

“Blessings From the Backside”

Scripture Reading:

⁹ And he said, “Yes, go. But tell my people this: ‘You will hear my words, but you will not understand. You will see what I do, but you will not perceive its meaning.’

¹⁰ Harden the hearts of these people. Close their ears, and shut their eyes. That way, they will not see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn to me for healing.” (Isaiah 6:9-10 NLT)

Welcome to the last day of 2006. Tomorrow starts a new year. Like most of you I’ve made up my resolutions for next year and I’ll be keeping all of them; at least for the first eight hours of the New Year.

If I can get through lunch without eating potato chips or a candy bar, then this year is the start a whole new healthy diet. I’ve got a resolution to help Joan clean the house. I usually do the vacuuming; but if Sears comes out with a riding vacuum cleaner I’ll feel better about it. Here’s another one; eating vegetables without complaining. This one stands a chance if Joan cooks peas, beans and corn out of a can, these I like. Otherwise for me vegetables are what real food eats – beef. I’ve got a couple of other ones; throw my dirty cloths in the hamper without being asked; I won’t be so quick to lose my temper.

The trouble is the first is followed by the second, the second by the third and the third by the fourth. It won’t take long before I’ll get ticked off enough at a bad driver or a dropped glass or a stubbed toe to let loose with a blue streak of, if not bad words—at least unsanctified thoughts. Before you know it my dirty cloths will be back on our bedroom floor.

For most of us, our New Year’s resolutions get packed away with the last of the Christmas decorations. I can’t even tell you the number of times my New Year’s resolutions have gone by the wayside.

Now I'm not saying that resolutions are bad, they just tend to be, for the most part, unrealistic. It's just that they are awful hard to live up to and when we can't meet those expectations we tend to feel guilty.

Maybe a better thing to do at this time of the year is to look back and just count our blessings. Be thankful for what God has given us. Change December 31 from "New Years Eve" to "Count Your Blessings Day." A day to just be thankful.

But just what is a blessing? We hear the words "bless" or "blessing" all the time but do we really understand what a blessing is? Sometimes I think we have overused the word and forgotten what it means or signifies. It gets watered down to mean "Have a nice day."

To bless, in the biblical sense, means to ask for supernatural favor. We're not asking for something we can get for ourselves. We're crying out for the wonderful, unlimited goodness that only God knows about or can give us. Here's a very simplistic example to get the point across: A friend of yours sneezes, your immediate response is to say "God bless you!" Usually this comment is only in passing and for the most part is expected. But what you're really doing is asking for God to watch over this person, to keep him healthy and safe. If God chooses to bless this person, he receives the gift you asked for as a blessing. By God's grace that person becomes blessed.

Sometimes God gives us blessings and sometimes we have to ask for it.

There's a little prayer in First Chronicles called the Prayer of Jabez and it starts out with:

"Oh, that you would bless me indeed!"

Jabez is not asking for anything in particular. He's just leaving it to God. He's letting God figure out what He wants for him. He's putting his trust in God. Jabez is so excited about his request; the phrase ends with an exclamation point. There is a sense of excitement here. Whatever it is that God wants to give Jabez, he will gladly accept.

But sometimes God gives us blessings and we don't perceive them. In our busy lives we are not always aware of the blessings God has bestowed upon us. Sometimes we do not even recognize that a blessing has been given. As God told Isaiah:

⁹.... 'You will hear my words, but you will not understand. You will see what I do, but you will not perceive its meaning.' ¹⁰ Harden the hearts of these people. ... That way, they will not see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn to me for healing.' (Isa 6:9-10 NLT)

In the scripture reading this morning, if we replace "Harden the hearts of these people" with "Make them busy being busy" it's easy to see why we don't see the blessings we have received. We just don't take or think we have the time to see what's going on around us.

We have to work. Each of us has at least 8 hours of work to manage each day. You have to manage your boss. You have to go to meetings. And then you have to handle chaos.

We also have personal tasks. These are the things that you've just got to do. You've got to sleep. You've got to take a shower; you've got to brush your teeth; you've got to floss your teeth for at least a week or two before you go to the dentist because the hygienist is disgusted by how your teeth look. You've got to go to the doctor; you've got to get some exercise.

You've got to take care of household stuff; you've got to buy food for meals, fix meals, eat meals, clean up after meals. Somebody's got to make sure that the grass is mowed and clothes and dishes are washed. You've got to pay the bills, balance your checkbook.

And the list of things you've just got to do goes on and on.

