

CHAPTER 2

What it Means to Bless God

When God blesses us, we are moved to bless Him in return. But what does this mean? Isn't God self-sufficient? Doesn't He have everything He needs? What could we possibly give Him that He doesn't have already? And how could anything we do ever make any difference in the eternal, unchanging God?

I remember a time when I was struggling with these very questions, and this is because I was struggling to understand a particular verse. In Ps. 103:1, King David writes:

Bless the LORD, O my soul;
all that is within me, bless His holy name.

No matter how many times I read this verse, I couldn't bring myself to understand how I—or anyone else for that matter—could possibly bless God. I was so confused about this, I actually prayed God would help me understand this somehow.

At the time, my first child was two years old, and more and more he was imitating the things I said and did. When I rolled a ball to him,

he would roll it back. When I said simple things, he would repeat them. One of the things I would say was: “I love you, Blake,” and he would say, “I lu ju...” Around this time, one night, after a full evening of play, I carried him to his room, and just before I put him in his crib, completely unprompted by me, he said, “I lu ju daddy.” When he spoke those words, I literally stopped where I was with him in my arms. It’s hard to convey how those words made me feel except to say they *blessed* me. They went directly into my soul in a way no other words ever had before, and in that moment, I had the distinct impression God was answering my prayer. It was as if He was saying: “And you wanted to know how you bless Me?”

Of all the things God possesses, there is one thing He will never possess unless we give it to Him: our hearts. However, when we give

Just as we are blessed by our experience of God’s heart, He is deeply blessed by His experience of ours.

Him our hearts, it brings great blessing to Him. Just as we are blessed by our experience of God’s heart, He is deeply blessed by His experience of ours.

Let’s go back to our definitions for “a blessing” and “what it means to be blessed”:

A blessing is a gift God gives as an expression of His favor.

To be blessed is to experience God’s favor in the gifts He gives.

Now, we can modify these definitions to express what it means to bless God:

A blessing is a gift we give to God as an expression of our favor.

For God to be blessed by us is to experience our favor in the gifts we give.

In the last chapter, we learned that God’s blessings move us to respond both upwardly and outwardly. We respond upwardly in the praise and thanksgiving we give Him, and we respond outwardly as we become instruments of His blessings in the lives of others. Both are ways we give to God and bless Him. In this chapter, our primary focus is on our upward response. We will learn more about our outward response in Chapter 6: “The Fullness of the Blessing.”

We may struggle with the idea that we can bless God because we tend to see “favor” as condescending: “I’m doing you a favor....” However, as we have learned, favor can be *unmerited* or *merited*. In no way is the favor we show God unmerited by Him. In fact, the unmerited favor He shows us is what moves us so deeply to merit (value) Him so highly.¹ It’s helpful also to remember that the essence of favor is *pleasure*, and the pleasure God finds in us simply because of who we are (unmerited favor) is what moves us to find such great pleasure in Him for all He is and does for us (merited favor).

I’m very grateful God allowed me to understand *and experience* what it means to bless Him through the words of my own son. To this day, I continue to be moved when I remember how God answered my prayer.

¹ Another reason we may struggle to think we can bless God is because we tend to think only the greater should bless the lesser, and there is a specific case in which this is true. When someone speaks a blessing over someone else, the one speaking the blessing represents God and is expected to hold a higher position than the one receiving it (see Heb. 7:7). This is why those who speak a blessing over others in Scripture are commonly priests, kings, fathers, etc. (e.g., Gen. 14:9, 1 Kings 8:54-61, Ex. 39:43). However, this doesn’t mean we are not able to bless God in the sense of allowing Him to experience our heart for Him. This must be true because of the many passages that speak of how we are able to bless God.

And there is something else in Psalm 103:1 that I didn't understand for a long time. Have you ever asked yourself why so many verses in the Bible speak of blessing God's *name*—as opposed to simply blessing Him? When we understand this, we are moved all the more to bless the LORD *with all that is within us...*

The Significance of a Name

There are multiple ways a person's name is significant, including God's name.

