

Psalm 67:1

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us.

Just about everyone acknowledges someone else sneezing by saying 'Bless you'

- This is undoubtedly short for 'God bless you'
- And one traditional explanation is that this custom dates from the time of the plague
- When sneezing could be seen as the onset of the plague
- Just the time, then, when someone needed immediate blessing
- In the hope that they would not develop the disease

Although the common perception seems to be that it is going out of fashion

- Despite the number of alternatives to end conversations of various kinds
- A large number of people still say 'God bless' or 'God bless you'
- In one sense this is just a social convention, the kind of thing people always say
- And yet the whole idea of God blessing people
- Is an important one in the Bible, and our passage for today, Psalm 67

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us.

There is little doubt that many great Christian hymns and songs

- Have been inspired by a saying or verse from the Bible
- Perhaps the greatest example is 'O Thou who camest from above'
- Based on Leviticus 6:9, 'the fire must be kept burning on the altar
- Similarly this psalm is based on verses from the Old Testament
- The priestly blessing from the book of Numbers

The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face towards you and give you peace."

(Numbers 26:4-6)

The psalm contains many of the characteristic elements of the psalms of blessing

- In such psalms kingship is ascribed to the LORD the God of Israel
- God cares for his people (Israel), the nations and all his creation
- But the psalm is also a missionary psalm
- Since it looks forward to God's kingly rule over both Jews and Gentiles

The psalm has a simple poetic structure – although it is a song it is also clearly a prayer

- A prayer for God's blessing (1-2)
- A prayer for the inclusion of the nations, the Gentiles (3)
- A prayer for the rule of God (4) – which is the centre of the psalm
- A renewed prayer for the inclusion of the nations (5)
- And a concluding prayer for God's blessing (6-7)

I IT'S A PRAYER FOR BLESSING
II IT'S A PRAYER FOR SALVATION
II IT'S A PRAYER FOR WORSHIP

I IT'S A PRAYER FOR BLESSING

In different type, at the beginning of many of the psalms

- Some added information is given – this was a common practice of the time
- But the headings do not mean much to us and are often obscure
- The English word 'psalm' comes from the Greek word *Psalmoi*
- Meaning 'songs sung with musical accompaniment'
- The Hebrew title *tehillim* simply means 'songs of praise'
- Similarly, the word 'selah' (untranslated) is rather obscure
- Even though it is used 71 times in the Psalms and in a few other places
- It might be something to do with the musical directions
- Or it might mean 'stop and listen'
- The idea being to pause and reflect by listening to the music

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us

- Clearly we need a moment to reflect on that
- Because while saying God bless you, or praying for God to bless people
- Might be fairly familiar I wonder if we think about what it really means
- The very idea that he might bless us at all rests on the fact that he is gracious
- That is God is prepared to give us something good even though we don't deserve it
- His grace is an unmerited expression of his love for his children
- In the priestly blessing which may well have inspired the Psalm
- The three aspects of blessing are protection (Num. 6:24), favour (25) and peace (26)
- His protection is not an insurance policy – it means ultimately we are in his hands
- His favour is not like winning the lottery – it means he will do what is best for us
- His peace is not necessarily peace and quiet – but it is freedom from sin and death
- When we speak of faces lighting up or beaming we are saying something similar
- To what we have here – God's face shining upon us
- People would have been accustomed to the king showing approval or disapproval
- With a simple facial expression
- God the great King assures his people that he receives and cares for them with joy

As the psalm begins with a prayer for God's blessing, so it ends

- The great hope is that through being gracious to one people and blessing them
- Others will seek the grace and blessing of God
- This is the believer's great prayer and the believer's great hope
- In verse 2 the psalmist uses the expression 'all nations'
- In verse 7 the psalmist uses the expression 'all the ends of the earth'
- But the meaning is just the same
- The psalmist's vision is that Jews and Gentiles, one nation and all nations
- Will share in the glorious presence of God, come to know him
- Share in his blessings and have reason to praise him
- In verse 2 the psalmist uses the expression 'be known'
- In verse 7 the psalmist uses the expression 'fear'
- But the meaning is just the same – here fear does not mean 'petrified'
- In traditional English a sufficient word is 'awesome'
- Which these days tends only to mean 'really good'
- Even to glimpse the depths of God's grace leave us in reverent, solemn, joyful wonder

II IT'S A PRAYER FOR SALVATION

The psalmist calls on God to be gracious to his people and to bless them

- So that his ways may be known on earth
- His salvation among all nations

There is scarcely anything more topical than this

- Just recently I met someone in the community
- Who told me that when she was younger she used to attend a Methodist Church
- But then she grew up and moved away and somehow fell away
- The interesting thing was that she asked me two questions
- The two questions were 'what did I think about Jehovah's witnesses?'
- And 'what did I think about other major world religions?'
- I replied that most of Jehovah's Witnesses that I met were nice people
- Whose trustworthiness, morality, reliability and sincerity were admirable
- Ordinary people like ourselves – but that I did not like the Watchtower movement
- The same was true of most people who followed other world religions
- Over the years I have met followers of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and Islam
- Most of the followers of other major world religions I had met were nice people
- But that is, of course, true of the great majority of people I meet
- Whether they are devoutly religious, nominally religious, secular or humanist
- Most of the people that I meet seem to be nice people and I get on with them
- But as I pointed out to my new friend the major issue is always this: Who is Jesus?

