

Beautiful Opposites

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[0 : 00] Amen. Well, as I think all of you know, today is a very, very special day.

As part of our service this morning, we're going to be baptising wee baby Soracha. And this is a very, very precious moment for Mary and Kevin, and for all the family and friends, and for us as a congregation, because this baby is a child that was longed for, and that was prayed for, and that was waited for.

And we rejoice, we just rejoice anew today in the amazing goodness of God. So it's a very special day for us as a church family.

And Soracha is a beautiful name, but an unusual name. And so I, along with many others, had to learn to pronounce it when we heard it, and also had to learn what it means.

And I hope my understanding is correct that it means brightness, light, shining. And that's a fantastic name for a baby, because that's exactly what a baby brings.

[1 : 08] A newborn child just brings so much brightness and light and joy to a family, and brightness and light for a community as well. And the baby herself, and all the babies here, all the children being raised here, they also enjoy the brightness and light of the love of their parents and grandparents, family and friends.

That's just the smile and the joy and the song and the laughter just shines through these precious, precious days. So Soracha is a beautiful name.

And in many ways, Soracha is the opposite of Doracha, which is the Gaelic word for darkness. And so Soracha is a beautiful opposite. And that made me think of the wonderful words that we have in Numbers chapter 6, verses 23 to 27, that Mari read for us.

These are famous and wonderful words, and I want to think about them under the title, beautiful, beautiful opposites.

And we're just going to go through each verse one by one, and hopefully this title is going to help us see more of the depth and beauty that's contained in these verses together.

[2 : 47] So thinking first of verse 24, it says, The Lord bless you and keep you. And both of these terms are maybe better or maybe easier to understand if we think of their opposites.

So they're very familiar words, but especially the word bless, it's a very familiar word, but sometimes it's a hard word to define. What exactly do we mean when we talk about being blessed or blessing? And I think one of the most helpful ways to think about it is that to be blessed is the opposite of being cursed.

And cursing is a concept that we can understand. It's a very negative term, and it speaks of things going wrong, and it expresses things turning out the opposite of how we wanted them to be.

Warnings have not been followed, consequences have come, and that whole idea of a curse is something that we can relate to and understand and see. Blessing is the opposite of that.

It's the beautiful opposite of that. And I want to highlight two key things that are involved in blessing. There's a declaration of specialness, and there's an outpouring of goodness.

[3 : 58] So in blessing someone, there is a declaration that they are special. And that can be true of individuals or of things. And you actually see it throughout the Bible.

Right at the very beginning, the Sabbath day is, the seventh day is blessed. It's declared special, different from all the others. And you go through the rest of the Bible, you see children, friends, even kings, blessed.

And in that blessing, there's a declaration of the fact that they're special. And that was particularly true of Israel in the Old Testament.

So here in the book of Numbers, we're way, way back at the start of the Old Testament. The Israelites have come out of Egypt. They've escaped from slavery. They're in the wilderness,

preparing to enter eventually into the land that's been promised to them.

And what's becoming clear is that they have been chosen by God to be the people through whom his purposes and plans are going to be worked out.

[5 : 02] Now, that had a massive consequence for the people of Israel. They had been declared special. And that meant that they had to be different from all the other nations around them.

And so many of the instructions that you will see in the books of Numbers, Leviticus, all these books way back at the start of the Old Testament, sometimes it can feel a little bit obscure. But one of the big aims of all of these commandments is that the people of Israel would be different because they've been set apart as special.

Now, of course, all of that, like everything in the Old Testament, all of that functions as a shadow.

So we highlight the fact that what we see of Israel as a nation and what we see of individuals like Moses, Aaron, and others in the Old Testament, all of that's a shadow pointing towards what will be fully accomplished in the New Testament in the coming of Jesus.

And so the people of Israel chosen in the Old Testament is a shadow of the church. All people from all nations have been called to follow Jesus and to live as his people and, again, to be beautifully different.

So there's a declaration of specialness in a blessing. There's also an outpouring of goodness. And so if someone's blessed, it means that they experience success and happiness and security and value and an opportunity to thrive.

[6 : 27] And that's how we tend to use the language of being blessed today. So when good things come into our lives, when things go well, we feel very, very blessed. This is a weekend where we feel very, very blessed.

We have amazing weather. We had a wonderful wedding yesterday. We've got a precious, beautiful baptism today. The baking that we've eaten this weekend is amazing. It's just a weekend of incredible blessing in so many ways.

