

"The John 3:16 of the Old Testament"
Zephaniah 3:17
31 March 2024

Welcome to Grace Baptist Church and...*bless your heart*. If you visit the South, like the great state of Texas for example, or Oklahoma, where I grew up, you won't be there for very long without hearing someone say these words: *Bless your heart*.

I've shared this with you before, but since we have had some families move to Texas over the years, and some others have, and are moving to other parts of the South, one of my pastoral duties is to prepare you for life there, to prepare you for life in the South, should you ever move there. And if you're not from the South, you may not know that "Bless your heart" has several meanings... and it would be good to know that.

In the South, "Bless your heart" has several meanings:

1) Bless your heart can be an expression of sympathy or pity in the South.

For instance, when someone you love and care for gets hurt or has something bad happen to them and you say "Bless your heart"...it means, *"Oh, I am so sorry you are going through this. I wish I could take it away and make things better."*

Or, for instance, if you're a kid and you fall down and skin your knee in Chick-fil-A playground, don't be surprised if a woman, a total stranger, comes up to you and says, *"Bless your heart, Sugar Booger. Where's your Momma at? You need some Neosporin on that knee, honey."* And she might just pull some Neosporin out of her purse and just start applying it to your skinned knee! Without even asking your momma! And if you're still crying, she'll probably pick you up and hold you tight and tell you, "Bless your heart" 50x until your Momma shows up. That's just how we roll in the South!

But "Bless your heart" can also be used as an expression of thanks. For instance, someone might say, *"You brought me Starbucks? Oh, bless your heart!"*

So "Bless your heart" can be an expression of sympathy/pity, or, even expressing thanks in the South.

However, you need to know that "Bless your heart" has another meaning in the South. It can also mean something else, something entirely different.

2) Bless your heart can also be a lead-in to a very vile insult, or a preface to a severe cut down.

For instance, when someone walks into a room wearing a cringeworthy outfit and someone says, *"Bless her heart,"* it means, *"That poor thing has the tackiest taste in the world!"*

So, even though it sounds nice, it's really a cut down. For instance, *"Bless his heart, he's as dumb as a sack of rocks."*

You see, in the South we believe in being polite, even if it kills us! So, sometimes when we really want to say something nasty, we just add the words "Bless your heart" because it makes us feel better about being so mean!

So, remember that the next time you visit the South, because even though it sounds like it's a sweet-sounding compliment, it may not be. Now, let me put "Bless your heart" into a context that y'all might understand. Here's how it might work on the Central Coast:

"Bless his heart, he doesn't know how to drive in a roundabout. He's from Bakersfield. Bless his heart."

All joking aside, the good news of the Gospel is that God wants to bless us. He longs to bless us! He wants to bless you. To bless your heart. And, that's what Easter is really all about. That's what resurrection is all about.

God loves you and wants to bless the real you. Not the Instagram you. The real you. The you that is really struggling with a messy house and bickering kids. The you that has yelled one too many times at your kids...on Easter morning! The you that struggles. The you that keeps sinning that same ole sin.

God longs to bless that you. And the good news of the Gospel is that you don't have to have it all together to receive God's blessing. Isn't that great? You don't have to be perfect before God blesses you. And that means that you can start over today. You can forget what lies behind and receive God's blessing today. On Easter. Right now.

Because if it depended on us, if it was up to us to get our act together before God would bless us, then guess

what? We'd never experience His blessings! It's all due to grace. We can't earn His blessing. Please understand that! You can't earn or work hard for God's blessings. It all comes to you because of His grace, because of His kindness...because Jesus is just plain good to us. He really is.

Here's what Easter is all about-

WHENEVER GOD THINKS ABOUT YOU, HE SMILES AND THEN OPENS HIS MOUTH AND SINGS FOR JOY!

Wow! Imagine that! That's what Easter is all about. God loves us- with all our failures and faults, with all the secret sins that no one else knows about. He actually breaks out in inexpressible joy, He breaks out in song when He thinks about us. That's how God feels about you! When He looks at you, when He thinks about you, He sings for joy! God singing with jubilation over His kids...because of His Son.

Okay. So, today we're taking a break from the book of Genesis, and we'll be in Acts chapter 3, Numbers 6, and Zephaniah 3. But, we're still in our series "Messy Discipleship," we're just gonna jump into the middle of a sermon that the apostle Peter preached in Acts 3. So, turn there in your Bibles. Peter is speaking to a group of Jewish folks who just witnessed a lame beggar get healed. So, Peter is explaining that miracle and then he'll connect it to the death and resurrection of Jesus. So, Acts 3.

LOOK AT VERSE 25...

"...You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness."

