

God's Blessing Goes With You!

The old church

When you make profession of faith in God's church, you receive the blessing after you say "I do". This blessing is the official seal on the rich promise of God.

The idea of this blessing after the confession of faith is a very old one. We can trace it back to the practice in the old church, the church of the first centuries of the Christian era. At that time a custom existed of having the confession recited, and after that, the laying on of hands. This laying on of hands symbolized the certainty that the prayer for the Holy Spirit was heard. Once the confession is made, one is anointed by the Holy Spirit and as such one also receives the blessing of God.

As we have seen, because many errors crept into the church, a new sacrament grew out of this custom in later times. The grace – it was taught then – was put in the hands of the priest, and was transferred by those hands. But that was quite different from what was found in the first centuries of the Christian church.

The Reformation

The Reformation returned to the practice of previous ages. People were a little wary, however, of the laying on of hands, because so much superstition had been associated with it. In the time of the Reformation the great value of the *blessing* which God gives, after we have given him the response of faith, was well understood.

The Lord initiated the first move. He addressed us, he made a covenant of grace with us. Now the last move is also the Lord's. He answers our "I do" with his blessing. In our profession we make our commitments. We do that on the basis of God's promises. However after making our commitments, the question arises: will we be able to live up to our commitments? Immediately the voice of the Lord comes to us. Now that we have spoken, the Lord will not be silent.

God is the first and the last, the alpha and omega. He was the first at our baptism. He came to us with his Words of promise. He is also the last, at our profession of faith. He gives us his blessing. He assures us

of his help. For, in response to our commitments, he affirms once again the richest promises. We may enter life comforted; his Word is comfort, his speaking is blessing.

Old and New Testament

We know about the blessing which God's people received in the Old and New Testament. When in the old covenant the priest had offered the incense offering, he came out of the sanctuary to bless the people who were gathered in the court of the tabernacle. The priest did not come to the people with empty hands, but with blessing hands, and he pronounced the words of Numbers 6:24-26. There we read a three-fold blessing: the Lord will keep his people, that is, protect them from all dangers that may threaten. He will make his face to shine over his people. That means: he will make his face to be clear. The LORD regards his people kindly and is gracious to them. The LORD has mercy on his people. And finally: he lifts up his countenance upon his people. He applies his love and gives his peace.

When this blessing is pronounced, it is not just asking for God's help, a *pious* request. No, the nature of his blessing is that, as it is pronounced, it does indeed descend on the people of God. God *gives* his help, his protection, his mercy, his love, his peace. His people go home with these *gifts* of God. In the Old Testament the verb "to bless" has the specific meaning of: to bestow power. To receive the blessing of the Lord meant: to depart in *his* power, not in one's own strength, which ultimately is weakness, but in the power of the LORD. Likewise in the New Testament, a distinction was made between the "priestly" blessing of Numbers 6, and the "apostle's blessing" of 2 Corinthians 13. At the end of his second letter to the Corinthians the apostle gives the apostolic blessing: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (v. 14) It is the blessing of the Triune God. As in Numbers, the blessing here is also threefold. In Numbers it was about the keeping by the Father, the grace of the Son, and the peace of the Holy Spirit. In Corinthians also the love of God the Father, grace of Jesus Christ and fellowship of the Holy Spirit are given to God's church.

Paul's letters are like sermons to the congregation, which close with God's blessing. The congregation will be satisfied with that! They are words of encouragement and comfort.

Once again it isn't just Paul's request at the end of his letter. No, by means of his apostle the LORD bestows his blessing on his church. The original Greek does not even have a verb in this verse. Originally the word "be" is not there. It can't be left out in translation, but the fact that it is not there, emphasizes even more strongly that it is not a wish which is expressed here, but a reality.

God's blessing follows! The LORD himself gives his blessing, and his blessing can only return empty if it is deflected by unbelief. He who puts himself in conflict with the blessing Word of the Lord, will cause that blessing to become a curse. But the people of God who have sung his praises, who desire to fulfill their vows to the LORD, they go home blessed, comforted and encouraged. These people of God have heard God's promises in his Word. They especially enjoy these promises through the blessing. God now assures his people that he will stay with them with his grace.

Blessing after confession

The apostle Peter in his first letter gives such a blessing to the "exiles of the dispersion": "And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen and establish you." (1 Peter 5:10). In the King James Version this verse is in the form of a wish, but it is better to render these words as a positive promise. That way the character of the *blessing* comes out even more clearly. How beautiful it is that you receive the blessing in these words after you have made profession of your faith!

Your eyes are then directed towards the Lord, who will also complete the work of grace which he has begun in you. The apostle Peter has plenty of reasons to point out to the "exiles of the dispersion" this continuing grace of the Lord. They badly needed such a word of encouragement and comfort in connection with the confession which was required of them.

With joy they accepted God's Word, and made their confession that Jesus Christ was their Saviour. But difficulties arose soon after. They had expected much from their lives as children of God, but Christian slaves were treated more harshly by their heathen masters than before. The women who had confessed their faith were abused by their

heathen husbands. If anything went wrong anywhere, the Christians were blamed: they suffered much oppression and persecution.

Now the apostle Peter asks: do you feel let down? Remember you *must* suffer for Christ's sake. No one may suffer as an evildoer. Be merciful and humble. Don't repay evil with evil. Even if you suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed!

