses us with grace and then peace. Now we'll start with peace. What is peace? The peace, peace, perhaps it's the opposite of conflict.

Perhaps peace is simply the opposite of conflict. It's being at rest. It's being settled. It's not being at war. But there's something even more to it than that. In the Old Testament, the word for peace is the word shalom.

A word that many of you guys will know. It's the word shalom. And it means much more than simply not being at war or not being in conflict. The word, the idea of shalom is the idea of being at ultimate rest.

It's ultimate prosperity, ultimate rest. And it's specifically, every time it's used in the Old Testament, refers to getting the promises of creation, to having a place to live, a land to dwell in, a people to live with, relationships, marriage, a purpose, a job, all the blessings of creation and of being one of God's people.

[20 : 54] It's ultimate fulfillment. This is the idea of shalom. It's having all of these blessings that were promised in the idea of, in the fact of creation. But it's not just an Old Testament idea.

Paul uses it as well all over the place in the New Testament. Paul uses the same little Greek word that means shalom all over the place in the New Testament. It continues.

What that means is that humans need exactly what God created humans to need in the very beginning today. We still need exactly the things we were created to need.

Human beings, we all still need the blessing, the favor of God, the benediction of God, to hear the Father say yes to you. And we also need the blessings that are attached with His benediction.

A home, a job, an identity, and the fact that we know that we are the Fathers. We still need the same thing. And this is what Paul is pronouncing in the benediction every single time.

[21 : 54] Now secondly, what is grace? Now the interesting thing here is that what grace is, it's simply the flip side of the coin. Grace and peace are two sides of the same coin.

Grace and peace come together. Grace and peace are two sides of the same coin. Grace is simply God's divine favor. The exact thing we saw in Genesis chapter one. It's God saying yes to you.

It's God's divine favor. That's grace. Grace is not a thing. Grace is not something you can touch. It's not physical. It's not a thing when you undergo the sacraments, when you partake in the sacraments.

Grace is not a thing to be eaten, but something to be visually symbolized of a spiritual reality. Grace is God's favor. It's God's pronouncement of yes to you in Christ Jesus.

So in Romans chapter five, Paul says that grace and peace are two sides of the same coin. He says it this way, through Christ we have obtained access by faith into God's grace, into God's favor.

[23 : 04] It's God's yes to us in Christ. And because of that, he writes, we have peace with God. You see, he's saying that when God says yes to you, when he shows his divine favor to you, what you get is peace.

It's a legal status. It's a pronouncement that you are his and he is yours. And it comes with all the benefits of Shalom, the promises of Genesis chapter one. Grace and peace. That's what's being pronounced in the benediction and the divine blessing to you.

Now, how do you get it? How do you get the divine blessing? How do you get the benediction? How do you get grace and peace? You see, Paul is assuming when he pronounces a benediction in all his letters that because of sin, we don't deserve the benediction, the word of benediction, but the word of judgment.

He's assuming that we don't deserve the word of benediction, but the word of judgment. So how do you get it? How does the benediction become your benediction from God?

John and John gives us an answer to this question and John and his gospel and John chapter one. In John chapter one, John connects for us the fact that Jesus is the Creator and he is also the word by which God the Father created.

[24 : 32] So Jesus is Creator God and he is the word by which God the Father created, the mediator of creation. So John says in the beginning was God, was Jesus Christ and he was the word.

He is the word. The little Greek word is the logos. You see, he's the word. What John is saying there is that Jesus Christ is the benediction of God.

He is the good word. John literally calls him the word. You see, Jesus Christ is the benediction of God. He is the very, he is the good word of God, the spoken word of God.

He is the benediction. How do you get to hear God's favor, his grace and peace? How does it become yours? How is it conferred to you? It's not that when we pronounce the divine blessing at

the end of a service that you can hear that is your divine blessing from God the Father. How is it? It's because Jesus, the benediction himself, the good word. When he was hung on the cross, the good word himself did not hear the good word of God, but the word of judgment. [25 : 40] So that we might hear the benediction. Jesus Christ heard the word of judgment on the cross so that you could hear a benediction at the end of a worship service.

