

## The Amazing Privilege of Approaching God

*Numbers 6:22-27; Ephesians 2:11-18*

**W**e have been pronouncing the blessing from our Scripture passage at the end of our morning worship services. I have told you that God has given me a couple of messages to share with you, and these were truths that had the potential to transform your prayer life. I want to tell you right now that I believe that if you will really “get” the truths of this passage and the message I believe God has given me for you, you will never approach the privilege of prayer the same way again.

God once showed me some marvelous truths in His Word. It happened very early one Spring morning (in 2009), when He and I were alone, and I was reading in the book of Numbers. I came across this blessing in the sixth chapter, and I was intrigued by the fact that God said that His Name and His blessing would be upon the Israelites whenever this blessing was pronounced over them. I began to read everything I could find about the blessing, and discovered that it was standard practice in the Scriptures to pronounce this blessing, that to this day, these words are used in Jewish worship, and of course, in Christian services as well. I discovered that many places where we read that one person “blessed” another, it is very likely that this was the blessing used.

For example, we read in Luke 24:50 that after the Resurrection of Christ, when it came time for Him to leave His disciples, *“When He had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, He lifted up His hands and blessed them.”* Many Bible scholars believe that when it reads that Jesus *lifted up His Hands and blessed them*, He was using the blessing of Numbers 6, since it was in common usage in that day. In fact, get this—these may have been the last words the disciples heard Him say, because we read in Luke 24:51, *“While He was blessing them, He left them and was taken up in heaven.”*

So this blessing must have been pretty special. There must be meaning in these words that we have overlooked. I certainly had! So I embarked on a search, to find out as much about this as I could, and in my quest, I dug up some golden nuggets. It was extremely important to the Israelites, and they considered it to be a very serious thing. Over time, certain traditions developed as the Jews have sought to give added meaning to the giving of the blessing. For example, the priests would stand with their arms stretched out and held high, to represent that God is high and lifted up. They turned their palms downward, to indicate that this was a blessing which came from on High.

Now that there is no Temple, the rabbis only hold their arms shoulder high, to indicate that the glory has departed. But there is a very interesting fact of history that might shed some light on what the blessing means. It concerns how the rabbis hold their hands when they are pronouncing the blessing. They spread their fingers apart in such a way as to approximate the Hebrew letter “*shin*,” which is the first letter of “*Shaddai*” one of the names of God. In doing so, they are signifying that this is a blessing which comes from God, and God alone.

Each member of the Jewish congregation covers his head and eyes with his prayer shawl, to represent that the presence of Holy God is with them, and they don’t dare look. Even the rabbi’s face is covered. It causes them to focus on receiving blessings directly from God, *Shaddai*, not from human beings.

But several years ago, one little boy did peek, and what he saw influenced him as an adult. In his later years he wrote in his autobiography, “I had heard that this indwelling Spirit of God was too powerful, too beautiful, too awesome for any mortal to look upon and survive, and so I obediently covered my face with my hands. But of course, I had to peek.” He spent hours practicing holding his hands the same way the rabbi did.

When that little boy grew up, he became an actor in a popular television show called *Star Trek*. During the filming of the first show of the second season, Leonard Nimoy devised on the spot a modified version of what he had seen in the synagogue. He held only one hand up beside his head, with his fingers held in the same position as he had seen the rabbi hold his, a special greeting known forever now as the “Vulcan salute.”

Many Christian ministers pronounce this blessing (without the “Vulcan salute”!) over their congregations every Sunday, and we have modified it to fit our belief in Christ. There are variations, of course, but your pastor holds his hands high, arms and fingers spread far out, to signify that this is a great big blessing, and with his palms facing downward, to represent that this great big blessing is coming from God. To complete the symbolism, you should stand with your arms spread wide and your palms upward, as high or as low as you wish, because you want to receive the blessing!

Let’s look closely at the blessing itself. In Numbers 6:22-23, we read, *The Lord said to Moses, ‘Tell Aaron and his sons, “This is how you are to bless the Israelites.’* At first glance, these verses say nothing to us. They could be seen as

introductory to the blessing which follows, words which are disposable. In fact, whenever we quote the blessing, we leave out these two verses as being unnecessary. But look at them again. Pay attention to the fact that while these verses do introduce the blessing to us, they are not disposable. These are not words that Moses pulled out of thin air to give to Aaron. God gave them to Moses, to give to Aaron, that Aaron and the other priests could use them to bless the people of Israel.

So get this truth; let it sink in like gentle rain on the thirsty ground: the only reason we have this blessing is ***because it is something God wanted to do!*** His love for us is of such magnitude that it cannot be contained—it must be expressed. All these long years later, His love for us has not diminished one bit. In fact, this promise He gave to them is for us today as well: *“So they will put My name on the Israelites, and I will bless them”* (Number 6:27). He was saying that through this blessing, and the giving of it, sinful human beings can have access to God Himself!

