



### ***“Would that All the Lord’s People were Prophets”***

In the name of him who invites thirsting souls to come to him that from them springs of living water might flow, dear friends in Christ: I’m glad that God did not give me Moses’ job. Oh sure, some of the things he got to do would have been pretty cool; you know, like turning your trusty old staff into a deadly cobra whenever you felt like it (that would be a good way to make sure you won all your arguments), or dividing the Red Sea so the people could safely pass through and then dropping the walls of water on the heads of your pursuing enemies – that’d been something to see, or going up on top of the mountain for a forty day personal chit-chat with the Lord. Who wouldn’t want to have done some of those things? The trouble is that those high points in Moses’ career were relatively few and far between. The vast majority of the time he was in the Lord’s service was spent leading his people Israel through dry desert wastelands. And the Scripture is pretty clear: it was no picnic for Moses.

Quite the opposite: it’s hard to imagine a group of people as stubborn, faithless, whiny, and ungrateful as the Israelites. The series of stories that describe the exodus from Egypt and the subsequent wanderings in the desert read like a catalog of human weakness and failure – and always it seems that Moses is the guy caught in the middle. When things went well, no one listened to him or the instructions he had received from the Lord. When things went poorly (usually precisely because no one was listening and the Lord decided to apply a little corrective discipline) Moses was the one upon whom the complaints and anger of the people fell: “Moses is an idiot!” “We knew it was a mistake to follow him!” “He’ll probably get us all killed!” “Why did we ever listen to him in the first place? We should have stayed in Egypt!” “Let’s just kill him and go back there where life was so good.”

Then on the other side, several times he finds himself having to defend the people against the wrath of God. Take the incident of the golden calf for instance. The Lord becomes so angry with the Israelites for making and worshipping an idol *after he has just told them specifically not to do that sort of thing* that he tells Moses, “I’ve had it with these people. They’re worthless. I’m going to wipe them all out and start over. I’ll make a new nation for you – people who are faithful and obedient – you can lead *them* to the Promised Land.” Though he might have regretted it later, Moses jumped in to intercede for the Israelites. “No, Lord, don’t do that! Why, just think how it would look to the rest of the world. You said you’d take *these* people to Canaan. If you destroy them, even though they deserve it, it will look like *you* failed to keep your word. Tell you what, if you must destroy someone for this terrible sin they’ve committed, I’ll take the blame. Destroy me instead.”

I’m pretty sure I would not have done that. After all the grousing and abuse they’d heaped on Moses, if that’d been me in his sandals I’d probably have said, “Destroy them and start over? Sounds pretty good to me.” Or if I were feeling particularly magnanimous, I might have tried to talk the Lord into just destroying the worst offenders and maybe afflicting the rest with a plague of painful boils or something equally nasty. It certainly would not have been my inclination to offer to take the hit for them. But like I said, I’m glad that God didn’t give me his job.

As it turns out, the Lord was moved by Moses' selfless prayer of intercession on behalf of his people and his willingness to sacrifice himself for them, and so he relented from the judgment he had proposed. And so, Moses continued on leading that rebellious rabble that seemed so bent on testing the limits of his patience and forbearance—both his *and* the Lord's. Moses was a great man, there's no doubt about it. I'm willing to admit that he was at least ten times the spiritual leader that I could ever be. But it needs to be said that even Moses could be stretched beyond his limits by the faithless behavior of God's people.

That's what happens in the lead up to today's Old Testament lesson. The Israelites are now about three months out of Egypt. You remember how God brought them up out of that land of cruel bondage with great signs and wonders. Okay, now they have just left Sinai where God's glory appeared on the mountain and where Moses received God's Word. So now the Israelites are on the move again and approaching the Promised Land for the first time. And they haven't yet engaged in the rebellion that gets them sentenced to forty years of wandering in the desert, so at least at the moment it looks like the end is in sight. We're almost there. In a week or two we could be living in the land flowing with milk and honey. We're that close.

And you might think that with the finish line so close there'd be a rising sense of anticipation – and perhaps a willingness to put up with the temporary discomforts and inconveniences of the march. You know, it's the home stretch. We can tough it out. But no; apparently that would be too much to ask for. Instead there arises a general complaint. It's about the food supply. Though God graciously provides ample manna from heaven every day – which is actually pretty versatile stuff: you can bake it, boil it, and serve it up a number of different ways – it's suddenly not good enough. The people want meat. And it's not like they go and pray to the Lord and ask for it; they just start grumbling. "We're sick to death of this stinking manna. We can't even bear the sight of it any more. Oh, remember how terrific we had it Egypt, with plenty of fish from the river and fresh fruits and vegetables every day! Oh, if only we were back there again. But here we are stuck out in the middle of no place with nothing to eat but this despised manna. We want meat." They literally stand around chanting it: "We want meat! We want meat!" Wherever Moses goes he's confronted by crowds of angry protesters saying the same thing.

And for Moses it's the last straw. He snaps. He goes to the Lord and says, "What did I do to deserve this cruel punishment you've placed upon me? Am I these people's mother? Did I give birth to them all? Is that why you think I should have to carry them like two-year-olds throwing a temper tantrum all the way to Canaan? I can't do it. I can't put up with it any more. I'm finished. If you mean for me to continue to bear the burden of all these people, forget it. I'd rather you just strike me down dead and get it over with. It would be far better than the slow death by nagging they're giving me now."

