

Delight and Defence of The UK Blessing

If you're anywhere within 200ft of a Christian's social media you will have encountered this youtube video. Musicians and worship leaders from a number of churches across the UK, singing "The Blessing" over the nation.



The video is here in case you've missed it: The UK Blessing on youtube.

Let me be clear from the outset here: I *delight* in this song and how it's being used. This post isn't a substantial critique. It's a bit of wondering, a bit of defence, a bit of leaning off from it to think about the times we're in and the church of which we are a part. The song itself (attributed in the main to Kari Jobe and Cody Carnes) came into the limelight coincidentally with the Covid-19 pandemic. We've sung it ourselves as a household in this strange season.

So here goes: I **delight** in this song.

I delight in the content of the song. Its main motif draws upon the Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6:22-27:

The Lord said to Moses, 'Tell Aaron and his sons, "This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

""The Lord bless you

and keep you;

the Lord make his face shine on you

and be gracious to you;

the Lord turn his face towards you

and give you peace.'"

These are deep and rich words that Scripture leans on from time to time to give assurance of God's love and favour. It's there again in Psalm 67, for instance. It's not about individualistic blessing: the focus is on *nation* and *generations*. This also has rich grounding (Exodus 20:6, Deuteronomy 7:9) as does the invocation of God's *presence* (e.g. Joshua 1:9) and God being *for* his people. These deep waters well up in the New Testament (e.g. Romans 8:31) as declarations of how fundamentally, totally, existentially, substantially, utterly, profoundly is the blessing of God to be found in Jesus of Nazareth, died and risen again as Lord and Saviour!

Notice how a lot of this biblical grounding is from the formative days of God's people, Israel, in the time of their rescue from slavery in Egypt, their wandering in the wilderness, and the entering into the promised land. These were not easy roads. There were afflictions from around them, and the afflictions of sin and wayward hearts within them. Sometimes it may seem like the loving heart of God looks like discipline (some of us are feeling that at the moment) and feels like his absence (ditto): but the deeper truth remains and calls the heart to trust him. He is for you. He is with you, to the thousandth generation. May his face look upon you and give you peace. **At this time of affliction**, however we might feel it and experience it, these are life-giving words to sing.

Of course, some may (and have) suggested that the blessing that the Scriptures reserves to God's people shouldn't be invoked over the world at large. The critique is not invalid: the blessing of God is not merely a universally and thinly applied sense of warmth, it is deep and located and especially attached to God's determined work, his promises to his people, and his presence in the person and work of Jesus. But it's not

wrong to pray for the blessing of many. I've addressed this question before. I long for all people to know the loving presence and saving grace of God, who knows us and made us and has given us his Son to save us and lead us into an eternal life that begins now. Especially now.

I delight in the recording and release of this song. Having had to come to grips with sermon recording and livestreaming, I can very much delight in the video and audio editing skills!

It's not perfect, of course. I've already seen some comments from those who haven't seen someone who looks like this that or the other; not all the intersectional categories have been covered. I feel it a bit myself; there's a lot of big evangelical charismatic mega-churches in that mix: Where are the "ordinary worshippers" who look more like me and mine? I've got a well-honed cynicism after years in this church game. The "what about me?" response is an understandable human reaction, but in this case I/we should get over it.

This song hasn't come from some tightly planned bureaucratic focus-group vetted process of fine-tuned diversity management. If there is anyone who has "made it happen" it's Tim Hughes (formerly of Soul Survivor, and now of Gas Street Church Birmingham) and his espoused attitude towards the song is commendable. It has come about from a loose arrangement of friends and networks and invited and offered contributions. It's organic and messy, and therefore not perfect. And that's good.

It also hits a pretty good balance regarding the spotlight and avoiding the sort of brand-driven recognition we often slip into. One of the *points* of this song is to show that the churches are alive and working together. So it needs some sense of being able to recognise people and places and names of congregations. It does a good job of avoiding the celebrity factor. People are not named, *churches* are. It's been released under a neutral brand. The naming of churches serves the

purpose of showing a community of communities without overdriving the brands. And I love knowing that there are Eastern Orthodox and Catholics and !Pentecostals and St. Someone's of Somewhere all in the mix.

For me, unlike other attempts at this sort of thing, this feels like my brothers and sisters, and I can sing with them. I *know* these faces. I have seen quite a few of them in real life. I've had conversations with a number of them. There's at least one face in that mix that I've served coffee to across my dining room table. The family of God is both bigger and smaller than we think.

