BLESSING A GREAT THEME OF THE BIBLE

Words like “bless” and “blessing” occur over 400 times in the Bible. On top of that there are many places where God’s blessings are being described where these words are not actually used. It is true to say that blessing is one of the great themes of scripture.

God’s purpose is that his people should be the means of bringing blessing to the world; that, as we receive his blessings into our lives, those blessings should touch others.

But “bless” is a word that we often use without really thinking what it means. I have a small golden Retriever puppy. People see her in the street and say “Bless!”. If I sneeze, the chances are someone will say, “Bless you!”. At the end of a service in church, we will probably hear “the blessing”. But what do we mean? And what do we expect to happen when someone blesses us?

Through this summer, we are going explore these things in some detail. Our aim is entirely practical. I believe that, if we understand how to receive God’s blessings into our lives and how to give to others out of what we have received, we will become the means of touching many, many lives for God. So we will look at how we can receive more of God’s blessing into our lives and how we can bless others – our families, friends and neighbours; our places of work, our towns and cities, the nation; our own church and other churches; the world. This week, and the next three weeks, we will explore some basics before moving on to see how we can be the means of brings God’s blessings to others wherever God puts us.

WHAT DOES “BLESS” MEAN?

Having searched through all those biblical references to blessing, I think that the best definition is to be found in a phrase that Jesus used. He said (in John 10:10) that he had come so that those who trust him should have “life in all its fullness”. I think that “life in all its fullness” would be as good a definition of blessing as you could find. You see, right from Creation, God wanted mankind to be blessed. By their disobedience, Adam and Eve forfeited the fullness of God’s blessing. Jesus came to restore to mankind what had been lost in the Garden of Eden.

If I were to ask you, “What makes mankind different from the animals?” you would probably, and quite correctly, say, “Mankind is created in the image of God”. But when you look at the story of creation in Genesis 1, there is another difference – God blesses mankind:

**Genesis 1:24-31**

24 Then God said, “Let the earth produce every sort of animal, each producing offspring of the same kind—livestock, small animals that scurry along the ground, and wild animals.” And that is what happened. 25 God made all sorts of wild animals, livestock, and small animals, each able to produce offspring of the same kind. And God saw that it was good. 26 Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground.”

27 So God created human beings in his own image.

In the image of God he created them;

male and female he created them.
28 Then God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground.”

29 Then God said, “Look! I have given you every seed-bearing plant throughout the earth and all the fruit trees for your food. 30 And I have given every green plant as food for all the wild animals, the birds in the sky, and the small animals that scurry along the ground—everything that has life.” And that is what happened.

31 Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good!
And evening passed and morning came, marking the sixth day.

God's blessing on mankind includes “fruitfulness”, “dominion” over the earth and the provision of food. As the account of the Garden of Eden continues we find that God also blesses mankind with loving sexual relationships and, most of all, intimacy with God himself.

**GOD’S HEART IS TO BLESS ALL OF MANKIND**

God passionately wants all of mankind to enjoy these blessings. After the Fall of man, sin and violence spread everywhere, so that God decided to destroy mankind from the face of the earth (Genesis 6:5-7). Only Noah and his family were spared. After the Flood, even though God recognises that man’s heart is irreversibly evil from birth, he renews the creation blessings:

**GENESIS 9:1-3**

1 Then God blessed Noah and his sons and told them, “Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth. 2 All the animals of the earth, all the birds of the sky, all the small animals that scurry along the ground, and all the fish in the sea will look on you with fear and terror. I have placed them in your power. 3 I have given them to you for food, just as I have given you grain and vegetables.

However, the greatest of all the blessings given at creation has been lost: man’s sinfulness has broken the intimacy with God that Adam and Eve enjoyed in the Garden of Eden, when God walked there in the cool of the day (Genesis 3:8). That would only be completely restored in Christ. God’s purpose to restore his relationship with mankind began to be worked out through Abraham; and it is to Abraham that God gives a very special blessing. What God says to Abraham repays some study, because it is full of significance for understanding what God means by “blessing”.

**THE PROMISE OF BLESSING GIVEN TO ABRAHAM**

God’s blessing for Abraham (which was restated on a number of later occasions) is found at Genesis 12:2-3:

**GENESIS 12:2-3**

2 I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. 3 I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you.”

1. **God will bless Abraham and his descendents**

It starts with, “I will bless you” – that is, give you Godly dominion and authority over what I have created; make you fruitful, and provide for all your needs. In other words, Abraham will receive, in some measure, the blessings that Adam and Eve enjoyed in the Garden of Eden.
2. Abraham will become a blessing to others

God then says that Abraham “will be a blessing to others.” God never intends his blessings to stop with the recipients. It is a scriptural principle that those who freely receive should also freely give (Matthew 10:37). I vividly remember John Wimber ministering healing to a woman whose back was badly bent. As she received healing so she gradually straightened up. When she was completely straight, John led her to another lady with a similarly bent back and, under John’s direction, she ministered healing to the second woman. Whatever blessing we receive, we are commanded and empowered, to bless others.

