



Peninsula City Church

No Greater Love

It's All in the Way We Look at It

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It is All in the Way We Look at it

Introduction

Q. What does the priestly prayer in Numbers 6:22-27 mean?

How would you answer a 6–8-year-old child if they were to ask you this question? That is,

²² “Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ²³ ‘Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying, “Thus you shall bless the sons of Israel. You shall say to them: ²⁴ The Lord bless you and keep you; ²⁵ the Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you; ²⁶ the Lord lift up His countenance on you and give you peace.” ²⁷ So they shall invoke (Lit. *put*) My name on the sons of Israel, and I then will bless them” (Num 6:22-27 NASB).

We even have a song modelled on this part of the Bible. Yet do we know what we are singing about when we sing it? So, on the one hand, sadly for many a Christ-follower, they only have a little or no knowledge of the prayer. So, they are unable to help the child. On the other hand, others may explain it so that the child cannot understand it at all. But what is the prayer all about, and what is its relevance?

It here that context is needed and enormously helpful. The whole topic of understanding the Bible and what it meant to the original audience is essential. It is only then can we apply it to ourselves. Try to respond to what we have just read. Here we will look at two aspects.

- The historical background: What did it mean to the original audience or hearers?
- So, what is its relevance for us today: That is, how does it apply to us and what should be our response to it?

Remember that we are trying to help a 6–8-year-old child understand the question above. It is not an academic exercise (although, as adults, we will need to use our grey matter); it requires a response. Hopefully, the response would be that we have answered the child, and they have understood what we have said to them and can respond to the prayer. The reason being is that we have understood what it meant to the original hearers and means to us today.

1. Its historical background

Q. What is the historical background behind the prayer for the original hearers?

Introduction

When the prayer in Numbers 6:22-27 would have been used, it would have been understood and responded to suitably by those who heard it. In other words, it was set within a time and culture where no explanation of it would have been needed. However, if we are honest, we do not really know what it means to try to apply it in our day and culture.

It falls in a section of the Bible from Exodus 20 through Numbers 10:10. The section deals with the social, civil, and ceremonial features that were to be part of the nation of Israel. Within this section of the Bible, we find the book of Numbers, where Israel was counted before they journeyed to the promised land. The book of Numbers covers about 50 years (although various dates are given); it is roughly set in 1450-1400 BC. It covers the period from the second year after the exodus from Egypt to being on the edge of the Promised Land and ready to enter it 38 years, nine months later. That is,

“Then the LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying” (Num 1:1 NASB).

“These are the commandments and the ordinances which the LORD commanded to the sons of Israel through Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan opposite Jericho” (Num. 36:13 NASB).

In the first section of the book, the instruction of the prayer was provided about 1450 BC. It covers a majority of Israel’s wanderings in the desert, especially their 40 years due to their rebellion. It comes before Israel’s departure from Mount Sinai in Num 10:11ff to live as nomads.

The prayer here in Numbers is found at the end of chapter six and comes after the instructions for a person who wants to take the Nazarite vow. It is also before the instructions for the offerings given by the nation of Israel’s leaders. The New King James Version (NASB) publisher has called it the prayer “The Priestly Blessing.”¹ As do the publishers of the New International Version (NIV)² and the New Living Translation (NLT),³ whereas publishers of the New American Standard Bible (NASB) use “Aaron’s Benediction,”⁴ to mention a few.

a. Evidence of its use in daily life

Interestingly, in 1979 two small amulets just outside of the old city of Jerusalem. In light of these being found, it has been said regarding prayer that,

“The most meaningful prayers are not simply recited but lived. And some of the best known have surprising backgrounds.”⁵

The article went on to state that,

“The amulets were made of thin sheets of silver, which were rolled up like small scrolls and suspended around the neck as jewellery. When a team of specialists unrolled the amulets, they discovered that each amulet contained several lines of Hebrew inscriptions on its surfaces. The small size of the amulets required that microscopic photography to read the inscriptions. When the inscriptions on the amulets were photographed and read, the team discovered that both contained versions of a blessing with striking similarities to the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:24–26.”⁶

Image showing the translation,



¹ *The Holy Bible: The New King James Version*. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 164.

