

## Should God bless South Africa? Part 1

By David de Bruyn

South Africa's national anthem begins with the words "God bless Africa." It is a supreme irony that millions who do not believe in God, or are in no personal relationship with Him, sing these words with enthusiasm – God bless us!

There was a time when the words, "God bless South Africa" meant something else. They were a prayer, a request for the God of heaven, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, to bless our country and people. Today, however, reflecting the times we are living in, where every man is a law unto himself and submits to no one, those words are no longer a request, but in a sense, a demand.

Now the words seem to convey an expectation. They are a chant that we say, and supposedly, God, upon hearing those words, must move in and bless. God is no longer the Sovereign King, He is the servant, the one who must bless as soon as we order it.

Today we use the term 'God bless Africa' as if saying it means that it *will* happen. We say those words like once they are out our mouths, God is compelled to bless. Not a day goes by without someone calling on God to bless us as a nation, as a church, or even as a family. Recent books have made much about asking for God's blessing and obtaining it.

It seems, though, that two questions are never satisfactorily answered in all that we hear about blessing. They are, firstly, what exactly is God's blessing? What does it mean if God blesses you – what will it look like? It's the lack of a solid Biblical answer to this first question that has opened the door to the false teachings of the prosperity Gospel.

So much confusion exists on that topic today that the term 'bless' has lost some of its power. It is quite true that God does indeed want to bless His people. This is part of His nature – to overflow in blessings. But the lack of a proper definition of what that blessing is has created much false teaching.

It is one thing to state the Biblical truth – God wants to bless His people. It is quite another thing to read into that statement unlimited health and wealth. That's a classic case of where a poor definition leads you completely astray. If I define blessing as a lifetime supply of chocolate, then it is logical to say that if God wants to bless me, He will give me a lifetime supply of chocolate. That's logical, but it's wrong.

It's wrong not because I have denied the Biblical truth that God wants to bless His people, but because I have wrongly defined what blessing is. People have trivialised the blessing of God to being comfortable lives, health and wealth, a lot of rain and good

crops. While God's blessing may include these things, it certainly is not the heart of what it means for God to bless a nation.

The second question which is almost never asked is: what pre-requisites must be in place for God to bless, as John MacArthur unpacks in his booklet, *Can God Bless America?* The same is true for us. Does simply chanting 'God bless South Africa' guarantee it? I think it is better to ask – *should* God bless South Africa? Is it fitting for God to do so now, or would it be a contradiction?

Also, does God bless indiscriminately, or are there things that must be in place before He blesses? Maybe we should even back up further, and ask a question that no one wants to even speak out loud – can God curse South Africa? **Psalm 9:17** says: *"The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God."* God can, and does, destroy nations.

God gave this ominous and at the same time encouraging warning in **Jeremiah 18:7-8**: *"At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; if that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them."*

Clearly, according to those verses, God does choose to destroy nations, and only repentance stops that from happening. Jonah preaching to Nineveh and their repentance is a good example of this.

How does God curse a nation? I believe most often, He stops restraining the sin in that nation, and allows it to destroy the country. God speaks of this a lot in **Romans 1**. Three times it speaks of God giving the unbelieving world over, or giving them up. There comes a time that God says to man, 'Have thine own way.' When that day happens, it is the death of that country.

Jim Nelson Black wrote a book called, *'When Nations Die.'* In it, he looked at the historical collapse of various civilizations and tried to identify common elements. He came up with 10 factors that seemed to be in every civilisation before it decayed and collapsed:

1. An increase in lawlessness
2. A loss of economic discipline
3. Rising bureaucracy
4. A decline in education
5. A weakening of cultural foundations
6. A loss of respect for traditions
7. An increase in materialism
8. A rise in immorality
9. A decay of religious belief
10. A devaluing of human life.

That sounds like an ominous warning when we look around, not only at our own country, but probably worldwide.

Rome followed this pattern. Beginning with strong families and sound political structures, Romans believed in "duty, honesty, and honour" and in being "earnest, tenacious, well-disciplined, frugal, and self-sacrificing." But as power, wealth, and lust took over Roman hearts, high taxes, adultery, and perverted sexuality destroyed families and the nation began to decline.

Having seen how and why God curses a nation, I think we can already guess what the Bible's prerequisites are for God's blessing a nation. But before we see that, let us ask and answer that crucial question – what is God's blessing?

The words for 'blessing' in the Old and New Testament are used variously to mean different things. Sometimes, they refer to praise and honour. Blessing here means to worship, to give praise and honour to someone. In this sense, it can mean to confer benefits on someone.