Again, I'm good at cynicism. I've seen ego-driven light-show presentations done with not much more than a Christian aesthetic. This is not that. It's not absolutely pure and precise, but so what? It's a cracked-jar crumpled-paper offering of people who want to declare the love of God over a hurting nation. It is something to delight in.

The only thing that wears my heart, just a little, is this. There's not enough of Jesus. One of the cracks in our jar (that I think this current season is rubbing at, one of the loving disciplines of God for us right now) is that we have been in a rut of church being about church rather than church being about Jesus. The church *is* a blessing – but that's a truth of vocation (what we are called to and enabled to be) rather than identity (what we are by our own right in and of ourselves). The declaration at the end: "Our buildings may be closed... but the church is alive" is great, but it's unfortunate in that it's simply about us. It's the same with the blurb in the video description which is about *our* unity and *our* good works. It's almost there, but not quite. **We are only a blessing because Jesus is. We are only alive, because Jesus is. Let's say that.** We embody the blessing, but Jesus is the substance of it.

We're not singing ourselves over the nation, we are singing

the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Keep doing it.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

Q&A: Should we pray for blessings for unbelievers?

Sarah A writes:

Hi Will,

Should we as individuals or churches offer prayer for unbelievers for God to intervene in day to day challenges or bring his blessings on a situation?

I completely appreciate that the motivation to offer this is loving and evangelistic and that God of course can use these interactions for his glory.

But is it right to be offering this kind of prayer? It seems to be offering prayer for what God can do rather than seeking him for who he is. Clearly an unbeliever's first and greatest need is to come to repentance and find Jesus. To me, offering prayer for problems or asking for blessings seems to put God in the role of fixer with the Christian acting as an intermediary therefore bypassing the need for a relationship between God and the one who wants prayer. But we know that only Jesus is the intermediary between man and God and the promise of Hebrews 4:14 – 16 is for Christians who now have access to the throne of God to receive mercy and grace to help us in our time of need.

1 John 5:14 – 16 tells us that if we ask anything according to God's will, he hears us. So does God hear these kind of prayers?

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

Thanks Sarah,

Great question. In summary, you ask “Should we pray for unbelievers for God to intervene or bring blessings?” In summary, my answer is “Yes.” Does he “hear these kind of prayers”? Yes, but as with all pastoral encounters, praying for someone in this way comes with a responsibility to exercise care, faithfulness, and discernment.

There’s a lot going on behind this answer, though, and I’d like to unpack it if I may. The first thing to consider, although it may seem like a simplistic question, is this:

What do we mean by “unbeliever” anyway?

I’m not sure I actually like the term “unbeliever” as it’s a little denigrating: everybody believes in *something* after all.

But clearly we do need to grasp some sort of distinction between those who do and do not believe those things that *Paul* tells us are of “first importance”, “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, [and] that he was raised on the third day.” We are at least talking about those who do not have a personal faith in Jesus.

That’s simple enough. If we start there, it is biblical example that leads us to conclude that praying for someone who doesn’t have this faith is not only permissible, but it is often desirable.

Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus himself intervened in the lives of many who had not yet put their faith in him in a formal sense. Similarly, in *Matthew 10*, he commissions the disciples to go and “freely give” just as they have “freely received” and in practice that means that they are to “heal those who are ill, raise the dead, cleanse those who have

leprosy, drive out demons.” I think that puts us in the ballpark of “praying for God to intervene in day to day challenges and to bring his blessings on a situation”, to use your words.



I find the example of Peter and John in Acts 3 particularly informative. Here the lame man does not ask for salvation, not even healing; he is simply asking for money. Peter and John do not take the opportunity to evangelise to him (although the end result has the man dancing in praise to God), rather we get the following famous line (emphasised below):

*When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, ‘Look at us!’ So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, **‘Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.’** Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong.*

This phenomenon appears to be writ large in Acts 5:12-16 where we read that “a great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.” None of this appears to depend on those involved having a pre-existing state of belief in Jesus. In fact, usually the intervention and intercession *leads* to belief.

We could just about leave it there, but **let’s push a little**

deeper.

