

Loved Ones
Blessed
March 13/14, 2009

Good morning everyone. What if that song was true? What if Elton John's vision was bigger than he could ever imagine? (Actually, Bernie Taupin wrote the song, so it was his vision, I guess). What if, somewhere, there existed someone – a Father – who loved us enough to guarantee that we would be blessed? How would we look at life and the events of our lives if we not only knew that but actually believed it and staked our lives on it?

Well my message today is that there *is* such a Father, our Father in Heaven, the God of the Universe. But I have to tell you that getting to the point of being able to *say* that to you has been a little challenging because, for most of the past week, I've just been in a funk. It started Tuesday night then it got worse as the week went on. Everything from the weather, to computer problems, to some things here at my job (I know you can't believe that), to my never-ending battle with eating – and I know you *can* believe that, I've told you about that before. It just has not gone as I had hoped this week. Yesterday, I woke up with a sinus headache that just pounded me all day long.

I have not *felt* very blessed which didn't make it very easy to prepare for this message. I mean, you try writing a message about being "blessed" when all week you've feel like you've been surrounded by gloom and doom, fear and negativity. Try speaking to people about God's blessing when – right or wrong – you're feeling a little more cursed (in the moment) than you are blessed. It's hard to get motivated.

Of course, I probably shouldn't be surprised. Pretty much every message I give, God allows me to experience a battle with what it is I'm going to be talking about during the week before it. I think He does that so that I won't be arrogant and act like I have it all together but, more importantly, so I won't be tempted to try and snow you with a bunch of pious platitudes that *sound good*, but aren't real.

And believe me, when it comes to the subject of "blessing" there are a bunch of sermons out there that are like that. I know because I read a lot of them this week just trying to find some help for my own heart, and there weren't very many that actually helped me.

Fortunately, for me and you, God finally showed up for me Friday evening and helped me see some things I had been missing (and I'll tell you a little about that experience later), so hopefully I have something of value to say to you today. We'll see.

Anyway, I want to talk to you about two things:

1. What it means for us to be blessed simply because we are God's loved ones in Christ.
2. How to live with the fact that it doesn't always feel that way or appear that way circumstantially. (And just so you'll know, that's a pretty big subject so we'll also be talking about it next week.)

In fact, let me just give you the brief outline of this whole series so that you can see how it all fits together.

Last week we talked about the fact that we are dearly loved by God, therefore we are chosen by God. And if you weren't here, I encourage you to listen or watch online or pick up a DVD or CD at our resource center on the way out ...

... but, basically we saw that being chosen means that God:

- *Knows* us ...
- *Desires* us ...
- And *draws* us to Himself ...
- Because He wants us to *belong* to the new family that's made possible through what Jesus of Nazareth accomplished in his death and resurrection from the grave.

That's what it means – at least, in part – to be chosen by God. We're known, we're desired and we're drawn so we can belong.

Of course, the question is (and we didn't answer this last week because we wanted to just relax and rejoice in what it means to be chosen) ... the question is ... *for what purpose are we chosen?* What does God have in mind for those who He loves and chooses? That's what we're going to talk about today and next week and the week following (then, after that, it will be Easter and we'll start a new series).

So, for what purpose are we chosen? Let me put it like this (and this will frame the series for you):

Those who follow and belong to Christ are ...

- Loved, therefore chosen ...
- To be blessed ...
- To be broken ...
- To be "given."

To phrase it another way, God has chosen to bless us, break us and give us (not "give to us" but to "give us") ... because He loves us. Loved, therefore chosen, blessed, broken and given. If we have come to Christ as our savior and received his grace and mercy, *that's who we are*. That's our identity. Chosen, blessed, broken, and given.

To Be "Blessed"

So let's talk about what it means for us to be *blessed*.

And I want to start out by making two very important distinctions that we have to understand or we're going to be easily confused and discouraged by the negative circumstances of our lives.