A Name Conveys Identity

To begin with, a name conveys identity. The Israelites lived among nations that worshiped many “gods.” This is why it was necessary for God to reveal His name to them. It was to *distinguish* Himself from all others. The name by which He chose to reveal Himself is *Yahweh*, which means “I am” (Ex. 3:13-14). This expresses His self-existence. He had no origin, and He will have no end. He is the God who *was, is, and always will be*. And this name allowed God to add certain terms to it to more fully convey all He would be for His people. For example, in Gen. 22:14, He is *Yahweh Jireh*: “I am your provider.” In Ex. 15:26, He is *Yahweh Rapha*: “I am your healer.” In Judg. 6:24, He is *Yahweh Shalom*: “I am your peace.”²

Very significantly, Jesus used this same language to speak of Himself. He said: “I am the bread of life.” (John 6:35); “I am the light of the world.” (John 8:12); “I am the good shepherd.” (John 10:11).³ In these statements, Jesus was clearly identifying Himself with *Yahweh*. This becomes abundantly clear in John 8:58, where He says: “...Before

² See also Ex. 17:15, Jer. 23:6, Ez. 48:35.

³ This is one of the themes of John's gospel. See also John 10:7, 11:25, and 14:6.

Abraham was born, I am.” In fact, Jesus’ very name means “*Yahweh Saves*” (Matt. 1:21).

Not only is God the God who *was, is, and always will be*, He is the God who *was, is, and always will be* everything we need Him to be. If we are going to know Him this way though, we must rely on the name by which He revealed Himself. We cannot rely on “gods” we create; we must rely on the God who created us. Only He is able to bless us, and only He is worthy of all of our gratitude and praise. This is why He gave us His name.

And there is another side to identity. Not only does a name *distinguish* from all others, it is *indistinguishable* from oneself. This is certainly how we see our names. If you hear a group of people speaking your name, you don’t think: “That has nothing to do with me; it’s only my name.” No, you see your name as entirely connected to yourself, and this is how God sees His name. He makes no distinction between His name and Himself. This is why there is such great power *in His name* (e.g., Pr. 18:10, John 16:24); it’s because there is such great power *in Him*.

To bless God’s name is to bless *Him* (because His name is *indistinguishable* from Himself) and *Him alone* (because His name *distinguishes* Himself from all others). And there is another reason a name is significant—including God’s name.

A Name Conveys Nature

Not only does a name convey *identity*, it also conveys one’s *nature*. Over time, a person’s name comes to be associated with certain characteristics in that person. For example, if someone says, “I’m going to fight for my name,” the significance of the name has moved from mere *identity* to the *nature* (character, reputation, etc.) conveyed in the name.

When God's people looked at creation, not only did they see the God who bowed low to bless them, they saw certain qualities in Him as well. We see this in Rom. 1:20:

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood from His workmanship, so that men are without excuse.

The "invisible qualities" mentioned here are God's "eternal power" and His "divine nature." We understand the concept of God's "eternal power," even if we can't possibly fathom it, but what is meant by His "divine nature"? In the Old Testament, two qualities are paired together more than any others to speak of God's nature. One is *emeth* (eh'-meth), which means "truth." The other is *cheved* (kheh'-sed), which means "love." For example, in Ps. 117:1-2 we read:

For His lovingkindness [*cheved*] is great toward us,
And the truth [*emeth*] of the LORD is everlasting....
NASB

The reason these qualities are paired together so often is because they express the two sides of God's moral nature.⁴ We are familiar with other similar pairings such as "justice and mercy" or "law and grace." *Emeth* and *cheved* are broad terms that gather up all of these seeming dichotomies. Our problem is that we so easily miss one in pursuit of the other. We miss truth in the pursuit of love, or we miss love in the pursuit of truth, but God holds both together in perfect unison. We see this emphasis in Ps. 85:10:

Unfailing love [*cheved*] and truth [*emeth*] have met together.
Righteousness and peace have kissed! NLT

⁴ Examples of other verses that pair together *emeth* and *cheved* include Gen. 24:27, Ex. 34:6, and Ps. 25:10.