And so that's just pointing us to just that idea of an outpouring of goodness. It's just such a positive, positive thing. So blessing is a wonderful concept. And it's the opposite of all the negativity of being cursed.

Now we've got the language of being kept. And that's the language of a watchman. It speaks of guarding and protecting. And so really it's the opposite of being careless.

And so when you see that word keep in the Old Testament, it's the same word that you'll sometimes get translated guard. And it's speaking of this whole idea of watching over something precious and protecting them.

[7 : 35] And again, that emphasizes specialness. And the big point here is that God wants to guard and protect his people. And that's going to involve protecting them from external threats. So as you go through the rest of the Old Testament, you will see that Israel will face external opponents and threats from which they need protection.

But at the very same time, and probably even more so, they need protection from internal foolishness. Because actually the biggest mistakes and problems for the people of Israel in the Old Testament don't come from out there.

They actually come from within, from the decisions that they make. And again, this ties in with all the commands that God gives to Israel.

When God gives commands to his people, he is doing that to protect them. He's doing that to keep them safe. And just as a wee aside, that's a massive challenge in parenting.

And every parent will know that in here. And I remember it when my own children were small as well. But there were so many times when you had to say no. And every single time, it was because you wanted to keep them safe.

[8 : 48] It was always to protect. And that's a great thing to remember in parenting. But it's also a really important thing to remember with the way that the Lord deals with us. Sometimes he will say no.

And that's always under this framework of wanting to keep us and protect us. Two massively important things about the gospel are being revealed here.

God wants to bless you. And God wants to guard you and keep you. And it's so important to remember these two things.

Because it's incredibly easy to think that God wants to stifle you. And that following Jesus is going to be like, maybe you wouldn't call it a curse.

But you would think, well actually it's going to have an overall negative impact on my life. You have got to know that God does not want to stifle you.

[9 : 45] He does not want to make your life rubbish. He does not want your life to be boring. He does not want to bring a cloud of negativity. He wants to bless you.

And he wants you to thrive in your life. But at the same time, he wants to keep you. And so that means that he is going to want to steer you away from terrible decisions.

And we need that. If you are anything like me, you are capable of bad decisions. And the Lord's protection and keeping is so important in guarding us from choosing things that are going to hurt us. And to hurt others. And that might hurt others. And in many ways, these things can tie in together. Sometimes our greatest blessings are going to come when we are given freedom. And that's, you know, that's an amazing thing.

And again, especially too with children, you know, you want, you know, you actually see those moments of great triumph. When they walk, when they can ride a bike, when they go to school for the first time.

[10 : 51] These are great milestones. But in every single one of them, you're granting freedom. And then it only gets worse because you have to send them off to high school and send them off to university. And then they get a driver's license. It's awful.

But it's actually wonderful for them. Because they're getting freedom. And these great blessings are coming through feeding. But at the same time, sometimes we are best guarded when there's good boundaries around us.

And you see that as parents. But we also see that in every part of our lives. That actually, the boundaries that we place around us in our lives. Whether that's boundaries between our work and our rest.

Boundaries in terms of protecting time with family. Boundaries around how much we drink.

Boundaries about what we pursue in regard to our spending. Whatever it may be, good boundaries are a precious blessing in our lives as well.

God wants to bless you. God wants to keep you. If you think that the gospel is going to stifle you. Or that it's going to just restrict your life in a rubbish way.

[11 : 59] Then you don't understand the gospel at all. Verses 25 and 26 have these amazing words. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you. A thing called parallelism. I'm nervous writing this word because I don't know how to spell it. There's a whole pile of L's in their suburb. Parallelism. Anyway, something like that. Okay, so. This is a pattern that you see again and again in the Old Testament. It's a very common way that they would write in Hebrew. And they would say the same thing twice.

Or the same things twice. And so you'll see often in the Old Testament two lines. And the pattern is very, very similar.

So there's a great example of it here. So 25 and 26. There's lots of parallelism. So both start the Lord. The Lord. And then verse 25 says the Lord make his face to shine upon you.

[13 : 06] And here 26. The Lord lift his countenance upon you. Now, that word face and that word countenance is actually exactly the same word in Hebrew. In English, we don't like repeating words too close to each other.

But in Hebrew, they love to do that. So in English, they translate it two different words just to make it sound better in English. But in Hebrew, it's good to know that it's actually just exactly the same word that's been used.

