

The Day of Pentecost

POWER UNLIMITED

Numbers 11:24-30

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Analysis by Ron Starenko

24So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent. 25Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again.

26Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. 27And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." 28And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of the chosen men, said, "My lord Moses, stop them!" 29But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!" 30And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

DIAGNOSIS: Power Squelched

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Power Aborted*

The Book of Numbers, including this reading, is a far cry from the Pentecostal power we celebrate today, though indeed the book is filled with signs of the Spirit's presence—the cloud by day

and the pillar of fire by night, the water, the manna, the lifting up of salvation on a pole. At the same time there is the repeated squelching of the Spirit. As an example, the prophetic spirit of Moses that was shared by seventy elders, as powerful as it was, was a power by which “they did not [prophecy] again” (v. 25), even though Moses wished that “all the Lord’s people were prophets” (v. 29). Clearly, some of the seventy elders wanted to dispossess the gift of the Spirit, as though it were a power that belonged only to Moses (v. 29), as though it were something too hot to handle. Becoming cold to the notion of shared power, by their fear they became powerless. For the dispirited, power is aborted before they realize its potential.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Power Resisted*
Joshua, who later became a great leader, was afraid of a free spirit and wanted it stopped (v. 28). We are afraid of what we can’t control (John 3:8), lest the experience of a shared spirit lead to chaos. There is a price for that fear. Not wanting the Spirit, we discover that other spirits take over, complaining, getting down on ourselves, becoming angry with our leaders, even blaming God, as did the Israelites, again and again. We will be led by one kind of spirit or another, the good or the evil. While none of us has the power to make the Spirit come, we do have the power to resist the Spirit. When we squelch the Spirit we create chaos, exacerbating our fears.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Power Lost*
The Israelites found disaster. Despite all evidence to the contrary, Israel believed that the journey to the Promised Land was a lost cause. As it turned out, an entire generation, all those who left Egypt, lost out. They had turned their backs on God who loved them enough to punish them along the way, who even in punishing them never removed the power of God’s Spirit from them. The tragedy was that they removed themselves from God’s Spirit. And that is the judgment: God turns us over to our own

schemes and devices. Let the experience of Israel be a warning to us, that by resisting the Spirit we eventually lose our will to live, even the right to live, struck down by God in the wilderness (1 Corinthians 10:5), under a burden of judgment too scary to contemplate. It is only “in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life” that we have “the forgiveness of sins” and “look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come” (Nicene Creed).

PROGNOSIS: Power Unleashed

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Spirit Empowers Jesus*

If Moses and the seventy elders were given the Spirit, even the gift of prophecy, to no avail, the Spirit finally rested on the One who could deliver. The Spirit of the living God rested on Jesus, the promised Messiah, who was baptized in the river Jordan, where his people had entered the new land flowing with milk and honey, despite their unfaithfulness and disobedience; he became for them the righteousness they didn't have, and shared it with us all. Jesus became the eternal water (John 4:14 and 7:38) and the eternal bread (John 6:32-33), the eternal life we could not manufacture in our wilderness (Numbers 21:5). While Moses complained, “I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me” (Numbers 11:14), Jesus could and would bear the sins of all the people, for all the world, like the venomous serpent lifted up in the wilderness (Numbers 21:8), yes, even the Passover Lamb sacrificed (Numbers 9:1-5) or the slaughtered red heifer (Numbers 19:1-9), suffering away the crushing power of God's judgment. There is no limit (Numbers 11:23) to the Spirit's saving power in Jesus now unleashed upon a sick and dying world.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *The Spirit Empowers Believers*

So powerful and unlimited is this prophetic word and promise that it puts an end to our bitter complaining, our stubborn insistence on living and dying by our own effort to get through the insurmountable wilderness of our discontent. The same Spirit that rested on Jesus and his work for us rests upon us, blessing us with the gift of faith and trust. In the metaphor of today's gospel lesson, the Holy Spirit is poured out upon those who received the apostles' prophetic word, like water gushing out of our hearts, making us alive and whole and free. That is the one Spirit, unleashed and now resting on the community of the church (Acts 2), where we share a common faith, a common purpose, where the power and life of Jesus surges among us. The community of the faithful, in Word and sacrament, is the embodiment of the Holy Spirit resting on the weary and world-worn, the Promised Land already a present reality. Like Moses, who was bold to hold God to God's promises (Numbers 14:18-20), the church holds on to Jesus, who is the promised and prophetic Word, the Christ of God.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *The Spirit Empowers Our Ministry*

The sharing of the Spirit's power is finally for the good of all—for the church and for the world—as we carry one another's burdens, as we bring healing and hope through our winsome witness and work. St. Paul recognized that what Moses yearned for (v. 29) was given in some measure to all believers “for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7), the prophetic ministry, where the church, on the one hand, unmask the idolatrous powers that create chaos by war, and famine, and injustice, and, on the other hand, unleashes the power of Jesus' love that makes for peace and good will. Indeed, where the Spirit is, there is Jesus, and where Jesus is, there is a Spirit-filled community moving through the wilderness to the Promised Land with power unlimited.