Based on the language of Scripture, I have come to believe God's primary characteristics (also called His attributes) are His power, truth, and love:⁵

Power

Truth

Love

In no way could we ever list all of God's attributes. However, these are *primary* in that His other attributes are derived from them—or some combination of them.⁶ God is *omnipotent* (all-powerful), and from His eternal *power* flow all of His other unlimited capabilities, including His omniscience (all-knowing) and omnipresence (present everywhere). From His *truth* come such attributes as justice, righteousness, holiness, etc. Out of His *love* flow qualities such as mercy, grace, patience, compassion, and so on. Many of God's attributes come from a combination of these qualities. For example, both truth and love are certainly present in God's goodness and faithfulness. To use an analogy, as it pertains to light, our entire spectrum of colors is derived from just three colors: blue, red, and green.⁷ In a similar way, all of God's attributes flow from His power, truth, and love.

And to carry this analogy forward, when all the colors of light are combined, they produce what is called pure "white light." This is why

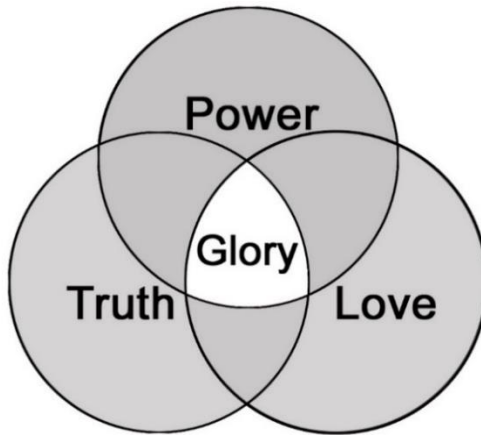
⁵ Another passage that speaks of God's divine nature in the context of His *power* is 1 Pet. 1:3-4.

⁶ We can take this a step further by seeing *truth* and *love* as God's primary *moral* attributes (those that pertain to right and wrong) and *power* as His primary *natural* attribute (that which is most innate to His being, apart from any moral implications).

⁷ As it pertains to material things (paint, ink, etc.), the three primary colors are red, blue, and yellow.

a ray of light is refracted into such a beautiful array of colors when it passes through a glass prism. In Scripture, God’s glory is His nature.⁸ Therefore, the fullness of His glory is the combination of all of His attributes joined together as one.

Here is a visual that represents God’s glory as the union of His primary attributes, much like the combination of the three primary colors in white light:



We see each of these aspects of God’s glory in creation as a whole. Only He could design the universe with the breathtaking complexity and interdependence we see in it. This speaks of His infinite **power**. And His creation is ordered by natural laws that are unchanging and entirely consistent. This speaks of His **truth**. And He fashioned the world in a way that sustains our lives. This speaks of His **love**.

⁸ In the New Testament, the Greek word for “glory” is *doxa* (dox’-ah). In 1 Cor. 15:40-41, this word (also translated “splendor”) refers to the *nature* of various created entities. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for “glory” is *kabowd* (kaw-bode’), which carries the connotation of “weight.” This is because of the weight inherent in the fullness of God’s *nature*.

We see His glory also in the various aspects of creation. In Ps. 19:1-2 we read:

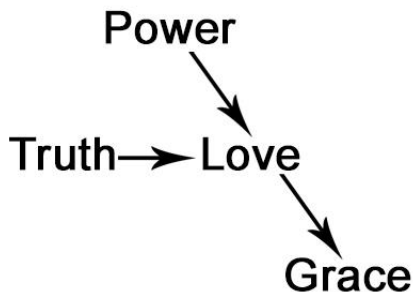
The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of His hands.

Day to day pours forth speech,
And night to night reveals knowledge.

