

# **TRAVELING WITH A HOLY GOD WHO BLESSES HIS PEOPLE Numbers 6:22-27**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Michael Oher is the starting left tackle of the Baltimore Ravens football team. He signed a five year contract last year for \$13 million. He was one of the five finalists for the 2009 rookie of the year. His life story is told in the movie, "The Blind Side" for which Sandra Bullock won an Academy Award a week ago for playing the adoptive mother of Michael Oher, Leigh Anne Tuohy. Michael Oher's story is truly a remarkable story. At 15 he was a homeless, uneducated teenager living on the mean streets of Memphis, TN. His father was completely uninvolved in his life and was murdered when Michael was 13. His mother was a crack addict. In his early years he was in one foster home after another. He went to 11 different schools by the time he was 15 and didn't go to school for 18 months when he was 10-11 years old. Through a series of events he ended up attending Briarcrest Christian School as a sophomore.

This is how his situation at the school was described by Michael Lewis who wrote the book upon which the movie was based. "The situation appeared hopeless and humiliating for all concerned. Word of the new student's various failures inevitably reached the principle, who also began to sense the dimensions of the void in the child's life experiences. 16 year old Michael didn't know what an ocean was or a bird's nest or the tooth fairy. He couldn't very well be taught 10th-grade biology if he had no clue what was meant by the word cell, and he couldn't very well get through 10th-grade English if he had never heard of a verb or a noun. It was as if he had materialized on the planet as an overgrown 16-year-old. Jennifer Graves, the Special Ed. teacher at the school, had the same misgivings: the boy reminded her of a story she had read in a psychology journal about a child who had been locked away inside a closet for years. 'That child didn't even have tactile sense,' she says, 'but it felt like the same sort of thing. Big Mike was a blank slate.'"

Michael Oher, "Big Mike", became not only an All-American lineman at the Univ. of Mississippi but also an Academic All-American. He is now a successful, wealthy, respected NFL football player because Sean and Leigh Anne Tuohy brought this homeless young man home to live with them, eventually adopting him as their own child. They made him part of their family and then used all their resources to help him succeed academically, on the football field and most importantly, as a responsible young man. If you will permit me to use the last verse of our text today, they put their name on him and they blessed him.

The story of Michael Oher's adoption by the Tuohy family and his subsequent "blessed" life is a small illustration of the nature of God's relationship with Israel as described in these final verses of Numbers 6. These verses are the final words of God to Israel prior to their leaving Mt. Sinai and beginning their march across the wilderness to the land of Canaan. They stand as the conclusion of all the instructions he has given to the priests regarding their role and duties in making it possible for him to safely live and travel with Israel. He tells the priests that one of their daily duties, as they sacrifice the animals and practice all the rituals for cleansing the people, is to put his name upon Israel by announcing this three line blessing. In v. 27 he says that every day, as the priests announce this blessing, this benediction, upon the people of Israel they are putting God's name upon them and assuring them that God will indeed bless his people.

This idea of God's putting his name on Israel is the language of adoption. God has taken the people of Israel to be his own people, to be his children. Just as adoptive parents place their name upon the adoptive child and make him or her legally theirs, so God has taken Israel to be his people, his children, giving them his name. They are now his family. The priests, by announcing this blessing each day publicize this fact. Just as adoptive parents not only make the child legally their own but they also use their resources to provide for and care for the child, so God himself blesses Israel. God's adoption of Israel is like the adoption of Michael Oher in that God takes Israel out of a hopeless condition, makes them his own and provides everything they need to live well.

For 2000 years the Christian church has recognized this blessing of Israel by the priests, in which God's name is repeated 3 times, as a revelation of God's blessing poured out upon his church, his family through the person and work of Jesus Christ. The NT clearly declares that these priests are a symbol of Jesus. God uses them to announce this blessing because they have gone through the acts of cleansing and so are clean in God's sight. They have performed the animal sacrifices which have atoned for the sins of the people. So also Jesus, our clean, sinless, holy high priest has performed all the atoning and cleansing acts on our behalf by his life and death. Now Jesus, having finished his work daily announces God's blessing over us, his people. The end of Luke's gospel clearly has this act of the priests announcing God's blessing on the people in view. Luke tells us that the crucified and resurrected Jesus "...led them (the disciples) out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them." Paul tells us in Ephesians 1:3 that God "has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places."

The blessing of God rests upon us through Christ. It is by his work that we are adopted as God's children and obtain all of God's blessings. It is not an accident that every Sunday, for 2000 years, thousands of Christian worship services have ended with this blessing, this benediction being announced over the congregation. The church has rightly seen in the threefold repetition of God's name, Yahweh, the revelation of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit announcing his blessing upon us his people through Jesus. This blessing describes the Triune God's attitude toward and work on behalf of every person for whom Jesus has died and now intercedes as our priest. That is what we are going to see as we look at this blessing in detail: the benefits we receive from our heavenly Father, through Jesus as we travel with him on the way to the Promised Land.

