Numbers 6:22-27

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Date: 12 October 2014

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[0:00] Well, what does God want for you? What does God want for you? It's perhaps a question we! don't think about very often, but it's an important question because how we answer that will show! what we really think about God. So what does God want for you? Not what does God want from you, but what does he want for you? What does he want to give his redeemed people? Now before we look at number six and how that answers that question, we'll pause for a moment and ask a very different question, but another important one. What does the world want? This world we live in, with all its brokenness and sadness, what is it that people hunger for? I don't know what the answer would be on the streets of Hanwell on West Ealing tonight, but striking words written a couple of months ago. You may remember Robin Williams, the actor and comedian, he put his suicide at the end of August. The day after his death had been announced, Russell Brand, writing in the Guardian newspaper, I never normally quote Russell Brand, the alleged comedian, but what he said here was interesting. He described Robin Williams as a hilarious stranger that we could rely on to anarchically interrupt the all-encompassing sadness of the world. And he summed off his feelings on the announcement of Robin Williams' suicide with these words, this rhetorical question. Is it melancholy to think that a world that Robin Williams can't live in must be broken? Is it melancholy to think that a world that Robin Williams can't live in must be broken? Now do you hear what he's saying? You're a questioner. Do you know what a longing is on his heart? What does he want? He wants an end to the all-encompassing sadness that he sees in the world around him. Which he puts down for the fact that this world must be broken.

If someone like Robin Williams can't live in it, then something must be wrong. So what is it he wants? And I guess he's speaking for many. He wants a world that's fixed. He wants a world where the sadness has ended. He wants happiness instead of sadness. And isn't that actually the deepest longing in every human heart? To be happy at last. Pascal, back in the 16th century, 16th and 17th century, wrote that he, that the motivation behind every action of every man and woman was to be happy. So it's the cause of some going to war. It's the cause of others taking their lives.
They want to be happy. What does the world want? What do we all want as human beings? We want to be happy. We want to end to the pain. End to the all-encompassing sadness.
So we come back to the first question. What does God want for you? What does God want for you? And we see the answer here in number 6. See, often the last place anyone looks for happiness and security is actually in the one place it can truly be found. In the creator of God who made the universe. And it's that God's words that we find here in Numbers chapter 6.
Let's see what he says. Well, it's right there, isn't it? Verse 24, the Lord bless you and keep you. These words, the context of them here, these are the words God gave to his priests to speak over his people. Now if we step back for a moment, we need to look first at all. What does this word bless mean? We often use the word bless. It's a very kind of Christianese word, isn't it? What does it actually mean? We often fill it with our own ideas of what it means. But as we read through the Bible, we see the meaning displayed in front of us. Even in the first chapters of the Bible, the word bless is a very key word. So in chapter 1 of the Bible, God blesses the living creatures.
[3:57] He blesses Adam and Eve. He blesses the seventh day and makes it holy. And what does it mean when God blesses? Well, it means he defines and enables something's purpose. So chapter 1, verse 27 of Genesis, God makes man and woman in his image. What does that mean? Verse 28, God blessed them. And God said to them, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.

And have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth. See, God's blessing defined the purpose of humanity. Go fill the earth and subdue it. That's what it means to be my image bearers. And it enabled them to fulfill that

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purpose.
God's blessing granted them the ability to do those things. It defined what it meant to be fully human and enabled them to realize that. As we read on through Genesis, we see more about the word blessing and how vital and how important blessing was. So by the time we get to Genesis chapter 27, we've got two twins, Jacob and Esau, who both want Isaac's blessing. Isaac was their father. He was going to bless them as his final act before dying. And they compete for his blessing. In fact, when Jacob steals it, Esau wants to kill him. His blessing was so important. Now what did that blessing actually mean? Well, it was Isaac, the father's desire for his son's total well-being.
It was all his love focused on the one who received the blessing. All his resources directed towards the good of the good of that son. All his prayers focused on the blessed one's security and fruitfulness. If you read through Genesis 27 later on, you'll see that. Now let's think for a moment. If that is true of a human father's blessing, then how much more true must it be of our heavenly father's blessing? When God blesses, he not only defines and enables a human purpose, but his blessing is his desire of the well-being for the one who is blessed.
[6:07] His resources directed to the good of the one he is blessing. All his energy invested in providing security and fruitfulness for that one. John Calvin described God's blessing as the goodness of God in action. The goodness of God in action. With that in mind, let's look at number six.