And every single time that you hear the words grace, mercy and peace be to you, when you stand today and hear this blessing, you know that the God man was cursed with judgment so that you might be blessed with blessings.

If you're ever going to hear God's word of favor, what the New Testament calls us to is what we've been studying in the book of Acts. And that's simply repentance. Repentance. The word of benediction at the end of the service becomes your word of benediction in repentance by faith. What's repentance? I said this a couple Sundays ago, but you can simply think of repentance this way.

Every single one of us knows that we break the rules that we deserve judgment. We break the rules. We break traffic law.

[26 : 49] We break all sorts of little rules. We break our household rules. We break friendship rules. We break roommate rules. We break all sorts of rules. All of us do all the time, and we all know that. But true repentance is not simply knowing that you break the rules.

Everybody knows they break the rules. True repentance is moving from saying, I broke the rules to saying, I broke him, the man, the benediction himself.

It's where your sin becomes personal, and your sin becomes so personal that it's not just your sin, but it became his sin, where you know that by faith. Where you see the man of power, the word of power, the good word himself broken, and that's your sin that broke him.

That's turning. That's knowing. That's owning sin. That's repentance. So at the end of the service today, when you stand and you hear, know that Jesus Christ was broken by the word of the curse so that the word of the curse you deserved could become the word of peace and grace.

Now thirdly and finally, when we finish, how does the benediction change us? How does the benediction change us? What does it do to us?

[28 : 04] Three brief things here. And the first is this. The benediction is the fulfillment of our identity. When God pronounces the benediction of us, this is the fulfillment of our identity because what it's declaring to us is that we are first born children.

Who are you? And the benediction answers you are a first born child of God. It's a declaration. You see. Now, oftentimes we get confused that the benediction is a prayer.

But the benediction is not a prayer. You see, we do have prayers of blessing all over the Bible. But the prayers of blessing in the Bible are when we direct our blessings to God.

We say bless you, O Lord. It's all over the Psalms. Bless you, O God. Bless you, O Lord. That's a prayer. That's our benediction to God. Our blessing him. It's blessing. In that case, there's another word for praising or worship.

Benedictions are not prayers. Benedictions are God's word to us. They're God's declaration to us, not our prayer to God. You see.

[29 : 19] There's a difference there. In the benediction, what's happening is not a prayer saying God will you bless us. It's a pronouncement that says to the doubter, to the person that's strolling with assurance.

It's not a prayer. It's God saying you are my son. You are my daughter. You are a first born to me in Christ Jesus. It's a declaration of who you already are in Christ by faith.

It's not a prayer asking for it. It's a declaration. And so for that reason, in our tradition, or in the tradition of the church universally, historically, a lot of times people have looked up for the benediction.

They've opened their eyes and looked up and they've put their hands out. And some of you do that. I've seen you. You put your hands out and you receive, right? Because it's God's pronouncement to you. This is a gesture that I'm receiving, the promise, the blessing, the declaration.

Not a prayer, but a reception. It's God's word to us, not our word to God. John Calvin explained it this way. He said, the benediction is God's word in a very special sense.

[30 : 32] It is a proclamation of grace spoken by God's ministers, by the power of God's spirit, and received by the people in faith. It's more than a prayer, he says. It's a sermon.

The sermon says this, that the blessing God gives to us is himself. That's the first thing. The benediction is a declaration of who you are.

First born, son or daughter, a prince or princess of the king himself. Secondly, the benediction fulfills our needs for relationships.

It fulfills the human need for a relationship. In the same exact declaration, that you are God's first born son or daughter, how? The New Testament uses a metaphor.

How are you God's first born son or daughter? Well, because you're in Christ. What does that mean? The New Testament's metaphor for what that means is that you are a bride of the bridegroom.

[31 : 33] That the church together is a bride of the bridegroom. The benediction is declaring that you have married up, that you have married somebody better than you. That you are a bride of the bridegroom.

And this, you know what this means? To marry into the family of God. To marry the bridegroom Jesus Christ. What does it mean? It means an inheritance. You see, it's working off the ancient Near Eastern pattern.

