

“Beyond Gesundheit” from Joe Heikman
2018-11-06 // Wildwood Mennonite Church
(shared worship service at Bethany Manor)

*The Lord bless you and keep you.
The Lord lift his countenance upon you.
The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and
give you peace.*

That was the benediction offered most Sundays by Pastor Graybill Brubaker at my church growing up. He was not a tall man, probably about 5-foot-4. But when he lifted his hands and spoke those words over us, sending us on our way, God’s blessing was big and powerful.

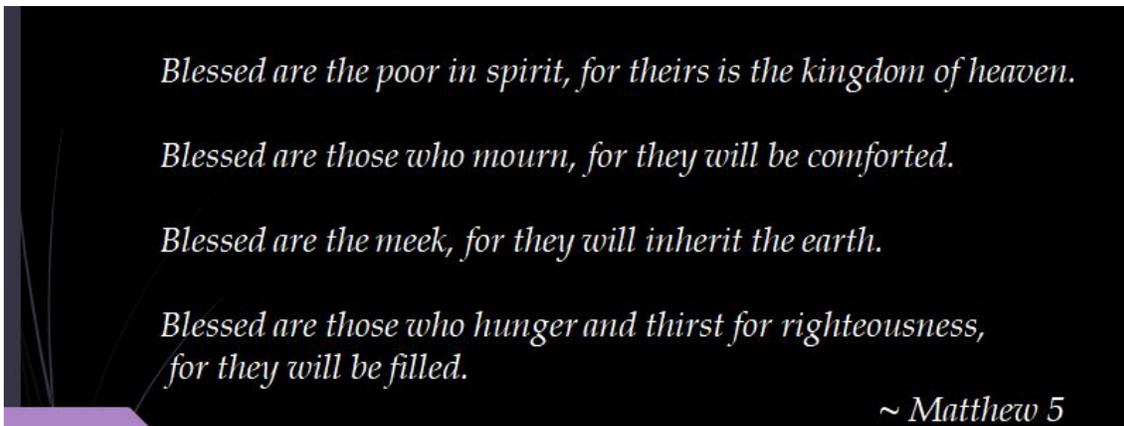
That was my first taste of a blessing.



ACHOO!! (Loud, fake sneeze... and the obligatory fake “bless you” came from the audience) “*Bless you.*” And that’s the most common blessing in our English language. Other languages offer *salud*, or *gesundheit* when someone sneezes, the wish for good health. We offer God’s blessing.

What do we mean by blessing? Is it the same thing now as it was for the ancient Hebrews who first spoke that traditional benediction?

I’ve been thinking about that word, “blessed,” or “bless-ed,” as I’ve been preparing for an upcoming series at Wildwood on the Sermon on the Mount. You’ve heard the opening lines of that Sermon from Jesus, the Beatitudes:



...and so on.

Some bible translators use the word “Happy” instead of “blessed.” “Happy are the poor, happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.”

Is that what a blessing is, happiness, positive thinking, a general sense of goodness and well-wishes?

That's what it seems to mean some of the time. (singing?) "Count your blessings, name them one by one..." We think of blessings as the things that we're grateful for: our health, our loved ones, the roof over our heads and the food on our table, the good weather. When we experience something good, we respond in gratitude: God has blessed us.

We also wish that kind of blessing on others, those who could use a little bit of grace or healing. "God, bless my friend, bring her comfort, be close to them, give them what they need."

There is also a sense of comparison in some of the ways we talk about blessings. I grew up in the States, where politicians of both parties close their biggest speeches with "God Bless the United States of America." I've heard over and over again how blessed we are to live in this country. (And Canadians say that, almost as often.) The implication, is again, partly gratitude, and partly that idea that *we* are blessed and *they* are not.

Blessed?

- a general sense of happiness?
- things to be thankful for?
- well-wishes, for health or comfort or provision?
- better off than someone else?
- chosen to receive exclusive benefits?

That sentiment runs deep in the biblical story as well: Christians were blessed, the Romans were not; the Jews were blessed, the Gentiles were not; the Hebrews were blessed, and the Egyptians were not.

The common assumption is that to be blessed is to be chosen, to experience God's favour, to get extra benefits, extra protection, a greater share of God's wisdom and holiness.

Is that what it means to be blessed?

