

Old Testament Survey - Part 20

by Dick Woodward

This sermon explores the life of Moses, emphasizing his meekness, leadership challenges, and the importance of community in overcoming burnout.

Duration: 27:33

Scripture: Numbers 11:14-17, Numbers 12:3, Numbers 12:6-8, Numbers 20:12, Numbers 22:28-30

Topics: "Old Testament", "Spiritual Leadership"

Description

This sermon delves into the book of Numbers, focusing on the greatness, meekness, and intimate relationship of Moses with God. It explores the concept of meekness, Moses' sin that prevented him from entering the promised land, and the burnout experienced by great biblical figures. The sermon also highlights the unconventional way God used a donkey to deliver a message, emphasizing the importance of availability over ability in serving God.

Transcript

As we continue to survey the book of Numbers and as we continue to look at truth that is arresting and truth that's allegorical and sometimes awesome, I would like for us to focus on a few more passages in the book of Numbers that arrest our attention. For instance, in Numbers chapter 12, there's a passage on Moses that I think is very arresting. We're very impressed as we come to the book of Numbers with what the book of Numbers has to say about the greatness of Moses.

The last chapter of Deuteronomy will tell us that Moses was unequaled, that he really was perhaps the greatest man of God who ever lived. And the book of Numbers will tell us in several places how special Moses was and what a great man Moses was. For instance, in chapter 12, verses 3 and 5 through 8, we have these words.

Now, the man Moses was very meek, more than all men that were on the face of the earth. Perhaps one of the most misunderstood words in the Bible is the word meek. Jesus said, blessed are the meek.

Now, that does not mean blessed are the weak. That does not mean that the milquetoast kind of person is especially blessed. That isn't what meek means.

In the scripture, the word meek means something like tamed. You picture a powerful stallion, a powerful horse. Now, when that horse is broken, as we call it, when you get a bit in its mouth, a bridle on its head,

and a saddle on its back, that horse isn't weak, but it's meek.

That's what meek means in the Bible. Jesus said, take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek. In what sense was Jesus meek? He was weak, or meek, rather, in the sense that he always did the will of his Father.

He could say, I do always the things that please the Father. He had so completely accepted the yoke of the Father's will, that made him meek. And he says to us, take my yoke upon you, and you become meek.

When the Apostle Paul was converted on the road to Damascus, when Saul of Tarsus had that head-on collision with Jesus Christ, when he collided with Jesus Christ there on the road to Damascus, he said, who art thou, Lord? And then he said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? Now, he changed his name from Saul to Paul. Saul meant mighty one. Paul means little one, or nobody.

What happened to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus is simply this. He became meek. When he said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? He became meek.

That's what meekness means. Now, understanding the definition of the word meek, then we understand the compliment that's paid to Moses when it says, Moses was very meek, more than all men that were on the face of the earth. That means he had taken upon his life the disciplines of God, and he wanted to obey God and do God's will.

Now, there's a compliment paid to Moses in chapter 12. When two people become jealous of him and God defends him, he says, if there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses.

He is at home in my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly, and not in the dark. And he beholds the form of God.

Now, it says their only response was to talk of stoning Moses and Aaron. And here we have a tremendous statement about the greatness of Moses. God comes to them and he says, speaking of course to Moses, how long will these people despise me? Will they never believe me, even after all the miracles I've done among them? I will disinherit them and destroy them with a plague, and I will make you into a nation far greater and mightier than they are.

Now, we saw in our last session that in fact, as it turned out, God did trade a nation of more than two million people for just two men, Caleb and Joshua, because Caleb and Joshua wholly followed God and believed him. Here in this encounter, God is suggesting, it doesn't turn out this way, but he's suggesting that he's willing to trade that whole nation for one man. He said, I'm going to strike all of them dead in this wilderness, and I'm going to make a nation out of you, just you.

Again, you see the values of God. God places such a great value upon this meek man because he will do God's will. That God says, I'm willing to trade you for all those people.

I think that's very arresting. It's arresting to see the intimate relationship Moses has with God, because we can have an intimate relationship with God. In the book of Exodus, I love this verse, God says to Moses, Moses, there is a place near me and you can dwell there.

Moses decides that's where he wants to be. Like the words of the hymn writer, there is a place of quiet rest near to the heart of God. That's what God told Moses.

There is a place near me, Moses, and you can dwell there. Moses really aspired to dwell there. Moses really wanted to be close to God, and he was uniquely close to God.