So, God chose Abraham to be the conduit of blessing to the nations of the world. And, now, that includes you. For those who place their faith in Jesus, God's blessing comes to them. Peter tells us in his sermon that God sent Jesus, and God raised Him up, and God resurrected Him, in order to bless you.

So, Easter is all about God blessing people! Easter is all about how God loves to bless His kids. And, we see that way back in the Old Testament in Numbers 6. The priests would pronounce this blessing, this benediction on the nation of Israel:

Numbers 6:22-27

Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, May Yahweh bless you and keep you; May Yahweh make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; May Yahweh lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them."

But what is blessing? What does it mean that God blesses His people? What does it mean that God raised Jesus up to bless you? Well, this priestly benediction, and the resurrection of Jesus, tell us that blessing is simply this:

a face-to-face relationship with God where we experience His smile and affection.

We see that in this blessing in numbers 6. His face shines upon us. He lifts his countenance upon us. True blessing is knowing God face-to-face and experiencing His smile, His affection. The imagery here of God's face shining is like a child seeing their parent again after they have been on business trip. Dad or mom comes home and their face lights up to see their family. This is what God does when He sees us! His face lights up! His face shines we He looks upon us!

Iain Duguid says-

This is the heart of blessing: to have the Lord delight in us so much that it is as if his face shines whenever he sees us. Blessing is not just that our faces shine when we look at the beauties of God, but that he delights to turn his face toward us and look at us. Blessing is our heavenly Father's face beaming as he looks upon us. Can you imagine God delighting in you in this way?... God wants you to feel his blessing today: he wants you to feel his pleasure, to feel that his face shines when he looks upon you...He wants you to "feel his pleasure."

So, God wants His blessing to pass on to His people. That means that God's not stingy. He's not tight-fisted with His love. He's not a miser with His affection. Maybe that's not how you see God. Maybe you picture Him as this uptight, cranky Dad who is always angry because His kids are so messy and bicker all the time. Listen, if you grew up thinking that God was this ogre, some meanie, some frowning, arms-crossed, cranky Father, I'm sorry. Whoever told you that totally misrepresented God. Jesus is full of joy...right now! I love what Sally Lloyd-Jones said:

"I imagine that Jesus was the most joyful man ever."

That's the testimony of Scripture. Is that how you see Him? That's how the prophet Zephaniah describes God.

Zephaniah 3:17

The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will

quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.

This is the heart of God. This is blessing! God raised Jesus from the dead, in order to be this God to you! The singing God! Easter is about you being able to live life and enjoy the joy that comes from knowing you are enjoyed by God because of Jesus. Easter is about how God not only loves you, but He delights to love you. His affection for you knows no bounds. He sings and shouts with unbridled joy over you because you are in Christ. The prophet Zephaniah is telling us that God literally sings for joy over His children. He bursts forth in sacred song.

Palmer Robertson says this about Zephaniah 3:17- *"This verse is the John 3:16 of the Old Testament."*

So, why did God send Jesus? Why did God raise Him from the dead? Because it just simply pleased Him to do so! It just makes Him happy to! His heart explodes with glad celebration that Jesus lived, died, rose, and ascended for you.

Think about this. This is what Easter, what the resurrection of Jesus means. God not only loves you, but He is moved to singing over you loudly. He enjoys you. So, you cannot increase God's smile by your obedience, by your behavior. He already greatly delights in you because of Jesus' obedience for you. Can you believe that? This is not just a bare fact. This is not just a piece of information. Like, "God loves you." Period. Statement. Fact.

No, God loves you!!! Exclamation points!!! And, He sent His Son to live and die for you. He raised Him from the dead, and now He can't contain His heart in singing. He can't contain His heart in singing over you as one of His children who are united to His Son by faith. Easter is about God delighting in the work of His Son Jesus, and now passing that blessing onto you. The reason Jesus conquered death, and conquered the grave, and conquered Satan, and conquered sin was so that you could be reconciled to the singing God and bask in the warm smile of your Heavenly Father.

WHENEVER GOD THINKS ABOUT YOU, HE SMILES AND THEN OPENS HIS MOUTH AND SINGS FOR JOY!

Christian, can you hear Him singing over you now? Can you hear God singing over you on this Easter morning just the same way that He was singing over His Son Jesus on that first Easter morning when Jesus walked out of that tomb? Can you see His smiling face? Can you sense and feel His affection for you? That's what Easter is all about! That we would be adopted into His family and experience His love, His care, and His affection forever!

Easter is about the Singing God. Easter is about the infinitely glorious God of the universe, who takes such delight and joy in His children that He sings over them and quiets them with His love.

