

Benediction

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[0 : 0 0] So we come now to the final words of the book of Ephesians. We've been in this book for some almost 20 weeks. The final words of Paul in the book of Ephesians contain two parts.

In the first part you'll see at the very beginning verse 21, so that you may know how I'm doing. I'm sending Tychicus, the beloved brother. So the first part of his kind of final benediction is that he's sending this guy named Tychicus. Tychicus was Paul's personal letter carrier on his third missionary journey, so there's a few places he pops up in the New Testament.

Look, Paul loves this guy. He says it very clearly, this is his brother. This is his brother in the Lord and he trusts him to take the letter. One interesting thing about Tychicus is that his name literally means, comes from the word fortune or luck. His name literally translates to something like lucky. He's a lucky guy. He was probably of a pagan origin.

His parents named him this kid. He's part of the faith. He's a lucky one and now he's been transformed by the gospel. He's become a faithful brother. But that's all I want to say about Tychicus, about the first part. I want to focus on the second part of these final words. The second part is the benediction. The benediction, for us, we do one of these at the end of every service and it kind of sometimes becomes the code for pick up your jacket and your purse. It's time to start walking out the door. But why do we do benedictions?

This is part of the question of why do we do what we do in worship? One of the reasons we do benedictions is quite simply because they're in the Bible. They're in Scripture and we try to map out our worship according to the elements that we see present in the New Testament and throughout the Scriptures. But that forces us onto an even bigger question.

[1 : 5 6] Why are they in Scripture? Why does God do benedictions? Why does Paul do blessings? Why are they in Scripture at all? People are drawn to benedictions even outside the church.

You think of similar things like toasts at parties or the way that almost every single legislative, legal, court session, parliament, Congress, they're all closed with something like a benediction. This idea of closing things with a blessing is filtered through every aspect of society and it's because humans want benedictions. Humans love benedictions even if sometimes we grow bored with them. A Christian benediction is distinct from all those other ways of closing things down in our broader society. I think what we're going to see today in this passage is that in the benediction is the essence, the purpose. It's the meaning of the whole world. The benediction is where we humans find our very purpose.

That's what I want you to see. What we're going to do is ask three questions about benedictions. What is a benediction? What is Paul's benediction in this passage? Then what do they do to us? What do they do to us? What do they do for us? First, what's a benediction? What's a benediction? Literally a benediction is a Latin word, benediction. It literally means benediction, good word, or to speak well of. But scripture's word for it, as you guys will know, is the word blessing. What's a blessing? A blessing is a difficult word to define because we use the word blessing all the time. It's kind of one of those terms that just slips off Christian tongues in every type of form. We pray blessings to God. We ask for blessings from God. We talk about blessing other people. We talk, we say things when we want to insult somebody like bless their heart. We throw around the word blessing all the time. But what does it really mean? What's a blessing? Well, it's so multifaceted, all I want to ask is this, what is God's blessing? What's God's benediction? What's God's benediction to the world? What's God's blessing? What's the first, the ultimate, the primordial benediction? Notice that one. In the passage we read earlier in number six, the Aaronic blessing, you might have noticed in the very first verse of the passage we read that it's not just Aaron's blessing to the people. This was the blessing he would have pronounced at every single tabernacle service, at the end of every tabernacle service. But it wasn't just Aaron's blessing. The passage literally says God

told Moses to tell Aaron to say this blessing. It was God's blessing. It wasn't Aaron's blessing. Aaron was just a priest. He was just the voice.

[4 : 54] But it was God's blessing. So we see in the Aaronic blessing one of the typical, most famous examples of God's blessing to the people. But it's not the first one in scripture.