And then there's the Lord. The Lord, he's doing something. He's making his face to shine upon you. He's lifting his countenance, lifting his face upon you. And that has an outpouring to be gracious or to give peace.

And so a very, very good example of parallelism. And again, here we see some beautiful opposites. And so we've got a face shining, a countenance lifted up.

And all of that is the opposite of a hidden face, a turned face, a hardened face. And often we can think that that's how God's face might be towards us.

[14:17] And yet it's the opposite that's been revealed to us here. It's speaking of God's presence, of God's beauty being revealed. It's actually a description of intimacy as we come close to God.

And this is especially important to think about if you know the story that's led up to this point in numbers. Israel has come out of Egypt.

And as they wander through the wilderness, they come to Mount Sinai. And you get that around Exodus 18, 19, 20. And the big description there is of the people of Israel gathered at the foot of the mountain.

And Moses goes up to the top of the mountain. And God comes down and meets Moses in a cloud at the top of the mountain. And it's one of the most dramatic, intense moments in the whole of Scripture.

And there's thunder, there's fire, there's smoke. And the big, big message to the people of Israel down is don't come near the mountain. And the whole reason for that is because the people are sinful and broken.

[15:28] And God is holy and majestic and pure. And they have to keep away. They just cannot come into God's presence. And so the nature of God as the pure, holy, perfect God and the reality of our sinfulness makes God and people incompatible.

And Sinai presents that so powerfully that the people can't even touch the mountain because the presence of God is there. And so in that moment, God seems untouchable, unreachable.

And we seem hopelessly unworthy. And yet God's desire is not that that's how it would be.

God's desire is not that we cower before Him in fear. His desire is that we would feel the warmth of His face shine upon us. And that's why Sinai is never the end of the story.

The end of the story is actually when we come right forward to Jesus. And God Himself is pulling children up onto His lap. He's meeting with people.

[16:41] He's smiling. And through Him we have access to the face of God, His presence, His love, and His beauty. And so our shining face, our lifted countenance, is the opposite of an unreachable, inaccessible God.

It's a beautiful picture of the warmth and intimacy that God wants us to experience. Then you have this wonderful word being gracious. That's another beautiful opposite because it's the opposite of legalism.

And this is something that we just have to always, always come back to in our preaching all the time because our hearts will gravitate towards legalism, like the middle one in the children's talk. The idea that, well, you know, you've got to reach a certain standard and you've got to make yourself good enough for God.

It's so important to recognize that all the way from the shadows of the Old Testament right through to the realities of the new, God's love and presence and blessing is never, ever earned.

It's never about us getting up to a certain standard. It's never about us knowing enough or proving ourselves or being good enough.

[17:55] And we have a very powerful illustration of this before us today because I can ask Mary and Kevin, what did Siddhartha have to do to make you love her? Nothing.

Nothing. Nothing. That's a glimpse of the gracious love of God. We also have a beautiful opposite here in the word peace.

That's actually the Hebrew word shalom, which you might have heard of. I can spell that one, thankfully. And that's a really fascinating word. It's often translated peace, but it's got a bigger meaning than that because it really means completeness, wholeness, fulfillment.

In other words, it's the opposite of feeling empty. The opposite of feeling uncertain. The opposite of feeling unsettled and insecure.

So often that's how life leaves us feeling. We just feel, we feel empty. We feel like we don't have the answers. We feel like things don't make sense. We feel like we're unsettled.

[19:05] We feel insecure. We feel threatened. And God's great desire is to exchange all of that for peace. And you know that, I can honestly say, I can tell you that from the theology of the Bible, but I can tell you that from my own experience as well, that that is the difference it makes to know Jesus, that there is just, there is a peace and a completeness that comes into your heart that nothing else can compare with.

But there's one more beautiful opposite in verses 25, 26. Actually, it's in verse 24 as well. And it's this word.

You. Why is that a beautiful opposite? What's it the opposite of?

It's the opposite of someone else. Because so often you can sit here and you can think of the blessings and love and goodness and promises of God, and you can think, that's for someone else. It's not for me. You can think, I've made too many mistakes. I've stuffed up too much. I don't know enough. I'm too far from what I should be.

[20 : 32] And you can think that all of this is for everybody else, but the last person it's for is you. Well, the fact that that word appears so many times presses into your heart that you are the one that God wants to pour all of this out upon.

