

# Beholding the Face of God

The human face has 40 muscles - twenty on each side. These muscles are unique from most of the muscles in the body. The vast majority of muscles in the body connect and power bone movement necessary for life. They allow you to move your arms, extend your legs, and chew your food. Other muscles power your vitals. Your beating heart pumps blood and your diaphragm expands your lungs. Yet the facial muscles connect and power facial skin motion. They lift the corners of your mouth into a smile. They wrinkle your nose in disgust. They lift your eyebrows in surprise. Unlike the other muscles mentioned, these movements are not necessary for living. They don't make living possible as measured by survival. They do, however, make possible living, as measured by the capacity to express emotion. Some 10,000 micro expressions can be achieved in combinations of these 40 muscles.

With this sheer magnitude of possible expressions in the human face at the ready, we, more than any species on the earth, have the capacity to communicate and relate to others. The far distant second creation with such capacity is "man's best friend" - the dog. Puppy dog eyes, drooping ears or barred teeth make their intentions clear. But the human is able to communicate with both facts and feelings. The facts of what our words are saying and the feelings that accompany those words. All that we say is transmitted in both what we say and how we say it. In short, we can communicate with both our brains and our hearts. This gives the human a depth of interaction unmatched in the animal kingdom. The human face, being the crown jewel of our humanity poured into our bodies. No wonder Moses wanted to see the face of God and no wonder he couldn't (*Ex 33:20*). So divine and beautiful must God's face be!

Moses was not the only spiritual giant that longed for the face of God - David did as well. One out of ten psalms reference the face of God. "*Turn us again, O God, and cause thy face to shine; and we shall be saved*" David writes in *Psalms 80*. In *Psalms 67* he sings, "*God be merciful unto us, and bless us; and cause his face to shine upon us; Selah.*" It is this idea of blessing and the face of God that we now turn.

Blessings are knit into the Biblical narrative. God blesses his creation in the opening pages of Genesis. The patriarchs blessed their offspring. The wisdom literature highlights the blessed man. Jesus teaches what the blessed life looks like. Blessing, as we understand it in the scriptures, can be understood to be a pronouncement of flourishing, abundant life. All of what it means to be healthy is poured into what we understand a blessing to be.

Ever since the third chapter of Genesis, we have lived in the reality of the curse. A curse is the antithesis of blessing. Swap out flourishing with wilting, abundance with scarcity, and life with dying and you have a curse. We live in a world of cursing. Wonderfully, the closing pages of the Bible sees the curse "done away with." Yet, God speaks into the aridity of our present to shower His people with health - a blessing. So important it was for his sons and daughters to be blessed, he commanded Aaron to pronounce it. His blessing is recorded in *Numbers 6:24-26*. He tells Moses to give this script to Aaron. This is how he was to bless the people. We are not surprised either, to see His blessing to include both facts and feeling, both logic and emotion, both words and expression. After all, God knows how to communicate to his children.

<sup>24</sup> *The Lord bless thee, and keep thee:*

<sup>25</sup> *The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee:*

<sup>26</sup> *The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.*

At the risk of pulling apart a liturgical masterpiece, let us separate the words from the expression. His words promise us three things: to keep us, be gracious unto us and give us peace. In God's blessing of "keeping", he extends to us his protection and secures our safety. In his blessing of being gracious, he bridges the differential of power between his glory and our

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weakness by bestowing his grace. In his blessing of “giving us peace”, he lays to rest strife and assures us completion and fulfillment. These three assurances spell health for human relationships: safety, grace and peace.

While communication of concepts is one thing, eliciting belief is another. The role which non-verbal's play in human communication has become widespread common knowledge. In 1967, a renowned study by Mehrabian and Wiener, established the importance of non-verbal communication, claiming the non-verbals carry most of the messages we send. Yet, a subtle nuance sheds some much needed light on the topic. Albert Mehrabian goes on to explain non-verbals play the most significant role in communication when words do not match the expression. Thus, say what you want, your face and body will communicate what is understood by the recipient. Therefore, for assurance that we can trust God for safety, grace and peace, we turn to the expression in God's face.

*“The Lord make his face shine upon thee”* reads the blessing. The shining face of God is commonly understood to be an idiom for the smiling face. God's face smiles upon us as he pronounces his blessing. *“The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee”* the blessing continues. Turning away one's face communicates shame and rejection, on the contrary, God communicates acceptance and approval. God wants to bless His children with his words. Moreover, he wants us to receive his blessing by reading his face.

In a world of cursing, it is important we bask in the blessing of our heavenly Father. We can do this by receiving the Aaronic blessing. As we recite it to ourselves, listen to what God is saying but include also, how he says it – the non-verbals of his communication. Imagine him smiling upon you. Because he is.

*Mehrabian, A., & Wiener, M. (1967). Decoding of inconsistent communications. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 6(1), 109–114. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0024532>*