

Psalm 67 The shining face of God

In his book *The Bible Jesus read* Philip Yancey tells the (true) story of Anatoly Shcharansky. In 1977, at the height of the Cold War, Shcharansky, a brilliant young mathematician and chess player, was arrested by the KGB for his repeated attempts to escape to Israel. He spent 13 years in a Soviet prison. From morning to evening he read and studied all 150 psalms (in Hebrew). “What does this give me?” he asked in a letter: “Gradually, my feeling of great loss and sorrow changes to one of bright hopes”.

The book of psalms meant so much to Shcharansky that when the guards took it away, he lay down in the snow and refused to move until they returned it. During those 13 years, his wife travelled the world campaigning for his release. Accepting an honorary degree on his behalf, she told the university audience: “*In a lonely prison cell, locked up alone with the psalms of David, Anatoly found expression*

for his innermost feelings, in the outpourings of the king of Israel thousands of years ago”.

I hope that we appreciate the psalms as he did. We come to the psalms because they give us a comprehensive account of life with God, individual records of how the spiritual life works. The psalms do not primarily give us information; they give us **relationship**. The first and greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with all our hearts and with all our souls and with all our minds. The psalms show us what that relationship can look like. The psalm we read this morning shows that when God

shines his blessing on us, it is not in order that we should sit around and bask in the sunlight; no, it is in order that we should take the light of the Gospel out into the whole world.

The psalm starts by asking for God’s blessing on Israel:

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us.

The psalmist is asking God for 3 things:

He is asking for the **grace of God**. What a good place to start! Like the psalmist we come to God as sinful people and we need to acknowledge that as the tax collector did in the story Jesus told when he said:

God have mercy on me, a sinner! (Luke 18:9-14)

The psalmist is secondly asking for **God's blessing**

The writer is going back to the ancient blessing which God gave to Moses to give to the Jewish people as they wandered through the desert after they had escaped from Egypt. They are familiar words because we use this blessing at our baptism services, but originally they were spoken by Aaron and the priests:

The Lord bless you and keep you;

The Lord make his face shine upon you

And be gracious to you;

The Lord turn his face toward you

And give you peace.

When we seek God's favour, we seek his blessing. But what does that mean? Sometimes

Christians seem to be looking for signs of God's blessing in terms of making money or getting a new car or house or job. But although material "goodies" can be part of the blessing, they are only a part – and not the most important bit. The best, the most desirable part of the blessing is that God himself would enter into a close personal relationship with his people.

When I was out in Nigeria I became aware of the many churches there which promote the idea that God's blessing equals prosperity. On the screen you can see one example of this. I'm not criticising Nigeria when I say this, because in many ways Nigeria is way ahead of the UK in spiritual awareness. And anyway there are a lot of churches in the West which also seem to believe that God has blessed us only if we get to be rich.

But Jesus destroyed this narrow, limited idea of blessing when he asked the crowds:

What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? (Mark 8:36)

Imagine that – gaining the whole world. I sometimes watch *Who wants to be a millionaire* and imagine that it's me in the hot seat, 15 questions away from £1m. There is part of me that fancies being a millionaire. And yet, even if I could gain the whole world ...

I know, both from what the Bible teaches us and from life experience, that the greatest blessing in life is to know God; and if that does not lie at the base of all our other blessings, blessings like being well off and having a happy life, then these other blessings are hollow and can even be a dangerous deception. On the other hand, to know God is the greatest blessing that anyone can experience either in this life or in the life to come.

The third request of the psalmist is for **God's face to shine on us.**

A shining face is the opposite of an angry or scowling face; a face turned towards someone is the opposite of a face turned away in disgust or indifference. The Bible uses the picture of

God “hiding his face” when his people have sinned and refuse to repent.

But a shining face implies the favour of a person; it implies the friendliness of warm relationships.

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us.

The psalm moves on to a wish, a longing for God's blessing on the nations. Verses 2-5 ask that the Gentiles might come to know and praise God, that they might understand that he is a God of justice in his dealing with whole nations as well as when he deals with individuals and that they might come to know his ways.

May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you (verses 3, 5)

The praise of God is what mattered most to the psalmist. There is a difference between thanking God and praising God. We thank God for the blessings he gives us. We praise God when we think more of the giver than the gifts, and realise that he is Lord and Creator of all;

that he is holy, powerful and wise, our heavenly Father, our loving and gracious Saviour. We praise God when in our thoughts, our words and our lives we put him first. And that is what the psalmist longs to see all the peoples doing.

A noble desire – but how can it become reality?

Firstly, the nations must see God's blessing on God's people.