Is it any wonder we can't see with our eyes or hear with our ears what God is doing for us? How God is affecting our life? How much God wants a relationship with us but we just don't have the time to allow Him to speak to us.

Over the past couple of years I've started to realize just how blessed I've been. It usually happens when I least expect it. I don't know about you but our house can get to be a mess sometimes. It's just the two of us in the house and two cats. For some reason, things don't get

put back where they belong or they just get lost sometimes. It can't be us ... so it must be the cats. They just won't put things back where they should be.

I'm sure we've all had this happen to us. We know something is in the house but we can't find it. So what do we do, we search and search and search for it. Turn the whole house upside down. Then we find it's been laying out in the open all along. We had eyes but could not see.

Sometimes when I'm looking for something that's gotten lost, something else will show up and remind me of a blessing I had not thought of before. Or I might see something that makes me think of a blessing in an entirely new light, kind of from the backside. Sometimes I even see that suffering or grief has a positive side to it when looked at from a different viewpoint; from the backside.

We have a big roll top desk at home; it's called the Black Hole. It's known by that name because whatever is put in it is lost forever. Usually if something is lost around the house and we just can't find it, the last question we ask ourselves is "Have you looked in the desk?"

A couple of weeks ago I was looking for a paper I was working on. It was no where to be found. After a lot of searching, my wife asked me if I had looked in the black hole. She had forgotten to tell me that she put some of my papers in it. And wouldn't you know it, there were the papers.

One of the things I found in the desk, besides the papers, was a photo of last summer's family vacation. Each summer our whole family gets together for a week. The last two years at a lake in northern Minnesota. The crew is made up of our three kids, their spouses and ten grandchildren. That makes for a total of 18 of us.

This photo was taken on the last day of vacation when we all got ready to leave and go our separate ways. Surprisingly, even after a week of being together, everyone is smiling and happy.

As I looked at the photo, it suddenly struck me how much my wife and I are truly blessed. We have three kids that actually talk to each other, all three have a college education and each of our kids has a spouse we are proud of, we get along with their in-laws and we've got ten grandkids we truly love. But once in a while when I look at family photos I see a blurred face floating around on the photo.

There are some events that take place in our lives that take a long time to be perceived as a blessing.

When Joan and I got married we were living in Plattsburgh, NY. Plattsburgh is in northern New York on Lake Champlain about sixty miles south of Montreal Quebec. Our lives had gotten pretty busy so we decided to take a long weekend and drive down to Binghamton, NY to visit her sister. Joan was about two and a half months pregnant at the time. So we jumped in the car, drove south on the Northway to Albany and then took route 7 to Binghamton.

The trip down and the first part of our trip were uneventful. I drove, Joan slept. Nothing unusual there, still the same after 40 years.

We decided to leave Binghamton early and drove north to see my grandmother in Syracuse. Joan really did not know her own grandmothers since both died in her early childhood, so my grandmother was the only grandmother figure she had known. And they really enjoyed each others company.

On the morning we were getting ready to go back home, Joan told me she was spotting. Normally from Syracuse I would have driven back taking the northern route to Plattsburgh by route 11 up through Watertown and Potsdam. I don't know why, I do now, but something told me we should go back taking the Thruway to Albany and then head north by the Northway. By the time we got to Albany she was spotting heavily.

Both of us are scared out of our wits by this point so we went to the emergency room at Albany Memorial Hospital. Neither one of us had any idea what was going on. We're two kids,

scared and alone in a strange city and a strange hospital. There is no one we could call or count on for help.

The doctors told us the bleeding was caused by what they called a spontaneous abortion, a miscarriage. This was nature's way of handling a genetic flaw in the fetus and the body was terminating a baby that would not have made it if the pregnancy had continued. We were also told that a surgical procedure would need to be performed to insure the uterus was cleaned out so there would be no infection. Both of us were devastated and confused. How could this have happened to us?

When I look at a family photo now, that blurred image in the photo I was looking at is the face of the child we will probably never know.

This was a tragic event. But looking back I am convinced this was a blessing in disguise, a blessing from the backside.

The writer of Genesis says that God looked at His Creation and after each day said "and that is good". When He created man

¹⁸The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." (GE 2:18 NIV)

So He made woman.

²⁴This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one. (GE 2:24 NLT)

When we lost that baby in Albany, for the first time in our married lives we had to trust each other and make our own decisions. Hard decisions. That weekend we truly became one.

We may never understand why this tragedy happened to us but I am truly convinced that God had a plan for us. He was preparing us for our future lives together.