² *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 99.

³ *The Life Recovery Bible: New Living Translation*. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1998), 173.

⁴ *New American Standard Bible: Reference Edition*. (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1975), 136.

⁵ Smoak, Jeremy D. “New Light on the Priestly Blessing from Ancient Judah.” <https://www.asor.org/onetoday/2016/08/new-light-priestly-blessing-ancient-judah/#:~:text=The%20Book%20of%20Numbers%20cites,the%20priesthood%20and%20the%20Tabernacle>. (20th April 2022).

⁶ Smoak, Jeremy D. “New Light on the Priestly Blessing from Ancient Judah.” <https://www.asor.org/onetoday/2016/08/new-light-priestly-blessing-ancient-judah/#:~:text=The%20Book%20of%20Numbers%20cites,the%20priesthood%20and%20the%20Tabernacle>. (20th April 2022).

See also Rabbi Sacks, *Jonathan. Studies in Spirituality: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible*. (Jerusalem, Israel: Maggid, 2021), 181-182.

“Amulet 1 contains the following inscription:

1 ...]YHW ... 3 the grea[t ... who keeps] 4 the covenant and 5 [G]raciousness toward those who love [him] and (alt: those who love [hi]m;) 6 those who keep [his commandments ... 7 ...]. 8 the Eternal [...] 9 [the?] blessing more than any 10 [sna]re and more than Evil. 11 For redemption is in him. 12 For YHWH 13 is our restorer [and] 14 rock. May YHWH bles[s] 15 you and **16 [may he] guard you. 17 [May] YHWH make 18 [his face] shine...**”

In addition to these amulets, there is the “Ekron inscription.” See the inscription on the tablet below and what it means for the prayer. Its dimensions are 38 cm, the width is 61 cm, the thickness is 26 cm, and it weighs about 100 kg.



“Beyond such similarities, the Ekron inscription is also important because it sheds light on the contexts in which inscribed blessings functioned in the Iron Age Levant. The inscription at Ekron, like the blessings on the Ketef Hinnom amulets, draws attention to the importance of the written-ness, that is, the tangibility, of the blessing in the Book of Numbers. In other words, the fact that the blessing inscription at Ekron was displayed in a temple complex might suggest that the writing of the priestly blessing in Numbers 6:24–26 was an appropriation and adaptation of the practice of inscribing blessings in temple space. That is, the appearance of the blessing in Numbers not only reflected its function as an oral formula, but also the significance of its written-ness or ‘textuality’ in temple spaces in the Iron Age.

The placement of the blessing in the text of Numbers may thus be seen as a re-locating of the ritual function of blessing’s from temple to text. By associating the priestly blessing with the tabernacle and the description of Israelites bringing dedicatory and votive offerings to the altar, the text of Numbers reflected the physical connection that existed between temple dedications and inscribed blessings in Iron Age temples. In this way, the citation of the blessing in the text of Numbers also paved the way for the continued use of the blessing in later Jewish and Christian liturgy and practice.”⁷

⁷ Smoak, Jeremy D. “New Light on the Priestly Blessing from Ancient Judah.” <https://www.asor.org/anetoday/2016/08/new-light-priestly-blessing-ancient-judah/#:~:text=The%20Book%20of%20Numbers%20cites,the%20priesthood%20and%20the%20Tabernacle>. (20th April 2022).

Here is another view of the tablet: to see the text.⁸



b. Numbers 22-26 and its cultural meaning

So, what does the prayer actually say? Using the New American Standard Bible, we can see that it reads as follows,

²² “Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ²³ ‘Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying, “Thus you shall bless the sons of Israel. You shall say to them: ²⁴ The Lord bless you and keep you; ²⁵ the Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you; ²⁶ the Lord lift up His countenance on you and give you peace.” ²⁷ So they shall invoke (Lit. *put*) My name on the sons of Israel, and I then will bless them” (Num 6:22-27 NASB).

