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NEW YEAR'S BLESSING

(On New Year's Eve our church had a blessing service. I shared a teaching, and the Elders laid hands on each person and imparted a blessing for the New Year.)

Another New Year! Zip, zip, zip! The years slip by like passing mile markers on the freeway. Would you like to have God's blessing in the New Year? The words "bless, blessing, or blessed" are in the Bible over 500 times. God's desire from the beginning was to bless us: *So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Then God blessed them and said, Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it....* (**Gen. 1:27-28a, 31a. NLT**)

Genesis 3 records how man fell into rebellion and sin, but God's desire was to restore and bless, and God chose Abram and his descendants for this role: *The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you."* (**Gen. 12:1-3**) Note: (1) God chooses of his own will to bless people. (2) Blessing is conditional on our obedience. (3) We are blessed to be a blessing. (4) Abraham's blessing was a prophecy to be fulfilled through the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ. (5) A curse is pronounced on those who treat with contempt those whom God has blessed.

God gave to Moses, **(First) the Way of Salvation through the Blood of the (Passover) Lamb; (Second) the Law (the Ten Commandments); (Third) the Blessing.** *Then the Lord said to Moses, "Tell Aaron and his sons to bless the people of Israel with this special blessing: May the Lord bless you and protect you. May the Lord smile on you and be gracious to you. May the Lord show you his favor and give you his peace.*

Whenever Aaron and his sons bless the people of Israel in my name, I myself will bless them." (**Numbers 6:22-27**)

The Hebrew word for blessing is *barak* (bay'rak). The definition is: "The action of pronouncing good things upon another. When God blesses, it is not an impotent wish, but an empowering and transforming word that accomplishes its purpose. It is an impartation. Blessing comes from God." God uses people as the means to transmit his blessing.

The Jewish community has a Bar-Mitzvah service for boys when they turn 13, and a Bat-Mitzvah service for girls when they turn 12, since girls mature earlier than boys. This marks the child's season of becoming a mature adult. This is simply an elaborate and beautiful blessing service. (You might Google this subject and review the components.) Israel and Jewish people comprise only a tiny percentage of the world's population, 0.02%, yet Jews have received 24% of Nobel prizes, vastly outnumbering much larger nations. Why is this so? It has been suggested that it is because of God's blessing, and also because of this cultural tradition where families bless their children.

Now let's look at blessing in the New Testament:

At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, he was baptized by John in the Jordan, (**Mark 1:10-11, NKJV**) *And immediately, coming up from the water, He saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove. Then a voice came from heaven, "You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."* This was Jesus' Bar-Mitzvah service when the Father publicly blessed the Son.

Matthew 5 – 8, the Sermon on the Mount, begins with what are called "the Beatitudes," which are nine blessings: *Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven; Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy; Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God; etc.* You will notice that these blessings are conditional on obedience and submission to God.

Matthew 19:13-15 is the occasion when Jesus said, *Let the children come to me.....and He took them in His arms and laid his hands on them* (and blessed them).

Luke 24:50-51 reports the final action of the resurrected Christ on this earth: *And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up his hands and blessed them. Now it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them and was carried up into heaven.*

Hebrews 6:1-3 lists six foundational doctrines for the Christian faith, and these are called “*elementary*” doctrines. In other words, new Christians should be taught these doctrines as their babies’ milk: (1) **Repentance** (2) **Faith** (3) **Baptisms** (note that the word is plural. I believe this refers to Baptism in water and Baptism in the Holy Spirit.) (4) **Laying on of Hands** (5) **Resurrection of the Dead** (6) **Eternal Judgment**. Did you notice that No. 4 is “*Laying on of Hands?*” Have you ever in your life heard a sermon or teaching on the laying on of hands? The Lord and the early church apparently considered this one of the foundational doctrines of the Christian faith! Shame on us for not taking this subject seriously.

There is a connection between the laying on of hands and the blessing. There are four purposes in the New Testament for the laying on of hands:

(1) **Commissioning someone for ministry. Acts 12:25-13:3.** As the early church came before the Lord in fasting and prayer, they heard the Holy Spirit tell them, *Now separate*

to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.....they laid hands on them and sent them away.