- 1. There are individual blessings and there is a state of blessedness (and they are not the same thing).**

There are individual blessings and there is a state of blessedness. They are not the same things. And, for most of us, whenever we hear the word “blessed” we tend to think in terms of the former: the individual blessings. For example, if you grew up in church, I’m sure you remember the old hymn: “Count your many blessings name them one by one. Count your many blessings; see what God has done.” To be blessed means having a lot of countable and tangible blessings.

But that’s not what we’re talking about when we say that “we are blessed simply because we’re God’s loved ones.”

Instead, we’re talking about the *state* of blessedness – and it will become clear what I mean by that in just a minute but, for now, we just need to know there is a difference between that and individual blessings.

We also need to know that ...

2. Individual blessings come from “behaving”; blessedness (the state of being blessed) comes from belonging.

That’s the second distinction because the Bible makes it very clear that there are blessings (individual) that will come to us because we *do* something that God tells us to do. They are conditional, based on our actions or on our behavior.

For instance – and this is just one of many examples ...

We read in Luke 6 that Jesus once said:

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap.

For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” Luke 6:37-38 (NIV)

What’s he saying? If you want to experience a life where people are gracious towards you instead of being critical and condemning, then behave that way yourself. If you want to be a person who gets a lot, then be a person who gives a lot. The blessings are conditioned on how well you obey what God says; on your behavior.

And that’s important to understand and important to apply (especially as you read the scripture and you see those things) ... but that’s *not* what we’re talking about today. What we’re talking about is the *state of blessedness* that comes simply from being God’s chosen and dearly loved ones; from believing and belonging.

So what is *that*?

3. Blessedness (the state of being blessed) is favor with God that cannot be earned.

It’s favor with God that cannot be earned. It’s unconditional. It doesn’t depend on your behavior. It just *is* because God chooses it to be so for those who belong to Him, for those who are part of the Beloved in Christ.

Now, if you have been around here for a while, you’re probably looking at that definition thinking, “hey wait a minute,

that sounds familiar: 'favor with God that cannot be earned' ... that's the definition of *grace*, isn't it?!"

Yes it is. But whenever we speak of grace we always tend to focus on the second half of the statement, that favor with God comes totally from *His* actions, not ours. We emphasize the "un-earnable" part more than we do the "favor" part. That's what makes His favor gracious, it's unearnable.

But the actual "favor" part ... that's what we mean by blessedness. That's what we get simply because we belong to Christ, simply because God loves us, simply because that is what we are chosen for. That is ours *no matter what*.

That's what the Apostle Paul is talking about in his letter to the Ephesians ...

... when he writes ...

God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of his grace and kindness toward us [i.e., his favor], as shown in all he has done for us who are united with Christ Jesus.
Ephesians 2:7 (NLT)

Why do we get it? Simply because we are united with Christ Jesus. God has chosen us. Even further, Paul says, to make us the objects of his favor so he can show us off all through eternity. He's proud of us. He's proud of what He has done in us. So it's His deal and not ours. He does the work, not us. That's why Paul writes in the very next verse, and we're all familiar with this verse, ...

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast. *Ephesians 2:6-9 (NIV)*

Favored by God

So, the question then – if we want to understand what it means to be “dearly loved and chosen for blessing” – the question is “what does it mean to be favored by God?”

Well, there are probably a lot of ways you could answer that but, I think, it means at least two things.

1. It means that what He intends for us is good and not evil.

And the quintessential scripture for that idea is Jeremiah 29:11 where God makes a promise to the chosen People of Israel as he prepared to send them away into exile in Babylon as punishment for their disobedience. God makes this promise to them that even though bad things were going to happen to them,;

"I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." *Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)*

God was telling them in that moment that he was still *for* them; that even though they would not be experiencing a lot of individual *blessings*, they were still a *blessed people* because his intention for them was still good. His favor was still upon them. His plan for them as a people was still to prosper.