Even before that, there's a blessing to Abraham. There's a blessing to Isaac. There's a blessing to Jacob. There's a blessing to Noah. But even before Noah, where does the first benediction take place in the Bible? The first blessing. And the answer is in Genesis one. Already in Genesis one, there are eight instances in Genesis one and two of God's benedictions, of God's pronouncement of blessing. And you'll remember this. Every time God creates something at the end of every single day, he creates light, he creates plants, animals, day, night, all the way to the sixth day where he creates humans. What does he say? He says, it's good.

It's good. He looks out at what he's done and he says it's good. Now why does he do that? And also on the last day when he creates humans in 1.28, it literally, he doesn't even say it's good anymore. He says God blesses them. You see that every time he's been talking about it being good, we get in the final day. It's a blessing. God has blessed them. What's God's blessing? What's the blessing that God's pronouncing on creation in Genesis chapter one? The first thing to see is this. God's blessing is the pronouncement of delight. It's the pronouncement of favor. It's God looking at what he made and saying, this makes me happy. I delight in this. This is my joy. And you'll see that it's intimately, blessings, benedictions are intimately tied up with the act of God creating. So how does God create? God speaks words and those words bring order to chaos. Those words make things good. You see, the very definition of goodness is simply whatever God says, whatever God says is what happens. Whatever happens is the very definition of what is good. What's a blessing? It's God looking out at the good things he does and delighting in it. In one way, it's stating the obvious. It's God looking out and saying, this is good because I spoke it. It's his delight. It's his favor. It's his love for what he has done. But there's a second thing, even in the first part of the Bible, that we learn about what a benediction is. And that's this. That when God creates humans and he blesses them, whenever God tells us that he's pleased with what he's done, he's delighted, he has joy for what he's created, the blessing includes content and includes, in other words, stuff. It includes commands. In Genesis 1, 28 to 30, the very first thing that God ever spoke to humanity was both a blessing and a command at the very same time.

See, it says that God blesses them and said to them, you remember, be fruitful and multiply. Have dominion over the garden. Spread the garden. Make it fill the whole world. Be my emissary. Be my appointed rulers. You see, God's benediction on his creation is what gives creation its purpose. When God pronounces a blessing, the blessing tells you something about what you are to do. You see, what's the content of God's blessing to Adam and Eve? Well, the first thing is this. He gave them a place. Press pause while that happens.

He gave them a place. He gave them, in other words, a home. Part of his benediction to them was, I'm giving you a land, a place to live, to make it your home. And wrapped up in that was that he gave them a vocation. He gave them a job to do. Be fruitful and multiply. Have babies. Fill this place up with people. Make a city. And spread the garden.

[9 : 03] Spread it to the ends of the world. Make the Garden of Eden encompass the whole of the cosmos, the whole existence. In other words, make my temple bigger. So he gives them a home. He gives them a job to do. He gives them a vocation. And inherent in all of those things is that he gives them an identity. That they're his. They're his. He delights in them. They're his kids. They're his rulers. They're his emissaries. They're his priests.

They're his kings. They're his prophets to the world. They have a home. They have a job to do. And they know who they are. You know, Adam and Eve, more than any other human that's ever existed on this planet, knew who they were, what they were doing, and where they were supposed to do it. And this is exactly what every single human being longs to know.

Who am I? What's my home? And what am I supposed to do while I'm while I exist in it? That's what we want. We all want. We won't want a purpose. We want a job. We want a vocation.

We want a place, a land, a possession. Look, the whole Old Testament is about land. It's all about land. It's all about who lives in Canaan and who doesn't. It's all about a possession.

The whole Bible is shot through with these three things. Why? Because God wrote these desires for home, for a job, and for an identity on every single human being's heart. We've been trying to get it back ever since we were expelled from the Garden of Eden. Every human yearns for these three

things. And the first benediction was the meaning of humanity. Now, what's the opposite of benediction? The curse. The curse. If benediction is literally God's good word spoken, His delight, then the opposite of benediction is God's word of wrath. It's God's speech of wrath. It's the curse. It's what happened to the people in Genesis chapter 3. But what I want you to see before we jump into very briefly into Paul's benediction is this, that even after the curse, the same pattern of benediction continues to take place throughout the whole Old Testament. And one of the great examples of this is the story of Jacob, Isaac, and Esau. Jacob stealing Isaac, Esau's birthright. This is one of the famous examples of a benediction, of a blessing, of a human blessing in the Old Testament.

