

ORIGINAL BLESSING

In Greek mythology, there is a legend about a labyrinth that was inescapable. Those who entered the labyrinth never found their way out. Even worse, within that maze was the Minotaur, a fearsome creature that was half man, half bull. Like in the movie *The Hunger Games*, every few years the king of Crete demanded that the Athenians send seven boys and seven girls to be sacrificed to the Minotaur. As you might imagine, the Athenians did not take well to this tradition. On one occasion a guy called Theseus, the prince of Athens volunteered himself in their place. Theseus knew no one who ventured into the labyrinth had ever found their way out, so he devised a crafty plan. He took a big ball of thread, tied one end to the entrance, then he unwound it as he went through the maze. After successfully slaying the Minotaur, Theseus found his way out of the labyrinth with the help of the thread. So why do I tell this story?

Life is a labyrinth. It is full of twists and turns that we do not see coming. As 2020 has taught us, along the way we will also have to deal with a Minotaur or two. Weaving your way through the difficult seasons of life can feel like you're lost in a labyrinth. People find themselves in addiction, depression or grief. What I want you to know this morning is that there is a way out. There is a ball of thread. There is a path marked out to the exit.

Gen 1:26-28 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." 27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. 28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

God created us. All of us. It does not matter where you are from or what you have done. It does not matter the color of your skin or whether you are male or female. God created us. He created us for a purpose. He created us to have meaning and value. Most importantly, this scripture reminds us that from the very beginning God has blessed us.

We live in a divisive time. We cannot forget this fundamental fact: you were created in the image of God. It does not matter whether you look like the person sitting beside you. The important thing is that you bear the likeness of your creator. You are unique. You are special.

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. The dullest most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship. Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses -- C.S. Lewis

I want you to understand this truth today. Before original sin, there was original blessing. Those words are incredibly significant, so let me repeat them. Before original sin, there was original blessing. God created us to be blessed. That is God's heart for you.

Some of us have a hard time understanding and accepting this principle. One of the problems I believe is with our understanding of God. Let me get a little theological on you for a moment... In the second century there was a bishop by the name of Irenaeus who laid the foundation for a lot of our theology today.

Irenaeus was the Bishop of Lyons, but he was originally from the city of Smyrna, one of the seven churches referenced in the book of Revelation. The bishop of Smyrna during that time was Polycarp. He was one of the early martyrs. When he was dragged into the Roman Colosseum, he refused to recant his faith in Christ. He said, "Eighty-six years have I served Jesus and he has done me no wrong. How then can I now blaspheme my King and my Savior?" Then Polycarp heard a voice from heaven say, "Be strong, Polycarp."

Anyways, it is known that Polycarp was discipled by the Apostle John (who was discipled by Jesus himself). All that to say, it was Irenaeus who first alluded to concept of original sin – meaning that we are born into the world with a fallen sin nature. Years later, Augustine expounded on this idea, and then eventually the protestant reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin picked up on this idea of original sin and expanded it.

Please hear me, I agree with the concept of original sin. I have kids. They learned to lie and cheat all by themselves. However, in focusing on the concept of original sin, we have lost this concept of original blessing. I believe that our children need to know that they are blessings first and sinners second. If they see themselves as sinners first and blessed second, it kills their self-esteem and confidence. I do not doubt our sin nature. It is true that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But sin is secondary. Before sin there was blessing.

Why is this such a big deal? Because we have lost the memory of God's blessing. Psychologist Alfred Adler is famous for beginning his counseling sessions by asking new clients the same question: "What is your earliest memory?" No matter how his patients replied, Adler would respond: "And so life is." Adler believed that our earliest memories leave a profound imprint on the soul. For better or for worse, it can be difficult to escape their powerful influence.

Imagine Adler asking Adam that question. What is your earliest memory? I am sure that there were lots of things that came to mind. Naming the animals. Loosing a rib but gaining a partner. The day they were disobedient and were forced to leave the garden forever. The painful years that followed, knowing all they had lost. Having one son kill another. So many memories...

But what was the first, Adler asks? Adam says, "My first memory is being blessed by God." Blessing sets the tone. Blessing sets the table. Blessing establishes the emotional baseline and spiritual basis of Adam's entire existence. Yes, sin enters the equation and alters things. All of our dysfunction, all of our pain, all of our imperfections come into play. But none of that changes the fact that we are made the image of God Almighty, that we are blessed by God Himself.