Another sense in which the word is used means a general sense of happiness. To be blessed is to be glad, joyful, a recipient of things that delight the heart. When we speak about God blessing humans, it is in this second sense that we mean it. God providing humans with what they need to be happy, contented and satisfied.

Now, this happens in two senses: in a general way, and in a specific way. God's general blessing is on the whole world. When our Lord taught that we should love our enemies, He was telling us we should do so because God does that. He said in **Matthew 5:45**: *"That ye may be the children of your Father which is in Heaven: for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust."*

So there is a real sense in which God blesses all. He gives all humans some measure of the joys of life – some pleasantries, whether they be sunshine, food, some laughter and happiness. Many who reject Him still experience the gracious general blessing of God. But there is a more specific kind of blessing: that which comes to God's people. Those who receive Christ as Saviour, those who are born-again, are blessed in a special way.

Immediately, the health-wealth proponents start smacking their lips, about to start 'amening' to promises of unlimited financial wealth to believers. But that is not Scriptural. No – if blessing corresponds to happiness, joy, satisfaction, then God's blessing is Him providing you with what will give you the deepest possible joy.

And what is that? God told Abram in **Genesis 15:1**: *"Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward."* What was Abraham's greatest blessing? His large amount of livestock? His huge household? His large collection of material possessions? His influence? The size of his household?

No, it was God Himself. God was Abram's exceeding great reward. Because God is the deepest satisfaction of the human soul. If the gifts of health and wealth are to be preferred for joy over God Himself, then what God has created is greater than Himself. His creation has somehow outstripped Him for glory and honour.

The truth is, when we make health and wealth a more satisfying thing than God Himself, there is one word for that: it is called idolatry. And so we understand that the greatest blessing is God Himself. **Ephesians 1:3** backs this up when it says: *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ."*

Where is every spiritual blessing found? In a person – the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the consummation of blessing. Those who have the Son are blessed, those who have not the Son, are cursed. It really does come down to that. Therefore God's blessing is when He gives what is necessary to know and love Him. It is when he chooses to reveal Himself in His Son Jesus Christ.

Having a Bible in your hands, a clear Gospel preached, the Holy Spirit to teach you, prayer, the local church, being able to worship in freedom, having Bible colleges, Christian bookstores, podcasts and media – all this is God's blessing, for it is God pointing people to Himself in His Son Jesus Christ.

A nation is blessed if it knows the true God. That is what **Psalms 33:12** says: *"Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD; and the people whom He hath chosen for His own inheritance."* When a nation, on top of that, has ample Biblical teachers, colleges, ministries, and churches – it is all the more blessed.

Financial health and wealth may sometimes aid this pursuit of God, but it may also hinder it. It all depends on the state of the people. Often comfort is more an enemy to the Gospel than persecution. As such, sometimes God withholds these things to stimulate growth. Does that mean God isn't blessing? Not at all. So long as He is working to reveal Himself to a nation, He is blessing.

If you found a group of persecuted Christians in China, and asked them if they were blessed, what would their response be? They would tell you how excited they were for the three Bibles they shared in their group of 200, and they would tell you how God had blessed them in that none of them had been arrested in the last month.

And they would be right. God's blessing is upon them, enabling them to seek Him and find Him – the greatest reward of all. Physical health and wealth is a side-issue. Blessing is God revealing Himself and providing the means for you to seek and find Him.

So when a nation prays 'God bless us,' they could mean two things. They could be asking for blessing in a general way: 'Please provide our nation with things necessary for everyday physical life.' But they could, and should mean, 'God, reveal yourself increasingly to our country. Let your ways be known, let your Gospel be preached, let

people turn to you in droves, let righteousness break forth as the dawning of a new day.'

Having defined what blessing is, let's move to the next question: How do we obtain it? Is it as simple as some have said, in that we just pray, 'God, bless me!' Well, consider the logic for a moment. If there is a nation living in outright rebellion toward God, would it be fitting for God to bless them in the two ways we have described?

Should God rain down the pleasantries of life on a country that lives in rebellion to Him? Should God send a richer understanding of truth to a nation that remains indifferent to Him? While we understand that any of God's blessing is an act of grace, for God to bless rebellion and unbelief would be a form of sanction, a form of encouragement for such things to continue.

For God to bless unbelief, pride and rebellion would be to literally bless what He condemns. God would be speaking out of both sides of His mouth to curse and bless the same things. But here we must insert some commentary on some wrong thinking.

There is a tendency today to, for instance, quote **2 Chronicles 7:14** and apply it all to our country: *"If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land."*

Now, understand – there is much we can apply to our lives from that verse. It teaches that God responds to humility, repentance, prayer and devotion. But it is viewing this verse apart from its context that causes confusion. This verse was said by God to Solomon about Israel. Israel was an ethnic, physical people, some of whom were believers and some of whom were not.