The psalmist believes that if other people were to see the light of God's smile on His people, then they would have visual proof of God's grace and God's love.

The best example of that was of course the Lord Jesus himself. The disciples never questioned God's love or God's grace because every day as they lived along side Jesus they saw God's love and grace in action. The Word truly became a human being and lived among us, John tells us in his Gospel, and we saw his glory and He was full of grace and truth.

The same principle operates today. How are non-Christians going to see God's love if they do not see it in your life and in mine?

John Stott puts it like this:

We claim to know, to love and to follow Jesus Christ. We say that he is our Saviour, our Lord and our friend. "What difference does he make to these Christians?" the world asks searchingly. "Where is their God?"

We have got to provide evidence of God's love and God's power in our lives. Does your life, does my life show forth the presence of God within? Does anyone ever look at us and think, "God certainly makes a difference for that person". As someone has pointedly asked: "If being a Christian was a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

Secondly, as we think about how God's blessing is to become known throughout the earth, we must tell people.

How does the blessing of the priest of old come upon the people? Is it some kind of magic where the priest lays his hands on a person and

they get the blessing? Blessing came to God's people of old when someone brought God's word to them. The word of God comes to people today by our speaking it to them.

After all, if God is gracious to us and makes his face shine on us, then we are truly blessed and we will want in turn to be a blessing to others. Sometimes I think that we feel overwhelmed by the scale of the need around us. What difference can one individual possibly make? We ask.

God is the same God who thousands of years ago promised one man, Abraham, that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed.

What difference can the church possibly make?

Often in our own society it seems as if the church is marginalised, put to one side and ridiculed.

The little group of 120 frightened followers of Jesus who met in an upstairs room after Jesus had gone back to heaven was a group of ordinary men and women of no great

importance or talent. Yet within 300 years the paganism of the Roman Empire had been overthrown. How? The Bible makes it clear that the church was transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit and moved out in faith and at great cost to itself and told the world about the Lord Jesus. They told the folks of their time about Jesus, about his birth, life, death and resurrection from the dead, and about the difference that Jesus had made in their lives. Do we really dream the impossible dream, that "all the peoples praise God"? If we do, then we need to be praying that the Holy Spirit will baptise His church. We also need to be ready ourselves to respond to God's call in our own lives.

To sum up then; the psalmist wants the nations to know about the Lord and there are 4 things which people can know.

God's ways

That your ways may be known on earth (2)

God has not left us ignorant of how he wants us to live. The people of Israel were given God's

law and they were to be a light to the other nations. Similarly, the NT asserts that Christians are to be lights to show people the way to God.

God's salvation

Your salvation among all nations (2)

God has shown his love in his willingness to save us from our sin. His salvation is not just for a select few, it is for all peoples.

God's justice

You rule the peoples justly (4)

God is the judge of all, but we can be sure that he is perfectly just. Nations and leaders who acknowledge him can see that he rules with perfect fairness and that they in turn are called to act justly to all. As the book of Proverbs puts it:

Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people (Proverbs 14:34)

God's guidance

You guide the nations of the earth (4)

As shepherds lead their sheep, so God guides all who look to him. Anyone who trusts God

for guidance can testify from experience in the well-known words of psalm 23 "*He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake*". The most important message of this psalm is that we who know the blessing of God should not keep it to ourselves but should live to praise God and to share with others all over the world the wonderful good news of God's love. As Christians we have a message to share; God has transformed our lives and he can transform the lives of other people as well.

We see this desire in verse 7:

God will bless us and all the ends of the earth will fear him

It is no wonder that this psalm has been called a missionary psalm. It anticipates the world-wide spread of the knowledge of God; it emphasises the belief that we are blessed so that we can in turn be a blessing to others; and it has a longing that from every part of the earth a song of praise would go up to God. In conclusion I would like to take you back to verse 1:

*May God be gracious to us and bless us and
make his face shine on us*

The greatest blessing of all is still to come,
because the greatest blessing is to see God.

You may remember that Moses once asked to
see God's face, but he received the answer:

*You cannot see my face, for no one may see me
and live.*

(Exodus 33:20)

None of us can possibly look on the face of
God and live. But one day we shall. One day,
and we have God's promise for this, we will
look upon God ... on the Day when all his
people, drawn from every tribe and tongue and
nation, will stand before his throne and sing his
praise. On that Day we will see him, not as in a
poor reflection but face to face. On that Day
God's face will shine upon us in the fullest
measure. In that Day the vision of Psalm 67
will be fully realised and our joy will be even
greater because great multitudes from all the
nations of the earth will be praising God with
us.