Firstly, we see that it originated with the Lord. He spoke to Moses and instructed him to speak to Aaron and his sons regarding the prayer of blessing. The reason that it was given to Aaron and his sons was to bless the children of Israel. Secondly, we see a set design that was to be read in vv22-26. It contains three promises from the Lord in 15 words in Hebrew.⁹

- One that the Lord will bless you and keep you: v24
- Two, the Lord will make His face shine upon you: v25
- Three, the Lord will lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace: v26

Then thirdly, there was a reason for this prayer of blessing, which was presided over by the Lord.

Israel would be travelling and living as the nomads in the desert. So, what was said by the Lord would have made sense to them as they prepared for their journey. In light of this, some matters are dealt with in these verses as part of this blessing. These are as follows,

- The Lord bless you: v24
- The Lord keep you: v24
- The Lord make His face shine on you: v25
- The Lord be gracious to you: v25
- The Lord lift up His countenance on you: v26
- The Lord give you peace: v26

⁸ “Miqne, Tel (Ekron).” <https://www.baslibrary.org/new-encyclopedia-archaeological-excavations-holy-land/0/0/104/miqne-tel-ekron> (20th April 2022).

⁹ *Systematic Theology Study Bible: English Standard Version*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 157. See also, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*. (London: Soncino, 1989), 594. Berlin, Adele, & Brettler, Marc Zvi (Eds). *The Jewish Study Bible*. (Oxford, NY: Oxford Uni Press, 1999), 297. Solomon, Norman. *The Talmud: A Selection*. (London: Penguin, 2009), 369. Rabbi. Scherman, Nosson. *The Chumash: The Stone Edition*. (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah, 2015), 762-765.

Do we know what all of this means to the first audience? How would you explain them to a 6–8-year-old child? If that is not enough, it went on to state the purpose, i.e.,

- So, they shall invoke My name on the sons of Israel,
- And I then will bless them

Again, it needs to be asked what does this mean? If we are honest, we have probably read it, said it, and even sung these words and have not known what they mean. Let alone being able to explain them to a 6–8-year-old child.

We need to look into the words used in this blessing prayer and promise of the Lord from a nomadic Hebrew perspective. Remember that they had just come out of Egypt, where they saw the gods fall against the might of the Lord. They were being led by Moses under the Lord's guidance and were now a group of people travelling in the desert living in tents. They were made up of families, clans, and tribes, which now had leaders over them and priests among them to guide them in worship and living with the holy God.

So, when the Lord instructed Moses to direct Aaron and his sons to pray this blessing over Israel, this was the background in which it was set in. They were on the verge of setting out on their unknown journey, which the Lord had for them. It is within this story that we find the prayer of blessing. It is not merely some abstract concept that the people were to try to understand. Instead, it was something that was laid out for them in concrete, meaning that all of them could grasp, even the children.

A simple reading

Firstly, we will look at these verses from Hebrew, translated into English since most of us do not read Hebrew. That is,

²² “ADONAI (*Lord*) said to Moshe (*Moses*), ²³ ‘Speak to Aharon (*Aaron*) and his sons and tell them that this is how you are to bless the people of Isra’el: you are to say to them, ²⁴ May ADONAI bless you and keep you. ²⁵ May ADONAI make His face shine on you and show you, His favour. ²⁶ May ADONAI lift up His face toward you and give you peace.” ²⁷ In this way they are to put My name on the people of Isra’el so that I will bless them” (Num 6:22-27 The Complete Jewish Bible, i.e., CJB).

However, if we are honest, we are still not getting what is said here in this prayer of blessing. Even with the transliteration of Hebrew into English, we are still in the dark. However, we can notice the flow of the prayer. That is,

- It was given to Moses from the Lord: v22
- Moses was to tell Aaron and his priestly sons: v23
- Then Aaron and his sons were to bless Israel: v23
- The Lord would be the One doing the blessing: vv24-27
- Finally, Aaron and his sons in blessing Israel this way would be putting the Lord's name on the people: v27

A deeper cultural reading

So secondly, we will need to come at it from another direction. That is trying to understand what the verbs mean that are used in the prayer. The critical thing to remember here is that Hebrew is an active language. It uses a lot of verbs rather than abstract nouns or adjectives. So, what are the verbs that need to be looked at, and how can we do this if we do not understand the Hebrew language?