So close to God and so valued by God that God is willing to trade him for that whole nation of people. I think that's arresting. Then, of course, as you continue to look at the life of Moses, it's arresting to realize that Moses doesn't get to go into the promised land.

In the end, God doesn't trade the whole nation just for him. He trades the whole nation for Caleb and Joshua, but not for Moses. The sin of Moses in chapter 20 is one of the mysteries of the book of Numbers.

Sometimes we think God isn't fair, and this is one of those places where many people think, God, that just isn't fair. When you realize what a great man this was, and such a little thing he did, why did you penalize him and say to him that he couldn't go into the promised land? The record goes something like this. God said to Moses, get Aaron's broad, and then you and Aaron must summon the people as they watch.

Speak to that rock over there and tell it to pour out its water. You will give them water from a rock, enough for all the people and their cattle. Then Moses and Aaron summoned the people to come and gather at the rock, and Moses said to them, listen you rebels, must we bring you water from this rock? Then Moses lifted the rod and struck the rock twice, and water gushed out, and the people and their cattle drank.

But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, because you did not believe me, and did not sanctify me in the eyes of the people of Israel, you shall not bring them into the land that I have promised them. Now we refer to this incident as the sin of Moses, and isn't it arresting that because this man sins, what looks to us like a little sin, especially when you think of the sins with which he was coping, when you think of all his patience in the wilderness for 40 years, what he put up with with these people, and here he apparently loses it on this one occasion, and God says, that's it Moses, you're not going into the promised land. It seems very severe to us.

Well there are a couple of observations we might make here as we look at the severity of God's punishment. First of all we ought to say this, shall not the judge of all the earth do right? Who are we to tell God what's fair or what's right? I don't think we have any business suggesting to God what's fair or what's right, because he's the one who defines what's right and what's fair. I think it's interesting to observe in the narrative, Moses never complains about this punishment.

In the book of Deuteronomy all he says is that he talked to God about it one day and God said, speak to me of this matter no further, and Moses never brought it up again. Moses doesn't complain and say that it's unfair or that it's unjust. I think another thought we might share here as we think about this arresting incident, is that God has a higher standard for leaders than he has for the people.

Don't ever forget that, especially if you're a leader. I believe the scripture very clearly sets out before us a double standard. When you become a member of a church, I believe there are standards you ought to keep, standards you ought to meet.

I believe any church that doesn't have definite standards for its members is not much of a church. You should expect something of your membership. But I believe a church, according to the scripture, should expect more from its leadership than it does from its followership or its people.

I believe God takes leadership very seriously. We saw that in the book of Leviticus, and Moses was in a position of leadership. And what might seem as a small sin to others, perhaps was not a small sin, because of who he was and the position in which God had placed him.

Apparently his sin was something like this. First of all, God said, speak to that rock over there. Well, he didn't speak to it.

He hit it with the rod twice. That was disobedience. God said, speak to it.

He struck it, not once but twice. He's obviously lost his temper because he says, listen you rebels, have I got to give you water from this rock? He's obviously angry. Apparently God charges him with this sin.

He says, you didn't believe me. I'm not sure exactly what that means. But he said, you did not sanctify me in the eyes of the people.

I think this was the seriousness of the sin. Remember when God taught Moses all those spiritual secrets, like you're not the deliverer Moses, but I am, and I'm with you. You can't deliver anybody, but I can, and I'm with you.

It isn't what you want Moses, it's what I want, and I'm with you. And then when it happens, you didn't do that Moses, I did that because I was with you. God taught him those lessons.

Now perhaps the most serious thing he does wrong here is when he says, must we bring you water from this rock? He's not sanctifying God in the sight of the people. He's not making it clear to the people that it's God who's doing this miracle. He's taking credit for it himself.

And perhaps that was the seriousness of the sin. I think the only way we can see this from God's perspective is to realize that God has a set of standards that he knows about. He shares a lot of those standards with us.

But remember, it's God who instructs us in righteousness, not we who instruct him. And apparently, you know, this was fair, and it was right, and apparently Moses felt that way. I do think it's arresting that God took this as seriously as he did, and there's a great lesson, I believe, in that for us.

Now there's another incident about Moses in chapter 11 of the book of Numbers that I find very arresting. We hear a lot today about the experience that we call burnout. There's burnout, and then there's flameout.