¹⁴When I think of the wisdom and scope of God's plan, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, ¹⁵the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. (EP 3:14-15 NIV)

Maybe He thought we weren't ready to bring up a family yet. I don't know. Until our kids started coming along and we started bringing up a family, He gave us the time to learn how to live together. Then when we were bringing up our family, He taught us how to stay together, even when other families we knew were breaking up and getting divorces. Throughout our married life, He's taught us to support and trust each other. Whenever hard times came, He's taught us to work as a team to overcome our family's difficulties. He taught us that:

*⁹Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work:
¹⁰If one falls down, his friend can help him up. (EC 4:9-10 NIV)*

Over the last couple of years God has been teaching us how to pray together. Before every meal we give Him thanks for all He has given us. If we have a tiff, He's taught us to not go to bed mad at each other, how to talk it out, forgive each other and pray that we get along better.

And now that all the kids are gone and we're alone again, He's been teaching us how to grey together, to grow old together, how to renew the romance:

*³By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established;
⁴through knowledge its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures. (PR 24:3-4 NIV)*

because the best is yet to come. The Apostle Paul used the word "submit" when speaking of the husband/wife relationship. I like to think he really meant that we should become co-dependent and be partners. Our relationship has become just that because of a blessing from the backside that happened many years ago.

At other times there are common objects around the house that make us look at our relationship with God in different ways. Another backside view of a blessing.

Here's a bar of soap. I had a couple of friends in college and they decided to have a contest, for who knows why, to see who could go the longest without washing his sheets. Six months later, they decided to call it a draw. OK. Now that's something that needs washing.

Soap is something you use to wash up with or to clean clothes or to wash the dishes; the dog when he gets sprayed by a skunk.

Now you're probably thinking "OK, he's gone out of his mind this time." But there is a way of looking at soap to remind us of why we read a very special book. This book is a very special blessing God has given us - the Bible – His word. What I want to do is give you a little acrostic to be a format for devoting yourself to the Bible and enjoying its blessings.

The "S" stands for Scripture. We should all make a commitment; be devoted on a regular basis to exposing our minds to—immersing our minds in—Scripture. Paul writes:

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness so that everyone who belongs to God might be proficient, equipped for every good work. (II Ti 3:16-17 NLT)

We do this so that we might be a different kind of people. There is no book like this book. God uses this book to change people. It changed the world.

The Bible is a book about love. The Old Testament is about a father who created a home for his family. It's a story about His trying to teach His family how to live with each other. It's a story about a family being disobedient and disrespectful to their father. It's a story of a father trying to cope with his kids. It's a story about a father's unrelenting love for his kids.

The New Testament Gospels are about God in human form, Jesus Christ; trying to teach us how to love our God and each other; how to get along with each other. It's a book about relationships. It's a book about a God who loved us so much that He sacrificed His son for the redemption and forgiveness of our sins. It's a book about the work of the Holy Spirit bringing people together in community to form His church.

When I first read the Bible all the way through, when I got to the end, I saw what looked like a hand written note at the bottom of the page. It said

I love you --- signed God!

I see that same message whenever I finish reading scripture now and my response is

I love you too.

So, "S" stands for Scripture ... we make a commitment to read the Scripture on a regular basis, to be devoted to it.

"O" stands for Observation. I want to illustrate this with a particular text from Scripture.

This is from Ephesians:

Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the Word to present her to Himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish but holy and blameless. (Ephesians 5:25-27 NIV)

I start with Scripture and then move to Observation. I look to see what the text is saying. Here it's the Bride (the you and I) who are to be "washed by the Word." So, when we come to God, Paul says, He wants to "wash us through water through the Word."

So that brings me to Application. I start with the Scripture. I observe what it is that Paul is saying—God's intent that we be "washed by the water through the Word." So then, I bring my thoughts before God. I seek to apply this. I let the thoughts of Jesus filter into my mind, so that His thoughts can become my thoughts. I imagine:

What would it be like to have a mind cleansed of all the garbage that weighs me down? Imagine that when you look at any woman who is not your wife, you would look at her as if she were your sister or your daughter. That's what it would be to have a mind "washed by the water of the Word." That's why we devote ourselves to the Word. That's why we study the word.

A lot of people say they believe in the Bible, but they never read it. They're not devoted to the Bible. Sometimes in churches, we become superficial with it, and we measure spirituality in goofy ways like:

- How much of the Bible have you read?
- How much of the Bible do you know?

It is not about information. I sometimes think of it like this:

God's goal is not for you to get all the way through the Scriptures;

God's goal is for the Scriptures to get all the way through you.

