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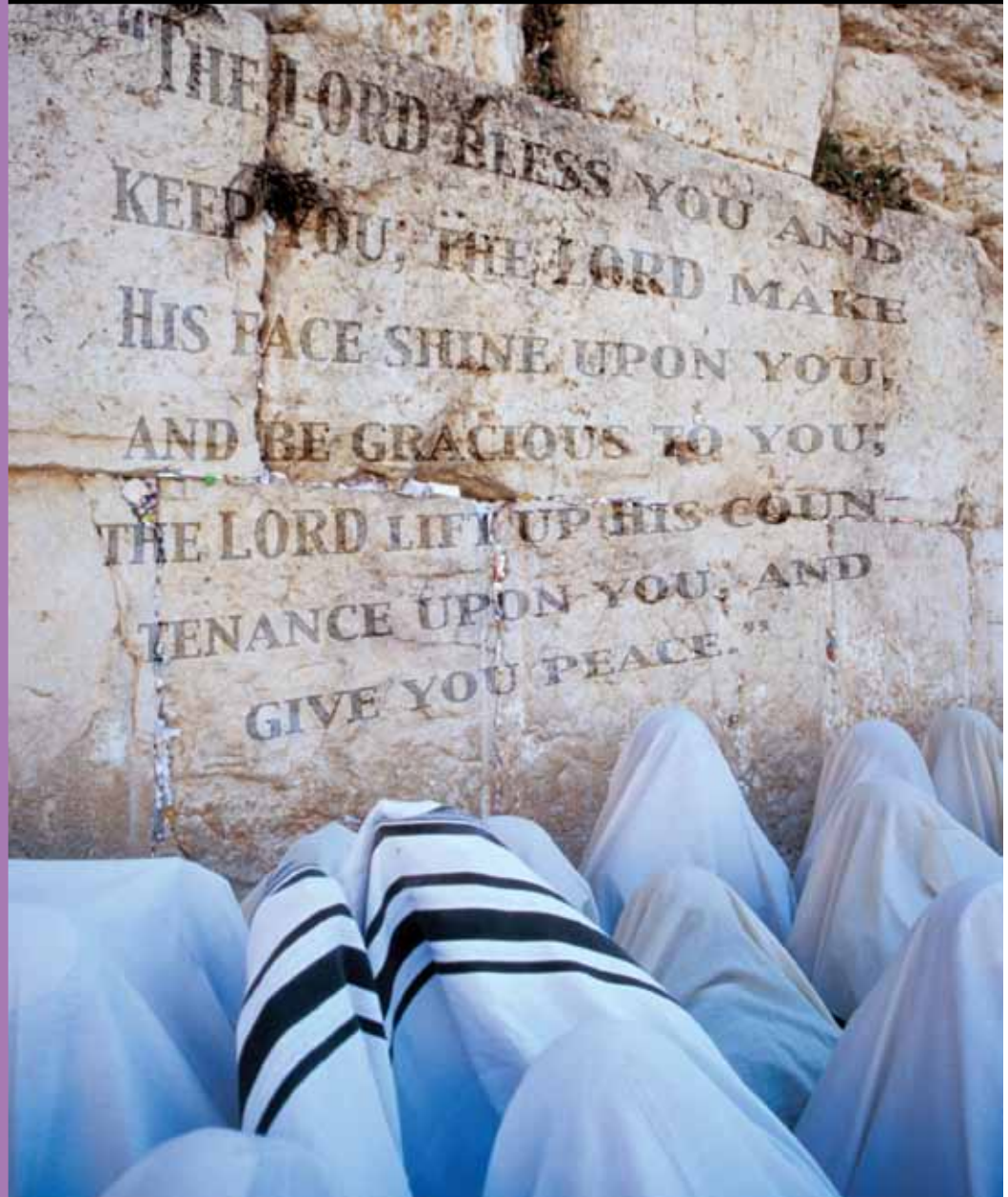
BRIDGES FOR PEACE

Israel Teaching Letter

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A FRESH LOOK AT THE PRIESTLY BLESSING



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“Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, ‘This is the way you shall bless the children of Israel. Say to them: ‘The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.’” (Num. 6:23–26).

I cannot tell how many times I have heard those words. At my most conservative estimate, it has to be well over 1,000 recitations of Aaron’s High Priestly Blessing, although in my denomination, it was referred to as the “Benediction.” I began attending the Lutheran church when I was about nine years old, and in a very short time, I had most of the liturgy memorized including these words, which closed out every service. Although the words were familiar, they never really impacted me. I even have to admit that they sounded like vain repetition: blah-blah-blah, yeah, I get the point, let’s go eat!

