

It's the beginning of a new year. Time of excitement. Time of wondering what's going to happen in the days ahead. Maybe you've made a resolution, a way to improve yourself, and that's a good thing. Or maybe you're just curious, what's this year going to be like? Is it going to be a better year? Is it going to be my year? Are things going to go generally well?

Those are questions I think that come up with every new year, but they're questions that come up especially this year in particular, because as we stand on the brink of 2021, I think we're wondering what's this year really going to be like? Because a lot of them people thought that last year, 2020 was an especially difficult year. No matter what you might personally think about it, it's hard to deny that it was a year full of disruption, that it was a year full of change that disrupted everything that we once held dear.

So we're wondering is 2021 going to be better than 2020? Have we finally hit rock bottom and now we're on our way up and out? Is 2021 going to be kind of the same as 2020, so that was at least for a few more months we can expect a lot of the same kinds of disruption? Or is 2021 going to be worse than 2020? Things that we haven't even thought of yet that are going to and happen in the days ahead? We can't know. It's impossible to know. Only God knows what the future will be. And because we don't know what's going to happen in this coming year, it fills us with uncertainty. We want to know what this year will be. Why does it seem like the only thing that stays constant these days is change?

But Christians, no matter what 2021 brings, there is one thing that never changes. One thing that will never, ever be different, and that is the blessing of our Lord, which he gives to you with each passing year. No matter what happens, if 2021 is a worse year or a better year, or all of the years after it, God's love and God's blessing is the same today as it always has been. Because God himself does not change, Christians. God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. When he promises you something, when he says his blessings over you, that does not change, no matter what the year may bring.

That is what we from our Old Testament reading for today from Numbers chapter six. Because in Numbers chapter six, we encounter Israel facing the same kind of uncertainty about their future. Because Israel at this point is wondering what's going to happen. They've come out of Egypt when God brought them out with the 10 plagues, caused them to pass through the Red Sea and then brought them down to Mount Sinai where he gave them the law, where he made them his promises.

But even during that time, they were wondering, did Moses only lead us out here to kill us? Are we going to die in this wilderness? What is going to happen to us in the days ahead? And then after Numbers chapter six, in the book of Numbers, we learn that Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. So you can only imagine the same kind of uncertainty that they must've been feeling. When is this ever going to come to an end? Are we going to wander out in this wilderness for the rest of our days?

Now we should understand here first of all, that most of that generation was in fact, godless. They did not trust in the Lord. So when they were wondering about what the future was going to hold, they were wondering the same way that the world wonders. With a kind of despair, with a

kind of complete uncertainty and a lack of hope. Wondering what's going to happen in the days ahead.

But there were two among them, two of that generation who did believe in God and who looked at their problems in a very different way. That of course was Joshua and Caleb. Joshua was Moses's right-hand man, the one who would eventually lead the people of Israel into the promised land. And Caleb on the other hand was one of the 12 spies who went into the land the first time. And Caleb and Joshua both, because Joshua was also one of the spies, said to the people of Israel, "Trust in God. Don't be afraid. Yeah, it seems like these people are huge. Yeah, it seems like we'll never get in, but trust in the Lord because he will deliver us just as he said that he would."

But Israel didn't listen. They didn't want to listen. And so Israel was forced to wander for 40 years, but Joshua and Caleb both wandered right along with them. Joshua and Caleb both were wondering, when would this ever come to an end? Was God going to keep his promise? Was God going to do what he said he was going to do? And Christians, God did keep his promise because he brought Joshua and Caleb both, together with the children of that generation, into the promised land, just as he said that he would. So when they were facing their uncertainties about what the future might hold, they could trust in the Lord because they knew that he would do exactly what he said he would do.

Christians, regardless of what 2021 brings us, regardless of how dark it might be or how bright it might be, what does not change about this coming year is that the Lord will keep his promises to you. The Lord will bless you just as he once blessed Israel and he will not fail to deliver on that blessing. What is this blessing which we see here in Numbers chapter six? What exactly is God saying to us? Well, it's a blessing which we're all familiar with because it's the way that we end our communion services every Sunday. 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. But what does that mean for us? Especially as we begin 2021?

The Lord begins this blessing with the Lord bless you. Now in the Bible, whenever God talks about blessing, he's always talking about an increase, about giving us more of something. In the old Testament terms, that was usually a physical increase, that they would have a bigger harvest for example, or that they would have a bigger herd, or that they would have a bigger family. Whenever God blessed them in that way, he gave them more and more of his worldly, physical blessings. That's still true for us, that can still happen, but he can also give us increase in spiritual blessings so that we grow in the fruits of the Spirit. That can happen even in the midst of difficult times.

I know of many people, for example, who have said that 2020 was actually a good year for them because they learned to trust in God more than they ever had before. They started to pray more. They started to go to church more. They started to do all of these things which they hadn't done in previous years, because they recognized that God was bringing them closer to himself. So God can bless us even in difficult times, giving us that spiritual increase of the fruits of the Spirit. So even if 2021 is difficult, Christians, God will still continue to bless you and to bring you ever closer to himself, to give you a stronger faith in him so that we will walk closer with him in all of our days.

The next part says that the Lord will keep you. He will guard you. He will protect you. Guard you against all danger and against all evil. Now we could understand that very simply to mean that he will keep us away from danger, and that's true. But it could also mean that he is going to keep us safe, even in the midst of evil, because on the one hand, God contains evil. He makes it smaller than what it could be. Your life could be a whole lot worse actually, if God did not contain evil and to keep it within certain bounds.

But on the other hand, God also leads us and protects us even in the midst of evil. Like the words of Psalm 23, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me. Regardless of what 2021 brings us Christians, even if it is a terrible year, the Lord will continue to guard us, he will continue to protect us, because he loves us. No matter what we face, he is always with us, even to the very end of our days.

The blessed continues, the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. When the Bible talks about God's face, it's always talking about his favor towards us. You know, if God looks at us, that means he's favorable towards us. If God looks away from us, that means he's unfavorable, that he is in fact angry with us. So the call to make his face shine upon us means that his favor towards us is increasing, that he is pleased with us. Nowhere else is he more pleased with us than in his son, Jesus Christ.

Which in fact is the second part of this blessing, that the Lord would be gracious to us, that he would show us his mercy and show us his love. God loves you so much, Christians, even in this coming year of 2021, whatever it might be, that he has given you his son, Jesus Christ. God will continue to be merciful and gracious towards you because he loves you and has made you to be who you are.

The blessing concludes, the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. Again, we have this image of God's face being lifted up on us, that he is showing us his favor, and this favor expresses itself in peace. The peace which surpasses all understanding. The peace which only God can give. The world does not know this peace. World looks at the future and worries and wonders what's going to happen. But as Christians, we don't have to worry and wonder, we have this peace which comes only from knowing God. Because no matter what happens in the days ahead, Christians, God is still King. God is still alive. And because he is still our living King, we know that even if we have the very worst year that we can remember, that he will not forsake us and he is with us always. So don't worry about what the future might be. Jesus lives, and for that reason we can rejoice in him.

Christians, let 2021 come. Let it be whatever it's going to be. If it's better than what we think it might be, the Lord be praised. If it's worse than we think than it might be, the Lord be praised, because God does not fail on his promises. God will be with you always. He will deliver you from every trial and tribulation. So Christians, the Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you his peace, not only in 2021, but in every year to come. To him be the glory now and forever. Amen.