[11 : 33] Kind of what it entails for us is that the blessing ceremonies in the ancient Near East during the biblical times followed a particular pattern. And that pattern was based in a hierarchical society. So you had a clan, and the head of that clan, the patriarch, in this instance was Isaac, right? And Jacob goes in, you know, he, this is after Isaac has told Esau, go out, you know, kill a deer, cook it up in a stew, bring it to me, and we're going to have a ceremony. And in that ceremony, I'm going to declare you my firstborn. So this benediction, this blessing, he was going to put his hand on his head, he was going to declare him the firstborn. That's what it was about. You know, you guys all know the story. Jacob went out, he steals, he makes a stew, he puts hair all over his arms, and he steals the blessing. What was, what was contained in this blessing? What was this blessing about? First, the blessing was that he was going to give the firstborn son a land, a possession, a home. He was going to gift to him all the lands that he owned. The second thing was he was going to give him a vocation, a job, a purpose. You're the clan leader.

You're the king of this kingdom. You're my emissary. And the third thing he was going to give him was an identity. You are my firstborn. In other words, I delight in you. I delight in naming you my heir, my heir of this kingdom, you see. Now, what's interesting is that being the firstborn is not entirely, entirely in the Old Testament, about being born first.

You know, Jacob popped out of the womb before, Esau popped out of the womb before Jacob did by a couple minutes. He was the older one. But what happens when Jacob goes in and steals the birthright? Esau comes back after that and says, Father, no, this is my birthright.

I'm the true firstborn. Give me the birthright. And what does Jacob say? I can't. Why? Jacob's not the firstborn. Esau is, but Isaac can't give the firstborn blessing, the benediction, to Esau. Why? Because the words have already been spoken. The benediction has already been pronounced. After Jacob is given the blessing through cheating, through lying, and Esau says, give it to me instead. Just take it back. Just take your words back. He says, I can't look. Words themselves create the very reality of the firstborn. They stick. They're legal.

They're binding. It's signing the dotted line. There's no going back from the benediction. It's just what is. Jacob is now the firstborn son. Sticks and stones are very powerful weapons.

[14 : 42] Sticks and stones break bones, but words, but words, you see, words decide kingdoms. Words build and break down nations. Words give identity and homes and purposes. The firstborn isn't determined by who was born first, but by the one who is told, you are my child. I delight in you. What does it mean to prosper? What does it mean to be fulfilled? What does it mean to be blessed? What does it mean to have a benediction? It's to hear the words from a father. I delight in you. You're my firstborn, even though you weren't born first. It's the answer to humanity's longings, the benediction, from the very beginning of the Bible, the favor and delight of the sovereign, the gift of a home, the purpose of a vocation, the reality that you're the king's child. Now, secondly, what is Paul's benediction? We'll be really brief here. What is Paul's benediction? It's very simple. It's mainly encapsulated in two words. You'll see in verse 23, peace be to the brothers and sisters, should say and sisters. Then in verse 24, grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's two words. It's peace and it's grace. You'll notice that in the New Testament, these blessings, they're not new. We read in the Aaronic blessing just a moment ago, the very same words, may grace and peace be unto you. May God be gracious to you and grant you peace.

This is an old blessing that Paul's giving. First, peace. What's peace? Not being at war? Yes, of course. But in the Scriptures, the idea of peace is something a little bit more than that. It comes from an Old Testament word and many of you will know this. The Old Testament word is shalom. Shalom, you've probably heard this word. Shalom is translated, we translate to peace. But our term for peace doesn't really even encapsulate what's going on in the word shalom. Shalom, rather than just not being at war, is something more like your ultimate fulfillment. It's having a home, a job, and

an identity. It's getting back the Garden of Eden. It's happiness. It's joy. It's fulfillment. It's completion. Of course, not being at war with somebody is included in all of that, but it's way more than that.