Then it happened! I discovered the Jewish roots of Christianity, and those roots began to reveal new insights that expanded my understanding of our Lord and His Word. Getting into the Jewish roots of our Christian faith has literally been a God-send! By learning Hebraic thought, rabbinic idioms, and cultural practices, so much of the Bible continues to open up to me and expand my spiritual horizons, which I’m able to share with my students. Understanding the Jewish roots of Christianity is vital to understanding much of what we miss today in biblical interpretation and understanding of the Scriptures.

So, in this teaching letter, I would like to “unpack” the Aaronic or High Priestly Blessing in light of the Jewish teachings I’ve come across regarding this remarkable portion of Scripture. After all, the Jewish people have been studying (and living) these words far longer than any Christian theologian has. Don’t you think they might have something to offer? First, I would like to share some thoughts on what “blessing” is. Then I would like to go line by line through the High Priestly Blessing to strengthen and brighten the meaning of each section. Finally, I would like to give my summation of the blessing in a way that I hope will truly be an ongoing source of spiritual encouragement to you.


WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BLESS?

Blessing is the act of declaring God’s favor and goodness upon others. Throughout the Bible, we see that blessing is not only the good effect of words, it also has the power to bring them to pass. Now, I’m not saying that every blessing we pronounce will come to pass as if it were some mechanical formula. That’s up to the Lord. However, let’s not sell the action of blessing short either! The apostle John said that when we pray according to His will—and a blessing is a type of prayer—we can



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be sure that the Lord hears us and will give us what we've asked for (1 John 5:14–15). Thus, God responds to the words in our prayers of blessing.

Another way to think of a blessing is that we are asking the Lord to wrap up His people in His protective and loving care. We are asking the Lord to extend positive actions in the life of the one being blessed. We see this reflected in the Psalms: "*For You, O LORD, will bless the righteous; with favor You will surround him as with a shield*" (5:12). "*Save Your people, and bless Your inheritance; shepherd them also, and bear them up forever*" (28:9).

Blessing is the opposite of cursing. *Eerdmans' Bible Dictionary* defines a curse as the "invocation of harm or injury upon a person (or people), either immediately or contingent upon particular circumstances." Therefore, we are asking the Lord to extend a whole range of good things upon a person when we speak blessing on them. Since *shalom* (peace) is an all-encompassing Hebrew word, which includes "a state of wholeness and security, embracing the physical and spiritual dimensions" (also *Eerdmans'* definition), then the best blessing would be one which includes *shalom*.

May I step on a theological toe? Why is it easier for us to believe that we can be hit with a curse and sustain some type of lingering effect than to accept someone's blessing and expect it to have an equal if not greater effect, especially when it lines up with the Lord's own Word? Perhaps this will be an encouragement to you, dear reader, to speak more blessings on those around you.



“NOW THEREFORE, LET IT PLEASE YOU TO BLESS THE HOUSE OF YOUR SERVANT, THAT IT MAY CONTINUE BEFORE YOU FOREVER; FOR YOU, O LORD GOD, HAVE SPOKEN IT, AND WITH YOUR BLESSING LET THE HOUSE OF YOUR SERVANT BE BLESSED FOREVER.”

2 SAM. 7:29



The Lord’s blessing rests on those who are faithful to Him: *“Behold, I set before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you today”* (Deut. 11:26–27). To name a few effects, His blessing brings...

- righteousness—*“He shall receive blessing from the LORD, and righteousness from the God of his salvation”* (Ps. 24:5).
- life—*“It [unity among brethren] is like the dew of Hermon, descending upon the mountains of Zion; for there the LORD commanded the blessing—life forevermore”* (Ps. 133:3).
- prosperity—*“Now therefore, let it please You to bless the house of Your servant, that it may continue before You forever; for You, O Lord GOD, have spoken it, and with Your blessing let the house of Your servant be blessed forever”* (2 Sam. 7:29).
- salvation—*“Salvation belongs to the LORD. Your blessing is upon Your people”* (Ps. 3:8).
- forgiveness of sin—*“Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity...”* (Ps. 32:1–2a).
- peace (*shalom*)—*“The LORD will give strength to His people; the LORD will bless His people with peace”* (Ps. 29:11).

In the Bible, important persons blessed those with less power or influence. The patriarchs pronounced benefits upon their children, often near their own deaths as Jacob did for his 12 sons (Gen. 49:1–28). Even if spoken by mistake, once a blessing was given, it could not be taken back, as when Isaac blessed Jacob instead of Esau when he was deceived by Jacob and Rebekah (Gen. 27). Leaders often blessed people, especially when getting ready to leave them. These included Moses (Deut. 33), Joshua (22:6–7), and Yeshua (Jesus) (Luke 24:50). Can you begin to grasp the impact of blessing? Biblically speaking, this blessing



thing is pretty powerful! (For more about blessing, see “The Blessing,” at www.bridgesforpeace.com, under Publications/Teaching Letters.)

HOW DID THE LORD WANT TO BLESS HIS PEOPLE?

