



What is Blessing?

Somehow we have lost the sense of what blessings truly are. We seem to have only two common associations for the word. It's either “God bless you,” when someone sneezes, or “God blesses those He loves.” In a church situation, we also use “bless” as a synonym for “praise,” as in “Bless ye the Lord.” We are rendered powerless by our own preconceived notions of blessing and what it is to bless.

Webster's Unabridged Dictionary gives many meanings for the transitive verb "to bless."¹ Now, a transitive verb needs a subject (the blesser) and an object (the blessed). Most of the time we think of only God as the subject of this particular verb—the only proper blesser. But that is wrong, as the definitions show.

To make or pronounce holy; consecrate.

To make happy, blithesome, or joyous; to confer prosperity or happiness upon; to grant divine favor to.

To express a wish or prayer for the happiness of; to invoke a blessing upon—applied to persons.

To invoke or confer beneficial attributes or qualities upon; to make or confer a blessing upon.

To guard; to keep; to protect.

To praise or glorify; to extol for excellences.

Let's examine these ideas more carefully. Only one of the definitions above actually relates exclusively to God. “To grant divine favor” is the one action detailed in the definitions that can only be taken by God. We are not divine; we can not do this. But, we are agents of the divine. We have been called by God to do all of the other actions. Just as God has blessed us, we are called to bless God, ourselves and others. The more we bless, the more we behave in accordance with God's will.

Easton's Bible Dictionary, published in 1897, has this to say²:

God blesses people when He³ bestows on them some gift temporal or spiritual. We bless God when we thank Him for his mercies. A man blesses himself when he invokes God's blessing or rejoices in God's goodness to him. One blesses another when he expresses good wishes or offers prayer to God for his welfare. Sometimes blessings were uttered under divine inspiration as in the case of Noah, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. The priests were divinely authorized to bless the people. We have many examples of apostolic benediction.

Remember that God has called the Jewish people “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6, Parshat Yitro). This means that Jews have the right and the privilege of blessing others. In fact, God told our father Abraham “And I will bless you; I will make your name great, And you shall be a blessing . . . And all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you.” (Genesis 12:2-3, Parshat Lech Lecha). Because Christianity and Islam were born from a Jewish womb, both Christians and Muslims claim this promise for themselves. So, we are all the priests that Easton mentions in his Bible dictionary. God is depending on us to bless ourselves—as part of the people—and others. If we don't do it when we see it needs doing, how can God reach those who won't believe in an invisible, spiritual God? More to the point for us, as people of faith, living Torah or following Jesus or Mohammed, how can we justify refusing to extend God's blessing to even one person in need?

We are like the second rainbow in the picture above. The first rainbow shines as the sun illuminates the water vapor in the air. The colors that are always present become apparent to us as the light is refracted and reflected in the droplets of vapor. The second rainbow is a less vibrant reflection of the first. If you look closely, you will notice that it is a mirror image, the colors are reversed. Just so, we reflect the blessing that God has given us and become a little like God in the doing. When we pass blessing on to those around us, we temporarily put a face on our God. It is then that we become what we are truly meant to be: reflections of the One who made us.

All of this is on a personal level. But what of the promise, repeated in Genesis 22:18, Parshat Vayera, that all the families of the earth shall be blessed in us? If you refer back to Webster's definitions, you will find "to invoke or confer beneficial attributes or qualities upon; to make or confer a blessing upon" and "to guard; to keep; to protect." This is what we do when we pause for a moment to consider the poor, the stranger, the widow and the orphan. When we buy a newspaper from the homeless person selling them on the street corner, when we hold the door for the handicapped person making his or her way into a store, when we comfort the lost little child, when we offer help to someone who hasn't asked even though they need it, then we are blessing them. When we offer up a prayer for the welfare of someone who is upset or hurt, we are blessing them. When we say, "Have a nice day!" and genuinely mean it, then we are blessing someone. All of these actions help to guard a human spirit, to keep a human heart from failing, to protect our world.

We are faced with two choices daily. We can look at the world and decry all that is wrong with it. We can blame others; the liberals, the conservatives, the feminists, the radical-whoevers, the not-so-radical-whoevers. We can speak or take action against them. This is choice one, and it makes us part of the problem. However, we can also make the other choice. We can look at the world and cry out for redress to all that is wrong. We can bless others; the liberals, the conservatives, the feminists, the radical-whoevers, the not-so-radical-whoevers. We can bless them and take action on their behalf. This makes us part of the solution. As Moses told all of us in Deuteronomy 30:19, Parshat Vayelech, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse.

Choose life . . ."

May you be blessed with all you need.

¹bless. (n.d.). Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary. Retrieved April 02, 2008, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/bless>

²bless. (n.d.). Easton's 1897 Bible Dictionary. Retrieved April 02, 2008, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/bless>

³The use of the masculine pronouns here is original to the text. Since it reflects the common usage of the time, I did not change it. There is no intention to marginalize women, simply a respect for Easton's work as it is.