Without speaking a word, the heavens *declare* what God's glory (nature) is like. We see His glory throughout the earth as well. In Num. 14:21 we read, "... The whole earth is filled with the glory of the LORD."

And if we look closely enough, we can see God's glory in every blessing He gives. This is what moves us so deeply to bless Him in return. As much as we are moved to see our blessings as coming from the God who bows low before us, we are moved even more when we see them in the light of His eternal power and divine nature.

Of all the ways we are moved by God's glory though, nothing moves us more than the *grace* we experience in it. Here is a simple diagram to help us see this:

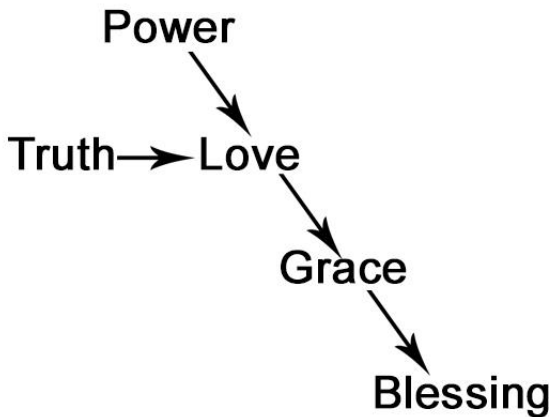


In the last chapter, we learned that God expresses His grace in the *mercy* He shows and the *help* He gives, and we see each one (mercy and help) in the *relationship* of His attributes to each other. Without question, God's **grace** flows out of His **love** (as we see in the diagram

above), but this **love** means all the more to us when we see it in the light of His **power** and **truth**. To begin with, He *loves* us even though He is the God of infinite **power**. It's one thing to see our blessings as coming from the God who bows low before us; it's quite another thing to realize this same God had to bow low to bring forth all the heavens and the earth. The God who helps us needs not help at all. This is what makes His *help* so overwhelming to us. Write the word "Help" just to the right of the arrow pointing to "Grace" in the diagram above—or at least visualize it there.

And He *loves* us even though He is the God of perfect **truth** (justice, righteousness, etc.). We should show mercy because we ourselves stand in such great need of mercy (e.g., Matt. 7:1-5), but the One who shows us the greatest mercy never needed mercy at all—and never will. Now, write the word "Mercy" just to the left of the arrow pointing to "Grace."

In the last chapter, we also learned that God's *blessing* flows out of His grace, so let's add this to the diagram:



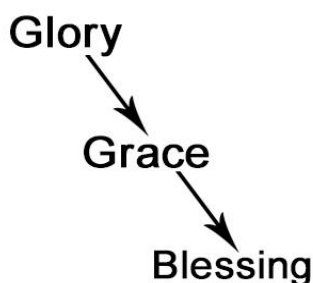
Now, let's add the *characteristics* of God's blessings we learned from the last chapter. First, add the words "Help" and "Mercy" to this diagram just as you did in the previous one. Then, to the right of the

arrow pointing to “Blessing” write, “More than we can Accomplish.” Notice how this flows out of the *help* God gives.

To the left of the arrow pointing to “Blessing” write, “More than we can Deserve.” This flows out of God’s *mercy*.

Then, below the word “Blessing” write, “More than we can Contain.” When we are touched by the blessings of God that are more than we can accomplish or deserve, we can’t help but fall on our knees—and even on our faces, and bless the LORD *with all that is within us*.

We can now simplify the previous diagram as follows:



As we learned in the last chapter, living in God’s blessing begins with how we see Him. To the extent we see His glory, we see *and experience* His grace. This is what produces in us such a profound sense of His blessing. Every blessing issues forth from His grace, and His grace issues forth from the fullness of His glory.⁹

⁹ This diagram builds on the three keywords in our definitions for “a blessing” and “what it means to be blessed” in the last chapter. Here, God is represented by His glory (*power, truth, and love*). His favor is represented specifically by His unmerited favor (*grace*). And His gift is represented by what it becomes to us when we experience His favor in it (a *blessing*).

