

When I was a child, I was always corrected by adults when I said: “*Can* I have...this or that?” and instead, I was taught to say: “*May* I have...this or that?” So, is the word “may” about asking a question or making a demand for some particular thing? In Psalm 67 the poet frequently uses the word “may,” as in the opening line of the psalm: “*May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us...*” Was he requesting from God a certain response, or was he asking permission for more of the same, please? The New Living Translation of the Aaronic Blessing in Numbers 6 also uses the “may” word. “*May the LORD bless you and protect you. May the LORD smile on you and be gracious to you. May the LORD show you his favor and give you his peace*” (Numbers 6:24-26). Would you call that a request or demand? For that matter, is any prayer simply a request or a demand of God?

I have been asked more than a few times what the word “bless” means—which surprises me. Apparently not all people are aware of what a “blessing” is intended for or what it means. If there is no clear understanding of the purpose of receiving a “blessing” at the end of worship—at weddings, at baptisms or funerals, what is the pastor’s reason for saying it? Do some people think that a “blessing” is some kind of magical formula like saying “Abracadabra” and then it happens? People must not realize that “blessings” are each of us looking to God for God’s past mercies and gifts of generosity; or that in faith and trust we turn to God and ask that God’s continuing goodness and grace will be shown to us at a particular time or place. What do you say? Do all Christians understand the purpose of God’s blessings?

Let me attempt to define what a “blessing” is. Maybe you can improve on these attempts. If so, please do! To be “blessed” is to recognize and accept a gift from God that is unexpected, unearned, inexplicable, incomprehensible and mystifying; all because of God’s loving activity toward us and around us; and because God chooses to offer us a gift of grace by blessing us with favor, and perhaps with protection, or other heavenly gifts.

Or, to be blessed can mean to be sanctified and made holy through prayer or the “laying on of hands,” as we request God’s gracious favor upon a person or a place or an event for special reasons or desires. Have you ever thought about how to describe what God’s “blessings” mean to you personally? (from Joan Stott – ‘The Timeless Psalms’ RCL Psalms Year C.© 2013)

The backdrop of every blessing is the world. To state the obvious, the world is a mess, deeply divided, badly fragmented, and all too often highly violent. To all this, biblical Christians and faithful Jews say, there is a universal story because there is a God who created the universe and continues to guide it. The God who created all things reveals truth that is absolute and universal. His truth is built into the cosmos. There is a universal purpose because of the design of the universe. God has imbedded meaning in the world and the creatures he created.

Therefore, we are on a journey that is meaningful and has direction. The culmination of our journey is the fuller presence of God where we will become most fully who we were created to be. This is God’s desire; not just for his people; it is his desire for all peoples and all nations. “*May the peoples praise you, God; may all the peoples praise you*” we read in verses 3 and 5. God desires that “*persons from every tribe and language and people and nation,*” come to him, as stated in Revelation 5:9. God wants all people to know

and praise him. Isaiah was one of the first prophetic voices to suggest this. Isaiah said that the foreigner who genuinely comes to God will not be turned away.

As the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, his protégé, *“This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”* (1 Tim. 2:3-4). Let’s remember that Paul was an Apostle to the Gentiles. He was engaged in this ministry because, *“God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ”* (2 Cor. 5:19), Jews and non-Jews alike. Jesus understood his earthly ministry as focused on Israel. When he is approached by a non-Jewish woman in Matthew 15—a Canaanite—he tries to put her off, but she persists. Jesus says to her that it’s not right to throw the children’s bread to the dogs. Jesus does not use the word for *stray dogs* who scavenge for food outside. That word was often used as a slur against Gentiles. No, the word that Jesus uses was often translated *little dogs, puppies, or household pets*. These pets were allowed around the dining table and they would eat scraps of food that fell on the floor. They were part of the family. The Canaanite woman picks up on this, saying, *“even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table”* (v. 27). Jesus praises her for her faith and says, *“Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted”* (v. 28). Matthew adds, *“And her daughter was healed at that moment”* (v. 28).