(2) **The transmission of the Holy Spirit and gifts of the Spirit. Acts 8:14-17, 10:44-48, 19:1-7, 1 Tim. 4:14.** *Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit....And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied.....Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership.*

(3) **Healing the sick. Mark 16:18b. ...they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover. James 5:14-16.** *Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.*

(4) **Blessing. Matthew 19:13-14.** The occasion when Jesus laid hands on the children.

Let me close by sharing a couple of stories related by Pastor Bill Ligon in his book regarding the blessing: “A Rabbi who is a friend of mine told me about a father and mother who came to him about their son. The son was in trouble at school and had received all F’s in the 7th Grade. The teachers were now talking to one another and “cursing” him with their words, calling him a trouble-maker, and telling him he was going to end up in prison. The boy was now repentant, so the Rabbi instructed him to go to each teacher and say: ‘You are an excellent teacher. I am sorry for the way I have been acting. Please forgive me. I want to change.’ The teachers responded as the Rabbi had guessed they would. They told the boy they didn’t believe him, and they cursed him again. The boy listened patiently and repeated his words blessing the teachers. Again the teachers rejected his apology and cursed him. The boy listened patiently and again repeated his apology and promise to change. Finally the teachers believed the boy and stopped talking about him. His father laid hands on him every morning and blessed him. That year the boy made all A’s and B’s. He went on to graduate with honors and became a successful businessman.

“A Baptist pastor brought his wife for ministry. She was an angry, emotionally disturbed person, and she was born with a birthmark on her forehead in the shape of a V. Pastor Ligon learned that the woman’s mother spoke curses over her from the time she was in the womb and all of her life. Her mother would say, ‘You have always been cursed, and you will always be under a curse!’ The mother’s name was Virginia. Pastor Ligon had the woman forgive her mother, pray for her, and start speaking blessings about her and to her. Gradually she started to become peaceful, and gradually the V on her forehead started fading away! After about six months, she reverted to being angry toward her mother and talking about her. The V started returning. It dawned on her that the external sign was reflecting the internal condition of her heart. She repented and started blessing her mother, and the V again faded away.”

Pastor Ligon tells of initiating an annual blessing service in his church. Over the years, they have received testimonies of businesses that started prospering, homes and marriages being healed, and children changing into godly people.

COWARDS GO TO HELL?

There is a verse almost at the end of the Bible that puzzled me for a long time. (Lots of things in the Bible puzzle me, but this one really raised questions.) It is in Rev. 21:8, and reads: *But cowards, unbelievers, the corrupt, murderers, the immoral, those who practice witchcraft, idol worshippers, and all liars – their fate is in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.*

Every time I read that verse, I would think, “What? Cowards! God, why such a horrible fate for people who are overwhelmed and defeated by fear? They are just weak people. They can’t help it if they are fearful.” I think I reacted that way because I had such a struggle with fear in growing up, and I felt myself to be a coward. I wanted to be like my Dad, who was an unusually strong, courageous man. But much to my distress I was more like my Mom. She had a terrible, abusive childhood with an evil father, and it wounded her so deeply that she never fully recovered. John Eldredge says that every boy grows up with a question in his mind, “Do I have what it takes to be a man?” I was afraid that I didn’t.

Over the years God started helping me overcome my fears. A big insight came when I learned that a person can be tormented by a “spirit of fear” that comes down through the generations. When I identified that demonic spirit, renounced it, and cast it out, it was a huge breakthrough. Then I learned through Joyce Meyer and others that when God tells people in the Bible to “Fear not!” He is not commanding them not to feel fear. We can’t command our feelings. He is telling them not to yield to their feelings but to go on and do what they are supposed to do in spite of any feelings of fear. When we do that, the feelings go away and we start having respect for ourselves. Life kept putting me in fearful situations where I had to learn to ignore my feelings and obey and trust God.