That push begins with something of a counterpoint to what I've just suggested: You see, one problem in using the examples I have is that all those who are being blessed are, in some way, *already part of the people of God*. That is, they are members of the Jewish people, under the covenant promises of God. The miracles, blessings, and interventions that we see being ministered through Jesus and his disciples are not so much prayers for unbelievers, but a demonstration that God's promises to his people have been fulfilled.

This, itself, is gospel: The kingdom of God is here, the blessings of the covenant are fulfilled in Jesus; enter into the hope of your people. Or simply, in application, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!"

In some sense, then, these blessings and interventions are "in-house." The covenant blessings come to God's people when the covenant is obeyed, (just consider *Deuteronomy 28* if you have the time). It is no surprise, then that these blessings of healing, restoration, and divine intervention are made manifest through the faithful *obedience* of Christ, especially in his death. The blessings now flow, through him, to the "*lost sheep of Israel*". Examples such as the healing of the lame man in Acts 3 are not so much about "praying for unbelievers who are on the outside" but "demonstrating that the gospel is true on the inside."

But that doesn't mean I've contradicted myself. What we've done is dug down to the roots of the gospel, and found them grounded on the covenant promises of God. So let's go back to that covenant:

What is at the heart of the promises of God?

Look at the covenant that God makes with Abram (later called Abraham) in *Genesis 12*:

*'I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and **you will be a blessing.**
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and **all peoples on earth**
will be blessed through you.'*

Here's the impetus: Whatever blessing comes to God's people, it is to flow out into the world. Whatever blessing we have in Christ, we are to share it.

So perhaps we should turn to a different biblical example to interact with your question. Consider something like Jesus' response to the Canaanite woman in *Matthew 15* as he heals her daughter. This example is particularly telling: Both the woman and Jesus make a point about blessings for those who are currently *outside* of covenant grace. The dialogue about Jesus only going to the "lost sheep of Israel" and whether or not she might "eat the crumbs that fall from the table" serves not to diminish but *amplify* the faith she has exhibited outside of the fold. She was not yet been brought into the fold, so to speak, but the blessings can and do *flow* to her. Her prayer *was* heard and it was answered. Jesus is simply doing what the promises of God demand; sharing the blessing.

So our very foundation, the grounding of God's words of promise that sets the shape of who we are in Jesus, shifts us to look outwards. Seeking the blessing of those who are "outside" in some sense is not just one possible outworking of our own belief and covenant inclusion, it's *essential* to its very character. We bless because we are blessed, we freely give because we have freely received. **We, who are in Christ, are to act as he acted, and continues to act through his Spirit in us.**

To pray for a person who is not yet “in Christ” doesn’t usurp Christ’s role as an intermediary, it *exercises* it, as long as we pray according to his character. We can only pray from the basis of the covenant blessing we have in him, i.e. we can only pray in *his* name. To offer to pray for someone in their circumstances, is therefore an act that *reveals* Jesus more than it hides him. To pray for someone in their circumstances is to act *according to* the promises that God has fulfilled in Jesus, not against them.

That’s the foundation I’m coming from, in answering your question. There are, however, a couple of things to tease out:

Firstly, you write *“It seems to be offering prayer for what God can do rather than seeking him for who he is. Clearly an unbeliever’s first and greatest need is to come to repentance and find Jesus. To me, offering prayer for problems or asking for blessings seems to put God in the role of fixer with the Christian acting as an intermediary therefore bypassing the need for a relationship between God and the one who wants prayer.”*

I think I get what you mean, but excuse me if I miss the mark.

Clearly, our longing for people to share in the blessings of God is ultimately met if they, too, become a part of the covenant people; if they turn to Jesus in faith, and receive forgiveness, renewal, and all the other things. But we cannot separate prayer for other forms of blessing from this. If comfort, healing, or divine intervention comes from answered prayer, this is more likely to draw people to the ultimate blessing rather than hide it. To separate prayer for salvation from prayer for blessing in general creates a **false dichotomy**.

But **secondly**, your concerns are valid, and should remind us to **be careful** in how we pray. In some way, this is why I bother to go to some of the depths that I do in answering these sorts

of questions. If we pray as if “God is a fixer” then that is the “gospel” that we will proclaim in those prayers; and, especially in the event that the “fix” doesn’t come as we thought it might, we might *hinder* people’s view of God.