Now consider this. The specific words of Aaron’s High Priestly Blessing came from the Lord Himself and were to be spoken over His people Israel, by which He would place His name upon them. The effect of His blessing would display His character, His nature, His very being in and through His people. So, let’s look at these words and see how the Lord wanted to bless Israel and all those who attached themselves to His covenant people.

According to Sifre (Jewish commentary on Numbers and Deuteronomy) and most other rabbinic commentaries, the “first blessing refers to material prosperity,” the “second to the spiritual blessings of *Torah* knowledge and inspiration,” and the “last blessing to God’s compassion above and beyond what one deserves, as expressed in forgiveness of sin and the giving of peace.”

FIRST BLESSING: MATERIAL PROSPERITY

The LORD bless you is an invocation that the Lord God bless His congregation with material prosperity. Why interpret it as material prosperity? Nineteenth-century Rabbi Hirsch writes, “Since this verse of the blessing concludes with a prayer that God protect us, it is clear that we speak of benefits that requires protection even after they have been granted. Spiritual blessings are protected only by the personal worthiness (faithfulness) of the recipients, but material blessings are always subject to outside danger” (emphasis mine).

What good are material blessings if you can’t hold on to them and enjoy them? And just how much or what kind of blessings are we talking about here? Even though the blessings are regarded as material, that doesn’t leave out other needs. The Jewish sages say that since this is a general term, the amount and type of blessings must depend on an individual’s need. For example, a businessman needs customers and a sufficient supply to meet his orders. A student needs the blessing of an increasing intellect and memory for his studies. A parent needs patience and wisdom to raise children in the love and respect of the Lord. For seniors, there are health and continued care needs. The Lord’s blessing is as varied as our individual needs and is regarded as real-time, rubber-meets-the-road blessings, not some spooky I-wish-you-well notion.





“DO NOT LAY UP FOR YOURSELVES TREASURES ON EARTH, WHERE MOTH AND RUST DESTROY AND WHERE THIEVES BREAK IN AND STEAL; BUT LAY UP FOR YOURSELVES TREASURES IN HEAVEN, WHERE NEITHER MOTH NOR RUST DESTROYS AND WHERE THIEVES DO NOT BREAK IN AND STEAL.”

MATTHEW 6:19-21



And keep you. This term can also be rendered “guard safely” and “watch.” As said before, this word choice led the rabbis to determine that the aforementioned blessings are primarily material blessings and that the Lord intends to not only bestow them upon you, but these gifts are such that only God can guarantee them, since the most powerful people on earth cannot insure a gift given to another. Physical blessings are fragile and subject to decay and loss. We seek God’s protection, so that once given, His blessing will not fade away. Hence, the Lord’s blessings require His protection.

No kidding! During these difficult times, a friend of mine recently quipped that his 401k retirement plan is now a 101k and rapidly approaching a 50k. Millions of people around the world are stunned at how fast their hard-earned, and supposedly safe, investments are collapsing, some through outright fraud, but most through circumstances that have created a financial storm of gigantic proportions. Truly this is a day when we not only need His blessings but His divine safeguarding of those gifts as well.

Here is an interesting perspective from Jewish tradition. The text says, “God bless YOU” and implies blessing you with wealth and protecting YOU, not IT, so that you can use the wealth for the benefit of others. According to Jewish teaching, the best way to preserve wealth is to give it away for charity and good deeds. This is the ultimate protection of what the Lord gives us by converting wealth into a lasting form and assures God’s continued blessing toward a trusted steward.

We know this also from a familiar first-century rabbi. Yeshua taught us: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal” (Matthew 6:19–21). How about taking a moment right now to do something to help Israelis through Bridges for Peace? Action should follow study, right disciples?

SECOND BLESSING: SPIRITUAL KNOWLEDGE AND INSPIRATION

This blessing is to enable the Lord’s people to devote themselves to Bible study and living it out daily. **The Lord make His face shine upon you** can also be translated, “May the Lord illuminate His countenance for you.” Throughout the Bible, light is often a metaphor for the Lord’s Word. For example: “For the commandment [mitzvot] is a lamp, and the law [torah] a light; reproofs of instruction are the way to life” (Prov. 6:23). “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps. 119:105). “The entrance of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple” (Ps. 119:130). So when the sages see “light” in this blessing, one of the conclusions is that this blessing has to do with the Word, specifically the *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.).

The Italian rabbi Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno (1475–1550) offers

this *midrash* (interpretation): “May God enlighten you so that you will be capable of perceiving the wondrous wisdom of the *Torah* and of God’s intricate creation. Having received the blessings of prosperity, we have the peace of mind to go beyond the elementary requirements of survival.” Therefore, this second blessing is an extension of the first. But there is more!