One helpful tool is a basic understanding of the Hebrew alphabet. It will help us use some basic Hebrew tools, like the one I will mention here. Another helpful tool is the *Strong's Concordance*; if you do not have a paper copy, you can access it for free online: <https://biblehub.com/strongs.htm>. What needs to be remembered, though, is although it is a helpful tool, it has its limitations. Also, there is a danger in any words studies of taking words out of context of the verse and the culture of the day. These two things are essential and not to be ignored. In light of this, we will review these verses in light of the language used. The main feature that will stand out here is the verbs and how they affect what was said in these verses, which we have missed as analytical thinkers.

Therefore, it could be translated the following way from the Hebrew, taking the practical application of the verbs. The following is an expanded, dynamic translation to try to capture what is being said here through the verbs that the Lord has used. It is encouraged to read slowly to get what is being said in this prayer. That is,

²² “And YHWH (*the LORD [and so on in these verses]*) spoke to Mo'sheh saying, ²³ ‘speak to A'ha'ron and to his sons saying, in this way (*I instruct you*) you will bless [*exalt*] (*you [m.p.] will kneel much [before]*) the sons of Yisra'eyl (*you must be*) saying to them.

²⁴ “YHWH will exalt (*bless, [it is not just a wish or a prayer but is stronger than that, it is more is a binding statement and action]*) you (*I will kneel much before you to show respect*) and will and He will safeguard you (*m.s.*) (*guard you with a hedge of protection*). ²⁵ YHWH will illuminate (*He will make light, brightness*) the wholeness of His being (*of His faces*) toward you (*m.s.*), bringing order, and He will give you (*m.s.*) comfort [*grace*] (*He will provide you with strength and protection in His 'camp'*) and sustenance (*friendship*). ²⁶ YHWH will lift up His wholeness of being (*His faces to you*) and look upon you (*m.s.*), and He will set in place (*set down in a fixed and arranged place*) for all your (*m.s.*) need to be whole and complete (*He will place completeness [shalom] to you being without deficiency*).”

²⁷ In this way, they are to put My name (*My title, character*) on (*upon*) the people of Isra'el, so that I will bless [*exalt*] (*I will kneel much before you show respect*) you (*m.p.*)” (Num 6:22-27).¹⁰

Consequently, having gone over these verses, we will look at the verbs used in these verses. The aim here is not simply head knowledge; it is to understand what the first audience heard and how they would have put it into practice. These are as follows,

- The Lord **bless** you: v24; as in Gen 24:11, when the camels knelt down, plus to kneel and pay respect as in Gen 12:2. The Lord said to Israel, ‘I will kneel a lot and with great intention before you to show respect and give you gifts.’ The gifts are mentioned in verses 24-26.

¹⁰ “The Aaronic Blessing from a Hebrew Perspective.” <https://www.ancient-hebrew.org/studies-interpretation/aaronic-blessing-from-a-hebrew-perspective.htm#1> (20th April 2022). Also, Benner, Jeff A. *The Torah: A Mechanical Translation*. (College Station, TX: Virtualbookworm.com Publishing Inc., 2019), 472. Benner, Jeff A. *Benner's Commentary on the Torah*. (College Station, TX: Virtualbookworm.com Publishing Inc., 2019), 63-66. Benner, Jeff A. *Biblical Hebrew Picture Dictionary*. (Magnolia, MS: Ancient Hebrew Research Center, 2018), 88.