Recently I re-read M. Scott Peck’s book, People of the Lie, and his confrontation with one of his patients really opened my understanding. (Scott Peck is a Christian psychiatrist, which sounds like an oxymoron.) He was counseling a man who told him he had “made a pact with the devil.” He had promised the devil his soul and the soul of his son if the devil would take from him his obsessions and compulsions. Scott admitted that he didn’t know if there was a literal devil, but he was sure that what this guy had done was dangerous. Scott really unloaded on the man, as follows:

“George, you have a defect, a weakness, in your character. It is the cause of all the difficulties we’ve been talking about. It’s the cause of your bad marriage, the cause of your obsessions and compulsions, and now it’s the cause of your pact with the devil. Basically, George, you’re a kind of a coward. Whenever the going gets a little bit rough, you sell out. When you’re faced with the realization you’re going to die one of these days, you run away from it. You don’t think about it because it’s “morbid.” When you’re faced with the realization that your marriage is lousy, you run away from that too. Instead of facing it and doing something about it, you put it out of your mind and refuse to deal with it. Then because you always run away from things that are really inescapable, they come to haunt you in the form of your obsessions and compulsions. Instead of perceiving your symptoms as a message that things in your life need to be faced and dealt with, you run away by making a pact with the devil!

“Easy. That’s a key word for you, George. You like to think of yourself as easygoing. Joe Cool. I suppose you are easygoing, but I don’t know where you’re going easy except into hell. You’re always looking for the easy way out, George. Not the right way. When you’re faced with a choice between the right way and the easy way, you take the easy way every time. The painless way. You will do anything to find the easy way out, even if it means selling your soul to the devil and sacrificing your son.

“You said you are feeling guilty. Good! If you didn’t feel bad about taking the easy way out, no matter what, then I wouldn’t be able to help you. Psychotherapy is not the easy way out, it’s a way of facing things, even if they are painful. If you’re willing to face the painful realities of your life – your terrorized childhood, your miserable marriage, your mortality, your own cowardice – I can be of some assistance. But if all you want is the easiest possible relief from pain, then I expect that you are the devil’s man.”

George recognized the truth in what Scott said, that he had been hiding from anything that would cause him pain. He said, “What you’re asking me to do is to voluntarily return to a state of torment, to actually choose a state of pain. I’m not sure I can do it. I’m not sure I am willing to do it.” But that evening was a turning point in George’s therapy. He started facing his feelings of anger, frustration, anxiety, depression, sadness, grief, and his fears of the transience of existence. His marriage started getting better, and he started growing up.

I have been seeing for a long time that one of the basic things that draws people to addictions and the power that holds them there is fear and cowardice. Escapism. Denial.

Life is painful. Just run to your bottle, or to your pot or cocaine or meth or porn. Don't face it, don't think about it. Don't deal with it. The Bible says, ***For he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.*** (1 Peter 4:1)

My daughter, Jeannine, had the courage to obey God and stop her 30-year addiction to gambling. She went through withdrawal, depression, emotional and physical pain, nightmares, weeping, temptations to suicide. (Suicide is the coward's way out, whether it is the fast way with a gun or the slow way with a bottle, needle, or pills.)

After I accepted Christ, I can remember times when I was trying to bring my flesh and my addictions into line with my profession of faith. I can remember thinking, "This is so hard. I can't do it. I don't want to do it. Christianity is probably all in your mind anyway. It's a bunch of myths. It's probably not objectively true." But something way down deep was saying to me, "It's so doggone difficult, it must be true." I knew in my heart that the easy way is the way to destruction.

What is this crazy religion telling us to do, anyway? Well, it is really demanding some outrageous things of us: "Don't lie. Don't steal. Don't murder people with your hands or your words. Be faithful to your wife. Don't criticize people behind their backs. Be kind to people. Forgive those who offend you. Live a life of love. Seek to know God as your heavenly Father, as your Dad. Stop acting like you are some sort of God. Humble yourself. Stop giving in to your sexual urges. Live a life of purity. Don't be greedy. Be a giver. Be loyal to your spouse, your employer, and your country. Don't allow some stupid addiction to control you and ruin your life." Yes, these are the kinds of unreasonable things Christ asks us to do. And they are so difficult to do, so contrary to our fallen nature, that He promises to give us grace and strength to enable us to do them. And he does!