And of course, that word “prosper” is, in the Hebrew, the word “shalom” and we’ve talked about that a lot in recent years. It doesn’t mean just financial wealth and creature comforts, though it does sometimes include those things. Shalom is an overall condition where life is the way it was meant to be in all of its dimensions: spiritually, relationally, emotionally, physically and yes, even economically and financially.

As one who is chosen and dearly loved by God, rest assured *that is God’s intention for you*. Shalom is God’s intention for you. That you would experience life as it is meant to be. “Abundant life” Jesus called it. That’s what it means to have God’s favor in our lives; to be blessed.

To be favored by God also means that ...

2. What He intends for us – the good and not evil – is unstoppable.

What God intends for us is unstoppable. God has decided, God has decreed, God has declared, simply because He loves us, that his favor – his intention of good – is going to be upon us in abundance and nothing will keep it from happening.

And the quintessential word on that from the scripture is Paul’s writing to the church at Rome:

If God is for us [and he is – that’s the point! If God favors us], who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

Why would God hold back anything else it would take for us to truly experience “shalom?”

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through [get this!] him who loved us.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:31-32, 35-39
(NIV)

Do you hear that? Nothing and no one will get in the way of the good that God has intended for you as one who is dearly beloved in Christ. Nothing. Zip. Zero. Nada.

God’s goodness towards you is an unstoppable river. The good that He plans to happen to you and *for you is going to happen*. And you can’t do anything to earn that because Jesus already did. That’s what it means to be favored by God. That’s what it means to be blessed because you belong.

“So, what kind of good things are you talking about here, Rick?”

Well, I tried to figure out a smooth way to explain this and put it in an outline, but I couldn’t. So, these are just some things that came to me as I was writing and I will share them with you. These are things that God has planned for you, good things, just because you belong, not because of how you behave.

Actually, that might be a good place to start.

Peter tells us that God gives us everything we need to live a life of godliness.¹ God gives us every resource we need in order to learn how to behave. So, even the ability to behave in a way that is going to eventually lead to those individual blessings – if we don't have that ability yet to do those things – part of the unstoppable good that's coming your way simply because God wants to show his favor is this ability to behave. God is going to give you everything you need so that you can live a godly life.

Of course, in the bigger picture, Paul tells us that God's favor is shown in forgiveness and redemption not just here and now, but also in the fact that Jesus is going to return one day and renew, restore and regenerate this whole creation, including you, if you are a believer. It's an unstoppable good that's coming your way.²

Until then, God has given you the Holy Spirit – his presence in your heart and mind – free of charge, to guide you and encourage you. And He's given us the scripture and the church for the same purpose. The flow of unstoppable good is already coming towards you.

In addition, God has decided that one day, you are going to be so much more like Him in your character in the way you think and act, that you will not even recognize yourself. It's an unstoppable good that's coming your way, and for a lot of you, it's already happening.³

Beyond all of those things, whatever God's plan is for you to be part of what He's doing in this world, whatever that looks like, He'll direct you in that. He will lead you to that. He's not going to keep you in the dark so that you waste your life. If you need a house or a car or a spouse or a job or whatever to accomplish that, God is going to send that good thing to you.

The list could go on and on, but the point is that because God loves us, He has called and appointed us for good things. We are chosen for prosperity – shalom – and all that it means. We are not called to doom and gloom and fear and negativity. We've got to get this clear in our minds *that God is on our side*; that God is for us and not against us; that God is committed to doing what it takes for us, spiritually, physically, temporally (in this life) and eternally (in the life to come). God's favor rests on us because simply because we are loved. This is what we were chosen for.

Truth for Living

Now, I would bet that some of you are thinking right now, “Rick, you said at the beginning that you didn't want to be one of those preachers who just throw out pious platitudes, but you're getting pretty close, you're getting a little preachy on us. So, I've got a question for you: How do you explain the fact that even though the Bible says God intends good and not evil and that His intentions are unstoppable – how do you explain the fact that, right now I'm not seeing a whole lot of that in my life?”