- The Lord keep you: v24; like a nomadic shepherd keeping their flock safe by erecting an enclosure of thorn bushes, maybe together with rocks and or wood, Israel would be safe. The Lord has promised to exercise His great divine care over His own. So, it is a guarantee of the Lord's protection. In other words, may the Lord,
"Protect your newly gained blessing of prosperity so that bandits cannot take it away from you."¹¹
- The Lord make His face shine on you: v25; face here is a plural revealing the many faces or features of the Lord as He is in relationship with His own. His faces shine or illuminate the way with His divine light; the same word is used in Gen 1:3 "let there be light..." So, it could be said that it is a figure of speech like a parent kindly looking at their child/children with their full attention, their face glowing, and a heart full of compassion and approval for them. It is like the Lord looking directly at Israel, with a heart full and busting with compassion and approval for them as His children.
- The Lord be gracious to you: v25; it is more than the abstract idea that grace is just being unmerited favour. It would be a special place where someone can run to for protection. If one of the tribes of Israel needed protection from an enemy, they would run to the camp for it. So, what is being said here is that a place exists which is beautiful and precious. It is a place of a wall of safety and peace; it is in the camp of the Lord.
- The Lord lift up his countenance on you: v26; the Lord's face is not hidden from His children in anger or disapproval. A person's face can reflect the various internal moods. It can be hard to hide anger, disgust, disapproval, or even joy, acceptance, and pleasure. It is like the saying, 'It is written all over your face.' So, the original hearers would have understood this to mean the Lord's face is lifted towards them in approval.
- The Lord give you peace: v26; He is the One who would give Israel the gift of peace. The idea behind the word of giving here would be to set one of the flock down in a stable and prepared place. The term used here is shalom, which means so much more than mere peace. It carries features like wholeness, completeness, well-being, and safety, to mention some things. So, ultimately it is to be without deficiency in life.
- So, they shall invoke (Lit. put) My name on the sons of Israel: v27; the idea of the name in the culture had to do with one's character. The Lord's character is faultless and constant in every way. Since Israel are His children, He wants them to live as their Father does. So, the Lord wanted His children to have His character and live in light of it.

What comes through here is that this priestly blessing from the Lord is more than merely something to be learned and recited. It is more than a formula for blessing. It is to be seen within the context of a relationship. That is, from a Father to His children. It is from the Lord the Father to His treasured children. It reveals how much He wants to give His children.

2. So, what do we do about it?

Q. What is its relevance for us today

Today, we can have a problem trying to understand this prayer and things like it. It is read through layers of tradition, translation, languages, and lost cultural understanding. For example, we have probably read Numb 6:22-27 (and things like it) in English from one of the Bible translations, paraphrases or one person's translation attempts. We also have our church and denominational traditions that have been put on top of the Bible to understand it. Then there are the language

¹¹ Rabbi. Scherman, *The Chumash*, 763

differences from early Hebrew through later Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Latin and then English. If that is not enough, we have no idea of the culture in which the original hearers or readers lived. Like the old saying, 'It is lost in translation.'

In the first part of this paper, we briefly looked at some of the above issues in understanding the priestly prayer. However, how will that help us understand its relevance for us today? It can also be seen through the coming of the person of Jesus Christ. The Father sent him to reveal what the Father is like and How He loves His children. For example,

⁸ "Philip said to Him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.' ⁹ Jesus said to him, 'Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, "Show us the Father"? ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works'" (Jn 14:8-10 NASB).

"Jesus therefore answered and was saying to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner'" (Jn 5:19 NASB).

So, what we see from the priestly blessing in its context can help us see its relevance for us today. God does not change His nature; He is the same as He was when the priestly prayer was first prayed. The Father sent Jesus as His gift, who would give us gifts. He is God who came and has knelt down before us at our level.

He wants to kneel before His own on their level and give them,

- His guarantee of protection
- He is looking directly at us with a heart full and bursting with compassion and approval for them as His children
- His face is lifted toward us, shining with approval
- He reassures us that we have wholeness, completeness, well-being, and safety because of Him, to mention some things
- As His children, we already have His character and can live in light of it

What has been explained here can carefully and culturally be done in any part of the Bible. However, it will take longer than merely reading the book's verse, paragraph, and chapter. It will take some study time to determine what was said and why. Maybe use the *Strong's Concordance* mentioned earlier to find out the Hebrew or Greek word, idea, or thing and its possible use within the context that it was used. It needs to be done prayerfully by asking God's Holy Spirit (the Author of the Bible) to help us. We may need to slow down and take some time to think and reflect on what we have just read. So, we have looked at two aspects. That is,

- The historical background: What did it mean to the original audience or hearers?
- So, what is its relevance for us today: That is, how does it apply to us and what should be our response to it?