This verse speaks about seeing the Lord’s face. Now obviously this is figurative because right now we can’t see the Lord’s face... or can we? A person’s face reflects their very being. It carries the full range of expression which reflects their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. Not only that, but the eyes are called “the window to soul.” By looking at God’s face, we should be able to see and understand more of who He is. So where is the Lord’s face? All around us!

Romans 1:20 says, “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse” (emphasis added). If we put this together, we can conclude that through the teachings of the Word, we see God and His plan revealed all around us, which helps us better understand the greatness and awesomeness of our Creator. When this happens, we see that all material blessings come from His hand rather than by chance or natural causes.

And be gracious to you. This is simple. After being granted material and physical blessings, after opening your eyes to His glory and greatness through the inspiration of His Word, may the Lord help you find favor with others as well as Himself! Grace is unmerited favor and something that we need when we approach the Lord. There is nothing we can do to merit His love and blessing. We simply stand in awe and thank Him for what is given to us every day without reproach or reluctance. *Selah!*

THIRD BLESSING: GOD’S COMPASSION

The Lord lift up His countenance upon you can be stated in this way: “May the Lord turn His face toward you.” Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, 1040–1105) wrote that this could be understood to be a blessing that the Lord would suppress His anger, meaning that even if we are sinful, the Lord will show us special considerations and not punish us, but forgive us.

This especially follows on the heels of the previous blessing of grace. But it speaks deeper to me. I can experience someone’s grace, but they may still hold hard

feelings against me. Sure, I’m not punished, but my relationship with the other person has been harmed and needs a little *tikun olam* (repair of the world). If I were to approach that person on the street, what would be a good indicator that things aren’t quite right between us? Right! They would drop their face as they passed by. A close friend, though, would look up and smile! That’s what this blessing is about, that our gracious and loving Lord would look upon us not only with grace but delight, with no hint of reservation. To have the Lord’s face lifted upon us is to cause us to lift our faces toward Him as well, knowing that we’re okay with Him and that He both likes and loves us!

This third blessing is looked at as the Lord’s compassion above and beyond what we deserve, as expressed by the forgiveness of sin and the giving of peace. Do we deserve to be separated from God because of sin? Absolutely. Is there anything we can do personally, apart from the Lord, to remove sin and the punishment of total separation from Him? Any biblical Christian will tell you no. But according to Ephesians 2:4–10 and the rest of the New Covenant Scriptures, we see we DO have a path to forgiveness and a way to look fully into the face of the Lord. And that brings us to the final blessing.

And give you peace. One may have material prosperity, health, daily needs met, etc., but if we don’t have peace, it’s hard to enjoy it all. We have traveled a long way through this High Priestly Blessing, and we finally arrive at the capstone. The Lord Himself wants to

wrap it all up with peace, His *shalom*.

This *shalom* is not simply the absence of war. It is harmony between conflicting forces. Because of sin, that conflict is between us and the Lord, between us and others, even within ourselves. *Shalom* is a peace that results when barriers are

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torn down and all hostilities cease bringing a condition of rest. This all encompassing peace goes beyond human understanding. It is a peace that defies all contrary circumstances that make us want to scream with anxiety!

This is a peace that is with us in good times and bad, that infuses us body, soul, and spirit. "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus [Messiah Yeshua]" (Philippians 4:6-7). This same peace begins with the Lord (Romans 5:1-2) and moves out into all areas of our life. What a tremendous thing that the Lord blesses us with...on top of everything else He's given!

A SUMMARY OF THE BLESSING

When Yeshua was about to depart from His disciples 10 days before *Shavuot* (Pentecost), the Scriptures record that He lifted His hands and blessed them (Luke 24:50). This is significant because the High Priestly Blessing is also called "The Lifting of the Hands." Yeshua was blessing His disciples with the same blessing that His Father had commanded Aaron, through Moses, to speak over the house of Israel and thus place His name on them.

Imagine this. As Yeshua is speaking these words, He rises to begin His priestly ministry of intercession. He speaks the words that have been placed on His people for thousands of years and would be spoken for at least a few thousand more. I would like to offer my own paraphrase based on this study.

May the Lord bless you with all the material prosperity you need, and may He protect it so that you can do good works, especially that you may have the time to learn His Word.

May He give you insight into His Word so that you can see the absolute wonder of Who He is, how He's causing all things to work for good in His plan, and through that, grant you favor with God and man.

May He top it off with everything you don't deserve but desperately need, everything that He is more than willing to give you through His covenant love and affection, and may you be overwhelmed entirely with His peace!

May you experience this blessing every time you hear the "Benediction."

By Pastor Jay Christianson
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All Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

Many pastors, Bible teachers, and lay people have written and asked if they can use these notes for preaching and teaching. The answer is a resounding "yes"! It is our hope that the information contained herein will be disseminated over and over again, whether through the spoken word or by photocopying and redistributing these teachings. "For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (Isaiah 2:3).