Such blessing to others can occur almost automatically. When Joseph was working as a slave in Potiphar’s household, we read (Genesis 39:2-5):

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Genesis 39:2-5
2 The Lord was with Joseph, so he succeeded in everything he did as he served in the home of his Egyptian master. 3 Potiphar noticed this and realized that the Lord was with Joseph, giving him success in everything he did. 4 This pleased Potiphar, so he soon made Joseph his personal attendant. He put him in charge of his entire household and everything he owned. 5 From the day Joseph was put in charge of his master’s household and property, the Lord began to bless Potiphar’s household for Joseph’s sake. All his household affairs ran smoothly, and his crops and livestock flourished.
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Joseph lived under God’s blessing. The key to this was that he maintained a personal relationship and walk with God: “the Lord was with Joseph”. Out of this relationship, Joseph enjoyed God’s blessing, even though he had been sold into slavery; and because he was being blessed, Joseph became a blessing to those around him, so that they too were blessed.

This has obvious implications for us. Whether it is in our workplace, or in our home, or with our wider families, our neighbourhood, the clubs and classes we attend – wherever it is, if we are keeping a walk with God and enjoying his blessings, then we will become a blessing to others. But the fact that this come happen, as I have said, “automatically” does not exempt us from looking for ways in which we can bring blessing to others, and making an effort to do so. For instance, in the use of our money, it is very clear from Scripture, that when God blesses us with income, we are to use what he has given us to bless others:

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2 Corinthians 9:11
11 Yes, you will be enriched in every way so that you can always be generous. And when we take your gifts to those who need them, they will thank God.
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But how much to give and to whom is our decision – nobody gives money away “automatically”!

3. The blessings given to Abraham will reach the whole world

The third thing to notice about God’s blessing to Abraham is that its ultimate purpose is that “all the families on earth will be blessed through you”. This purpose is nothing less than the restoration of the creation blessing to the whole world, which was to be achieved through Christ, descended from Abraham.
Paul points out that Christians are spiritual descendants of Abraham (Romans 4:11-17). We Christians, therefore, are part of God’s means of bringing blessing to “all the families on earth”.

**GOD HAS NEVER WITHDRAWN ALL HIS BLESSINGS FROM UNBELIEVING MANKIND**

So far, I have concentrated on what God wanted for mankind at Creation and is being restored through faith in Christ. However, God has never withdrawn all of the creation blessings. Jesus once pointed out that God “gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike” (Matthew 5:45). God still provides what is needed for mankind to support life, even though people can only obtain it “by the sweat of their brow” (Genesis 3:17-19).

**OUR WALK WITH GOD THE KEY TO RECEIVING HIS BLESSINGS IN ALL THEIR FULLNESS**

But God actually wants us to be blessed in every part of our being. “Life in all its fullness” includes not just our material well-being, but physical, mental and emotional health and freedom from pain; productive work; good relationships with others, and a satisfying and fulfilling walk with God. It is this relationship with God that is the key that unlocks blessing into every other part of a person’s life.

*Blessing does not mean exemption from pain*

However, living under God’s blessing of life in all its fullness does not imply exemption from difficulties and suffering. Indeed James says that the person who perseveres under trial is blessed (James 1:12); when troubles come our way, we are to consider it an opportunity for great joy, because we know that when our faith is tested, our endurance has a chance to grow (James 1:2-3). Psalm 94:12 pronounces God’s blessing on the person he disciplines, a perspective backed up by Hebrews 12:1-12. Indeed, it is often in the dark and difficult times that we find God’s blessings in ways that would never have been possible apart from the difficulties. The Psalmist found the blessings of support and God’s protection in the valley of the shadow of death in ways that would never have been possible in the green pastures and beside the still waters (Psalm 23).

Receiving all the blessings that God wants to give us is not unconditional. There is a tremendous list of the blessings that God wanted Israel to receive as they entered the Promised Land in Deuteronomy 28:1-14. But over and over again it is made very clear that these blessings will only be given if God’s people remain obedient to his revealed will. The history of Israel recorded in the Old Testament illustrates the outworking of this principle.

It is just the same in the New Testament. Ephesians 1:3 says this:

> All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ.

In the Old Testament, God’s people could only maintain their walk with him if they obeyed his laws. Under the New Covenant, the position is still the same: once we have entered into a right relationship with God through faith in Christ – once we are united with him – we maintain it by obedience. The difference from the Old
Testament experience is that now we have the constant availability of the blood of Christ to daily and repeatedly cleanse us from our disobedience, so that we can sustain a living and vibrant relationship with him. This relationship is what John calls “walking in the light” (1 John 1:5-2:6).

CONCLUSION
From the moment he created mankind, God has wanted everyone to enjoy all his blessings: “life in all its fullness”. These blessings are material, emotional and spiritual. But we only begin to enjoy them as God intended when we maintain a daily walk with God, trusting him and receiving, moment by moment, the cleansing and forgiveness that is ours through Christ. As we are blessed by God, we become a blessing to others; as we receive God’s blessings into our lives, God expects us to give to others as freely as we have received from him.