For Christians, the true identity and the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus

- Are critical – it is because Jesus is eternally God
- yet born into our world, fully human – that he can enter into our sufferings
- have victory over sin, die on the cross as sin-bearer and rise again
- it is his triumphant resurrection that declares him to be the Son of God with power
- because of his fully divine and human nature and his saving works
- Jesus Christ is our Saviour, God's gracious gift to us, worthy of our faith and trust

For the Jehovah's Witness, Jesus is not divine –

- They teach he was once a spirit creature, Michael the archangel created by God
- Although they believe he is mighty, they do not believe he is as mighty as God
- One sacrifice, however great, is insufficient to pay the debt of sin
- The only way to salvation is continually striving to obey God
- Particularly in door-to-door visitation and the sale of Watchtower publications
- Jesus was not raised in the flesh but only in spirit
- The Holy Spirit is neither personal nor divine

It is hard to give a brief reply to what other religions believe about Jesus

- But none of them believe that he is the one true and living God – revealed in flesh
- That he died as a sin-bearer and atoning sacrifice for our sins
- That he was crucified dead and was buried and on the third day rose again
- The questions: who is Jesus? What did he really do? And is it relevant to me today
- Are the most vital questions that we can ever address

From observing God's blessing on his people

- The nations should be able to deduce his royal sovereignty
- Believers therefore must testify to our conviction that ultimately we are in his hands
- That we trust that ultimately he will do what is best for us
- And that because of God's grace made known in Jesus we are at peace with God
- Because we are free from the curse of sin and death
- The good news is that others too may enjoy this salvation, deliverance, victory
- Others too may come under the benefits of his kingship, blessing and promises

Sometimes you meet people who say that they either know nothing about the Old Testament

- Or think that as a Christian they do not need to know anything about it
- Sometimes that latter is simply an excuse for the former
- But there is no doubt that the very essence of the Christian message
- Is that the God who did mighty saving acts among his people Israel
- Is the god who does the most might saving acts in Jesus Christ
- Jesus Christ is, therefore, the final revelation and one true way to God
- As the gospel goes out to the nations – they must come to Israel's God (the Father)
- Through the Son
- Since Pentecost, this ancient prayer is being magnificently fulfilled
- If at present Israel does not share in large numbers in this salvation (Rom. 11:25)
- Christians are to pray that Jews too may acknowledge God in Jesus Christ (11:26-27)
- There is no place for anti-Semitism, or any other prejudice in the Christian church
- But that does not mean that we play down the uniqueness of Jesus
- Or the saving grace of God made known in the one who is the one, true Saviour

But the prayer for salvation has to be understood as a prayer for the kingly rule of God

- There are some people who foolishly think that salvation (in terms of forgiveness)
- Means that thereafter you can go on living as you like
- In the New Testament – Jesus preached the Kingdom of God (God's kingly rule)
- Not surprisingly, in the Old Testament, the psalmist tells of God's kingly rule
- When his salvation comes, God rules the peoples justly
- and guides the nations of the earth

The in-gathering of the nations is the harvest – that the psalmist speaks of in verse 6

- And that Jesus, himself, speaks of when he says:
- The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few (Matt. 9:36-38)

The psalmist's prayer is written for all the people of God

- It is a prayer for blessing – may God be gracious to us and bless us
- But it is also a prayer for salvation
- That your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations
- May the nations be glad and sing for joy
- May the peoples praise you, O God, may all the peoples praise you
- For you rule the people justly and guide the nations of the earth
- From this we can learn that praise and obedience go together
- That is that praise is not something that you can turn on
- While living a disobedient life

III IT'S A PRAYER FOR WORSHIP

An important part of worship is the gathering of the people of God

- Within local churches there can be many dimensions of Christian life
- In larger churches there are midweek groups, home groups or cell groups
- Bible studies, fellowship groups (women's groups, men's groups, YP groups)
- At their best all of these are of inestimable value to the local fellowship
- But they are not, by themselves, the gathering of the people of God
- For in the gathering of the people of God
- We praise his name, we hear his word and celebrate the sacramental signs of grace
- We open our lips, our ears and our hearts to God
- This is not separate from daily living but an integral part of it

From the psalms we get a more complete picture of biblical worship and praise

- It is undoubtedly delight in his creation – the heavens declare the glory of the Lord
- It is delight in his salvation – from sin and death
- It is delight in his blessing – his protection, his favour, his peace

The pattern of the psalm shows that the plan of God is to increase the company who praise

- When people are saved from sin and death the praise company grows
- When the good news of Jesus Christ and his salvation reaches the nations
- They too will join in praising God
- God cares for his people (Israel), the nations and all his creation
- But the psalm is also a missionary psalm
- Since it looks forward to God's kingly rule over both Jews and Gentiles

The call to God to bless us is not essentially a selfish one

- It is so that all nations will come to worship him
- There is something wonderful about being in a great congregation of people
- Who are praising God – our walk with God is incomplete until we praise him
- And the praises of God are incomplete until the great congregation is gathered

Verses 3 and 5 are in fact the same – they are the great chorus or refrain of this psalm

- May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you
- When the earth knows God's blessing, God's salvation, God's praise and worship
- Then the powerful witness will call forth a great harvest

God will also bless us as individuals and a congregation of his people

- When we share his heart and vision for the world
- It is a gracious circle, when we are blessed and use that to reach a needy world
- A confident expectation that we shall move from glory to glory

Psalm 67 is:

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