

The Triune God Puts His Name On You To Bless You

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Have you ever taken a group picture only to spot one face that wasn't quite right? One face ends up blinking, turned away, or not smiling at the moment. You just wish you could change that. But that's becoming sort of a problem of the past. With technology we've started to really map and figure out the face. Knowing a face can make a big difference in things. Facial recognition software has done amazing things. It helps us find criminals and terrorists by filtering out features of the face at a rate that would be nearly impossible with human observation. And now there are features on some smart phones and which not only automatically recognize when it sees a human face, but it will suggest for you the best smile in a series of pictures. All you have to do is press the button to capture several images at once. It then scans through the faces in the photo, filters out any blink or frown and replaces it with another image that has a smile. The consensus is: we like smiles in our pictures even if we have to switch a face in a photo to get it all just right. What about if we had a glimpse of God's face. And if that were possible, would there be anything we'd want to change? Today as we read of a special blessing which he gives in Numbers 6. Even if we could we would never want to change the expression on his face.

What would we see if we could see the face of God? To begin with, we have a big problem. Not only is God Spirit, he is hidden from us. I'm sure that the people of Israel felt the same pain that you and I feel when we long to know the Lord. They faced over 400 years of time in Egypt. Before they would be freed from that land, they would endure severe treatment and harsh, forced labor. They would have their backs beaten, bodies worn out, and even their babies torn away from mothers and drowned. They faced hard labor with impossible demands. All the while what did they see from God? He was hidden. They didn't see his face watching over them. They didn't sense his loving plan in the burning hot sun. You can be sure they knew what it was like to wonder, "Is God with us? Or is he now against us?"

The ancient Israelites weren't the only ones to ever feel like God was turned away from them. All people have been banished from the presence of the Lord God. Ever since our forefathers broke his will and defied him in the Garden of Eden, God has been hidden. And we can't just blame our parents. God turned away because of what flows from your heart and mine. Even the purest thoughts are tarnished with ugly rebellion. God can't be blamed for the awful separation. It's us. Born in sin we all turn our faces away from God to our own ways. Isaiah captures it well when he talks about the face of God and the sinner. Isaiah gives us that awful pronouncement in which he wraps the guilt of all people: "Your sins have hidden God's face from you." (Isaiah 59:2) It's a powerful picture of what has happened between God and humankind. Perhaps you've experienced it before. A face says a lot. And the absence of a glance can even say more than the most powerful glance. What does it feel like when someone you love won't look at you? It cuts deeper than the most powerful words. It leaves an ache that no glance could ever bring about. That is why the Psalmist writes of when God turns his face from us, "When you hide your face, (all) are terrified." (Psalm 104:29) What could be worse than God turning away from you?

One thing could be worse: his turning his face back toward you with anger or disgust. Imagine seeing God's face turn back toward the sinner --no longer looking with the affection which he had when he gave life, but the wrath and anger in which he will justly deal with that life which turned against him. There is the awful truth that Jesus says he will declare to those who turned away from him, "Depart from me, (I don't want to ever see your face again,) you who are cursed, and into the fire prepared for the devil and his angels." (Matthew 25) God's Word reveals this is the expression that the sinner deserves. Our conscience accuses us and tells us this is the lot we have coming from our Lord.

We long to change our situation and force God's face to turn back in kindness, but we can't make him. Our face would forever show sadness and pain over our own sin. It would if God did not change things. No, he didn't just show us a different picture and edit things. Instead he gives us just what we need for eternally seeing his face in joy. He blesses us and expresses that blessing to us.

How is God's expression made known to us? It is given in his Word. The Sons of Israel were to know the Lord through the priests and the family of Aaron. Moses was to speak to Aaron and the sons of Aaron so that they in turn might speak to the people of Israel. But what Moses shares isn't just a fancy poem for the priests. It isn't just something Moses conjured up to create a new image of the Lord for the people. It was something which the Lord instructs Aaron and the priests to say. This is what the Word of the Lord tells Israel about their God. And he wants them to hear it through the spoken Word, a blessing.

Say to the sons of Israel, "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you, the Lord look upon you with and give you peace." Who is the Lord? His title "Lord" comes from the Hebrew expression "he who is." He is the eternal one who always was and always will be. But here we find the greatest truth about the eternal God: He is the one who blesses you. All good things come from him. Each of you has been blessed by him with mind, body, and all your abilities. He has given you clothing and shoes, food and drink, house, many have land and possessions, and all that you own comes from him. But his blessing goes beyond simply giving you all that you need for life. He also keeps you. The Hebrew word translated "keep" is the word used for guarding and protecting. He keeps you safe from all harm and danger --physical and spiritual. He sends his angels to watch over you. He provides with miracles and in many daily things. You see, the people of Israel needed to hear over and over that the Lord does all this for them. He is their loving Father and Creator. He is their

protector and provider. He is yours too. Consider all the blessings the Lord has showered on you. Consider all the dangers of disease and war and famine and theft from which he has spared you. If you have something good, if you hold onto something good for any period of time, it is from him.

