

Introduction

- Greetings.
- We have been tracking through our series on the person and work of the Holy Spirit.
- In our first week, we looked at the Spirit and creation. A standout feature was the Father as the speaker, the Son as the words, and the Spirit as the breath, who carried the words of God along, rendering them effective. The Spirit was pictured as hovering, ready with eager anticipation for what comes next.
- In our second week, we shifted from the Spirit as Cosmic Creator to the Spirit as the Personal Indwelling Presence of God. We saw how He empowered Bezalel and all those who would work on the tabernacle, raising them up to higher levels of excellence and proficiency. A standout feature was that the result of the infilling of the Spirit was pretty ordinary. They were filled and they were able to do stuff.
- Today, we come to another noteworthy passage where the Spirit features.
- Turn with me to [Numbers 11](#).
- As you do so, allow me to provide some background.

- By this time, the tabernacle has been built. Once the work is finished, there is a theophany — a cloud descends, covering the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord fills the tabernacle ([Exodus 40](#)).

- The Lord then leads the people away from Mt Sinai and into the wilderness.
- At this stage in her history, the Israelite nation already constituted a great multitude. According to [Numbers 11](#), they numbered 600 000 people.
- They make a 3 day journey and settle down to camp ([Numbers 10:33](#)).
- A mere 72 hours into their march, the people break down into bitter complaining. They were lamenting the fact that they were having to eat manna. They were craving the meat and fresh produce that they enjoyed in Egypt. Across the entire nation, people were “standing at the doors of their tents, weeping.”
- The “anger of the Lord blazed hotly” against them and Moses became so burdened by the weight of responsibility for these people, he tells God that he wanted to die.
- With that, we come to our text.

Numbers 11:16–17 ESV

¹⁶ Then the LORD said to Moses, “Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them, and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. ¹⁷ And I will come down and talk with you there. And I will take some of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you may not bear it yourself alone.

Numbers 11:18–20 ESV

¹⁸ And say to the people, ‘Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat, for you have wept in the hearing of the LORD, saying, “Who will give us meat

to eat? For it was better for us in Egypt.” Therefore the LORD will give you meat, and you shall eat. ¹⁹ You shall not eat just one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, ²⁰ but a whole month, until it comes out at your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, because you have rejected the LORD who is among you and have wept before him, saying, “Why did we come out of Egypt?” ’ ”

Numbers 11:21–23 ESV

²¹ But Moses said, “The people among whom I am number six hundred thousand on foot, and you have said, ‘I will give them meat, that they may eat a whole month!’ ²² Shall flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, and be enough for them? Or shall all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, and be enough for them?” ²³ And the LORD said to Moses, “Is the LORD’s hand shortened? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not.”

Numbers 11:24–25 ESV

²⁴ So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD. And he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent. ²⁵ Then 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 as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied. But they did not continue doing it.

Numbers 11:26–30 ESV

²⁶ Now two 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. ²⁷ And a young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.” ²⁸ And Joshua the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth, said, “My lord Moses, stop them.” ²⁹ But Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would

that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!"³⁰ And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

- If you read this chapter quickly, it seems like a straightforward story.
- But if you slow down and look closely, you will see that the text is packed full of symbolism. When you take the time to consider this symbolism, a completely different layer of potential meaning opens up.
- Today, I want us to look at this passage through two lenses:
 - (1) The Obvious lens, where we consider the text at face value, and
 - (2) The Not-So-Obvious lens, where we consider the symbolic meaning.

1. The Obvious: God Empowers Others to Help Moses

- The surface-level meaning of this text is clear.
- Moses is burned out and God steps in to provide relief.
- Have a look at verses 16-17. God says,
 - “Gather some guys together; I will empower them and they will help bear the burden of the people, so that you do not have to bear it alone.”
- Often, when we think of the Spirit, we think of the supernatural, or the spectacular.
- God could have responded to Moses with a miracle, gifting him with greater capacity and raising him to higher levels of proficiency.
- But God does not do that.