We can never get superficial about it. In Application, I come to God and say:

OK, God. I want to live this stuff.

And that leads to "P."

"P" is for Prayer. I honor my time in Scripture, being washed by His blessing, by forming Prayer. I look at the scripture I'm reading, I observe what it's saying to me and how I can apply it to my life and out of that I actually form a prayer:

Lord, you know that I cannot transform my thought patterns on my own. My default mode is toward self-centeredness, anxiety, small and petty thoughts, greedy thoughts ... so would You cleanse my mind? Would You give me a mind like Jesus' mind? I'd really love to just think thoughts that are noble and courageous and true.

Then we start to be transformed. The point of reading Scripture is not to show how smart we are, or how committed we are to God. The point is that His kingdom can come down into our minds, and there is nothing like the Bible for that.

One last thought about the blessing of being able to read Scripture. Think about your own devotion to the Bible and about our devotion as a community together to be a People of the Bible ... to:

Read the Bible, know the Bible, love the Bible, do the Bible, live the Bible,
die to the Bible.

That's what Jesus did.

I have a five year plan. At least once every five years I'll at least think about cleaning out all the junk that has been accumulating in the garage. Well this year we had some remodeling

work done to the house and I was forced to clean out the garage. It had to be emptied completely. And while I was cleaning it out I found this chain that reminded me of a blessing, a blessing from the backside.

We've used this chain to pull down vines from our trees, to help pull out stumps when we had to cut trees down, sometimes even to pull a car out of a ditch in the winter. So when we needed it, I'd put on this old coat, get the chain out and hook it up to our three wheeler. When we used it you could just see the strain it was under, the tension of trying to get that stump out, how focused it was, what a burden it had to carry. And then when it had done its work how relaxed it became and free it was.

And then while I was looking at the chain, I got to thinking about the hold that Satan has on us. How Satan puts the burden on us by separating us from God through his temptation to sin. How Satan binds us with his chains. How Christ said

²⁸Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. (MT 11:28 NIV)

Jesus brought us relief from Satan's chains by His blood. He set us free by taking on those burdens for us. He brings us freedom through His sacrifice for us. And by this freedom we are a new creation in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Corinthians 5:17 NIV)

Your burdens — they are lifted from you. We become:

- Washed by Christ's body and blood and His sacrifice for us,
- Washed by the water of baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit and
- Washed by the water of God's Word in Holy Scripture

Washed by the Water of the Word.

For a large portion of my life I was mad at God. I did not have a good view of Christians; I thought for the most part they were a bunch of hypocrites – talking about all this love stuff and then expressing hate and prejudice towards others. So I used to play this game whenever I got into a conversation with them about their religion. I called the game “Stump a Christian”. One of my favorite questions was “Why do you want to go to heaven?” This would usually end the conversation.

I now know why I want to go to heaven. I have three goals in mind when I get there. My first goal is to look God straight in the eye and thank him for all the blessings He has given me, even when I shut Him out of my life. He was there with me all along and just like a father; He wanted to provide for me. I want to thank Him for the blessings I was too prideful to acknowledge or too blind to see. My next goal is to thank Jesus for being my buddy, even when I turned Him away and shunned His wanting to be my friend, to have a relationship with me. My third goal is to thank the Holy Spirit for helping me make wise decisions, for giving me the “gut feels” that guided my life.

It is through faith and an acceptance of the grace that God bestows on us that we come to recognize and accept all the blessings we have received. But

¹What is faith? It is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen. It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see. (Heb 11:1 NLT)

When the disciples asked Jesus why He spoke in parables, He quoted Isaiah; just as in the scripture we heard today. He gave them all the clues to solve the riddle that were contained in the parables. If you take the time, look for the clues God has given you, then

*¹⁶... blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.
¹⁷For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. (MT 13:16-17 NIV)*

So here's my prayer for you and a little challenge. Tomorrow we get an extra day off for New Year's day, so why not treat this day, New Years Eve Sunday, as a true Sabbath Day; a

day of Sabbath rest. Use it as a day that God had intended; a day of rest and a day to think about Him. When you get home today, hide the clicker (The Vikings and Packers are out of the picture anyway), hide the car keys, put the phone on "Do Not Disturb", turn off the cell phones. Get rid of all your distractions. And then maybe take a long look at the things in your house. Try to find something that's been missing for a long time. Maybe, just maybe, you'll see blessings you had not seen before. You'll get a chance to count your blessings. Maybe you'll find a blessing you had not thought about before; a blessing from the backside. Give yourself a chance to see how really blessed you are.

Let's end in prayer.