Then we have the wonderful words of verse 27. So they shall put my name upon the people of Israel and I will bless them. That phrase there, my name, actually ties this verse very closely to what we're going to do today in baptizing Soracha.

Because baptism is a naming ceremony, but we often misunderstand this because we can think it's to do with the baby's name. But that's not actually the biblical emphasis at all. Baptism is a naming ceremony, but it's God's name that matters.

And the crucial thing about baptism is not that I'm giving Soracha her name, she's already got her name. In baptism, God's name is being placed upon her.

And that speaks of so many key aspects of the gospel. And again, we see them by thinking about beautiful opposites. God's name upon the people Israel and everything that God is doing in Numbers, in the Exodus, and everything that baptism points towards is reminding us of the covenant relationship that God wants us to have with Him.

[22 : 01] That's the opposite of hostility. God does not want to persist in a hostile relationship at all.

He wants to enter a deep, beautiful covenant relationship with us. His name upon us speaks of ownership and possession. That's the opposite of being abandoned.

And so if my name is on something, it's mine. God's name upon us speaks of the fact that we are His.

We are not going to be abandoned. We're not left behind. It speaks of loyalty and commitment. Everything about God's covenant promises are about loyalty and commitment.

That's the opposite of giving up. God. So often in life, people will give up on us. God never does that.

[23 : 04] God never does that. And these words and baptisms speak so powerfully of the amazing promises of God.

And those promises are the opposite of a lie. So often we are deceived by empty promises that fall short.

God's promises are the opposite of all of that. In fact, God's promises just bring blessing and joy and fullness and completeness that always blows our expectations.

And so in all of these words, we have some beautiful, beautiful opposites. And these words were spoken to Israel early on in their history, in the Old Testament.

And they're incredibly important because Israel's going to need everything in these verses going forward. Because as the Old Testament progresses, Israel is going to feel like the opposite of everything that we've been speaking about.

[24 : 11] And that's going to happen in two ways. Because as you read on in the Old Testament, Israel are going to wander off from God. And that's because they keep on thinking that they're going to be better off like everybody else.

And so instead of being the people that God's calling them to be, they're tempted to follow the nations around them, to leave God behind and to wander after what everybody else is doing. And they do that again and again and again. And so that's the first way in which they'll feel the opposite of this. They think, well, I don't actually need this. And they wander off. But then again and again and again, there are moments when they realize their mistakes.

But when they realize their mistakes, they still feel like the opposite of all of this. Because instead of feeling like the people upon whom God's face is shining, they're going to feel so ashamed, so broken, and so full of regret.

Israel need to hear these words because again and again and again, they're going to feel like the opposite. And exactly the same happens to us.

[25 : 28] So we all wander off from God. And often we think that we're going to be better off actually being the opposite of what Jesus is calling us to be. And we see other people doing stuff

and we think we want to fit in with them.

And we see people succeeding with no word of God. And we think, well, maybe I'd be better off like that as well. And maybe that's how you feel today.

Or maybe that's how you felt in the past. It can be a massive threat, especially when we're young, to feel like that and to see everybody else doing great and they don't have all of this in their lives.

And we think, oh, I'll just be like them. And we wander off and turn away from what Jesus is calling us to be. It's so easy to do that.

When we do that, we make terrible choices. And when we realize our choices, we bitterly regret our mistakes. And when that happens, we think that God must be so fed up of us.

[26 : 35] And maybe that's how you feel today. Maybe you feel like, maybe you feel like you're the opposite of all of this because you feel like you're just stuffed up so much in your life.

If that's how you feel today or when you feel like that in the future because it'll happen to us all, we need to keep coming back to these beautiful words in number six.

The world around us is going to always make us empty promises that will deceive us and lure us away. The devil is going to constantly try and accuse us, bringing before us all our mistakes, reminding us of all the stupid things that we've done, all the ways that we've let people down and ourselves down and let God down.

the gospel meets us with beautiful opposites. Beautiful opposites to all of that.

And that's why perhaps the most important words of all in this section are the words that I haven't read yet, the words in verse 22, that all of this is what God is saying.

[27 : 53] These words of blessing, it's not Aaron saying them, it's not saying, hopefully God will bless you. It's not us saying them, begging that God might bless us, it's God saying it.

Because this is what God wants. This is what He initiates. This is what He promises.

And so, our prayer for Soraha, our prayer for all of you, and God's great purpose and desire for every one of us is contained in these magnificent words.

the Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.

That's everything that Jesus wants you to have. Amen.