What is the goodness of God in action? What is it that he commands his priests to pronounce over every worshipper who comes to him seeking forgiveness? Well, good to remember the context of the big story here. The Israelites are stuck in the desert. They've been led, actually stuck at the foot of Mount Sinai at this particular point. God has rescued them from Egypt, from terrible slavery. He's married them, effectively. He's entered into this covenant relationship with them.
He says, I will be your God and you will be my people. Not only that, he's now moved in amongst them. The first chapters of Numbers describe all the tribes of Israel camped around the tabernacle at the center. The tabernacle that had just been built. The tabernacle over which the cloud of God's glory rested day and night. That symbolized God's presence among his people.
So God was now at the center of them. And one says, that's terrifying. The Holy God has just moved into the neighborhood. He's just given them all these rules, all these laws about what is clean and unclean, etc., etc. But he's also given them priests and sacrifices. Why? So when they've broken those laws, which they need to be able to live in the presence of a Holy God, they can come and find forgiveness. And to do that, they go to the tabernacle. So if you and I had been Israelites at that time, from that sunlight there above us, with a memory of slavery in Egypt, freshen up brains, it was only a year earlier. Or slightly less than a year earlier. What would have happened?
Well, we'd know some sin, some way we'd broken God's law. We'd feel grieved about it. And so we'd head off to the tabernacle with our sheep or our goat or whatever. And so the priest who would make the sacrifice, do the business. We'd come with our burden conscious. The priest would do this. And as we were ready to head back out into the world, having sought to get atonement by God's gracious means for our sin, for our failing. These are the words we hear.
[8:36] These are the words that God commands the priests to speak over his people. And it's for all his people. If you've read through the book of Numbers, you have seen there are priests who do this stuff, there are Levites who help them, there are Nazarites, early on in chapter 6, who are, if you like, the keen beings. They're the people who sign up for a special vow, special vow of dedication. But then these words that the priest speaks are not just for the professionals.

They're not just for those who make vows and promise something to God. They're for all those who seek God's forgiveness. They're for every believer. This is what God wants for every individual who trusts in him. Now, of course, this is the Old Testament. So some would say, what's it got to do with us? Well, everything. If this is what God wanted for his people who came to a fallible human priest, to make a sacrifice of sheep or goats or bulls, then does God want any less for those of us who come not through a sacrifice that cannot make perfect, but through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ shed on the cross? Does God want less for us? Does God want our high priest, the Lord Jesus Christ, to pray anything less for those who trusted in him? Of course not. These are shadows and stripes, as we sang in the last hymn, but they're fulfilled in Jesus. So as we read through Deuteronomy 6, we see this is what God wants for his people.
This is what God wants for you as you come to Christ to seek his forgiveness and mercy. So what does God want for each believer? Well, to sum up in three words, because it's a Sunday night,