You may also recall that Jesus healed a Roman Centurion’s servant (Matt. 8:5-13) and Jesus healed a demon-possessed man in Gadara, a Gentile region. When Jesus heals 10 lepers, one of them is a Samaritan, a sort of half-Jew. While Jesus believed that his primary mission was to Israel, he did at times minister to non-Jews. Of course, in the Great Commission, Jesus instructs us to make disciples of *all* nations (Matt. 28: 19).

The worldwide mission of God is declared in Psalm 67: *“May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you rule the peoples with equity and guide the nations of the earth”* (v. 4). It is God that makes the nations glad as he exercises his sovereignty over all nations and peoples. It is God’s blessing that causes the nations to sing for joy. That joy is rooted in God’s judgment, because his judgment means God exercising his rule over all the earth, and he is fair to all.

As theologian David Wells says, “Christian hope is not about wishing that things will get better...” [Above All Earthly Pow’rs, p. 206] “The conquest of sin, death, and the devil and the establishment of the Rule of God do not await some future, cataclysmic realization” (p. 208). Through his life, his cross, and his resurrection, Jesus Christ has already begun the Rule of God.

The message of Psalm 67 speaks God’s rule as it relates to receiving God’s blessing and being a blessing. For instance:

- God’s blessings should first be recognized and desired.
- Praying for God’s blessings to us and to all is always a fitting prayer.
- Realizing that agricultural produce is God’s blessing seems important to the writer of Psalm 67. When we hear of Midwest farmers filing for bankruptcy in this country we should be concerned.
- Since God has blessed us, we ask that God continues to bless us.
- God is the source of all kinds of and methods of blessing.

- God guides more than Israel; more than the church.
- God's graciousness and blessing to us is for the sake of others.

Did you notice that the psalm alternates between talking about "us," and talking to God? Verses 1, 6, and 7 referring to "us," are the surround verses, whereas verses 2-5 are where the psalmist is speaking to and about God. The central idea for "us" is blessing, whereas the central idea for the "peoples and nations" is that they praise God for what God does: saving, ruling and guiding with equity. Therefore, in Psalm 67 we see the two halves of salvation, as Claus Westermann states in the book, *Blessing In The Bible And The Life Of The Church*. To state it concisely, we are blessed to be a blessing.

God's overarching action that results in human salvation comes through his deliverance and his blessing. God's unseen but vigorous activity in all of life is noted in verse 6: "*the land yields its harvest.*" Cecil B. DeMille can make a movie about deliverance with a cast of thousands, that is rerun on television around Easter time every year. After all, deliverance is the exciting stuff. But who would ever make a movie of an orchard growing?

This psalm requests that God's favor be shown in blessing "us" and also in making God's nature and activity (the way God does things) known to others who are not "us." When God's blessings are recognized, people praise God in response. These unseen and apparently natural blessings are part of the created order...to "*the ends of the earth.*" Through things such as these, God conveys his favor to all. The response to these blessings from God in the last verse of the Psalm is "*so that all the ends of the earth will fear him*" (v. 7).

Walter Brueggemann, in his book, *The Message of The Psalms*, points out that to "fear" him is to revere him. Brueggemann asks, "What does it mean to fear Yahweh? The answer may range from reverential awe to utter terror. Probably it is comprehended in all of these" (p. 105).

God's people are right to pray for God's blessings and to seek them. The psalmist's hope is that everyone in the entire world will see God's blessings to his people and thereby will recognize his power and majesty.

As John Calvin wrote, centuries ago, "Every benefit, which God bestowed upon his ancient people, was, as it were, a light held out before the eyes of the world, to attract the attention of the nations to him" (*Calvin's Commentary* on Psalm 67:6). This is still true today, even on a personal level. God blesses you so that you can be a blessing to others.

We live in a time of unrest and cruelty and violence. In America today we live with many uncertainties. But one certainty we can cling to is that God will help us navigate turbulent times whenever and however they come. God is in control. More than this, God loves his children and he cares for us. And we who know God's love and care can be a blessing to those who do not. This present age is without God but it doesn't have to be without hope.

We are blessed.

So take God's blessing and God's praise into the world.

Be a blessing to others.

Pray that more and more people will seek God and receive Christ.

This is God's will for the nations—that all will be united in his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. "*God, our God, blesses us*" (v. 6). Amen.

(Parts of this sermon are from a sermon by The Rev. M. Anthony Seel, Jr., St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Vestal, New York)