So far, we have identified two ways a name is significant. A name conveys *identity* and *nature*. This helps us understand why so many passages of Scripture speak of blessing God's *name*. To bless His name is to bless Him and Him alone (identity) for everything His name represents (nature).

And there is still another way God's name is significant....

A Name Conveys Possession

Not only does a name convey *identity* and *nature*, it can also convey *possession*—at least in some cases. We put our name on things we own, and this is actually what God was conveying in the Priestly Blessing. In Num. 6:27 (which comes right after the Priestly Blessing), we read:

So they [the priests] shall put My name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.

What did God mean when He said the priests would put His name on the people through the words of the Priestly Blessing?

Each expression in the Priestly Blessing begins with: "May the LORD...." (Num. 6:24-26). When we see the word "LORD" in all capitals in the Old Testament, it translates God's name, *Yahweh*. Therefore, as the priests spoke the blessing over the people, they were placing His name on them, and this expressed *possession*. In Ex. 6:7 God says: "And they will be My people, and I will be their God." Notice how this sense of possession moves in two directions. We are His, and He is ours. We might think of a bride who takes the name of her husband. Just as he is able to say, "This is my bride," she is able to say, "this is my husband." Or we might think of a child who takes the name of an adoptive mother and father. Just as parents are able to say, "This is my child," the child is able to say, "These are my parents."

It's hard to imagine what the people experienced when they heard the words of the Priestly Blessing spoken over them. As we learned

earlier, God makes no distinction between His name and Himself. Therefore, not only were the priests placing His name on them, they were joining His very life to them. This is not to say the people experienced this automatically. They had to join their faith to the words spoken over them. When they did this though, they experienced God's grace like the very light of God's countenance, lifted up over them and shining on them out of the "perfect white light" of His glory.

Returning now to Num. 6:27, after giving Moses the words the priests were to speak over the people, God said: "... and I will bless them." Why does God emphasize this still again? It's because He is not like the man who lavishes one gift after another on the woman he loves—until he marries her. Just the opposite, He *continues* to pour out His blessings on His people *because* He has become their God, and they have become His people.

There was blessing in the words spoken over them (Num. 6:23), and they would receive blessings from Him *always* through their union with Him. And how moving this must have been for them to realize too. The One who made them His own (*possession*) was the one true God (*identity*), and He would bless them out of the fullness of His glory (*nature*). Because He possessed all *power*, there would be no limit to the ways He could bless them. Because He spoke only the *truth*, He would be faithful to all His promises. And because He was the God of perfect *love*, everything He did for them would be only for their highest good.

God gave the Israelites the Priestly Blessing in the context of the covenant He established with them.¹⁰ Therefore, we can see it as being much like a blessing that would be expressed in a wedding ceremony, and every time they heard it, it would remind them of their covenant relationship with Him. How then could they have felt more blessed?

¹⁰ More on this in Book 2, Chapter 3: "Hearing God through Scripture."

And how could we feel more blessed when we realize He possesses the same heart for us? And what could ever do more to move us to bless Him in return?

As we reflect on this, it reveals something else about the blessings God gives....

The Reason God Blesses Us

If God's blessings move us to bless Him, does this not reveal His very reason for blessing us? We could say it this way:

God blesses us to draw us into a relationship of mutual blessing with Himself.

This is why it's so important for us to respond to God's blessings by blessing Him in return. Only then will His very purpose for blessing us be realized, and only then will His blessing become full in us.

With this in mind, here are two primary applications to take from this chapter. First, see God's attributes (His glory) in the blessings He gives. In the last chapter, our goal was to see every blessing as coming from the God who bows low before us—and to experience His favor in each one. Now, see His power, truth, and love in every blessing He gives, and let it move you to experience His favor even more deeply.