#### MAIN POINT

**The Triune God, our Father, blesses his children through Jesus...**

#### **I. Guarding us (v. 24)**

The word that is translated "keep" in our English translations in v. 24 is used 148 times in the first five books of the Bible but is very seldom used with God as the subject. Usually, it is used of humans "keeping" God's laws and commandments. However, there are two times it is used prior to this in the Bible with God as the one who is doing the guarding or keeping: First, God tells Jacob as he sets out on his journey leaving behind his family and the land of Canaan to go to his uncle Laban to find a wife (Genesis 28:15), "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." God promises to keep Jacob safe in order to bring him back to the land of Canaan. Then in Exodus 23:20, God promises Israel, "Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared." Again, God promises to keep or to guard his people, the descendants of Jacob, on their journey to the Promised Land. Now in Numbers 6 God commands the priests to daily announce God's intention to keep or guard his people as they journey to the Promised Land.

God's keeping or guarding his people is a prominent theme throughout the rest of the OT. It is a repeated request and stated truth throughout the psalms. For example, in Psalm 121 this verb shows up 6 times in this short Psalm which reads, "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand... The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore." When the psalmist says he lifts his eyes to the hills and then asks where his help comes from, he is referring to the fact that on the hills of Canaan is where the false gods, the idols were worshipped. He is asking, which god will be his God; which god will he depend upon to keep him safe as he journeys through life? Then he proclaims that it is Yahweh, the God who made the heavens and the earth whom he will depend upon. The reason for this confidence is because this God is the one who keeps or guards Israel and he will never sleep. He is always standing watch over his people. He is the one who will keep us from all evil. He will guard our life. He will watch over us in all of our

travels. No parent can always protect their child from harm but this God is not only always watching over us, his children but he has the power to keep us from all evil.

In the NT this same word is used in a couple of key passages to describe what Jesus has done and is doing for us. First, in John 17:11 Jesus, in his prayer to his Father the night before he was betrayed and killed said this about his disciples, “While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.” Second, in 2 Thessalonians 3:3 we are told, “But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.” Then in the benediction found at the end of Jude it says, “Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy...” In these passages we find that our Lord Jesus keeps us safe from the power and schemes of Satan and from our own fickleness and our tendency to stumble and fall off the path. God is preserving us, guarding us so that we make it safely into the Promised Land, just like he guarded Israel so they could make it into Canaan.

Jesus died and rose again so that God would guard every believer from all evil. However, the evil from which he guards us is not the loss of earthly things. There is no promise that God will keep you from disease or accident or wayward children or abusive spouses or financial ruin or earthquakes or tornadoes or murderous men. In fact Jesus says that in this world we will have much trouble. The apostles tell us it is through many afflictions that we will inherit the kingdom of God. However, if Jesus is your high priest then God does promise to guard you, to keep you from abandoning Christ, to guard you from the deception of Satan who aims to turn you from Christ and to keep you from stumbling into sin in such a way that you fall off the path that leads to life. The worse thing that can ever happen to you is to die and to go to hell and the best thing that can ever happen to you is to be loved by God and to live with him in the new heavens and the new earth forever. God is guarding us from the evil of abandoning Christ and ending up in hell. God promises to guard and keep everyone safe who trusts in Jesus so that we never taste death but live with him forever.

*The Triune God, our Father, blesses his children through Jesus...*

- *Guarding us*
- *And...*

## **II. Being gracious to us (v. 25)**

One of the happiest experiences in my life is coming home at the end of the day and being greeted by my wife and children with a smiling face, a happy hello and a warm hug. When the people we love smile at us and communicate that they are happy to see us and to be with us our hearts are happy. To walk into a room of strangers and see a friend who immediately smiles and comes to greet you and says, “It’s so good to see you,” turns an awkward, uncomfortable moment into a pleasant moment. When our friend’s face “shines upon us” we are set at ease and given hope that the meeting won’t be as unpleasant as we anticipated. A child who is sure that their mom is going to be mad at them for spilling the milk but who instead is greeted by a smiling face and a mom who says, “accidents happen, let’s clean it up,” is not only relieved but happy to be in the company of her parent. It is a remarkable source of joy in life when the people we love are happy with us and happy to be with us. Conversely, it is a source of great pain and sorrow when those we love are not happy with us or not happy to be in our presence.

Imagine with me that when you walk out of church today, Jesus was standing in the foyer and you caught his eye as you left the sanctuary, what kind of look would he have on his face when your eyes met? Would he be standing with his arms folded and frowning or would his face shine upon you; would he be happy to see you? I think most people Christian people would say that Jesus would be frowning at them. But this blessing tells us that is not the case. If Jesus is your priest, who has made atonement for you and cleansed you and has put God’s name on you, then God’s face is shining upon you. He is happy to see you. Let me be clear: if you are not trusting in Jesus as your life then God is not smiling at you. If you could see him now you would be

terrified by the angry look on his face. However, if you are a Christian, if you are trusting in Jesus alone as your savior and treasure, then God's face always shines upon you.