To help us dig into that question, I'm going to tell some stories from the life of Jacob in the book of Genesis, one of the great ancestors of the biblical story. Jacob's whole life was wrapped up in this idea of blessing.

Many of Jacob's stories are very familiar, like the story of his birth. Rebekah gave birth to twin sons--was Jacob born first or second? Second. And does anyone know what the name Jacob means? "Heel-grabber." That's quite the legacy to be saddled with, hey? The second-born son, always grasping after his brother, eating his dust. The first born, Esau, by right of birth he was the blessed one, the heir to the lands and fortune of his father.

But as the twins grew up, Rebekah favoured her younger son. And so when their father Isaac was dying, when he was about to formalize the blessing of the firstborn and give Esau the keys to the kingdom, Rebekah and Jacob conspired against Esau. Isaac was blind with age, so they dressed Jacob up in Esau's clothes and covered his fair arms with goat skin so he'd be hairy like Esau. And Jacob went in to Isaac's tent and pretended to be his brother.



So Isaac spoke the words of blessing over Jacob, instead of Esau, and the younger son received the birthright.



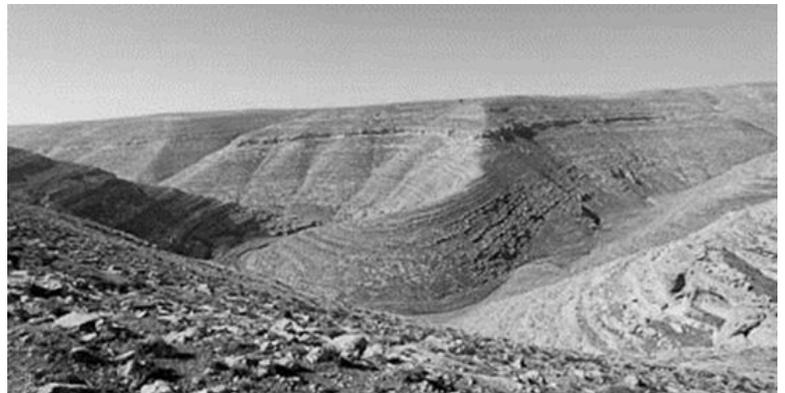
And they all lived happily ever after, right? No, of course not. Esau was, shall we say, displeased with Jacob for stealing his birthright. Murderously displeased. And he was a big, burly hunter dude, not someone you wanted to mess with. And so Rebekah arranged for Jacob to sneak away, to run off through the wilderness in hopes of reaching Rebekah's birth family far from the Promised Land of Canaan.

That's the part of the story that I never understood--what did Jacob and Rebekah, think would happen, that Esau would just laugh it off, "ha, you really got me there brother, guess that makes you the head of the family now, how would you like me to serve you?"

No, Jacob had to know that Esau would not just let go of his position of power and honor. That was how this story was always going to end, with Esau in control of the family and its wealth, and Jacob out in the desert, running in the wrong direction. He had the blessing, technically, but that was the only thing.

So that's the first lesson from Jacob's life, that being blessed must be about more than comfort and wealth and control. Jacob was blessed and Esau was not, but Esau was the wealthy and powerful one.

God's blessing does not mean wealth, or power, or living in peace and comfort. There's something deeper going on.



But that's a difficult lesson to learn. Jacob did make it to the lands of his mother's brother, Laban, who gave him a job as a sheep and goat herder. And Jacob did well with Laban, earning his trust and marrying two of his daughters. (I should say that this arrangement does not go smoothly and causes significant trauma for the women and the men in the family for generations. I recommend reading or watching [The Red Tent by Anita Di-a-mant](#) for a fictionalized view of the stories of the women in this family).



Laban's flocks and wealth grew very great while Jacob cared for them. Jacob and Laban agreed that this prospering was a sign of God's blessing on Jacob. Laban wanted Jacob to stick around so that he could continue to share in the benefits of that blessing, so Laban agreed to divide the flock, so that Jacob could have control of his own animals as well as caring for Laban's.

And that worked for a while, but then there came jealousy between them when Jacob's flocks did better than Laban's.

Again, the fight over the blessing of God divided the family, as Laban and his sons accused Jacob and his family of stealing from them, taking advantage of them.

