

BLESSINGS

This Sunday, August 20th, our responsive reading is Psalm 67. Psalm 67 is a song meant for public worship, with the people chiming in on verses 3, 5 and 7. ***Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.*** And, finally, ***May God continue to bless us: let all the ends of the earth revere him.*** The theme of the psalm is *blessing*.

The psalm begins with a request for blessing. “May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us” These words are probably very familiar. What is called the Aaronic benediction normally close our worship services: “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 upon you, and give you peace” (Numbers 6:24-26). Here, those words are slightly tweaked and are used to open the psalm.

The theological category of blessing is one of the most important in the Old Testament—a theme that is often underappreciated. The great theologian Claus Westermann contrasted two general aspects of God’s merciful action towards humanity: God’s *saving* activity and God’s *blessing* activity. Old Testament theology strongly emphasizes God’s saving activity—forgiving sin, rescuing from oppression, saving from death, etc. But the Old Testament consistently speaks of another sphere of God’s mercy: the blessing activity of God—fruitful harvests, fertility, health, prosperity, and the like. Psalm 67 emphasizes our need—the longing request for *God’s blessing*. Like God’s saving activity, God’s blessing activity is available by grace alone.

The OT law given to Moses was bestowed as a gracious gift in order that life might thrive—as a sign that God has drawn near to the covenant people. God’s blessing is by grace alone because God blesses whom God chooses, when God chooses, for the reasons God chooses. God’s blessings are gracious, surprising, unexpected gifts. This is clear throughout the biblical narrative (think Abraham and Sarah, Zaccariah and Elizabeth, Mary, the mother of Jesus).

Why must we be reminded of God’s blessings? Because it is easy to forget. Recently, as I said a cursory “God bless you” to someone who had sneezed, the person said, “What has God ever done for me?” The implication seemed to be: 1) God hadn’t done anything, and 2) that everything this person had in life was the result of her own hard work. How sad and misguided, but my request for God’s blessings upon her still stands.

Psalm 67 also refers to the *saving power* of God (v.2 “that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations.” One occasionally sees a bumper sticker on a vehicle declaring “Jesus Saves.” Amen! But how about another bumper sticker on the other side saying “God Blesses.” These are the two primary shapes of God’s activity: 1) the dramatic acts of *saving* or rescuing (e.g. the Exodus in the Old Testament, the cross/resurrection in the New Testament) and 2) the quiet, almost unnoticed action of *blessings* every day in sunshine and rain, health, the joy of life in family and friendship, and hope for tomorrow. God has blessed us richly. And we rely on God’s continued blessings.

And this short, repetitive psalm has one more important lesson to teach about God’s blessing activity—God blesses for the sake of mission. God’s blessing is the foundation of mission. The ultimate purpose of God’s blessing is mission: “that your way be known on earth, your saving power among all nations.” So that the peoples and nations might praise God—“let all the peoples praise you”. When we pray with Psalm 67 that “God continue to bless us” or when we end the worship service with the plea that “the Lord’s face shine upon you,” we do so for the sake of God’s mission. In order that through God’s people, all of the world might experience God’s saving help.

GOD BLESS US, EACH AND EVERY ONE!