And maybe, for some of you, it's not you who's not seeing it. Maybe you're looking at someone you know or love, a follower of Christ, and you're thinking, “I'm looking at their life and I'm just not seeing ‘blessing’ written all over what's happening to them.”

Well, that's a tough question and, as I said at the beginning of this message, one that I've personally wrestled with in a way I wasn't expecting this week (though certainly in a *much lesser* way than some of you because my life is way easy compared to most people).

Well, I told you that God showed up for me Friday night as I was struggling to get the point where I could even start writing something down to say. And in that little struggle, God reminded me of three things that I'll share with you and maybe they'll be helpful to you too.

1. Even though I *am* blessed (even though that's the truth), sometimes I *feel* cursed because I still live in a world that is under "the curse."

This is very important to understand. Sometimes I *feel* cursed not because I *am* cursed, but because this *world* still is, and I've got to live in it.

That's what Paul was getting at when he wrote to the Galatians that ...

Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing (our sins).

What he is saying is, I'm not under the curse any longer. I'm not on God's "bad side," so to speak. Instead, Paul writes, I'm on the favored side.

Through Christ Jesus, God has blessed the Gentiles (non people of Israel) with the same blessing he promised to Abraham ... Galatians 3:8-14 (NLT)

And if you know your Bible history at all you know that the blessing that God gave to Abraham was abundant life. He said, "I'm going to prosper you. You're going to do great things for me. I'm going to use you in this world. I'm going to fulfill your mission in this world. I'm going to fulfill your life. Paul says, that's yours. You're not cursed.

However ... the world still is. Bad things are still going to happen in this world and they are going to affect me. They're going to rub off on me. Some of them are going to happen to me. And I'm probably going to feel sad and depressed. I'm probably going to have days where it feels like it's all gloom and doom. And it's going to be like that until the day I die.

But – and this is huge – it's not going to be like that forever because, one day Jesus is coming back to fulfill his promise to renew, restore and regenerate all things. He's going to remove the curse of sin on this world. And I'm going to get to live in that world. And so are you, if you belong to him.

And that leads to the second thing I think God showed me on Friday evening.

2. My life in this world is not the entirety of my life.

My life in this world is not the entirety of my life. And it's very easy to forget that there is much more to come in our lives if we know Christ; that in the scope of eternity, what we're experiencing right now is not even a blip.

However, what we're tempted to do is to see life in this world as the entirety of life.

I made a little diagram that illustrates it.

Most of us think of life as being from the day we're born in this flesh until the day it dies. We go through phases in that flesh life where we're feeling blessed, or it's so-so or it's hard ... and then, when we hit 80+ (I'm thinking positive, in my case), then that's it. Whatever happened in this life – that's how we measure if we were blessed or not.

But life in this world for Christ-followers isn't the entirety of life.

So, a more accurate diagram would look like this:

The days in this current sin-cursed world are just a sliver of the entirety of the life I've been promised by God. When Jesus returns and there is no more curse, there will be no more hard or even so-so. There will still be creative challenges because God has created us to be creative people and we're always going to face challenges and things like that, but there is never going to be a time in that world to come when we feel as if we are not blessed.

So ... and here's the point: if I am not feeling blessed today or this week, if I'm not feeling blessed right now, what is "now" in relation to the entirety of my life? Almost nothing.

Just because I don't feel blessed today, or this week, or this year, or I don't see signs of God's favor, doesn't mean I won't. It doesn't mean that I am not favored and that unstoppable good still isn't coming my way.

See, if you're not experiencing a whole lot of "good" in your life today ... take heart; it's not going to be like this forever. God promises.