Shalom is finding worth and contentment. Worth and contentment. It's knowing who you are and where you're going. Modern culture ever since in the early 20th century has kind of been pushing this thing about where we find our worth and our contentment, our shalom, you might say. And most of what's been, I mean, you've heard this a million times and it's partially true that it kind of screams, don't go find yourself worth from what other people think about you. That's a very common notion. We find our esteem. We find who we are. We find our identity. We find our worth not from what everybody else thinks, not from our perceived reputation. But where does modern culture say instead you find your esteem, you find your worth? Well, we kind of coined a new term that never really existed before the 19th century and that's self-esteem. Self-worth, self-image.

You don't get it from other people because if you get it from other people, then other people have control over you. What they think about you is what makes you do what you do. But instead you get your worth from yourself. You look inside yourself. You realize who you are. You realize your own potential and that's where you find your worth. Now, look, there's something right about that and there's something wrong about that. The right thing about that is if you go around looking for worth and contentment, looking for shalom and everybody else and then what they think about you, it's going to crush you because what's going to happen is as soon as somebody doesn't give you a blessing but gives you a word of curse, all of a sudden you've lost everything. You've lost the reputation. You've lost the thing you wanted most. You're worth coming from other people. But when we go around and look for our worth in other people and our reputation, there's a reason we do that.

[19:37] There's a reason we do that. And that's this. God wrote our longing for worth and contentment on our hearts and we can't get it from ourselves. Sure, we don't look around and try to get it from everybody else but we can't get it from ourselves. There's no such thing as creating your own self-worth. There is a reason people care about other people's opinions but it's because peace, true peace, shalom, contentment, worth, it does come from the outside. You know what the solution is. We need the Father's delight. We need the benediction.

We're all longing so much from a benediction from the outside, from a blessing from the outside but looking to get it from everybody else in the room is the wrong place. We need it from the Father. We need a Father to look at us and say, I'm pleased with you no matter what. Now, how do you get this kind of peace? How do you get this kind of contentment that Paul's talking about here? Well, he's already told us, he told us last week in fact when Derek preached his sermon on Ephesians 6.15 on the armor of God, you know, there's a great juxtaposition there because he's saying, put on the Roman soldier's guard, put on the Roman soldier's outfit, dress yourself, get ready for the battle but what are the shoes? What are the shoes of the Roman soldier's battle readiness? The Christian, it's the gospel of peace. The Christian soldier ready to fight puts on peace as his feet and what is this peace? He says it's the gospel. It's the gospel. Now, what's the gospel? Well, the gospel's encapsulated in Paul here in the second aspect of the benediction. Grace be with all of you who love the Lord Jesus Christ. The answer that Paul's been giving us throughout this whole book is that Jesus Christ is the gospel. He is the gift. Look, what's grace? Grace isn't a thing. We often make that mistake of thinking that grace is something out there, some type of power or force or whatever. We get bestowed with grace but grace isn't a thing. Grace is Paul's shorthand word for just saying the gift of the gospel, the gift of the gospel. Grace is Jesus Christ himself. Grace is just the fact that Jesus has been gifted. The incarnation is the great gift and it's antithetical to everything that we deserve. We all want to hear a word from God that is a benediction, a blessing but the words that we deserve to hear spoken out of God's mouth is nothing more than the curse, nothing more than the wrath, nothing more than a pronouncement of judgment. That's what we deserve. But oh, the gospel, the gospel of peace, what does it do to us? John makes sense of this for us what's happening here in John chapter one when he says that God's son, Jesus Christ, the true firstborn son, what does John call him? He says that the Word became flesh. The Word, the law of God, Jesus in other words, John tells us is the Word of God. In other words, he is the very speech poured forth out of God's mouth that communicates to us. He is the Word. He's the good Word. Look, if benediction literally means good Word, it's not just this that in Jesus Christ we can get a blessing, but that Jesus Christ literally is the blessing. Jesus is

the benediction. He is the benediction, the good Word, the very good Word spoken out of God's mouth. That's exactly what he is.