In the wording of the blessing, we see some marvelous things, things that, if fully understood, will transform our prayer lives and the way that we approach God. In fact, even being able to approach God is a blessing in itself! Who are we to assume that we can approach God? How dare we? What right do we have to even think of such a thing?

Who are we? We are frail, men and women of dust. We are the created, the ones who depend on Him for every breath we take into our lungs. The Scriptures say that the nations are like a drop in the bucket compared with the surpassing greatness of Almighty God. If the nations are like a drop in the bucket, then who are we? This is not a literal saying, but consider this for the purposes of analogy. Currently, the population of the United States stands at more than 300 million. Divide one drop of water into 300 million parts, and you represent one of those parts. Charles Spurgeon once observed, “As well might a gnat seek to drink in the ocean, as a finite creature to comprehend the Eternal God.”

Every corpuscle of blood that courses through our veins, every nerve ending that fires, every moment of our existence is given to us. We are full of sin. We are so unworthy of any attention He would give us. We are sinful, rebellious human beings who have turned our backs on Him time and time again.

The Scriptures tell us that all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. The very best we can do, when compared to the holiness of God, is like something we would throw away as being revolting. We are rebellious children who constantly run

away from God, insisting on our own way. We are sick and think we are well. We are poverty-stricken, and think we are rich. We are blind, and think that we see. The Scriptures say that we are desperately wicked, and think we are righteous. Our hearts are filled with lust and greed and pride. The Scriptures, and our own experience, remind us that our hands shed innocent blood, our tongues speak lies, our eyes wander, our thoughts stray.

Jeremiah 17:9 tells us *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.”* Earlier theologians called this condition of the human heart “depravity,” but we are much too sophisticated for such a term in our day. We refuse to admit our moral bankruptcy, our continuous bent toward evil, our utter and complete corruption. Call it what you will, the end result is separation from God.

Every murder is the result of sin. When a person lies, whether a politician in the highest office, or the smallest child, it is because of sin. When a person steals, sin is at the root of it. Failing to worship God, to acknowledge Him as Lord, to surrender to Him every aspect of our lives, is nothing other than sin. Every thought of lust, every unkind word, every evil thought, is the result of sin, and the total moral depravity of our hearts.

From the day Adam and Eve disobeyed God and were cast out of the Garden of Eden to this very moment, sin separates us from Almighty God. You can begin reading your Bible at Genesis, and you’ll go only six chapters deep before you read these very sad words: *“The Lord saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.”* Then this heartrending revelation: *“God was grieved that He had made man on the earth, and His heart was filled with pain”* (Genesis 6:5-6).

What right do we have to think that we can approach Him?

Jeremiah 6:15 tells us that when we have engaged in habitual sin, we even forget how to blush, that the things that formerly caused us to hide our faces in shame no longer affect us in that way. We grow calloused to the tender call of the Holy Spirit on our lives. In Matthew 23:28 Jesus told the Pharisees, *“On the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness,”* but His words apply to anyone whose heart has turned away from God. From that infamous day in the Garden to this very moment, there has not been a single individual in the history of the world who has not sinned.

And who is this God, this Almighty Being Whom we might dare to approach?

This is Almighty God, the Great I AM. This is the Creator of the Universe, One Who brought all that is into existence not by planning and struggle, but by merely speaking it. This is the Everlasting Father, the great King above all gods, and Lord above all lords. This is the Most High God, the One Scripture describes as a Consuming Fire. He is our Sun and Shield, our Sure Foundation, the One Higher than the Highest. He is the One who treads upon the high places of the earth, He which Was, and Is, and Is To Come.

He is a jealous God, The Ancient of Days, the Creator of the ends of the earth, Who alone does great wonders. He is the Lord God of hosts, the Lord God omnipotent, the Lord of glory, the Lord of peace, the Majesty on High, the Mighty One of Israel. He is the Righteous Father, the Sun of Righteousness, the Glorious God, the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, the Glorious Lord.

He is the One Who covers Himself with light as with a garment, Who rides the clouds like a chariot, Who stretched out the heavens like a curtain, Who walks on the wings of the wind. This is God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is the One who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, Whom no one has seen or can see.

How dare we approach Him? How dare we enter into His presence? With our utter and complete sinfulness, and His absolute holiness, were it even possible for us to enter His presence, we would be annihilated in the first millisecond. Left to ourselves and our own devices, we would have no hope at all of approaching God. Our sins have shut us out of His presence, slamming the door in our faces, casting us out into utter and eternal darkness.

We resolve to do better, to turn over a new leaf, to change our ways, but every good deed is only a feeble scratching at the door, with no one to answer on the other side. We find ourselves eternally on the wrong side of the door. On our side is impenetrable darkness and hopelessness. On the other side is the very throne room of God, with eternal hope and light and life and peace. Our own righteousness is like trying to reach the moon, having only a step stool; it may get us higher than others around us, but leave us still far short of our goal.