That the first born receives the ultimate inheritance. And this is what the promise is in the benediction. That because you are marrying up, you're marrying into the royal family. You're marrying Jesus Christ.

You're marrying up. The promise is an inheritance. It's all the things that God promised in Genesis 1, that he repromised in Genesis 12. What it means to be fully human, the desires, the things that you want most in life, that in Christ Jesus they are yes and amen.

That's the inheritance that's being promised in the benediction. That you will inherit the good kingdom that Jesus Christ has purchased by his blood. In other words, the benediction tells you that you have the ultimate promise with Christ Jesus of a home and a garden with him.

[32 : 44] Of an identity, of being God's son or daughter. Of having the ultimate perfect relationships. And of having a vocation, a job.

To be a worker of his ultimate kingdom. Now thirdly and finally is that last point. The benediction is the declaration that God has given you a job to do.

In other words, the allusions throughout all of history have always seen the benediction as a declaration of your vocation as a priest. The New Testament teaches that every single Christian is a priest.

We confess the priesthood of all believers. And what that simply means is that you too are a minister. And so when God blesses, he's sending you out.

He's sending you out as a minister. Go be an emissary of the king. Be a vehicle of blessing. In other words, the ministries of the church. Evangelism, teaching, fellowship, hospitality, mercy, love of God and neighbor.

[33 : 51] These are your ministries. They're not just the ministries of the minister, but they're the ministries of all the ministers. The priesthood of all believers, all of us. And so the benediction is the sending of God's grace.

The benediction is the sending of God's priests, of his ministers out, saying, go, this is your ministry too. And now go with God's blessing.

We'll close with this. Robert Bassholz in 2007, he wrote a book. The book was simply called Benedictions. And this is how he defines a benediction.

The benedictions are pronounced by ministers at the close of a worship service as an expression of hope and encouragement to God's people to face whatever the future might hold for them.

They are a reminder of a good and great God who is rich in mercy, who is not only for them, but with them in whatever trials may befall their course in life.

[34 : 53] It has been my experience, he writes, that God's people are indeed looking earnestly and intently for a final word of divine well-being from God.

Now, I was reading this week, well, yesterday, from John Calvin, from some of the reformers in the time of the Reformation, the 1500s, and the writings about worship service orders and benedictions. And John Calvin wrote a book in 1542 called The Form of Church Prayers for Geneva, the place that he worked and ministered. And in that book, he says that at the end of the service, every minister should pronounce the Aaronic blessing from number six.

At the departure of the people, he writes, according to our Lord's appointment, and this follows the example of Christ at his ascension in Luke 24, when he led the disciples out.

As far as Bethany, he lifted up his hands and he blessed them with the Aaronic blessing. Now, Luke 24 does not literally say God blessed them with the Aaronic blessing, but Calvin is speculating there, because this is the blessing that they pronounce most often in the first century.

[36 : 06] And Luther says the same exact thing in the time of the Reformation, but every minister should pronounce the benediction of number six, because this is the benediction that Jesus blessed at his ascension.

Now, John Knox, our Scottish forefather, ups the ante on this in his book, because he says in his book in 1556 in *The Form of Prayers*, he says that the minister should not only end the service with number six, but that Calvin and Luther have taught, but that the minister should also add to number six, 2 Corinthians 13-14, which says the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost be with you all, because this benediction includes the names of all the persons of the Trinity, where number six doesn't.

So he says John Knox's book of liturgy, our great Scottish reformer and forefather, said that we ought to use number six in 1 Corinthians 13 at the end of our service, because it combines the great blessing of the Old Testament that was used by everyone for centuries with the promise of the blessing of the Trinity.

So at the end of our service, in just a few moments after we sing, I'm going to follow Knox and do just that. So that's what we'll do. All right, let's pray together.

Father, we long as your children to hear a word of blessing and favor, and this is what we were made for. So we ask that you would, by your spirit, confer to us the divine word of favor on the basis of Jesus Christ tonight, and that we would existentially, subjectively know it and feel it, grace, mercy, and peace, and that we would go forward as your emissaries into this world, knowing that we are indeed yours.

[37 : 56] I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.