- There comes a point where it no longer makes sense for the burden of responsibility to rest with one finite man.
- Instead of giving Moses more capacity, He chooses to distribute his leadership load.
- Now, when you divide the sheer number of people among these men, each man needed to take responsibility for somewhere between 8500 and 9000 people.
- You'd better believe that they needed a special empowerment to be able to step up to the task!
- And a special empowerment is precisely what they received, as is evidenced by the fact that they began to prophesy.
- But as we will see, the prophecy wasn't the gift itself. It was a sign of the gift.
- The gift itself — the long-term implication of this infilling — was that these men were empowered in a very practical way. They were given an ability to help Moses lead.
- Friends, God is concerned that His kingdom matters are well administrated. He knows our gifts and abilities and He knows our limitations; He has made us who we are. He is not going to change who we are for the meeting of practical needs. Instead, He raises up people with unique pairings of ability and empowers them for practical leadership.
- This is, of course, consistent with what Paul says in the NT, where he compares the church with a body, with each member coming together to form part of and meaningfully contribute to the whole. Moses was the head, but he did not need to become the hands and feet as well.
- That is the obvious lesson from the text.
- Now, lets consider the text through a different lens.

2. The Not-So-Obvious: The Symbolism and What it Says

- As I have been grappling with the text, there is something that has consistently struck me as bizarre.
- The passage is unquestionably referring to the Holy Spirit of God. And yet, YHWH says, “I will take (**as though He could be picked up**) some of the (**not My**) Spirit that is on (**not in**) you and put (**literally place**) it (**not Him**) on them.”
- Can you see why the language strikes me as bizarre?
- The language is bizarre because we know that the Holy Spirit is a person and that He is a member of the holy trinity.
- He is not some impersonal, divisible thing that can be sliced up, picked up and distributed.
- So why do we have this odd language?
- Well, some scholars would argue that our understanding of the Spirit develops and evolves as the canon unfolds. It is only when we arrive at the NT that we have a fully developed pneumatology. These early Scriptures needed to be written in simple language so that the Hebrew people could understand.
- There may be some truth to that. But what I also know to be true is that the Spirit inspired the writing of the Scriptures and that He illumines the truths thereof to us.
- And so, if the language is odd, **He is the one who made it odd!**
- My view is that He made the language odd so that it would capture our attention, forcing us to look past the surface and dig deeper.
- And so, this is precisely what I would like for us to do — lets take a close look, from verse 24, tracing our way through, one step at a time.
- As we go, there are a couple of things I would like to highlight as significant.

- The first thing to notice is **where the ceremony takes place** (verse 24).
- God explicitly instructs Moses to bring the seventy men to the Tent of Meeting, and this is precisely what Moses does.
- A random gathering spot out in the desert simply would not do!
- What is the significance of this?
- My sense is that by hosting this ceremony at the very centre of the camp—the place where God condescends to meet with humanity—God is imbuing the moment with divine weight. He is telling the whole nation:
- *“Pay close attention. This isn't just a political reshuffling or human reorganisation. This is a holy ceremony that I am personally involved in.”*
- The second thing to notice is **how Moses positions the men** (verse 24).
- Moses positions them *around* the tent. The Hebrew here is clear. Moses positions them in such a way that they literally *encircle* the tent.
- He does not have them arrive and randomly stand about the tent of meeting.
- What is the significance of this?
- I believe Moses is saying something by what he is doing. He is using a visual cue to send a message to the entire community:
- *“These men have been set apart for a purpose. Their core mandate is to give themselves fully to overseeing and caring for matters pertaining to God and the spiritual health of this people.”*
- But look at what happens next (verse 25)!

- While these men are standing in formation, the Lord comes down in a cloud and speaks directly *to Moses* while they stand waiting.
- Only once He has spoken with His servant Moses does God proceed to take some of His Spirit from Moses and place it on the seventy elders.
- What is the significance of this order of events? Why make them wait?
- Here is my best guess: because human nature doesn't change. Whenever you promote someone to leadership, human envy kicks in. People ask questions:
- *“Didn’t God choose who He would empower for the building of the tabernacle? Why is the choice now left to Moses? How do we even know he has chosen the right people? Why did he choose this particular human and not that one; why not me?”*
- Sometimes people ask questions privately; at other times, they take it upon themselves to challenge and undermine and overthrow.
- By speaking to Moses first, in front of everyone, God publicly **validates** Moses’ ultimate authority. He shows the crowd that Moses is still the primary leader.
- Then, by transferring the Spirit from Moses to the elders, God **authorises** the seventy.
- The bible says, “As soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied.” While the text does not describe the nature of this prophecy, they clearly exhibited some behaviour that was characteristic of prophets. This distinctive prophetic behaviour served as an unmistakable sign of God’s authorisation, settling things in the minds of the people.
- At this point in the narrative, right after this beautiful, ordered ceremony at the tabernacle, the narrative takes an interesting turn with the introduction of two figures — **Eldad and Medad** (verse 26).