So, the good news isn't merely the absence of all condemnation. It's not just merely being forgiven. It's also the fullness of God's delight lavished on us in Jesus. We- who deserve only judgment from God- we become the recipients of His favor and delight! God is not just putting up with us now that we are forgiven. We now fill His heart with gladness. In Christ, God's favor, welcome, delight, acceptance, smile, and affection, rest on us. That's Easter. That's what it means for God to bless you.

But, to get there, to experience this joy, to see God's smiling face, to get this blessing, you have to go through blood. It gets very bloody. You have to go to the cross before you get to the empty tomb. The way to peace with God centers around what is called "substitutionary atonement." That simply means that something or someone dies in your place, and sheds their blood, in order to cover, wash away, and forgive your sins. God's wrath against our sin is appeased through substitutionary atonement as blood is shed. Old Testament scholar Ralph Davis describes atonement this way-

Readers should be aghast. The text says atonement is horrible, it is gory. Atonement is never nice but always gruesome. We need to see this for we easily fall into the trap of regarding atonement as merely a doctrine, a concept, an abstraction to be explained, a bit of theology to be analyzed. Or, little better, to view it as a moving story to be re-played during Passion Week. But we should know better. Surely the Israelite worshiper realized this when he towed a young bull to the tabernacle and had to slit its throat, skin it, cut it in pieces, and wash the insides and legs (Lev. 1:3-9). It was all mess and gore. From slicing the bull's throat in Leviticus 1 all the way to Calvary, God has always said atonement is nasty and repulsive. Christians must beware of becoming too refined, longing for a kinder, gentler faith. If we've grown too used to Golgotha, perhaps... (God's word)... can shock us back into truth: atonement is a drippy, bloody, smelly business. The stench of death hangs heavy wherever the wrath of God has been quenched.

The Bible makes it very clear, in both the Old and New Testaments, that the way to God is gory and horrible and gruesome and messy and nasty and repulsive and drippy and bloody and smelly. Blood had to be shed, in order for us to feel God's smile.

So, to be restored to, and to enjoy fellowship with God, something repulsive has to happen. Blood has to be shed. Why? Because atonement is bloody. Because forgiveness costs something or someone their life. Because without

the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sin. Why all the blood? Because God is holy. Because He demands perfection from every one of us and none of us can be perfect.

The law shouts to us, "You must, but you can't." But, the Gospel sings, "You can't, but I did."

God's law says that we must obey perfectly, but we know we can't! But, Jesus says, "Of course you can't obey perfectly! But I did for you!"

Jesus lived a perfect life and died a perfect death. The cross of Jesus simultaneously shouts and sings, *"This is how great your need is. And, this is how great God's grace is."* So, the only way into Heaven is by looking to the bloody, grotesque, sickening, nauseating Savior hanging on a Roman cross, and not turning away in disgust, but looking upon Him... and worshipping.

That's faith. Looking upon a disfigured Savior...and worshipping. Looking at Him in awe and wonder, and saying, "Is that really a human being? That can't be. What is that thing on the cross?" And then saying, "That's my Savior, that's who. That's my Treasure. The One my soul loves."

Will you believe today? If you haven't placed your faith in Jesus, today would be a great day to see God smiling upon you! Will you come to Jesus? Eternity is at stake. Eternity in Hell. Look to Jesus today and be saved from the wrath of God. Move from the very hot fires of Hell into the warm sunshine of His love.

Today- Easter! -would be a great day to see God smiling upon you, don'tcha think? I think so. Let's close with something Robert Murray M'Cheyne said:

Learn much of the Lord Jesus. For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ. He is altogether lovely. Such infinite majesty, and yet such meekness and grace, and all for sinners, even the chief! Live much in the smiles of God. Bask in his beams. Feel his all-seeing eye settled on you in love, and repose in his almighty arms...Let your soul be filled with a heart-ravishing sense of the sweetness and excellency of Christ and all that is in Him. Let the Holy Spirit fill every chamber of your heart; and so there will be no room for folly, or the world, or Satan, or the flesh.

That's Easter. That's what it means that God raised Jesus up to bless you. It's you living in the smiles of God. Basking in His beams. Feeling His all-seeing eye settled on you in love. And, then just resting in His loving arms. That's what Easter is all about. God loves us- with all our failures and faults, with all the secret sins that no one else knows about. He actually breaks out in inexpressible joy, He breaks out in song when He thinks about us. That's how God feels about you! When He looks at you, when He thinks about you, He sings for joy!

So, when you think about God this week, and you smile, remember that-

WHENEVER GOD THINKS ABOUT YOU, HE SMILES AND THEN OPENS HIS MOUTH AND SINGS FOR JOY!