On the other hand, bad news here, for those of us who *are* experiencing "good" right now, guess what? It's very likely that as we get older and our health fails (which is just part of what it means to live in a sin-cursed world even though you're not under the curse), our level of "good" is probably going to decrease. Are we going to start thinking "God has abandoned me in my old age?" or "God has changed his mind towards me. God no longer loves me."

You know some of us might actually think that ... unless we remember that life in this world is not the entirety of our lives.

Or as Paul wrote:

Our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever!

So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 (NLT)

You can't see the line past your current life running into eternity. But it's there. Focus on that, Paul is saying.

Actually, he echoes this same idea a few paragraphs later when he writes:

We live by faith, not by sight. 2 Corinthians 5:7 (NIV)

And that's the third thing I was reminded of Friday night.

3. We must “see” life with eyes of faith (and then act as if what we're seeing is true). Because it is true.

We've got to get to the point where everything that happens to us gets interpreted through the grid that we are loved and chosen and blessed. We've got to see past this day and into eternity. We've got to trust that God is for us and not against us and then live this day – this crappy day (if it is a crappy day) – out of that trust.

And here's where God got to me Friday night (kind of surprising actually). When you see with the eyes of faith, it's not just looking forward. Sometimes you look backwards and you see in your own life how, even in the times where you thought God wasn't blessing you (individual countable blessings), you were still blessed. You were still favored by Him.

I was reading the story of the OT patriarch Jacob and how, near the end of his life, he was about to bless Joseph's sons. Now, Jacob had had a pretty hard life. His “line”, if he were to draw it out, didn't look so hot.

- He was raised by a father who didn't love him, and that warped his whole self-image. He became a liar and a cheater because of it.
- He had to flee for his life as a young man, leaving behind his mother who was the only person who'd ever loved him and whom he'd never see again.
- He was forced to work 20 years for his uncle, Laban, who exploited him and manipulated him and stole from him.
- He had to marry a woman he didn't love, and then when he did marry the woman he loved, she died a few years later in childbirth.
- His children turned out to be disasters, all but one – the light of his eyes, Joseph – but in jealousy his brothers sold him into slavery and told Jacob that he was dead.
- And Jacob spent the last 15 or 20 years of his life in a clinical depression over what he thought was the loss of this favorite child⁴ ...

... until one day God miraculously led him to Egypt where he discovered that Joseph wasn't dead, but that God had rescued him and raised him up to be second in command over all of that nation.

And, as Jacob is on his deathbed, he calls Joseph and his two boys to his bedside because he wants to bless Joseph's boys. So he puts his hands on the boys and this is what He says:

*The God before whom walked my fathers Abraham and Isaac,
The God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this very day,
The Angel who delivered me from every evil
Bless these boys.*

And when I read that part – the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this very day – it gets me because that has been the story of my life, too. As I've said, my life is easy. I've had nothing compared to what Jacob had or nothing compared to what many of you have had, but there are times in my life when I get discouraged, and I look at things I've gone through and I get discouraged maybe about what God has called me to do in being a pastor of a church. And this week a bunch of things kind of hit, we're almost always running behind financially (we've talked about this before) ... or people get mad about something I say in a sermon and they make a big deal and they leave the church ... or people don't like the music, or the children's program or the youth program or whatever and leave the church ... or we're trying to figure out a better way to do things because something is not working; there is just always something to work on and fix ... and a lot of times I don't even feel competent at what I'm doing. I can get myself to the point where I start thinking, "what's the use?" and I start feeling like I am more cursed than I am blessed.

But the other night when I was reading this passage, God said, "That's you. Because this is how it's always been, Rick. For 15 years, you've never had enough money to run a church ... for 15 years you've always had somebody misunderstand what you said and get mad ... you've always had people leave the church over something ... and you've *never been* competent. I mean, come on. *But I am*. And I'm the one who is doing it.