But if we pray from an understanding of who we are in Christ, covered by his grace, filled with his spirit, inheriting his blessing, that is what we reveal. We know how we pray for ourselves and for our fellow brothers and Christians, with confidence in God’s character, with an understanding of how he works all things together for good, with an assurance of God’s love even in the midst of suffering. We pray from the same place when we pray for those who don’t share this understanding, and we must be additionally careful to ensure that this understanding, and our meaning, is clear.

I’ve seen it done badly. I’ve also seen it done well. I’ve been to big events where it’s all about the guru fixing things on some messiah’s behalf. I’ve also been to big events where sweet prayer and intercession has been offered, and things were gently and clearly explained along the way; the heart of God was spoken of, shared, manifested.

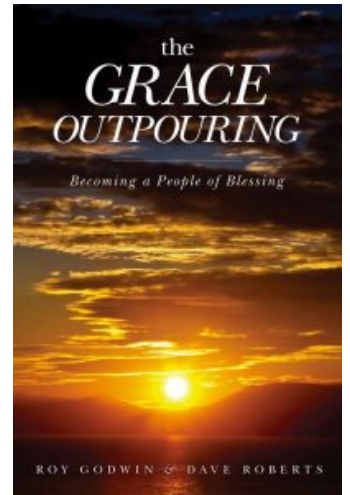
In short, wisdom is required. Whether it be a “Healing On The Streets” ministry, or an opportunity that comes from a conversation with a friend, as we come to our Father on their behalf, we need to ensure that our words help them to come along with us.

In the end, that’s the sweet childlike dynamic on which it all rests. We have found the one who is our, Saviour, Lord and Leader, who has the words of eternal life, the blessings of eternity. In him we are caught up into our Creator. This is a precious, beautiful, sacred thing. It’s not ours to hide, but we share it carefully, with wonder, joy, and delight. And who knows what our Lord will do?

Review: The Grace Outpouring

This book comes from Welsh retreat centre Ffald-y-brenin, but that place, and author, Roy Godwin, are not the point.

Here's something from the book, in Roy's words, that gets to the heart of the real issue for me:



A number of years ago I felt a cry rising up in my inmost being – “There has to be more than this.” As I remembered my dreams of what living as a child of God would be like, there was that cry again. There has to be more than this. I was stirred by memories of great days in the past when God had seemed so close, but that’s where they were – in the past. Oh God, there must be more than this.

Looking at church initiated the same cry. *There is so much good, so many signs of blessing in many local churches and fellowships, but looking more broadly at the national scene raised the question “Is this really all that the Father has in mind for the bride of his Son?” (pp180-181, emphasis mine)*

This book taps into a divine sense of dissatisfaction. I don't think it's unique to our time and place; I see it echoed in the lives of many Christian saints, both historical and contemporary. It's a dissatisfaction that is eschatological in nature (*Romans 8:22-23*) and speaks to the sense that until our Lord returns there is still more gospel work to be done.

The Great Commission to go and make disciples remains in

place.

In our experience, Gill and I have encountered people and places that are entirely satisfied with the status quo. Any dissatisfaction is a commiseration about the good old days rather than a cry for more. This is a dry place to be.

But for those who are dissatisfied the next question, of course is “What do we do with it?” How do we act on it? We have seen a variety of responses. All are well-intentioned, but some are problematic. The essence of the problem is this tension: in order to get good things done we take control, but nothing will satisfy if we do it in with and for ourselves.

We’ve seen it in mission agencies where the dissatisfaction leads to impatience, lack of care, vision without process, and ineffectiveness. We’ve seen it in congregations where that dissatisfaction turns into yet another program which is an attempt to scratch the itch so as to return to comfort, or prove worth, or not seem lazy, or simply “do what good churches should do.” We’ve both been driven in these sort of ways. It’s a frustrating place to be.

There’s a difficult tension at the heart of an effective ecclesial spirituality – to be dissatisfied, stirred, motivated, urgent, expectant; and let God be God and *build through us*, not in spite of us. It isn’t quietist or passive – things get still get done. But it *is* built upon a foundation of prayer, and being attentive to God’s Word and the providential promptings of His Spirit.

The Grace Outpouring hits us at the sweet spot of that tension. It promotes the dissatisfaction, it stirs us to action, and so it pivots us to turn to prayer, expectant prayer.