Some concluding thoughts

So, coming back to the opening question,

Q. What does the priestly prayer in Numbers 6:22-27 mean?

There are so many amazing things that we can learn from this passage of the Bible. As we have seen, there is a lot more to it than what comes through our Bible translations or paraphrases. Let me read the passage from an English Bible again,

²² “Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ²³ ‘Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying, “Thus you shall bless the sons of Israel. You shall say to them: ²⁴ The Lord bless you and keep you; ²⁵ the Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you; ²⁶ the Lord lift up His countenance on you and give you peace.” ²⁷ So they shall invoke (Lit. *put*) My name on the sons of Israel, and I then will bless them” (Num 6:22-27 NASB).

Now let me read it from a simple and practical understanding of the original culture and language. It is more is a ceremonial prayer to be prayed now and then. It is, in fact, a binding promise, statement, and action of the Lord to His own. That is,

²² “And the LORD spoke to Moses saying, ²³ ‘speak to Aaron and to his sons saying, in this way (*I instruct you*) you will bless [exalt] (*you [m.p.] will kneel much [before]*) the sons of Israel and you must be saying to them.

²⁴ “The Lord will exalt (*bless, [it is not just a wish or a prayer but is stronger than that, it is you that I will kneel with great intention before you to show respect and give you gifts and will safeguard you (m.s.) by erecting an enclosure of thorn bushes, maybe together with rocks and or wood so you will be safe.* ²⁵ The Lord will make light, the brightness of the wholeness of His being (*His faces*) toward you (*m.s.*) like a parent kindly looking at their child/children with their full attention, their face glowing, and a heart full of compassion and approval for them. It is like the Lord looking directly at Israel, with a heart full and busting with compassion and approval for them as His children bringing order. He will give you (*m.s.*) a place to find the beautiful and precious place of a wall of safety and peace. It is in the camp of the Lord in a sustaining friendship. ²⁶ The Lord’s face is not hidden from you; it reveals His joy, acceptance, and pleasure, and He will set you down in a fixed and arranged place for you (*m.s.*) need to be whole and complete. He will place completeness [*shalom*] for you to be without any deficiency.”

²⁷ In this way, they are to put My name (*My title, character*) on (*upon*) the people of Isra’el, so that I will kneel much before you (*m.p.*) show respect” (Num 6:22-27).

Hopefully, the fuller and cultural reading of Num 6:22-27 has given a clearer view of what was said by the Lord.

The Father sent Jesus as His gift, who gave us gifts. Jesus as God who came knelt down before us in our world and related to us at our level.

He showed us that the Father has knelt before His children at their level through Jesus Christ and gave,

- His guarantee of protection
- The satisfaction that He is looking directly at us with a heart full and busting with compassion and approval for us as His children
- Us the truth that His face is lifted toward us, shining with approval, and not turned away

- His reassurance that we have wholeness, completeness, well-being, and safety because of Him, just to mention some things
- We, as His children, already have His character and are able to live in light of it

But how are we to act in response to what the prayer is saying? We need to stop and reflect on what we are reading in the Bible. How would what we have seen help us relate to our Heavenly Father and those around us? What would happen if we recognised that we are a Kingdom representative as God's children in our communities? What would we say to someone about what stands out to us today? We need to apply this; otherwise, it is simply an academic process. Then we need to respond to what the Holy Spirit has been saying to us.

In response, we need to ask through this process:

- What personal application can be found in the passages?
- What is God teaching me today?
- That is, "What is God saying to me?"

How should I respond to what is being said, or so what?

- What are you going to do about it?
- What do you need to do to respond?
- Pray and respond