

How Can I Be Blessed?

Crucial Questions

R. C. SPROUL

How Can I Be Blessed?

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Chapter One

The Beauty of Being Blessed

I once walked into my office to find a letter from a former student who was getting married in California and had invited Vesta and me to participate in his wedding. Our schedule prohibited our accepting, so he had written to ask, “If you can’t come to our wedding, could you please record a benediction for our wedding?” I was moved by this request, and immediately a producer and I went into a recording booth and recorded a special prayer of blessing for this couple’s wedding. I am sure I was far more moved

by it than they were, because, as a pastor, I see pronouncing the benediction as one of the highest privileges that we have.

The word *benediction* simply means “good saying.” It comes from two Latin roots: *bene*, meaning “good,” and *dictio*, meaning “statement” or “saying.” A benediction is a good statement, an announcement of blessing. The standard Old Testament benediction is the Aaronic blessing, found in Numbers 6. It is given in a poetic, parallel form:

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. (Num. 6:24–26)

This standard Jewish benediction has three lines, and each line says the same thing in two different ways. In this kind of literary parallelism, if we fail to grasp the meaning of it in one line, the subsequent lines make it more clear so that we’ll fully understand what’s being expressed.

Notice also the emphasis on the face of God. This benediction is alluding to a special kind of blessing, a face-to-face intimacy with the Lord. For an Israelite, the highest state of happiness, the supreme experience of blessedness,

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was associated with coming as close as possible to the Creator, standing in His immediate presence, and basking in His unveiled glory.

The Israelites, as a semi-nomadic people, were acutely conscious of the fragility of human life. They saw that life seems to be like grass that sprouts and quickly withers and dies. They yearned for a permanent home. They wanted to be preserved. This benediction must have been tremendously encouraging. When it talks of the peace that the Lord brings, it's referring to something much more profound than cessation from military conflict. It's talking about an enduring peace, the peace with God that every soul hungers for. This benediction is the promise of the blessedness of peace, grace, and perseverance.

Throughout biblical history, this concept of blessedness was closely linked to the vision of God. What was referred to as a benediction in the Old Testament was sometimes called a "beatitude" in the New Testament. In this booklet, we're going to look at a famous and beloved portion of the New Testament that speaks about what it means to be blessed. This passage is known as the Beatitudes. It is part of the great sermon preached by Jesus Christ known as the Sermon on the Mount, and it is found in Matthew 5.

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To understand the Beatitudes, we must understand a bit about the form they take. They are what are known as “oracles.” What often springs to mind when we hear that word is something like the famous oracle of Delphi. This was a woman, a priestess at the temple of Apollo, who would look into the future and read the fortunes of kings and generals as they prepared for battle. She was called an oracle because she delivered a message from the gods; she was a conduit for divine revelation.

In the Old Testament, the prophets of Israel were agents of revelation. They did not speak their own message or express their own opinions but prefaced their teaching with the phrase “Thus says the Lord.” Then they delivered a pronouncement from God. God said to Jeremiah that He would put His word into his mouth, and Ezekiel had to swallow the bitter scroll that became sweet to his taste, because it was the word of God.

In the Old Testament, *oracles* came to refer to divine pronouncements. There were two kinds of oracles: oracles of weal, which were announcements of prosperity or divine benevolence, and oracles of woe, which were pronouncements of doom or judgment. For example, Amos delivered a series of pronouncements prefaced by statements such

as “Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria” (Amos 6:1). The negative form of the oracle in the Old Testament was often prefaced by the word *woe*. We see this also in Isaiah 6, where Isaiah got a glimpse of the inner court of heaven and saw the Lord exalted on His throne. Isaiah saw the seraphim flying about, singing, “Holy, holy, holy.” His impulse on that occasion was to pronounce an oracle of doom upon himself, saying, “Woe is me! For I am lost” (Isa. 6:5).

This oracular form of address was also used by Jesus as part of His prophetic role. He pronounced oracles of judgment against the scribes and the Pharisees. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” (Matt. 23:15). In particular, Matthew’s gospel records a great number of these oracles of doom.

The opposite oracle, an oracle of weal, was prefaced by the word *blessed*. The Beatitudes are a series of just this kind of oracle. Jesus was delivering the word of God to define the new covenant—the new situation that came to pass with His appearance.

The Beatitudes have two emphases. The first is the kingdom of God. This idea is central to Jesus’ teaching, particularly His parables. John the Baptist appeared on

the scene saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:2). Likewise, Jesus inaugurated His public ministry with the same announcement (Matt. 4:17). He frequently explained aspects of this kingdom by telling a story or relating a parable, prefaced by the phrase “The kingdom of heaven is like . . .” (see Matt. 13).