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you're getting tired. He wants us to feel secure, to enjoy his smile, and to experience his shalom. Security, smile, shalom. Three S's. If you fall asleep, please, you've got that.
So that's some of that. What does it mean? Verse 24, the Lord bless you and keep you. See, the Lord wants to bless those whom he's redeemed. He doesn't want to make your life a misery. He wants you to experience his goodness in action. Now, I've got to be honest, coming from the good Scottish Presbyterian background I come from, the idea of thinking what God might want for me was something I never thought I could think of. The idea of God blessing seemed to be very self-centered, seemed to be very consumeristic. It seemed to lead to the danger of the kind of health and wealth prosperity gospel, which so many falsely preach, even in this city. And if you get what blessing means wrong, then it can lead you into all sorts of wrong thinking. Because God isn't interested in meeting our unmet consumer needs. He's not interested in making our life more successful or prosperous or healthy. He's interested in our deepest, truest human needs. That is something quite different. But you see, there's a danger in going the other way, in going the way I went growing up, thinking I can't ever think about God wanting something good for me. Because as soon as you do that, how do you start thinking about God? You start to think of God that he was a kind of very distant sort of headmastery type figure. I mean, yes, I knew God was gracious and would forgive my sin, but I always had this kind of feeling in the back of my mind that he was sitting there like my old athletics coach or running coach, or like some teachers I had. Hey, I'll let you off this time, but you really ought to try harder. You really ought to do better. You ought to train yourself up. You ought to be more, you ought to be better by now. And yes, the Lord does want us to grow in Christ's likeness, etc., etc.
But he wants to bless us. He loves us. He's given his son for us. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, as Chris so helpfully reminded us in the prayers. The Lord is indeed the fount of every blessing. Do you see, if you look at this benediction, this Aaron's blessing, as it says in the ESV, if that's what you've got, verse 24, verse 25, verse 26, what do they all start with? The Lord. Every line of this, because the Lord is indeed the fount of every blessing. He wants to give us things that we could never manufacture for ourselves or earn for ourselves. It's what he wants to give. So what does it actually mean? The Lord bless you and keep you. Well, every line of this blessing, there's a sort of general statement at the start, and the second half of the line kind of clarifies or sharpens what the general statement means. So the Lord bless you. What does that mean? The Lord keep you. Now that word keep is a word that is equally translated watch over or protect or guard. So back in Genesis chapter 3, verse 24, when Adam and Eve had been kicked out of the Garden of Eden, and God put the cherubim with a flaming sword to guard the way to the tree of life. The word guard is the same word that is keep here.
[13:42] So the Lord keep you, the Lord guard you, the Lord protect you. That's what the priests were commanded to speak these words to the worshippers as they left the tabernacle. And they would know they needed God to keep them, to protect them. As they walked out of the tent, having made that sacrifice, as they walked out of the compound of the tabernacle, what would they see? They'd see desert all around them. They'd be going back to their tent in the wilderness. They'd be in those tents for a long time in an inhospitable wilderness. They need to know that the Lord would keep them and protect them. And you and I as Christians, we're on that same pilgrimage, having been redeemed from slavery to sin. We are not yet fully in the promised land. We live in an inhospitable world at times, don't we? Inhospitable culture. Isn't it good to know the Lord keeps us, guards us, watches over us?

See, these words were spoken by the priest. The Lord commanded these words to be spoken by the priest. Because he wants his people to feel secure. With all the insecurities in the world, he wants us to feel secure. Now what happens, even in human relationships, if we don't feel secure? If we don't feel we're going to be safe? What happens? I think there are a couple of ways. We either work or withdraw. We work or we withdraw. So think about a child who does not feel secure in its parents' love for him or her. What will happen? It may possibly try and do things to earn its parents' love.
Working for it. Being extra nice. Doing nice things around the home. Working harder at school. Desperately trying to earn some approval. It doesn't go off the rails completely.
Or in a hostile world, if you're worried about your children or worried about yourself, what do you do? You withdraw. We don't go out at night. It's dangerous.

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[15:47] There are people who want to withdraw from the culture. Things are dangerous out there. We want to protect. We want to keep everything safe. That often stops us getting involved in meaningful relationships outside the church.

It stops us engaging, listening to the questions in our culture and trying to answer them, trying to engage with them. If we don't feel secure, we try and build our own security. Working.
Or we withdraw to try and keep ourselves and our children safe. That's why we need this blessing. The Lord wants us to feel secure. The Lord will bless you and keep you.
Of course, we need his protection. We need his security. We have a powerful enemy out there. Our enemy is the devil, roaring lion, running around, looking for someone to devour, as Peter puts it in 1 Peter 5.
But also, he needs protection. It's not the same as comfort. Protection can be profoundly uncomfortable, can't it? You see that when you see people wearing protective gear for their work.
[16:51] The safety goggles and big clothes and stuff like that. Or think about witnesses who police take into protection. What does that mean for them? It means they're often taken away somewhere else.