And notice God doesn't say, "Say this to the best people of Israel." He doesn't say, "Tell this to those who are worthy in Israel." God wants this to be spoken to all the people of Israel. The Hebrew has a plural form of "you." Yet God instructs this to be said as if to say to every individual listening "The Lord bless *you*." This would include those who worshipped the golden calf. This would include those who grumbled when there was no water, "Is the Lord with us or not?" His blessing, his protection is given by grace. It is given to those who don't deserve it. And God wants that to be spoken and shared with all his people. He still today wants you to hear that he blesses and keeps you. He wants you to know that all who long to see his face and long for mercy, find it. He is your merciful Father who blesses and protects you.

The blessing continues: "The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you." If you could see God's face what would you see? In his Word we have our answer. The face of the Lord is not angry at you. He is not glancing at you with a mischievous grin. He is not pouring out his righteous anger on you. He desires you to see his face lit up. He desires that you know and enjoy his grace. To show you his face shining he veiled all its glory and took on human flesh in a lowly form. In the greatest miracle of all history, Jesus, the only and eternal Son of the Father, was born into this world. He lowered himself, set aside his glory. His face cried, showed weariness, showed compassion, showed zeal for the temple, his face was lowered to the ground as sweat fell like drops of blood the night before he died, and his face had blood running down it.

He did this to make his gracious glory shine upon us. Jesus Christ turned aside the wrath of God. He took on human flesh to take our place on the cross. As he hung there the Father turned his face away. He took our place so that the Father turned away from him instead of us. And because he did this Jesus can say to the worst of sinners, "Today you will be with me in paradise." And the believer who is suffering the worst of pains can know that God is not going to punish them for their sin. So even those who suffer can say with confidence and boldness through Jesus: "I will see God, with my own eyes!" God's Son brought us God's favor forever. If we could see his face right now, you'd see him looking with you with all favor and grace.

This is the graciousness of God! And once again, the fact that God needs to turn his face back towards us implies the sin which turned it away. But God changes things. He doesn't belittle the sin. He deals with it. And he turns to us in love and grace. God's Son makes his face shine on us and is gracious to us. It is an underserved love, but he blesses us with it!

Finally the three-fold blessing concludes: "May the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace." Remember that time when you felt the horrible sting of someone turning away from you in anger? Do you also remember the time when that face once again looked back toward you and brought you peace? God has sent the Holy Spirit to bring our hearts back to peace. This peace is more than just having the blessing of nice things, it is the blessing of knowing all that is in store as we have God's blessing upon us. He turns his face toward you and gives you his attention. And it is to bring you his peace. It is a peace that comes from knowing the Lord - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - our Triune God blesses you, keeps you, lets his face shine on you, is gracious to you, turns his face toward you, and in this way gives you his peace.

Putting your name on something can be helpful. In some branches of the military you will get a sea-bag. It will have your identification spray painted on it with your name. In that sea-bag will be more bags - each with your identification and your name on it. When children go to school their parents will often write their name on their lunch, their pencils, their supplies - some children have their name etched right down to their shoes. We sometimes give people gifts, like Bibles, with names etched on them. Now I see there are services which will carve a name on the back of your iPad or iPhone. It certainly can help with organization. But isn't there another reason and benefit to putting our name on things? It means it belongs to us. The child at school likely won't need to be reminded that the pencil in her backpack is hers. But she wants everyone else to know it belongs to her. The college student with their name on their Bible knows it is their bible. They know no one is going to steal their Bible. But the name makes it especially theirs. God does this too. He puts his name on you. "I will put my name on them and bless them." He does this for you. You are blessed and belong to him. In baptism he put his name on you "the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." He made you his own as he gave you his Spirit - you belong to him. He wants you to be confident in that as you picture him looking right at you with favor and love. You are his own treasured child.

The Lord says that the priests are to put this blessing on the people. And as they do it, they will be putting God's name on them. And it will be God himself blessing them with that Word. Still today when a gathering of believers concludes a service it is often repeated. I'm told that it was a practice which had fallen out of use in the church until it was added to the service by one of the reformers of the church in the 1500s. His name was Martin Luther. He had the practice of putting this blessing at the end of the service. It's a practice which continues today in many of our services. Why do I lift up my hands? Remember the beautiful symbolism behind that: The Lord is putting his name on you. With his Word you hear he blesses you, protects you, shows his loving face to you, and turns to you to give you his peace!

No matter what you face in life, no matter what ills, no matter what pains, no matter what the expression on my face or on yours, remember the description of what is behind *his* face. *The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you, the Lord look upon you with and give you peace.*" The Triune God puts his name on you and blesses you.