*You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. (It's **EASY!**) But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is **difficult**, and only a few ever find it. (Matt. 7:13-14)*

Friends, life is a test. God tells us clearly and consistently all through the Bible that, *It is given unto man once to die, and then the judgment.* Let us read and meditate once again on the promise and the warning in Revelation 21:7-8:

All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children. But cowards, unbelievers, the corrupt, murderers, the immoral, those who practice witchcraft, idol worshipers, and all liars – their fate is in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.

WHY CAN'T AMERICA WIN A WAR?

An editorial writer recently observed that our nation has the most powerful military that the world has ever known – jet planes with deadly weapons systems, aircraft carriers, drones, nuclear bombs and nuclear submarines, etc. – yet for decades we haven't been able to win a war against (comparatively) primitive nations and tribes. The last time we won a major war was World War 2. The major wars we have not won, as I recall, are Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. In fact, in spite of a massive sacrifice in lives and treasure, some of these nations are worse off rather than better. Could Someone be trying to tell us something?

The recent exposure of our nation's policy of torture brought all of this to my mind. The civilized world is under attack by as ruthless a gang of thugs as have ever appeared on the world stage: ISIS, al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, etc. We cannot defeat them by using their methods. We only stir up more hatred and more people willing to kill themselves in the process of killing us. I don't pretend to have the answers, and I certainly don't believe that God endorses pacifism as state policy. But consider some of the words of the Lord to Israel, the nation He raised up:

The best-equipped army cannot save a king, nor is great strength enough to save a warrior. Don't count on your warhorse to give you victory – for all its strength, it cannot save you. But the Lord watches over those who fear him, those who rely on his unfailing love. He rescues them from death and keeps them alive in times of famine. Our hope is in the Lord. He is our help and our shield. (Psalm 32:16-20)

You have eaten the fruit of lies – trusting in your military might, believing that great armies could make your nation safe. Now the terrors of war will rise among your people. All your fortifications will fall.....The Lord of Heaven's armies, the Lord is his name (says) Come back to your God. Act with love and justice, and always depend on Him. Return, O (America), to the Lord your God. (Hosea 10 - 14)

Perhaps if President Obama called on us to have a national day of prayer and fasting, as did some of our great presidents of the past, that would be a good start. (It is a measure of how far we have fallen that such a thing is unthinkable.) Or if the churches did that. Or if we did that.

LAW AND GRACE

The essence of law is demand. “You shall not, you shall not!” “Do good and get good. Do bad and get bad, judgment, condemnation.”

The essence of grace is supply. “I will give you: the Holy Spirit, forgiveness, peace, joy, rest, access to the Father’s throne, healing, eternal life.” “I will give you the desire and the ability to lead a godly life.”

Law is hard and inflexible. The Law was written on stones. The penalty for breaking the Ten Commandments was death – by stoning.

Grace took our punishment upon Himself on the cross. He took our death. We take His life.

Old Covenant: At the first feast of Pentecost, at Mt. Sinai, where the Law was given, 3,000 people died. Exodus 32:28.

New Covenant: At the second feast of Pentecost, at Mt. Zion, where Grace was given, 3,000 people were saved. Acts 2:41.

PATHWAY TO FREEDOM SEMINAR

God willing, I will lead another Pathway to Freedom seminar in our church.

DATES: Wednesday, February 4, 2015, for ten weeks, until April 8.

TIME: 7:00 pm – 8:30 pm. Baby sitting provided.

PLACE: Chapel, Canyon View Vineyard, Grand Junction.

At the conclusion of the seminar our teams will offer personal ministry to all participants.

If you have questions, please call me: (970) 434-1377.

Glenn

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I would like to thank each of you for your support of this ministry.

If any of you want to receive tax credit for your financial contributions, you may send them to:

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