They're often shut away so they can't get out. They can't move freely for their own protection. And sometimes the Lord protecting us may feel profoundly uncomfortable. Maybe there are things you've wanted for a long time which the Lord isn't giving you for your own protection.
Maybe you long for promotion at work. Maybe you long for a better income. What would happen if you got those things? Would you feel more secure in yourself?
And less secure in the Lord? Maybe he's protecting you by keeping you from self-reliance, by not giving you some of the things you might think would be nice. See, the Lord's blessing doesn't mean we get what we want.
It means we get what we need. The first thing that means we feel his security. Psalm 121 is a beautiful psalm that picks up on this. It uses the same word over and over again. The Lord is your keeper.
[18:00] Psalm 121, let me just read some verses to you. You can look at it later. I commend it to you for bedtime reading. The Lord is your keeper. The Lord is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon by night.

The Lord will keep you from all evil. He will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.
What does the Lord want for you? He wants you to feel secure in him. There's a second thing as well. Look down at the second line, verse 25.
The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. Do you know what it is to have someone's face shine on you? Have someone smiling at you? I don't know if you've ever did sport as a kid or perhaps played a musical instrument or something.
I can't play any musical instrument. I'm a completely a-musical. But I used to do a bit of athletics when I was a child. And you know when the race doesn't go quite like you want, I get to the end and I just want someone to smile at me.
[19:04] Look up for mum or dad and see if they're there and see if they would smile. Yeah, it's alright. It's alright. I'm sure even today we all want, there are times when we're feeling very down and broken and we need to see someone smile.

I know for myself, when I've once again sinned against my poor wife, Mariel, or when I've done something I shouldn't have done or not done something I was supposed to do, what do I want? I want her forgiveness.
I want her smile. I've got the relationship back again. That's what the Lord wants for you. As you trust in the sacrifice he has provided, trust in the Lord Jesus, he wants you to enjoy his smile.
He wants you to enjoy his smile. That's why he gives this blessing to the priests. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. He wants you to know you've got his forgiveness and friendship.
These are the words to be spoken at the end of that worship service in the tabernacle as the people went back out. That's why after our confession of sin we always have words of assurance from scripture to remind us that we are forgiven.
[20:10] We do know and enjoy the Lord's smile. But as you've been reading through the Bible at this point that these words should come as a surprise to us. Not many months earlier while the

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Israelites were still in camp around Mount Sinai after they rebelled against God and Moses had gone up the mountain to the Lord to intercede for them, to pray for them.

Exodus 33 verse 20 And Moses had asked to see God's glory. What did the Lord say? I'll make all my goodness pass before you. Exodus 33 verse 19 And will proclaim before you my name the Lord but he said you cannot see my face for man shall not see me and live.
And yet here just a few pages later just a few months later the Lord is saying priests tell my people the Lord bless you and keep you the Lord make his face to shine upon you.
How can we enjoy God's smile if no one can see his face and live? How is it possible? Of course the answer is in the second half of the verse isn't it?
The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. To be gracious to you. When God is gracious it means he gives us the good things we could never deserve instead of the punishment we do deserve.
[21:30] And he doesn't do it grudgingly. For those who trust in Jesus he doesn't do it grudgingly. As we were gone to the tabernacle burdened by our conscience served by the brokenness in our own hearts knowing we've broken faith through God who rescued us we come out hearing these words having offered the sacrifice.