And so again, Jacob had to run away, this time with great wealth, but with nowhere to go but back to the land of Esau, his very large and very angry brother.

Where was God's blessing now? Jacob had worked hard, very hard, for Laban. He had not stolen anything, he felt like he had earned God's blessing this time. He had done everything right, but here he was again, on the run, afraid for his life.



That's a second lesson, that a blessing is something that's given, not earned. If you feel like you deserve it, it's not a blessing. If you think a blessing makes you special, more worthy than your neighbor, it's probably not a blessing.

The third scene from Jacob's life comes in that in-between place, when he has led his family away from their homes with Laban and towards the showdown with Esau in Jacob's homeland in Canaan. It's another familiar story, but such a strange one.

As Jacob's caravan drew near to Esau's territory, Jacob was terrified. He sent gifts ahead to Esau, a significant portion of his wealth, hoping to buy him off. Then he was afraid that that wouldn't work, so next he sent his wife and children and all of the rest of his possessions, perhaps so that Esau would take compassion on the women and children, or maybe that by seeing Jacob's wealth of family and possessions Esau would be reminded that Jacob had God's blessing.

Having sent ahead everything that he had and everyone that he loved, Jacob waited alone by the river.



The familiar telling of the story is that God sent an angel to meet Jacob that night, and Jacob wrestled with the angel and refused to let go until the angel gave him an assurance of God's blessing.

It's quite a strange image, a human wrestling with the angel of God. And not only holding his own, but winning, by sheer force of will extracting a blessing from God. And that blessing comes in the form of a new name for Jacob, now called "Israel," the one who wrestles with God."

It's interesting, though, that the text is ambiguous about the identity of Jacob's opponent that night. It goes out of its way to say that "a man" wrestled with Jacob, and it never says that this person was an angel, let alone God.

There's a stream in the Jewish tradition that says that [the man was Esau](#). That's an interesting idea, that Jacob finally had the courage to take on his brother in the physical combat that he had run away from all those years ago.

And while Esau was stronger, Jacob was relentless. And again, as always, the contest was about blessing. Jacob still didn't have what he'd always wanted. He had heard the words of blessing from his father, he had won great wealth, but still he was insecure and wanting more. He sought the blessing from the only one who could actually give it--his older, twin brother.



And Esau's answer is amazing. What is your name? Jacob, "the heel-grabber," the second son, the afterthought, the weaker-than, the cheat. No, says Esau, that's not who you are any more. Your new name is Israel, the God-Wrestler. The one who never quits, who lives in the relentless pursuit of the gifts of God.

And that blessing satisfied Jacob. That one stuck.

I wonder if that's what blessing really is, the invitation to be transformed by God's presence. Jacob wasn't blessed when he won the approval of his parents. He wasn't blessed when he won the respect of his peers or the pleasure and security that came with great wealth. Those things might bring happiness and contentment with the good things of life, or they might not.

But the true blessing comes in the struggle that transforms us, the longing for God that makes us become more God-like.

That was Jacob's response to the blessing he received that night. "So Jacob called the place *Peniel*, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

"Peniel"--literally, the face of God. Now, where have we heard that before today?

May God bless you and keep you!

May God's face shine upon you, and be gracious to you!

May God look kindly upon you, and give you peace!

Same word, to be blessed is to see God's face. It sounds comforting and inspiring as a benediction, like the Irish Blessing "*May the road rise up to meet you, may the wind be always at your back, may the sun shine warm upon your face...may God hold you in the palm of His hand.*"

That sounds so nice and comforting! But remember, the Hebrews were terrified of the face of God. The High Priest only went into the Holy of Holies once a year, and always with a rope tied around his ankle so that they could pull him out in case he didn't survive being in the same place where God's presence had been.

When Moses was receiving the Torah law from God, when he went back to talk to his people, they were terrified of Moses because *his* face was glowing so brightly. They made Moses wear a veil to talk to them, so that they wouldn't get a contact high!

The Lord make his face to shine upon you - that was a serious, awe-inspiring invocation.

The point wasn't that we need to be afraid of God, but that God's presence is powerful and transformative. If the face of God does indeed shine on you, you will never be the same. And that's what it is to be truly blessed.