Second, let the glory you see in God's blessings move you to bless Him in return. This will bring great blessing to Him, and it will only deepen your experience of His blessing.

One evening, a friend of my wife sent her a message with a picture of her five-year-old daughter. Earlier that evening, when they arrived at their home, the stars were so bright, the daughter was moved to run a short distance from their vehicle and to bow beneath the starlit sky.

When her mom saw this, she came closer. Her daughter was on one knee, with her hands clasped together, and she was praying out loud. There were no requests—only expressions of thanks. This is when the mother took the picture.

When the girl saw her mother, she asked if she would like to join her, so she did. Bowing on one knee, just as her daughter did, with her hands clasped together, she began to pray, being careful only to give thanks.

As I looked at this picture, I couldn't help but think: "How this must bless the God of heaven." I felt as if I was looking into eternity past and seeing the very reason God brought forth all the heavens and the earth. He longed to bless us, and He also longed to be blessed by us, not because He *needs* our blessing, but because He is so greatly blessed by it.

As I continued to gaze at this picture, I thought about Ps. 8:3-4:

When I behold Your heavens,
the work of Your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which You have set in place—
what is man that You are mindful of him,
or the son of man that You care for him?

Interestingly, here is the verse that comes just before those verses:

From the mouths of children and infants
you have ordained praise.... Psalm 8:2

Even now I can't help but think about how blessed this little girl was to possess a heart of such deep gratitude and praise, whether she realized it or not. Some merely walk beneath the stars, and some bow before the God who made them, and we don't have to wonder who is most blessed. As you read these words, you may be thinking: "The

heart of this young girl is so beautiful, and it's something I long to possess, but I somehow lost that kind of heart a long time ago, and I don't think God could love the heart I have now."

If this is how you feel, may I assure you that you can possess her same heart? And you can know the great blessing that comes from blessing Him.

This is because, when the eternal God bowed low to bring forth all the heavens and the earth, it wasn't the last time He would bow low before His entire creation....

Summary

- Just as we are blessed by our experience of God's heart, He is blessed by His experience of ours.
- God's name is significant because it conveys identity, nature, and possession.
- God's name conveys identity in that it *distinguishes* Him from all others and is *indistinguishable* from Himself.
- In creation, not only are we able to see the God who bowed low before us, we also see the characteristics of His nature.
- The two attributes that are paired together more than any others to speak of God's nature in the Old Testament are:

emeth = truth

cheved = love

- The three primary characteristics of God's nature are power, truth, and love.
- The word used in the Bible for the fullness of God's nature (the combination of all His attributes) is "glory."
- Not only do we see God's glory in the combination of all His attributes, we see His grace in their relationship to each other.

- In the Priestly Blessing, God placed His name on the people, which conveyed possession.
- The reason God blesses us is to draw us into a relationship of mutual blessing with Himself.

Primary Applications:

1. See God's glory (power, truth, and love) in the blessings He gives.
2. Let the glory you see in God's blessings move you to bless Him in return.

Assignment:

1. Memorize Ps. 103:1.
1. Go on a "nature walk" (whether alone or with a friend) and let your goal be to see His nature (glory). Look to see His power, truth, and love in creation as a whole and the various aspects of creation. And let your heart be moved to bless Him all the more because of the glory you see.

Discussion Questions

1. Were there specific ways God spoke to you through this chapter?

2. What are three ways a name is significant?

3. What are the two “sides” of identity?

A name _____ from all others and is
_____ from oneself.

4. What two attributes of God are paired together to speak of God’s nature more than any others in the Old Testament, and why are they paired together so often?

5. What are the three primary characteristics of God's nature, and what is meant by "primary"?
6. What are some specific aspects of God's creation that move you to see His glory? Describe how you can see His power, truth, and love in each of these.
7. Why do so many passages of Scripture speak of blessing God's name—as opposed to blessing Him?
- To bless God's name is to bless _____ and
Him _____(identity) for everything His name
_____ (nature).

8. In your own words, describe the reason God blesses us.