The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. He wants us to enjoy his smile. And we can enjoy the smile of our heavenly father not because of our performance but because of Jesus' performance because of Jesus' perfect sacrifice for us.
Now of course this is counterintuitive isn't it? In every other area of human life we don't get grace do we? We always have to earn people's smile usually don't we? I don't know if you watch The X Factor I don't I hate it.
I do watch The Great British Bake Off which I guess shows you that I'm a middle class middle aged Brit. But there we go. And you know what it's like for competitors on these reality TV shows or strictly if you're into that?
Every week is an effort to improve yourself and once again to get the smile of the judges whether it's Paul Hollywood or Simon Cowell or whoever judges The X Factor these days sorry I'm really out of it I don't know.
[22:47] And each week it's kind of I hope I can live up to what I did last week I hope I can get through the judges this time I hope they'll still like me I hope I can stay on for another week. And in most areas of life that's how it works isn't it?

If we think that we need to do that with the living God then we'll have no confidence no joy we'll always feel insecure or we'll end up focusing on looking good before others and therefore looking down on some people we don't feel are doing as good as we are.
Isn't that the way we either go towards pride looking down on others or hiding and cover up because we're scared of what others will think of us. There was an incident in my last church a few years ago when in a period of literally two weeks two people in their twenties came to me they were friends they knew each other but they came to me because they were really upset because one of their siblings back home had gone to prison.
I can understand that would be a sad and terrible thing but they were so scared of what other people would think they couldn't confess it to anybody else. I don't want to bang their heads together guess what we've all got a mess in our lives it's not your fault your brother is in prison talk to each other tell each other about the grace of God and how he's helping you through this instead of being so scared and so worried what other people would think that you just clam up.
So we need to know we enjoy God's smile. We need to know we enjoy God's smile so we don't do that. So we don't look down on others or try to hide away our brokenness so people don't see the grace of God in action.
[24:33] Now if you don't feel God's smile right now then maybe it's because there is some sin you have not confessed. In which case you need to seek the Lord, open the scriptures, pray, long for him to act.

Or it may be it's because you're listening to the wrong voice. You're not listening to the voice of the high priest with his blessing. Instead you're listening to the voice of a parent or someone significant in your life for whom you could never measure up.
And you think this thing you've done wrong can never be forgiven because you're not listening to the Lord Jesus and the promises of scripture to say there is no condemnation for those who are in

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Christ Jesus.
Instead you're listening to someone else, perhaps a Christian leader or a friend, say you failed, you're not good enough. If that's the case you need to turn the volume down on that voice and turn it up on God's voice so you hear his words.
Some of those which Chris read to us earlier or elsewhere in Romans 8. What shall we say to these things, these accusations? If God is for us who can be against us? He who did not stare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will you also along with him graciously give us all things.
[25:50] The Lord Jesus is your high priest interceding for you. He wants you to feel secure. He wants you to enjoy his smile. And thirdly, relatively briefly, he wants you to know his shalom, experience his shalom.

Look at verse 26. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. That word peace in Hebrew is shalom.
I'll explain what that means at the moment. It's not just that I want to get all lessons in my sermon outline, although it's kind of convenient. It's because the word peace is a bit limited in English. Shalom creates a bigger picture of what it is.
It comes to that at the moment. What does it mean for the Lord to lift up his countenance upon you? It means pay full attention to you. You know what it's like when you're trying to talk to someone and they're not looking at you, do you feel loved?
No. Do you feel like they respect you? Probably not. We were having this little battle with my children recently. I'm trying to tell Zoe and Joel, when I'm talking to you, look at me.
[26:51] Look at me. I had my cutoffence at breakfast the other morning where I was sitting with Joel, everyone else in bed at that time, and Joel started saying something to me, and I was busy looking at something really important like what was the weather on the iPad, so I knew whether I was going to get wet on my bike.