And yet, we have been created for fellowship with this God! We have an unsolvable dilemma: How can we, as sinners in whom no good dwells, have fellowship with God, who is perfect in righteousness and holiness? How can we have access to this God who pronounces such an astonishing blessing over us?

Well, here's Good News; hear these words as if for the first time: *"I am the way and the truth and the life. **No one comes to the Father except through me**"* (John 14:6). Hear these words with your heart:

*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, **through whom we have gained access by faith** in to this grace in which we now stand.* (Romans 5:1-2)

In Ephesians 2:12-13, Paul was writing to Gentiles, and he described our condition without God:

*Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, **without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.***

Then Paul makes reference to something that every God-fearing Gentile encountered when he went to worship God at the Temple in Jerusalem. The outer areas of the Temple were designated for Gentiles; they could advance no further than that. It was even called "The Court of the Gentiles," and to make sure that they didn't accidentally go into a place they shouldn't, there was a four-foot high dividing wall, with thirteen openings in it. Spaced out along the length of this wall were engraved plaques, warning that anyone who was not a Jew was not to go beyond this point. If he did, he would be the one responsible for his own death.

So Paul is referring to that wall in a spiritual sense when he writes in Ephesians 2:14-15, *"For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, **the dividing wall of hostility**, by abolishing in His flesh the law with its commandments and regulations."*

He went on to pen these amazing words in verse 18: *"**For through Him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.**"* In ancient days, if you wanted to enter the king's throne room to talk to the king, there was a certain procedure you had to follow. You had to first find the one court official whose job it was to make sure you had a legitimate request. He would find as much out about you as possible: who are you, who's your family, where did you come from, what is your motive, what do you want to talk to the king about? He would "screen" all requests from those who wanted an audience with the king. If this particular court official decided that you had a good enough reason to approach the king, he would open the door to the throne room, enter ahead of you, and introduce you to the king. That was his job. There was no other way to approach the king.

The Greek word for his title is similar to the word for “access” in verse 18! For us believers, Jesus is this One who grants us access, Who takes us into the throne room of the Almighty, Who introduces us and grants us the right to talk to God! If you want to approach God, you have to go through Jesus Christ—there is no other way. So that is why we can read words of hope from Ephesians 3:12—***“In Him and through Him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.”***

When we read the book of Hebrews, we find that there Jesus is referred to as our High Priest who has entered into the Holy of Holies to represent us before God and make atonement for our sins. Listen to those precious words:

*Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. **Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence,** so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (4:14-16)*

A few chapters later, we find out how this confidence to approach God has been granted to us:

*Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, **let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith....**” (10:19-22a)*

So when we read in Numbers 6:22-23, “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites’” and when God says in verse 27, “So they will put my Name on the Israelites, and I will bless them,” what we are seeing there is that God was preparing His people—and us, too!—for the time when we would finally hear that though our sins are many, and our sins have hardened our hearts and separated us from God—that God was opening up a way for us to know Him and have our sins completely and permanently forgiven. We now have access to Him and can fellowship with Him!

So imagine this, now: though your heart was once blackened and hardened by sin, if you have accepted what Jesus did for you when He died, you have been restored to fellowship with God through Jesus Christ and His blood shed on the cross. The sins have been paid for—all of them! Jesus has thrown open the door that

separated you from access to God, and tells you that it is alright, that it is expected—no, that it is your right and privilege now as a child of the Eternal King—to come in even “boldly” and approach God with your requests, or even just to spend time alone with Him. Because of Christ, what an amazing privilege we now have to approach God!

Because of Jesus, now we can know God as our very present help in time of trouble, as the Captain of our Salvation, as the God of love and peace. We know Him as the One who always causes us to triumph in Christ, as the God who does great and unsearchable things, the One Who by His wisdom made the heavens. We now have free and unhindered access to the One who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think. We can approach the One who raised Jesus from the dead, Who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light.

We can go in and stand before the throne of Him who is our Defense and Refuge in the day of trouble, the One who delivers us and is our Exceeding Joy. In Him we find a hiding place, a refuge, a high tower, our strength and shield. He is our Father in Heaven, our Prince of Peace, the Amen, the Beginning and the End, the Branch of Righteousness, our Exceeding Great Reward. We can lay our petitions before the One who daily loads us with benefits, who forgives all our sins and heals all our diseases, the One Who is rich in mercy and worthy to be praised, the One who lives forever and ever, the One Who loved me and gave Himself for me!

Today, you have a choice, and it is the most important choice you will ever make in your entire life. Will you stand outside the door, trying and scratching somehow to find your way in? Or will you accept Him as your personal Savior, and allow Jesus to grant you access into the throne room of God?

*To be followed by the message “The Amazing Blessing of Almighty God”*