Blessing is our earliest memory, and that's why, blessing is our deepest longing. There is a longing within each of us to be blessed—to be celebrated for who we are, to be accepted and loved with no agenda, no strings attached. God loves you as is. Not because of anything you have done or not done. You are loved because God created you to be loved.

There are a lot of hurting people in the world today because they have grown up not understanding this truth. They have lost the understanding of God's blessing. It has left a deep hole in their heart. They would give anything to be blessed, to feel loved and wanted and accepted – things they already have in God.

Let me take a minute to talk about what the blessing of God is and what it is not.

1. Blessing is not about Pride

The blessings of God are not something we deserve. They are also not like winning the lottery, so that somehow now we are now better off than everyone else around us. It is one thing to say “God has blessed me.” It is a totally different thing to say “God has blessed me, but not you.” Obviously you can see the difference. The nation of Israel during the time of Jesus had a poor understanding of this. They took pride in their position as the people of God.

Luke 18:9-14 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: 10 Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men -- robbers, evildoers, adulterers -- or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' 13 But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' 14 I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

God chose the nation of Israel to carry His name to the ends of the earth. He made a covenant with Abraham. However, this covenant did not mean that somehow Israel was now better than everyone else. God's heart was still for all people. His desire was still to bless everyone everywhere, so that all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

Rom 3:27-30 Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. 28 For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. 29 Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, 30 since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.

As a believer in Jesus I can say that I am truly blessed. But what I am also saying when I say that is that you can be truly blessed as well. God's desire and God's blessing is for everyone who would believe it and receive it.

If anyone had a reason to feel good about themselves it was Ruth Bell Graham. She was the daughter of missionaries to China, where she lived through her childhood. She was the wife of Billy Graham, whose ministry to the world had far reaching impact. T. W. Wilson once said in an interview, “There would have been no Billy Graham, as we know him today, had it not been for Ruth.” She was the glue that held the Graham family together.

She died in 2007. At her funeral her pastor said “If you're here today and say, ‘Ruth Graham was a great woman,’ you missed the point of her life. The reason Ruth Graham was a great woman is because she had a great Savior and a great love for Jesus Christ.”

Many do not know that she was involved in prison ministry. The Grahams would often open their home to fed and house prisoners after they were released. When she died, she was buried in a simple plywood casket — the same kind of casket in which the prisoners are buried. The man who made the casket for her was a prisoner serving 31 years in prison for murder who had come to receive Christ during one of her visits and had grown into a wonderful example of how the love and grace of God can change a person.

Ruth Graham could have easily looked down her nose at these sinners and been glad they were getting what was coming to them. Instead, she saw herself as an object of grace along with them. She went to them and ministered to them in humility. She wanted them to come to know the Christ she loved and served so faithfully. That is blessing. Blessing is not about pride...

2. Blessing is not about Prosperity

Material blessings *can* be byproducts of God's blessing, but we devalue the blessing of God when we think of it only in material terms. It's not an exotic vacation with a #blessed hashtag posted beneath the picture on social media. It's not a "blessed" bumper sticker on an expensive car. It's joy unspeakable. It's peace that passes understanding. It's the things you can't put a price tag on. It's knowing that your past mistakes do not define you because your sin is forgiven and forgotten. It's not knowing what your future holds, but knowing who holds the future. The blessing of God is a right relationship with Him in whose image we are created. It's God with us, God for us and God in us.

God doesn't bless us to raise our standard of living, God blesses us to raise our standard of giving. If all we do is raise our standard of living, the blessing can become a curse. Your greatest asset can become your greatest liability, if you don't use it for God's glory!

Luk 18:18-25 A certain ruler asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 19 Why do you call me good? Jesus answered. "No one is good--except God alone. 20 You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.' " 21 All these I have kept since I was a boy, he said. 22 When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." 23 When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth. 24 Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! 25 Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

To any bystander, this rich young ruler must have seemed blessed by God. He seemed to have everything to live for. But Jesus turns the image around and shows us that, in reality, he had nothing to live for. The image of true blessing is not the person in the expensive suit driving an expensive car. True blessing is the follower of Jesus, with nothing to their name but a desire to serve Christ and a great retirement plan waiting for them in heaven.

The example of the believers Joshua and I met in Lebanon last October.