The people of Israel were tied to the land of Israel, a geographical area. The very agricultural conditions of the land of Israel was a reflection of the current obedience of the people of Israel. When God speaks of healing their land, He means, in context, a bringing forth of rain to produce the crops that an agricultural economy relied on.

Now, we are very quick to read ourselves into this verse. 'Yes,' we say, 'We need rain, just like they did. So if the Christians humble themselves and pray and seek His face and turn from sin, God will send rain and heal our land.' But wait – do Christians have a land?

Certainly, Christians dwell in lands. Certainly, we are citizens of particular countries. But do Christians have a physical, geographical area allocated to them in this era like the Jews had the area of Canaan given to them, where God could say, 'I will heal the land of my people'? No – just the opposite. **Hebrews 11** paints Christians as pilgrims.

*These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were*

*strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for He hath prepared for them a city."*

**Hebrews 11:13-16**

Listen to Paul in **Philippians 3:20**: *"For our citizenship is in Heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ."* So Christians of this age are a spiritual people, where our ties to our heavenly home are much stronger than our ties to our earthly home.

Does that make us unpatriotic, or disinterested in the welfare of our nation? Not at all. But it does mean that we must make the right distinctions. **2 Chronicles 7:14** is not a blanket promise for God to bless a physical country in physical ways simply because the Christians in it get their act together.

However, I believe that God can bless a physical nation in this day and age. When He does this, it will be for the sake of His people within that land – not for the sake of unbelievers who happen to keep some of God's moral laws. I believe Scripture teaches that God often blesses a household, city or country for the sake of His people who are dwelling there.

We see this in the life of Joseph. Potiphar's house received the overflow of God blessing him. God blessed Jacob as he stayed with Laban. God blessed Daniel with wisdom, and it was a blessing to the Babylonians. God's blessing spills over onto others. God may bless the unsaved in His grace, but His special blessing is for His people.

So what are the prerequisites for blessing in the life of a believer? Righteousness. God blesses righteousness, because it is an approval of His own character. In a sense, righteousness *is* the blessing, while it also brings the blessing. But the Bible is clear that righteousness is the reason God brings either His general blessing, or more of His special blessings.

Now, Scripture points out that when a nation has righteous rulers, and righteous subjects, God will bless that physical country. But take note what we mean by righteous ruler or righteous subjects. We mean those who have been made righteous by God, and continue to flesh that out.

How are we made righteous? When we receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour by faith. At that moment, Christ's righteousness is imputed toward us – it is counted on our behalf. **2 Corinthians 5:21** says, *"For He hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him."*

**Romans 4:5** says: *"But to him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness."* This, and this alone, is what makes a

righteous ruler or a righteous subject – someone who by faith has turned from sin to Christ.

A righteous ruler is not a ruler who denies Christ but is nice and fair. A righteous subject is not one who rejects Jesus, but happens to keep the civil laws. No, a righteous person, Biblically, is one who's been made righteous by God's power, and then lives that out by God's power. When a nation is increasingly filled with citizens made righteous by Christ's blood, God's blessing is already upon that nation, and gives reason for it to continue.

**Proverbs 14:34** says, *"Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people,"* and **Proverbs 25:5** says, *"Take away the wicked from before the king, and his throne shall be established in righteousness."* Now consider the verses dealing with the rulers being righteous:

*It is an abomination to kings to commit wickedness: for the throne is established by righteousness.*

**Proverbs 16:12**

*When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice: but when the wicked beareth rule, the people mourn.*

**Proverbs 29:2**

*The king by judgment establisheth the land: but he that receiveth gifts overthroweth it.*

**Proverbs 29:4**

*For the transgression of a land, many are the princes thereof: but by a man of understanding and knowledge the state thereof shall be prolonged."*

**Proverbs 28:1**

Speaking of corrupt, self-indulgent rulers versus righteous, godly ones, **Ecclesiastes 10:16-17** says, *"Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a child, and thy princes eat in the morning! Blessed art thou, O land, when thy king is the son of nobles, and thy princes eat in due season, for strength, and not for drunkenness!"*

So now we have come to a point where we understand: God blesses a nation for the sake of the righteous rulers and righteous population in that nation. As the righteous are found both in authority, and in the population, God will bless a nation for their sake.

But now we must come to the critical question: how does this come about? How do we end up with righteous rulers and righteous subjects? Do we moralise? Do we legislate? Do we try to dominate every sphere of life? These are the questions we'll answer in Part 2 of this series, *'Should God bless South Africa?'*