So I was looking down here, yes Joel, Daddy, look at me, I'm talking to you. Fair enough Joel, you're right. Well, the Lord is looking at you, he's lifting up his countenance upon you, he's giving you his full attention.
He's not like me, distracted by the news or the weather or whatever it was. He's giving you his full attention. Now, sometimes it doesn't feel like that in life, does it? Perhaps you've been praying for a situation in your life for years and nothing seems to be happening.
Praying for an unbelieving friend or something. Praying for a child you long for, praying for a spouse. And you think, is God listening? Is God paying attention?
Well, he is. He is. That's what the scripture assures itself. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, look you full in the eye and give you peace.
[27:57] So what is that peace? What is that peace you want to give? What is this shalom as it is in the Hebrew? Well, see, shalom is not just the absence of conflict, but it's the presence of wholeness.

We often think of peace as being, I just want to make it's peace, I don't want to disturb me, the absence of noise, absence of conflict. But the Hebrew idea is much bigger, it's the presence of wholeness.
Ultimately, the Lord wants to fix what is broken. He wants to remake the world that we have marred. That's why the Lord Jesus came, it's what he came to fix, it's why he died on the cross to take the punishment for our sin.
And in the end, to give us a whole new world, where what is broken is gone away with. Now we start to experience some of that now. So we have peace with God now, Romans 5 verse 1.
Therefore, since we've been justified by faith, we have peace with God for our Lord Jesus Christ.
So we have that dimension now. We have the beginnings of peace with each other. So Ephesians chapter 2 verse 14 says that Jesus himself is our peace, who has made us both one, broken down in his flesh, the dividing wall of hostility.
[29:11] Now we need God's grace day by day without that peace, without that unity that God has given us in the church. But also Jesus promises peace to his disciples now, an internal peace.

John 14 verse 27, peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.
So we have these beginnings of this wholeness now with peace with God, peace with one another, an internal peace given by Christ in a troubled world. But we don't have the full thing yet, do we?

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We don't have the wholeness of a remade world. We don't have the wholeness of a world where everything sad has become untrue, to use Tolkien's great line. But that day is coming.
That day is coming. If you read on to the end of the story of the Bible, Revelation 22 verse 3 for example, No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, the holy city, and his servants will worship him.
[30:15] See there, we get the ultimate security, living in God's presence. We get the ultimate shalom, the new creation, whether it is no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things will have passed away.

And we see his smile. Revelation 22 verse 4, they, his servants, will see his face. Security, smile, shalom, wholeness and peace.
It's where the story is going. The blessing God wants us to begin to experience now. We won't experience fully until Jesus returns and is visibly on the throne and all things are made new.
When that happens, Revelation 22 verse 4, his name will be on their foreheads. What do you write your name on? Every day at the start of the school year, Mary and I spend time writing Zoe's name on the new clothes she's taking to school because she grows so much in the summer.
What's that name there for? Say, this belongs to Zoe, it's hers. Don't steal it. God's name on his people, you're mine, you're mine, and no one is going to steal you.
[31:33] That's what it says. And you notice the very last line here, verse 27. So as the priests have given this blessing to his people, so they shall put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.

The word you in verses 24, 25, 26 is individual. The Lord bless you, individual. New person. And in doing that, in having God's blessing individually, so his name, his possession, his blessing, is on all his people corporately, on the people of Israel, on the church.
The Lord bless you, and keep you. He wants you to know his shalom, his wholeness. That's the purpose, the ultimate purpose for which Christ died.
So if people like you and I can be forgiven, and know God's smile and security and shalom, the whole wholeness that he offers. Poor old Russell Brand writing in The Guardian.
What does he really want? He wants the encompassing sadness of this world to be gone away with. He wants the world no longer to be broken. Isn't that what people around us want?
[32:50] There's only one place to look for it. That's in the God who longs to bless those who've trusted in the sacrifice he's provided. He wants you to feel secure, know you're protected by him, to enjoy his smile, know you're loved and accepted by him, and to experience his shalom, his peace, day by day, the wholeness you are made for.

Because that's what the Lord desires, his redeemed people. We need to look to Jesus for that happiness, for that security, for that forgiveness. This is the prayer of the Lord Jesus, our great great priest, is praying for us.
How could the Father fail to answer his son's prayer? Let's pray.

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