3. Blessing is not the absence of Problems

Being blessed does not mean that you will never again have any problems. That is impossible! Jesus told us that in this world we will have trouble. Everyone walks through the valley of the shadow of death. There will be times that we grieve. The more you love, the more it hurts. You will be mistreated and misunderstood. Life is not fair, but God is, and God is good all the time. His grace is sufficient.

Carl Jung made a striking observation about people who find healing and people who do not find healing. He said, "All the greatest and most important problems of life are fundamentally insoluble." That means they have no solution. If there is no solution to the problem, what's the point?

But he doesn't stop there. He says, "They can never be solved, they can only be outgrown." We do not grow in life in the absence of pain, but in response to pain.

The circumstances you want God to change may be the circumstances God is using to change you. What you perceive to be a curse may turn out to be a blessing in disguise because it's the catalyst for spiritual and emotional and relational growth. Sometimes you have to hit the bottom in order to bounce up to the top.

The musician Laura Story wrote a song that is entitled Blessings. It says;

What if your blessings come through raindrops, what if Your healing comes through tears
What if a thousand sleepless nights are what it takes to know You're near
What if trials of this life are Your mercies in disguise ...
When friends betray us, when darkness seems to win
We know that pain reminds this heart, that this is not our home
What if my greatest disappointments, or the aching of this life
Is the revealing of a greater thirst this world can't satisfy
What if trials of this life, the rain, the storms, the hardest nights
Are your mercies in disguise?

4. Blessing is Personal

What I mean by that is that the blessing of God in your life reflects who God created you to be as a person. They are not one size fits all. Remember the story of the Talents Jesus told in Matt 25. He gives one man 5 talents of money, he gives another man 2 talents and another man 1 – each according to their ability. When the master comes back, the men who had invested it come and return the money to their master. The focus of the story is usually on the man with 1 talent who buried it and is punished for his lack of effort. Sometimes we miss this part of the story;

Mat 25:20-21 The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.' 21 His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

Did you see it? The master does not give the money back to the faithful servant and then tell him to go and retire and live on a beach somewhere. The reward for faithful service was MORE SERVICE. Not less service, but more service.

I know so many people that just sit around all day and dream about retirement. I am dreading it. Why? Because I am already doing what I love. I am not saying that there are not good days and bad days, but I cannot imagine not doing what I am doing right now. As long as I am physically able to keep climbing up these steps I hope I am able to keep doing it.

Most of you at the church know Walter. He comes in every day and serves faithfully in this church. He is in his 70s. He does not do it for the money, we are not paying him. He does it because he loves doing it. So as long as he loves it and stays off ladders, he can keep doing it.

Sometimes we think that the blessing of God is like an early retirement or extended vacation. The reward for good work is more work. Listen, sin will complicate your life in ways it SHOULD NOT be complicated. The blessing of God will complicate your life in ways it SHOULD be complicated.

Are children a blessing from God? Yes. Do they complicate your life? Yes they do, but hopefully in ways that your life *should* be complicated.

Maybe you are a High School student and you have started coming with your parents to church. You hear that there is this thing called Youth Group on Friday nights. You are wondering if you should go, but there is always fear. What if it is boring? What if they do not like me? It is easier to just stay home. Will going to Youth Group and making new friends complicate your life? Absolutely! In all kinds of positive ways.

You are a couple going to the church and you are wondering about getting involved with a small group. Will it be awkward and complicate your life going to another person's home and getting to know a bunch of strangers? Yes. In all the right ways.

You hear that there is a missions trip and you wonder about whether you should go. Will it complicate your life raising support and sitting on a plane for 14 hours to go on that missions trip? Yes. It may also change your life. It may ruin you for the normal. It may place a hunger in you that will lead to dramatic change. Yes, it will complicate your life. Thank God it will complicate your life!

Has this virus complicated our lives? Absolutely. For some in good ways, for others in bad ways. The very first message I preached after the lockdown was entitled Facing Your Fears. In that message I said that you have a choice to make. You can either spend this time helping or hiding. You can either spend this time witnessing or worrying. You can either spend this time living by faith, or living in fear. I said that four and a half months ago. So, let me ask you a simple question; in the last 4.5 months which has it been? Have you been brave? Have you been faithful? Has your life been complicated in ways that it *should* be complicated, or in ways that it *shouldn't*?

If you are sitting at home today simply because it is easier, because you have grown accustomed to watching church in your pajamas, you have missed the point. If you are high risk, please stay home. If not, then what are you waiting for?