Resist the devil, be firm in your faith. Remember, the same experiences of suffering are required of your brotherhood throughout the world! Peter exhorts the exiles of the dispersion that struggle and opposition should not be regarded as abnormal, but as the *rule* for God's children. One thing is certain: the LORD never lets us down!

Grace and calling

The LORD never lets you down, says the apostle, for he is the God of all grace. That means: there is no grace other than the grace of God. He is the God who alone can give you what you need, and he is also the God who can grant you all you are in need of. He is the God from whom you receive all you may call yours.

This God of all grace has *called* you. That is the tremendous thing: grace and calling go together. Yes, we may say: this calling is the great wonder of his grace. By this calling the LORD has laid claim to your life. For that calling is not just a feeble and fading sound, no, that calling is a *power* of God, by which the Lord calls things into being that were not there before. It is a power as great and as strong as that of creation.

God calls, and it exists. He calls dead people and they live, they hear!

So the LORD has also called you. In yourself you did not want to listen, but through God's calling you have been made willing to listen. That is why this calling is the great wonder of God's grace, with which you are never finished. By that calling you are made a citizen of God's eternal kingdom, and are placed in living communion with the Lord Jesus Christ.

The beginning of that calling was that the Lord addressed you, called you out of the darkness of unwillingness and self-will to his light. And at the end, the great *goal* of that calling, will be eternal glory, as the apostle Paul puts it. That is what it will all culminate in: perfect glory, eternal joy with the Lord!

Between beginning and end

Between the beginning and the end of God's calling lies the road that you have to walk here on earth. That road is temporal, and difficult. The apostle Peter remarks on its temporal and imperfect character when he speaks of a "little while of suffering".

You must correctly understand "suffering". It does not mean the troubles and hardships that are part of this life. When the apostle Peter repeatedly speaks of suffering in this letter, it is always in connection with faith in Christ. He who confesses Christ must also suffer. You suffer because you openly stand for Christ. It has to do with the scorn you must bear for Christ's sake. If you experience opposition because you make a stand for Christ, you should not be surprised. That is also how Peter speaks to the dispersed exiles: do not be surprised as though something strange were happening! (1 Peter 4:12). If you are snubbed because you do not want to join the masses who are not too particular about the service of God, then that is part of that "little while" of suffering.

That suffering can take on other, worse forms. Children of God, faithful confessors of his name, have been imprisoned, thrown to wild animals, burnt on pyres, executed on scaffolds, and perished in concentration camps, all because they refused to deny their confession. And think of the Christians behind the Iron Curtain in the 1980's, who were crossed, curtailed, frustrated, persecuted, boycotted and oppressed because of their confession. That still happens to Christians today! It could happen to us as well. No one should say: that won't happen to me! It is possible for the LORD to ask you to suffer in your life, because you desire to confess him!

The certainty of God's grace

However, when you confess him, the power of God's *blessing* goes with you! You do not enter alone into that period between the beginning and the end of God's calling. And you do not go through that little while of suffering on your own. No, the certainty of God's grace goes with you.

The apostle Peter uses various words to express this certainty. There are no fewer than four of them. The God of all grace will *restore* you. That means he will equip you with all the gifts and powers that you need. He will take care that you are fully equal to traveling the road you

must go. You may continue to sing under all circumstances: "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want." (Psalm 23:1) The LORD proceeds to the goal of wholeness, of perfection, where nothing is lacking.

The God of all grace will *confirm* you. That means: the Lord will make you stand fast. You will not "fall". You will not be separated from Christ the Lord. Even when the threats are oppressive and the struggle great, you will not falter. The Lord will take care that you will be able to withstand the temptations. Yes, the LORD will make your confession even stronger in suffering, so that you will not deny his name.

The God of all grace will also *strengthen* you. You will see your strength renewed when you defend the name of Jesus Christ. You may offer strong resistance against the many, sometimes powerful attacks of Satan, and it is the Lord God himself who will provide you with strength for that. He will even take care that you are able to resist those attacks.

Finally: the God of all grace will also *establish* you. The Lord says thereby: you have been placed on a firm foundation. On solid footing, you don't slip and you don't sink. You are rooted and grounded in the love of Christ. (Colossians 2:6,7) Here we think of the end of the Sermon on the Mount, when our Saviour spoke of the two kinds of foundations. Everyone who does not do according to the words of Christ, will be like a man who built his house upon the sand. When rain and storm comes, that house will fall. But he who hears the words of Christ and does them, is like a man who built his house upon a rock. That house will not fall, because it has been founded on the rock. (Matthew 7:24-27)

Thus the apostle Peter writes about the certainty of God's grace, which goes with you into your life, as a blessing. With that choice of words Peter shows the riches of that blessing. This is written by that apostle who was foremost in confessing his Saviour, but who also wept bitterly after he denied him, yet was allowed to feed and tend the lambs. He now desires to strengthen and comfort the dispersed exiles with the certainty of God's grace.

The apostle once again testifies at the end of his letter, that "this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it." (1 Peter 5:12) You can stand firm only when you know: God's blessing goes with me, all my life. The Lord,

who has called me, is faithful. He will also restore, establish and strengthen me. He will prepare me for eternal glory.

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