

Many people believe the Holy Spirit is only present and active in the New Testament and that he is completely absent from the Old Testament. This fuels the notion that it is safe to ignore the Old Testament—it doesn't have anything to teach us about the Holy Spirit. My purpose this morning is to showcase the active work of the Holy Spirit from the earliest days of Israel. I want to share with you the good news that the Holy Spirit always provides for God's people and he will provide for you everything you need for life, salvation and to accomplish God's mission to the world.

I don't think I've ever met anyone who said Numbers was their favorite book of the Bible. It's not an easy book to read because of its jumbled nature. It reads less like a history and more like a scrap book of separate memories pasted together. Historically it covers the forty years between the giving of the commandments at Mt. Sinai to the final preparations to enter the Promised Land. This is done in just 36 chapters. The over-arching theme is the death of the old and the birth of the new. The book breaks nicely into 2 pieces: 1) The failures of the first generation in the wilderness (chps 1-25) and 2) The promise of the second generation to enter the Promised Land (chps 26-36). The message is clear: no one is ever doomed to repeat the past. If your parents were alcoholic and abusive, or if they were atheistic and unfaithful, or if they were temperamental and distant you are not doomed to repeat this. In you God can do a new thing if you let him!

Numbers 11 kicks off a section of complaints in the wilderness that runs through chapter 25. It starts out in verse 1, "And the people complained..." That sounds just like church doesn't it?

There are two things the Holy Spirit has taught me about complaining. Number one: listen to your critics for even in the nastiest remarks there is almost always some good information about yourself and your church. Number two: never let the most negative voices set the agenda for your life or mission. It's not our job to please people but to listen to the Holy Spirit and advance His mission—pleasing or not.

Look carefully at the complaint process in chapter 11. It starts with a rabble among them (11:4) This is a minority group, a tiny subset of the whole. See here a common fault in human behavior: the negative voices always are treated as the loudest voices and people allow the negative voices to run their lives and set the agenda. What began as only a rabble at the beginning of verse 4 becomes the whole "people of Israel" by the end of the same verse. God has been graciously feeding them but now they want God's grace on their own terms. They want to control the menu. They want to force God to accommodate his goodness to their life-style choices. In the words of Jesus they want God and money. They are saying, "I don't want the life God gives to me, I want God to give me the life I want."

This complaining pushes Moses to the edge and in verses 14-15 he complains to God: “I can’t do this by myself—it’s too much, all these people. If this is how you intend to treat me, do me a favor and kill me. I’ve seen enough; I’ve had enough. Let me out of here.” (The Message) Moses was having a bad day.

Moses’ authority did not come from an inherited office like those of the priests and later kings of Israel. Moses’ authority did not come from some democratic process. Moses’ authority was of the Holy Spirit. He is a Spirit-filled man. The Spirit of Moses is the Spirit of the Old Testament prophets. As Micah 3:8 put it, “I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin.” The Holy Spirit announces three things to Moses: 1) The Spirit is going to broker a direct and personal meeting between Moses and God, 2) The Holy Spirit is going to anoint 70 co-leaders to expand and multiply the leadership base of the people of God, and 3) the Holy Spirit is going to make the promises of God come true—the people will get their meat.

Everything the Spirit does for Moses in the Old Testament, he also does for the church in the New Testament. The Spirit gave Moses a personal meeting with God: “The Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to Moses” (11:25) Likewise in the New Testament Acts 2:1 and 4 “When the day of Pentecost arrived, there were all together in one place...and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit...” 1 Corinthians 2:12 says, “We have received ...the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given to us by God.” What a privilege! What a tremendous advantage! And what an enormous benefit believers have been given! Yet what a tragedy it is that so many believers do not claim this gift. Every year in this county about \$3.5 billion of inheritances goes unclaimed. Every year in this country nearly \$2 billion of lottery winnings goes unclaimed. This is nothing compared to the believers who do not avail themselves of direct contact with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit then anoints the 70 elders that Moses has selected plus two more. Notice the synergy here. Moses selects but the Spirit empowers. Moses’ efforts and met by the Spirit’s power. It is not a coincidence that in the Gospel story, Jesus selects and authorizes 72 disciples to multiply his ministry: “The Lord appointed seventy two others and sent them ahead...into every town and place...” (Luke 10:1) In this act Jesus is deliberately setting up a parallel with Moses’ story. Jesus is the very same voice that asked Moses to select seventy and Jesus is the very same one who anointed 72 elders. Jesus Christ does not leave his people orphaned. Jesus Christ does not leave us like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus calls and empowers apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry (Ep 4:11-12). Are you being called to become a pastor? You’ll never know unless you listen. Will you promise to listen? And if you are called by the Spirit to lead will you promise to say yes?

The third thing the Holy Spirit does for Moses is to make the promise of God come true. God promised meat for the people and he is going to deliver. Moses thinks he needs to remind God just how many chicken breasts are going to be needed to feed 600,000. This is what happens when we run the church like a business. We get business thinking. Business thinking goes like this: we only have this much and so we can only do that much. Every idea, every inspiration, every suggestion, every proposal and every dream gets run through the same grinder: we do not have the money to do that. But God promotes a different kind of thinking that even Moses was slow to adopt. It goes like this. If it is of God, then God will provide the means. The Holy Spirit guarantees it.

The first church I served was a tiny congregation of 100 people on the banks of the River Raisin in Lenawee County. A group of young parents in the church came up with an idea to purchase folding doors to create Sunday school rooms in the basement of the century-old building. The trustees reluctantly invited a contractor to come and give a bid for the job. They knew they didn't have the money. When the contractor told them he could do it for \$15,000, the chair of the trustees kindly thanked him and said, "You don't need to come back, we won't be doing this."

Just six months later the contractor was back putting in folding doors. God had provided. The Holy Spirit sprang up and brought what was needed. That is exactly what happened in Numbers 11:31: "Then a wind from the LORD sprang up, and it brought quail..." The Hebrew word for wind is *ruach* and this word is also the word for Spirit. Let the church have less business thinking and more Spirit-thinking. If an endeavor is of God, pursue it trusting that he will provide all that we need.

We must close by considering the strange episode of Eldad and Medad. They did not go with the others but for some reason stayed behind and were still filled with the Holy Spirit. Why is this detail even here? It reminds us that the work of the Holy Spirit is not under our control. He is not our trained dog. He is free to act when and where and with anyone he wants. We are people with expectations. We expect God to act in certain ways and if he doesn't, we are resentful or we turn our back on him. We tend to walk through life thinking that we are free but God has to follow our expectations. In reality the opposite is true. God is the only one who is free and we must meet his expectations. And if God is free then we can only be free when we conform ourselves to him who is freedom itself.

Moses ends with the prayer that all God's people would have the Holy Spirit. What was only a prayer in the Old Testament becomes true in the New Testament: "God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts." (Ga 4:6) Moses prayed for what we have received! The Holy Spirit was very active in the days of Moses doing for them what he still does for us: Leading his people, equipping his people and making God's word true among us. Let the wind of God spring up again as he did in the wilderness!