Most Christians do not think that God is smiling at us because we are so aware of our sins and failures to live according to God's will. That is why the second part of the blessing in this line is Jesus assuring us that the Lord is going to be gracious to us. God's smiling upon us is not because we deserve to have him smile upon us. We are sinners. We have broken his laws and not lived as we ought and thus God ought to not smile but be angry with us. However, he smiles upon us because he is gracious to us. God delights to treat sinners not as we deserve but exactly opposite to what we deserve. It is because God delights to be kind to sinners that he sent Jesus into the world to die for us and to rise for us. It is because Jesus has obeyed God for us and suffered the death we deserve that God continues to be gracious to us. He does not love us and delight in us because of us but because of Jesus. He pardons our sins and treats us as if we have never sinned but always obeyed him because Jesus always obeyed and then died the death we deserve. As Paul says in Romans 5:2, it is through Jesus that "we have obtained access into this grace in which we now stand."

It is because Jesus expresses and secures God's grace towards us that when we sin we do not hide our sin or deny our sin or fear God's punishment for our sin. Rather, when we sin we go immediately to our heavenly Father and confess our sin. We tell him what we've done wrong and that we're sorry and rejoice that we are forgiven because of Jesus our high priest who secures and announces God's blessing upon us. As we come to him with our sins in the name of Jesus we find, contrary to what we deserve, not an angry condemning judge but a smiling, loving Father who delights to assure us of his everlasting love for us.

*The Triune God, our Father, blesses his children through Jesus...*

- *Guarding us*
- *Being gracious to us*
- *And...*

### **III. Giving us peace (v. 26)**

The third line of the blessing begins by announcing that the Lord lifts up his face towards us. Again, this is a physical metaphor that illustrates God's paying attention to us. It is the opposite of God's "hiding his face" or "setting his face against" people. These phrases are always associated with God's judging people or leaving people to suffer the consequences of their sin. In Deut. 31:18 God through Moses describes the future of Israel and says, "And I will surely hide my face in that day because of all the evil that they have done, because they have turned to other gods." We can see the contrast between these ideas in Psalm 34. Verse 15 says, "The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry." But verse 16 says, "The face of the LORD is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth." So when our priest, Jesus announces to us that the Lord lifts up his face towards us he is assuring us that he is paying attention to us, he is eager to hear our prayers. It is because Jesus is our priest that we now have the right and the privilege of coming to God in order to ask of him help, grace and mercy for each day of trouble.

Notice that the result of knowing that God lifts up his face towards us in Christ is that God will give us peace. What does it mean for God to give us peace? I want to show you three aspects of this peace that we are given through Christ. First, Paul says in Romans 5:1 & 10, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ... For if when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him by the death of his son..." The idea contained in these two verses is this: When we came out of our mother's womb we were terrorists in God's kingdom. We are from birth willing members of the guerilla army that is waging war against God's rightful rule. We hate God and he hates us. However, through the death of Christ we are justified, that is, we are declared not guilty of sedition but loyal members of God's kingdom. And by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit our hearts are changed so that we no longer hate God but love God. Thus we who were at war with God are now through Christ, at peace with him. Thus when we enter his throne

room we are not immediately killed but warmly welcomed as friends because, through Christ, peace has been made between us and God.

Second, we are commanded by God, through the apostle Paul in Philippians 4:6-7, “do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Worry is the great destroyer of life. How often we are distracted by worry so that we cannot enjoy God or people or life. Worry ruins everything, especially the joy of being saved by Christ. So God commands us to not worry but instead to make known to him our requests while we thank him for his love and salvation and promises. The promise he gives to us here is he will give us his peace and that peace he gives will guard our hearts and minds in Christ. The peace that God gives will enable us to rejoice in the fact that no matter what happens to us, nothing can separate us from the love of God given to us in Christ. Just a few verses after this Paul says that he has “learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.” These two verses are that secret. He has learned to turn his worry into prayer that is laced through with thanksgiving for all that God has given him in Christ and the result is peace, contentment in whatever circumstance he finds himself. Again, the promise is not that God will never let the thing you are worried about happen but that God will fill you with that calm assurance that whatever happens you will still be loved by God.

Third, in Ephesians 2:13-14 we are told, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility...” Through Jesus, not only has peace been made between us and God but also we are at peace with one another. We have been placed into the family of God and all the things that separate humans from one another have been rendered insignificant. Our religious and cultural heritage, the color of our skin, our language, our gender, our politics, our educational choices, our marital status, our socio-economic status, our age, our hobbies... all the things that distinguish us from one another and separate us into cliques and competing groups have been abolished in Christ and so we are no longer at war with one another. We live in a community in which there is no reason for conflict and separation. We share in common the deepest and most profound reality: we are all sinners saved by grace, we are all citizens of the same country, we are all members of the same family, we all have the same Father and brother, we all share in the same life giving Holy Spirit. We are a community of peace who is to strive to live in that peace. As Paul says later in this letter, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” He has given us peace with one another. The question for each of us is this: am I striving to live with the people sitting next to me in this congregation in the peace given to us in and by Jesus? No matter our standing in human society we all have equal access to God through Christ alone. The only thing that matters in life is access to God and as nothing that I have or that I am improves my access to God or disqualifies me from approaching God, then nothing I have or am in this world matters. We stand on level ground around the cross of Jesus at peace with him and with one another.

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- *Guarding us*
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- *Giving us peace*

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