Even a cursory glance at the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes reveals that Jesus associated the kingdom of God with His own life and ministry. We can’t separate the person of Christ from the content of the Beatitudes, because the Beatitudes themselves point to Him as the ultimate source of our blessedness.

The Beatitudes are so called because they begin with the word *blessed*. There is a related expression that is used in theology with respect to this type of blessing. It has to do with the supreme hope of the Christian life. This hope is the beatific vision.

The beatific vision is the promise that, in our glorification, we will see God as He is. One of the most difficult aspects of being a Christian is loving, adoring, serving, and obeying a God whom we’ve never seen. We have to walk by faith, not by sight. Yet, the promise is given to us in the New Testament that there will come a time at the

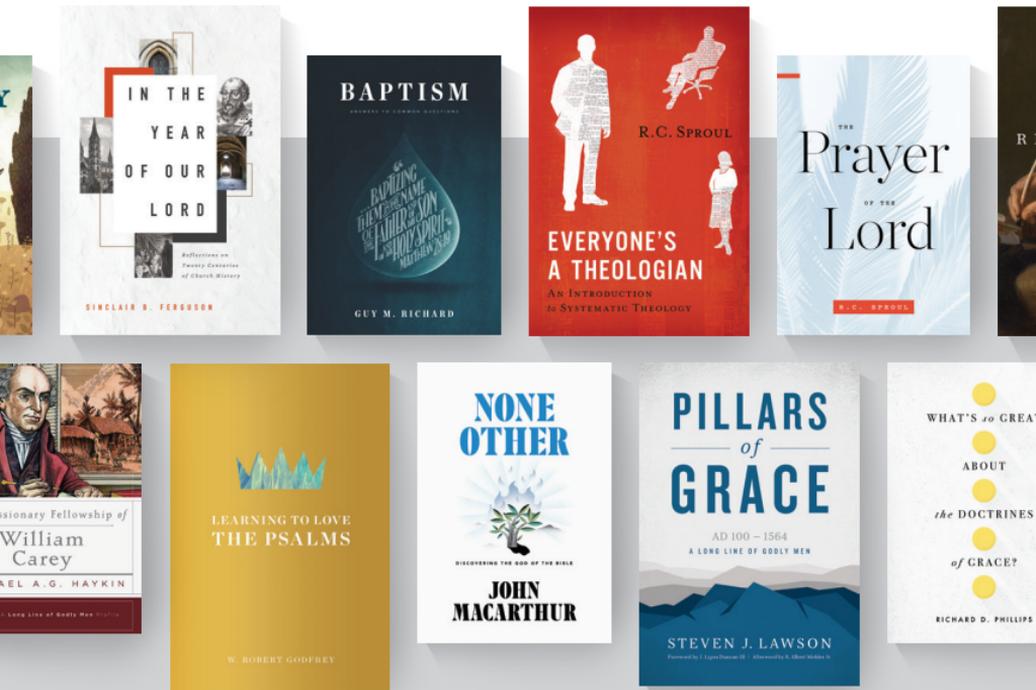
consummation of the kingdom of God when God's people will see Him as He is, in all His glory.

The reason this is called the beatific vision is because when we have that privilege of beholding God, the fullest aspiration of our humanity will be made complete. This hope is expressed in the famous prayer of Augustine of Hippo: "Oh God, You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You." Even though the Christian life is to be marked consistently by a pattern of joy, as we move from joy to joy there is always a limit to the joy that we can experience in this vale of tears—and the total fullness of that joy will not be experienced until we see Him face-to-face. We will move then to a whole new level of personal satisfaction, of personal joy and fulfillment—in short, true blessedness.

This kind of blessedness penetrates into the deepest chamber of our souls, and it overwhelms the soul with a sense of sweetness, delight, satisfaction, and contentment that knows no bounds. It's this kind of blessedness that we will consider as we study the Beatitudes.

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What does it mean to live a blessed life?

It's common to hear people speak of health, wealth, and prosperity as signs of God's blessing. But Jesus said that those who are poor, persecuted, and in pain are blessed. How can this be? What kind of blessing was Jesus referring to?

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul looks at a beloved portion of the New Testament known as the Beatitudes. As he explores Jesus' famous sermon, Dr. Sproul explains that whatever life's circumstances, true blessedness is found only by knowing the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

Dr. R.C. Sproul was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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