In Jesus, the Father showers the benediction on us through the firstborn son. In Jesus, God the Father pronounces the world worth saving from the curse. Jesus Christ is the benediction. He's the declaration that God delights in this world, that God delights in this world. He's not going to leave it to itself to die. But for God's Word of wrath to become for us a Word of benediction, the great benediction himself had to hear the Word of the curse. The benediction would never become a blessing for us unless the true benediction, Jesus Christ himself, the good Word, heard God speak curse. Look, when you hear the benediction at the end of church every Sunday morning, know this, God was cursed so that you can hear a word peace. God was cursed so that you can hear somebody say, Shalom be to you. The benediction himself lost every single delight in this world and he lost every single delight of the Father when he hung on the cross. He lost the benediction. He took on wrath so that you could hear the word grace. Grace be to you. Sticks and stones did in fact break his bones as well as crown of thorns, a whip that contained shards of lamb's bone that ripped the flesh from his back, a rugged splintered cross and a spear.

Sticks and stones broke his bones but words. It was the Word of curse, the spoken wrath that broke him. For us, God said to you, curse it be my son that he may say to estranged sons and daughters, benediction to you. You see. The blessing of God through the Gospel is our fulfillment. It's our shalom. It covers all of our greatest desires and so very briefly I just want to close with this. Thirdly, what does the benediction do to us? What does it do to us? What is a benediction when we state it at the end of the service? What is it trying to do for us? We've seen what it is, how it comes to us through Jesus Christ, but what does it do to us? Three brief things, maybe two if the clock runs too quickly. First, it declares to you that you are a first born child. In other words, there's your identity. [26 : 45] We've been looking for our identity ever since the curse came in Genesis 3. The first thing it does when you hear the word of benediction at the end of the service, it declares to you you are a first born child. Wikipedia, the best resource to use when you're trying to write a sermon, is I typed the word benediction into Google and looked up and of course Wikipedia comes up first. It clicked on Wikipedia and Wikipedia defines a benediction as an invocation to a deity or a prayer to a God, to God, the Christian God and Christianity. But this is not correct. Whoever wrote that, some guy, he doesn't know what he's talking about. That's not what a benediction is. You see, a New Testament benediction is not a prayer. Sometimes we get a little bit confused about that. It's not a prayer. A prayer is where you talk to God, where you make request, where you speak to God, where you bless God, but a benediction is the total opposite. A benediction is where God speaks to you. He doesn't make request, but he just blesses you. A benediction is actually the reverse of a prayer. It's not a prayer. And that's why traditionally in the church, benedictions have normally been accompanied by the minister saying, lift up your head, look up, and a lot of times hold out your hands as a gesture of reception. See, it's not you making request to God, but it's you receiving something from God. It's God's speech to you. Look, if you're a Christian and you struggle with doubt, you struggle with who you are, you struggle with your identity, when you hear the word of benediction at the end of the service, know this, it's not a prayer asking God that he might make you a firstborn son or daughter. It's God's statement to you that you already are. You see, it's God's informing you that you are a prince or a princess of the great king, that you are an heir, that you have an inheritance, that the possession has already been declared to be yours. It's armor for you to put on, to walk out the door. Again, it satisfies our deepest longing in that way for our identity, for who we are. We're princes and princesses. We're firstborns, if you believe on Christ.