And I have been with you the whole time. And, you – and this church, and the people in this church – are blessed. My favor is upon you just because I choose it to be so. So stop looking at your circumstances, stop whining about people who are mad at you, stop whining and fretting over finances. Stop being discouraged. Remember what I have done. Look through the eyes of faith and see all the great things that are happening here; look at all the new people who have come, just because people who are part of North Heartland Church love the church so much that they are inviting their friends and family. Look at all the responses that are happening to messages; look at the new clarity of vision I've given you and the other leaders."

That was kind of like a little moment for me. And, that's my junk. I mean, obviously you have different junk. But I'm sure you have times in your life when you can enumerate things that discourage you and you just feel like "I'm more cursed than I am blessed." And when we get like that we've got to remember:

- We're not cursed, we just live in a world where things don't work like they're supposed to just yet .
- Our lives in this world are not the entirety of our lives.
- There is a reality beyond what we can see. And we've got to "see" with eyes of faith (and then act on what we see). And the truth is that we are loved and we are blessed.

A Blessing

And, sometimes we just need to have people tell us that and remind us of it. Sometimes we just need to have the blessing spoken over us.

I think that's why, in the Old Testament, God spoke to Moses and told him that every so often, he was supposed to call

the people of Israel together and speak a word of blessing over them. The truth was they had been miraculously delivered from Egypt, but now they had to walk through a lonely desert for a long time, longer than any of them had ever thought, to get to the Promised Land. And, I think God knew that it would be easy for them to forget that even though life in the desert might be hard, the desert was only a part of the journey for them as a people.

And so, to help them see with eyes of faith and to live out of that truth ...

The Lord said to Moses, “Tell Aaron and his sons to bless the people of Israel with this special blessing:

The Lord bless you, and keep you;

The Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

The Lord lift up His countenance on you and give you peace [and yes, again the word is shalom]

Numbers 6:24-26 (NASB)

Whenever Aaron and his sons bless the people of Israel in my name, I myself will bless them.”

Numbers 6:27 (NLT)

In other words, God is saying, “I’m waiting for you to speak the words of blessing over people. And when you do that, I’m going to act.”

Now, here’s what I think each phrase of that blessing meant (just a little explanation) ... and I’ve chosen a little picture that goes along with each idea.

The Lord bless you, and keep you;

Don’t forget that God’s intention for us is good and not evil (that’s what “keep you” means; it’s a way of referring to God’s ultimate protection over the entirety of our lives).

The Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

Don’t forget friends, that even though we’re in this desert right now, God is crazy about us. His face lights up at the thought of us.

The Lord lift up His countenance on you and give you peace [shalom].

God is holding us up like his cherished children, lifting up his face to us, because we are so special to him. And his plan for us is shalom – peace and prosperity in every form.

Isn’t that a cool blessing? Wouldn’t it be cool if someone spoke that over us?

Well guess what ... that’s what we’re going to do as we close the service this morning because those things are true for all of us who are in Christ. This is what God has promised us not because of how we behave, but simply because of what we believe and to whom we belong.

The band is going to come up now and get in place to do a song as we get ready to do a blessing. And they're going to do the song while we do a blessing. And we've not done this before as a church, but we're going to do it kind of like communion. So, if you are part of my "blessors," would you please get in place like we do at our communion stations.

When the band starts, just come to one of the people here, and we're just going to say the words (and there is no magic in those words but they are great words) the words that God told Moses and Aaron to say over the people of Israel. And I know some of you may be thinking, "Oh man, I just don't feel like I am worthy of being blessed."

Well, guess what? You're not. That's the whole point! That's the message – get that. None of us are. So, let's get over ourselves here and come to God and say, "God, for some unknown reason, you've chosen me. You love me and you want to bless me." So take a step of faith here. Be bold, and let God bless you through these words.

First let's pray:

Help us God to live as those who are blessed and kept because you love us as the beloved, for we are the beloved.

ENDNOTES

¹ 2 Peter 1:3

² 2

³ Romans 8:29

⁴ See http://www.lakegrovepres.org/sermons/S2006/sermon_2006-11-26.htm