



BLESSED TO BECOME A BLESSING

Emit a hearty sneeze in my corner of the world within earshot of at least one other person, and you can expect to hear “Bless you!” in response. Even strangers will offer this verbal nicety, which dates back to the Middle Ages, when sneezing was a symptom of the deadly bubonic plague and saying “Bless you” was meant to bespeak good health under the specter of that devastating disease. I suppose a faint parallel could be drawn to the response to sneezes in our mutant-COVID era. But generally, “Bless you!” following a sneeze is now merely mannerly, a simple kindness meant to convey care about another’s well-being.

As lovely as that sentiment is, it seriously dilutes the potency of a blessing as originally conveyed. Originally, a blessing was comprised of words and gestures associated with God’s favor and protection. It was a means of rendering something holy, or sanctified. It was not until much later that a blessing came to mean a secular wish for prosperity or happiness, like it is commonly used today.

When we come across blessings in the Bible, and think about how we regard blessings personally, it is important to be mindful of the potent, original meaning of that word, rather than our rather puny, contemporary understanding of it.

The first blessings and so many others in the Bible came from God himself. In Creation, God blessed “the birds...the great sea creatures...and every living creature that moves”, as well as Adam and Eve (Genesis 1:21-22, 28). He also “blessed the seventh day, and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation” (Genesis 2:3). He extended that blessing to us in his commandment to keep holy the Sabbath day (Exodus 20:8-11).

Later, God blessed Abram, promising the aged and childless man countless descendants, and designating him as the patriarch of God’s chosen people. Furthermore, God expanded the reach of those blessings, by consecrating Abram to *become* a 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 in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:2-3).

This idea of being blessed to become a blessing illustrates the characteristic proliferation of God’s grace; and He continues to pour out this abundant life through blessings in our own time (John 10:10). We will receive — not earn — God’s life-giving blessings through our willing obedience to his loving commands.

The ancient Israelites learned this through Moses, who said, “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days” (Deuteronomy 30:19-20).

Jesus reinforced this teaching through his famous Beatitudes, which spell out the blessings that come when we follow in his ways: comfort in mourning, the kingdom of heaven, God’s mercy, and more (Matthew 5:2-12). All of those blessings transcend earthly ones such as good health, loved ones, and satisfying work, accruing instead to our intimacy with God and the imperishable vitality that relationship brings.

Being blessed by Him as we are, in so many ways and most especially in our salvation, we are meant to be conduits of those blessings to others rather than closed containers of his love. Jesus even taught us to let blessings flow to our adversaries: “But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Luke 6:27-28).

This is a far cry from offering an offhand “Bless you!” at a sneeze. It means extending God’s love freely and sacrificially, through both our words and actions. And as we ourselves become God’s blessing to others, embodying his compassion and unconditional love, the kingdom of heaven is truly at hand (Matthew 10:7-8; Matthew 25:31-40).

With love in the Lord,
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