- These two guys had been called to the ceremony, but for some unknown reason, they stayed behind in the camp.
 - Maybe they had other commitments.
 - Maybe they felt unclean and were worried for their safety.
 - Maybe they did not feel up to the task.
- Whatever the reason, **the Spirit fills them anyway**, and they too begin to prophesy as an affirmation of their appointment.
- At this point, **Joshua is displeased**. He calls for Moses to stop them (verse 28).
- Now, I don't know about you guys, but considering everything we have just seen regarding the importance of the ceremony, I am with Joshua on this one. If I were in his shoes, I would be like,
 - “Who do you two think you are by not responding to Moses’ invitation?”
 - “On what authority do you presume to prophesy?”
 - “How dare you undermine Moses’ authority?”
 - “If we allow you two to prophesy, what stops the next person from doing so?”
 - “Soon, anyone might prophesy!”
- Ah, but that is just the point, you see!
- God fills these two non-compliant characters to show that the Spirit is sovereign. He calls who He calls and He will not be restricted by geography, human institutions, or religious protocols.
- But he fills these two for another reason as well. He fills them, I believe, as a **prophetic foreshadowing of the New Covenant**, a time where He will not

restrict Himself to one space, to a physical tent, but will move out into the ordinary, messy, mobile tents that we call bodies.

- And it is for this reason that Moses' response is so apt (verse 29).
- *"Don't be jealous for me. My prayer is that the Lord would put his Spirit on all people!"*
- You see, friends, Moses recognises a profound truth: as beautiful as this ceremony was, it was temporary. Human leadership will never be enough. The ultimate solution isn't just better management. The ultimate solution would be a day when the Tabernacle walls would fall away, and the Spirit would inhabit *everyone*.

Conclusion

- Friends, while this prayer of Moses is inspiring, it is not the end of the chapter.
- You will remember that sandwiched between the instructions that God gave for the ceremony and the ceremony itself, God had said that He was about to bring a severe judgment on the people of Israel.
- Immediately after Moses utters his prayer, the scene shifts dramatically.
- In the verses that follow, a “wind from the Lord” springs up — the Spirit has been in action at the tabernacle and is in action here again. This *ruach* carries so much quail in from the sea that it piles up about 2 cubits (3 feet) high and extends about a day's journey around the camp, such that the people spend 2 days gathering quail.
- Those who gathered the least gathered 10 homers. With a homer being roughly 90 pounds, we are talking about people gathering at least 900 pounds (over 400 kgs) of quail each.

- God, seeing these people indulge themselves in this way, is stirred up to anger, such that when the meat was yet between their teeth, He struck them down with what is described as a “very great plague.”
- The death is so great, they literally name the place Kibroth-hattaavah, which means “graves of craving,” after the people who were buried there.
- And so the chapter provides us with a tragic juxtaposition.
 - The Spirit is at the centre of the camp, at the tabernacle, pouring Himself into those with willing hearts, who have postured themselves to receive.
 - The Spirit is also at the fringes, pouring judgment upon those who couldn’t be bothered and are preoccupied with their own greedy satisfaction.
- Thanks be to God, because of Christ, the Spirit no longer confines Himself to a physical building. He no longer restricts Himself to a select few.
- The dream of Moses—that the Spirit would be put on all people—was fully realised at Pentecost and is an active reality for you and me today.
- He is available to everyone who follows Christ.
- But there is one last piece of symbolism that I would like for you to take home with you and ponder. That symbolism comes as we consider possible parallels in the text.
- If Moses parallels a chief shepherd and the seventy elders parallel the men that God calls to care for the spiritual well-being of His people, then the Israelite nation parallels the people of God, the church.
- If this is true, where do you stand?
- Are you living like those the outer camp, consumed by appetites that lead to dryness and judgment, or are you posturing yourself so that the prayer of Moses would be realised in you?

- This, I believe, is the reason for the bizarre language.
- This is the not-so-obvious lesson from the text.

Benediction

1 Corinthians 12:12–13 ESV

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.