Roy, and co-writer Dave Roberts, do this simply by sharing the story of Ffald-y-brenin. Yes there’s some explanation and some reasonable theologising and all the other things that get

a point across, but in the end they just want to share what God has been doing. Dave writes in his foreword:

...as people who model our lives on a storyteller, we're best advised to do as he did and tell the stories of what God has done. So we invite you to join us as this story unfolds. We'll draw out principles and go to the root sources in Scripture, but we hope that what you read will help paint pictures on the canvas of your imagination that will allow you to be provoked by the Holy Spirit to prayer, compassion, and a mind-set that desires to bless others. (p14)

I can't do justice to the story here, but it truly does creatively provoke.

Along the way we do encounter some of the definitive Ffald-y-brenin experiences. To consider two of them:

Blessing: In the story Roy shares how his was initially an "accidental" tradition – to speak a blessing over all those who come to Ffald-y-brenin. To be a recipient of it is profound. Gill and I experienced this first-hand when we travelled to the centre a few weeks ago; tired and exhausted from a long day of travel and some of the complexities and perplexities of life we were shown to our room, and then to the chapel, where life-giving utterly-relevant personal words were spoken over us in Christ's name. I hadn't read the book before we went; I wasn't expecting it! It set us on course for a deep and meaningful time with God.

We don't always know what to do with "blessing." In some popular thinking blessings are almost like magic, talismanic words; this is usually unhelpful, and inhibits access to the gospel. For others, "blessing" is simply an indistinct form of prayer. Roy is right when he distinguishes blessing from intercession; as he points out to offer a blessing in Christ's name is a bold, daring, and necessarily humble action of someone who takes seriously the priesthood of believers and

the ambassadorial nature of the Christian vocation, and seeks to exercise it with generous care. It may not be a rigorous theological treatise, but I admire the thoughtfulness:

We're invoking the very character of God himself into the lives of those we pray for. They're getting a foretaste of being adopted into God's family. We're opening a door for them to glimpse something of the kingdom of God. God is saying, "I'm going to bless you with everything I've blessed my children with." (p36)

There is something right and properly kerygmatic in turning our holy dissatisfaction into words of blessing, to articulate, to *proclaim* the creative life-giving heart of our Lord and Saviour specifically, personally, and locally.

House of Prayer / New Monasticism: In the story a Welsh Christian retreat centre becomes a "House of Prayer" and Roy expands and expounds this by referring not only to the daily rhythm of prayer that is exercised at the centre, but also to the outward-looking movements that are as near as hospitality and acts of service, as far as intercessions for nations and global movements, and as deep as the revivals of the Celtic and modern Welsh church. I reflected earlier about how this compares to our English context.

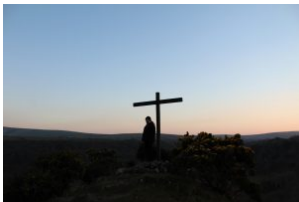
Gill and I have brought the daily rhythm of prayer into our home and are seeking to share it in some form with our church.

The daily reminder, using words of Scripture to cause us to bring to mind the characteristics and promises of a faithful God, has blessed us. We have somewhere to give that holy dissatisfaction a proper beginning, a turning to God, a daily repentance, a discipline of intercession and expectation.

Towards the end of the book Roy connects the dots with the amorphous movement that is becoming known as the "New Monasticism." It has deep and ancient roots of course. In current manifestations it invokes simplicity, purity and

accountability in ways that express the holy dissatisfaction in profoundly counter-cultural ways. They are ways that tear down middle class idols.

...Local House of Prayer involves sacrifice, just as it did in the Old Testament times. Among our offerings we will bring our worship (not necessarily singing) and the spirit of the community around us. We will need to set aside our rights, judgmental attitudes, pride, and self-righteousness. We will lay down our bodies and our patterns of thinking as living sacrifices for God's glory and his purposes. (pp167-168)



After returning from our recent visit to Ffald-y-brenin, Gill and I have been pondering these things. What I have read of here, and what we have encountered has informed our dissatisfaction. It has renewed our passion for God's Word and Spirit, and a determination to rely on him, rather than to burn-out in our own strength.

These things have been stimulated by our visit, and we will return. But it's not about the place, or the person. It's about doing the hard yards of following God. Of seeking him in the dissatisfaction, not collapsing it, not running away from it, but facing the pain and patience of it, and actively pursuing his way; so that at the end of it all he is glorified as God's people are blessed to be a blessing.