Jacob was transformed by God's blessing, slowly and surely. He had become "Israel," the one who lived with such courage and tenacity as to wrestle with God. He was becoming the father of a nation. Not some incredible empire; Israel as a nation barely made a blip on the history books, outside of their own. They eventually had some success, but only as far as they allied themselves with the more powerful nations around them. If being chosen and blessed by God meant great wealth and power, the descendants of Israel never had it.

And that brings me to a final story of blessing from the life of Jacob/Israel.

One of Jacob's sons was Joseph, "the dreamer," who was sold into slavery and yet rose to become the second-in-command of all of Egypt. That's another story for another time.

But after Joseph was finally reunited with his family, he brought his two young sons to their grandfather Jacob to receive his blessing.

Joseph carefully followed the tradition, and he brought the older son, Manasseh to stand at Jacob's right hand. As Jacob knew all too well, the firstborn would receive the first blessing, the birthright, the greater share of the family's wealth and favour. So Manasseh stood at Jacob's right hand, and his younger brother Eph-ra-yim stood at Jacob's left hand.

But when Jacob reached out to lay his hands on their heads, he put his right hand on the head of the younger brother Ephraim, and his left hand on the head of the older brother Manasseh.

Now, as the story says, Jacob's "eyes were dim with age and he could not see well." So Joseph assumed that he had made a mistake. Some of you have children who talk to you like this sometimes: "Now Dad, that's not right, this is Manasseh, he's the older one, so put your right hand here, and your left hand here." :)

But Jacob insisted on keeping his arms crossed. Though Ephraim is the younger brother, he will be the greater man and his descendants will be the greater tribe. Manasseh is older, but Ephraim has the greater blessing.



The Bible doesn't say why Jacob chose to give the greater blessing to the younger son. It's easy to hear the echoes of his own story, of the lesson that blessing does not always come to the one who *should* have it, but rather to the ones that are willing to be transformed by the presence of God.

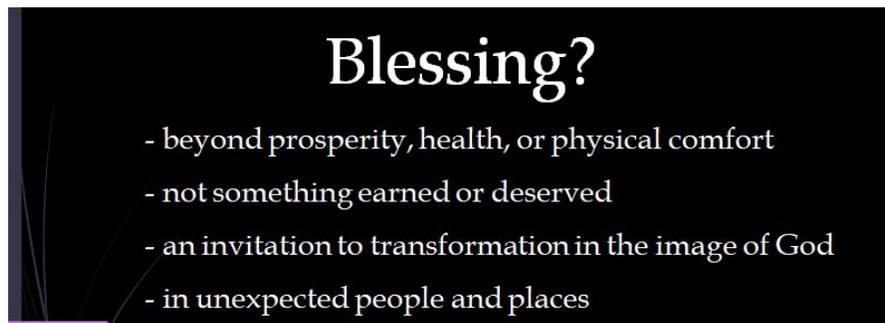
That pattern repeats again and again in Israel's history. Jacob's father, Isaac, was also the second son of his father Abraham, and yet he was also the blessed one. Israel's greatest king, David, was the lowest son of the weakest tribe. His successor, King Solomon, was born out of a scandal. Israel's greatest priest, Samuel, was a nobody, chosen over the sons of the High Priest Eli. Foreigners like Rahab and Ruth were brought into the lineage of Israel's royal house.

People who "shouldn't be" blessed *were* blessed. And many who were supposed to be blessed, who thought they were blessed, were not.

At least, not by what we expect blessings to look like. And that's my point. As humans, we are terrible judges of who is blessed and what that might look like!

We are so biased and limited in our perspective. The things we long for don't actually make us happy. The judgments we place on others, the people that we favor, that has much more to do with us than with who God might bless.

And so God crosses her arms and challenges our understanding of blessing.



Blessed are the poor, the weak, the merciful, the peacemakers.

When we look at others, in pity, or in envy, or in judgment, so often we get it wrong. We miss God's blessing, because it doesn't look like we expect that it might.

So.

May God bless you and keep you--*not with what you want, not with what might make you comfortable and secure, but with what you truly need.*

May the face of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob--*and of Rebekah, Esau, and Ephraim, and Manasseh, the God of the poor and the meek and the merciful, the peacemakers and the persecuted*--may the face of God in all people and all places shine upon you and be gracious unto you.

May the image of God shine in you--*not in spite of your struggles, but through them*--and give you peace.

Amen.