In response the Lord does two things for Moses. First, he promises to send the people meat – so much meat, in fact, that they get sick of it and become heartily sorry they demanded it the way they did. The second thing the Lord does for Moses is what we heard in the reading. The Lord essentially says, "You're right. You can't bear the burden of all these people. So, I'm going to distribute the load of leadership and responsibility you're carrying on these seventy elders who have been appointed. And to equip them to do it I'm going to take some of the Spirit that I've placed upon you and I'm

going to give it to them. Together, with them also strengthened and inspired by my Spirit, you'll be able to endure."

That's what we heard about in the reading, how the elders gathered around the Tent of Meeting, and how the Lord descended in a cloud, took some of the Spirit that was on Moses and placed it on the elders of Israel. Several things are worth mentioning here: first that the Spirit was already on Moses – evidently up to that point he's the only one who had it. And, of course, that's what made Moses the great man he was. Without the Spirit of God, he would have been just as spiritually weak and pathetic as the rest of the Israelites – as indeed he demonstrated on the several occasions that he let his fallen nature get the upper hand and control his behavior. And what I'd have you see is that this Spirit on Moses is Christ's own Holy Spirit. That's what enabled him to offer himself as a sacrifice to save the people. He would never have been able to suggest that on his own—the sinful nature is far too self-centered for such a thing; no, that was Christ's Spirit speaking through him.

And speaking of speaking through him, another thing I'd point out is that the outward sign of the Spirit's resting on these elders is that they prophesied. Now, that doesn't mean that they were predicting the future. To prophesy simply means to speak on behalf of God. That's what Moses did as God's appointed spokesman: he spoke forth God's Word. So, he was a prophet. Now the seventy elders would be joining him in this task: many mouths, but the same Spirit speaking through all of them.

And finally, it's worth noting that the Spirit's activity is not confined to a particular location. The main body of elders was gathered around the Tent of Meeting when the Spirit came upon them and they spoke God's Word. Or say it another way, they were at the church. The other two elders, Eldad and Medad were still in the camp – which we might think of as being at home or at work. The point is that God's Word isn't just for the place of worship; no, it should be spoken, heard, and applied wherever God's people happen to be. Apparently, some people didn't think so. When the runner from the camp reported it to Moses, Joshua, his aide, thought it somehow undermined Moses' authority. "We can't have people going around speaking God's Word just anywhere. Moses, make them stop!" To his credit, Moses was quick to see that it was not only not a problem but actually something desirable. "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets and that he'd place his Spirit on everyone." Yes, imagine that: what if all God's people had the Spirit of Christ living in them, speaking through them, and guiding their thoughts and actions. Moses saw that that wouldn't make his life more difficult, it would make it a thousand times easier.

Unfortunately for Moses, it was not possible at the time. Why not? Simply stated the problem was human sin. Recall that in the time before the flood, the Lord looked down and observed nothing but violence and evil on the face of the earth. He said, "My Spirit is not governing their hearts and minds." And so, he withdrew his Spirit from mankind in general. He let the various nations of men go their ways, letting sin run its course in them, and letting it take them deeper into spiritual darkness and depravity. Only among one people, his chosen nation of Israel, did the Lord cause the Light of the Spirit of Truth to continue to shine—and even then, not very brightly. Often it seemed threatened to be extinguished altogether; but the Lord always saw to it that there remained a flickering flame in a handful, a remnant, a few souls chosen by his grace.

That is until the important day in the life of the Church that we're celebrating today in which the very thing Moses wished for happened. God's Spirit came down and rested upon all of his people and they all spoke forth God's Word. What made the difference? Well, someone did what Moses couldn't do. Moses, you will recall, complained that he couldn't bear the burden of all God's people. Even with God's Spirit resting on him he couldn't do it. Why not? Because of his own burden of sin. He was flawed and weak himself. The fact is that except for God's grace he couldn't have carried himself to the Promised Land, much less taken anyone else there. Nor could he have been accepted as a sacrifice for the people's sin like he'd offered. One sinner can't die for another or for others. He can only die for his own sin.

Only someone who was sinless himself could do the job; someone who was also big enough, so to speak, to carry the burden of all God's people. I'm speaking of the Lord Jesus, of course. And what I'd have you see is that he really did what Moses couldn't. He took upon himself all our rebellious complaining, wandering, idolatry, and sin. He let his Father place the entire burden on his shoulders without complaining that he should have to carry it all. This is what happened on the cross as he gave his perfect life an offering for our sin. And when he breathed his last, he sent forth his Spirit. With the atonement for sin completed, with our debt of death paid, his Spirit could once again dwell in us. So, God took the Spirit that was on him and on Pentecost poured it out on all his people – now not just one chosen nation, but people from every nation and language.

And that would include each of us gathered here. It's funny, Moses asked sarcastically if he had given birth to all God's people; but the Lord Jesus did exactly that: he gave us birth in water and the Spirit when we were baptized, and now even though sometimes when our sinful natures get the upper hand and we behave like the spiritual equivalent of two-year-olds throwing temper tantrums, still he carries us in his grace and forgiveness to the Promised Land. But the point of Pentecost is that we don't have to behave that way. He has given us his Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ. With him we are to put to death the old, sinful nature and yield to the Spirit and let him have the upper hand in our lives. He's been given to us to work faith in God's Word, to lead, to guide, and to help us forgive each other and bear one other's burdens. And, yes, to be his prophets. To enable us to speak forth God's Word; here, naturally, as we assemble for worship, but also like Eldad and Medad: to speak it at home and at work where we can apply it to our lives. Today we celebrate the fulfillment of what Moses could only hope for. The Lord has given us his Spirit and made us his prophets. May we live in his Spirit, and with his enabling speak forth the mighty works our God has done for us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***