The second thing is this. The benediction is a declaration of God's wedding vow. It's a declaration of God's wedding vow to you. When Paul uses the word grace, it's like God saying to you, for better or for worse, even death will not do us part. It's a declaration to you that you've married up. You've married somebody better than you deserve. You've married somebody better than yourself. This has been all over the book of Ephesians. The church is the bride of Christ, the bride of the great bridegroom. Marriage is the great signpost to a new reality in the eschaton, in the future coming of the kingdom. Look, we are married, God says in the word grace, to the bridegroom of the kingdom, to the king of the kingdom, to be co-heirs, to be rulers. It's not only a promise of your identity, just like the firstborn, but of your inheritance. Thirdly and finally, it's this. A benediction declares to you your priesthood, your priesthood. Look, how is it that Paul can speak of benediction?

It's not Paul's benediction, you see. It wasn't Aaron's benediction, it wasn't Moses' benediction, it's not Paul's benediction. And when I say it in just a few moments, it's not my benediction. It's God's benediction. And the New Testament tells us of the priesthood of all believers. When you hear a benediction, know this, that God is reminding you, calling you in that benediction to a certain vocation. And that vocation is that you're a priest. You're a priest of the great king. It's a command for you to go out and be a blessing, as cheesy as sometimes that phrase sounds. And what does it mean to be a blessing after all that we've looked at? Well, yes, it means helping people in all sorts of ways, but primarily, what it means is this, going and pronouncing to people the gospel of peace, speaking the gospel, going around and having the ability to say to somebody else, you too are a child of the king. You too are a firstborn. This is how. Here's the gospel. This is what shalom is. This is how you get it. That's what it means to be a priest of God. You're all priest of God, if you believe in Jesus Christ. And know that every time you hear a benediction in worship, you ought to be reminded of your vocation, your priesthood, your job, your task, your purpose for being in the world. Now, close with just this word. About 20 or 30 years ago, it became really, really popular amongst, especially in the states, but the spread over to the UK and Europe as well, for churches to kind of reformulate how they did worship. And one of those big, big ideas was, look, things like benedictions, things like prayers of confession that Derek prayed, things like calls to worship. When you call the congregation to worship, this is really weird for people that are coming in and off the streets. You know, like we want to be as sensitive as we can be to non-Christians, to, you know, as they were labeled at that point, seekers, right? And the thing, benedictions are weird. You know, what's a benediction? A benediction is the minister telling you that some being from outside of this cosmos is speaking to you a blessing and telling you who you are, right? Look, it doesn't get any more foreign than that. It's literally a voice coming from outside the cosmos. That's very foreign. It is weird. It's strange. It's unusual. They were totally right. But about 10 years ago, what happened was some of these churches kind of came out and said, look, this strategy didn't work. The strategy didn't work. You know, we tried to make worship devoid of all the elements that are kind of weird to people in the streets, and it didn't work. And why is that? Oh, because the benediction is just weird enough, just abnormal enough that it changes people's lives. You see? The gospel is foolishness to the world. It's strange to those who are perishing, but to the people of God, it's wisdom. Look, the benediction is God's pronouncement, in fact, that there's something wrong with the world. There's something not right about it. You need a blessing from the outside. You need an invocation from God himself from the outside. Look, it's telling us that God has come to change the way this world is. Look, of course it's weird. Of course it's strange. But guess what? It's only strange to a world that is not what it's supposed to be. You see, the benediction and the prayer of confession and the call to worship and all these things, they're just strange enough, these churches figured out, to give people exactly what they've always been longing for, to repent, to hear that the world's not the way it's supposed to be, to know that there is a God out there that can pronounce such a thing as an identity, a purpose, a vocation. It's weird enough to be the gospel that changes lives. So now go and bless, go be a priest, go give a benediction by giving the strange weird out of this world gospel because it offers anyone that hears it the possibility of shalom and it's the only place that anybody can find peace. Let's pray. Our Lord and God, we ask that you would bless us today with grace, mercy and peace. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.