There are all kinds of, you know, there's breakdown and all kinds of words that we use to describe the fact that people kind of come to the end. Now I find it fascinating that in the Scripture, these great men of God, men like David, of whom the Scripture will say he was a man after God's own heart, or great men like Moses, where it'll say he was the meekest man on the face of the earth, the greatest man of God that ever lived. I find it interesting that these men burn out.

These men come to the end. This is a good description of burnout. Moses said to the Lord, why pick on me? Why give me the burden of all these people? Are they my children? Am I their father? Is that why you give me the job of nursing them along like babies until we get to the land you promised their ancestors? Where am I supposed to get meat for all these people? They weep, saying, give me meat.

I can't carry this nation by myself. The load is far too heavy. If you're going to treat me like this, please kill me right now.

It'll be a kindness. Let me out of this impossible situation. Have you ever felt like that? I find it interesting that Moses and Elijah and Job and Jonah and David, a lot of the great men of God in the scripture, get so burned out they all pray this same prayer, God kill me.

I want to die. Have you ever had a death wish? Have you ever been so depressed that you wished you could die? I believe this experience happens to many people and I believe it can happen to godly people because in the scripture, in the record, it happens to the greatest people of God who ever lived. So burned out they're praying that God will take their life.

Now it's very interesting that God doesn't answer their prayer. Have you ever thanked God for unanswered prayer? In the hymn, Spirit of God Descend Upon My Heart, it says, teach me the patience of unanswered prayer. I know people that don't like that line because they say there's no such thing as an unanswered prayer.

Well, I think there is, by the grace of God, such a thing as unanswered prayer. We don't know what God's will is and so we very often ask for the wrong thing. And because God loves us, he's not going to answer those prayers when they're not according to his will.

That's why he teaches us in the model prayer through Jesus that we should pray like this, thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven. If you're praying according to God's will, then if what you're asking for is not his will, you don't want it. But here's an interesting thing in the book of Numbers and in these other stories of burnout in the Bible.

When these men of God get so burned out that they ask God for the wrong thing, because their hearts are right, God gives them the right thing. In the eighth chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul gives us a very profound passage of Scripture. He says we don't pray as much as we ought to pray because we don't know the will of God.

We know that if we pray according to the will of God, we'll receive what we're asking. But our problem is we don't have a clue in the world what the will of God is, so we just don't pray. Well, Paul says in Romans chapter 8, verses 26 through 28, don't let that keep you from praying.

You pray anyway. You ask anyway, even if you ask for the wrong thing, because when you ask for the wrong thing, if your heart is right, the Holy Spirit who is in you, who does know the will of God, will make intercession for you according to the will of God, and then God will give you what is his will. In other words, ask for the wrong thing.

If your heart is right, God will give you the right thing, even if you don't even know what it is. This is why Martin Luther said, love God and do as you please. Now, that needs a lot of explaining, and please don't quote that out of context.

But there's a sense in which if your heart is right, you can't miss, because even if you ask, God, kill me. I want to just lay down and die. I'm so depressed.

Well, God's not going to kill you, but he will give you what you really need. Now, in the case of Moses, he gives him 70 men to help him. He says, you think you have to do it all by yourself.

Well, let me tell you something, Moses. This is a team sport, and you better get some other team members around you. Get you 70 men and bring them down to the tabernacle, and I'm going to take this

spirit that I've put upon you and put it also upon them.

This doesn't mean he took it away from Moses. He just means he passed it around. He shared it, and he anointed 70 other men.

Moses' father-in-law had suggested this back in the book of Exodus chapter 18, and apparently Moses really implemented it at this point when God showed him that it was God's will, not just the will of his father-in-law, who was not one of the chosen people. When Elijah prayed that he might die, God told him, Elijah, you've been neglecting your temple maintenance. Now you just lie down here and go to sleep.

So he puts him in a deep sleep, and then he wakes him up in the middle of the sleep and says, eat something. And there's food supernaturally provided there. So Elijah eats, and he says, now go back to sleep again.

And when he wakes up after that second sleep, it says, he went in the strength of that meat 40 days. If you read in 1 Kings 18, all the physical things that Elijah did when he challenged the prophets of Baal, you realize he's absolutely physically worn out. And when he prays that he might die, God says, oh, you don't need to die, Elijah.

You just need to get some rest. And you need to eat something. You've been neglecting the temple.

Now do some temple maintenance. That's what you really need. He doesn't kill him.

The same thing happens with Job and Jonah and David. But I find it interesting that when these men are burned out, and they come to the place where they need restoration, where they need renewal, what we call a revival, God is very practical in the way he leads them into that revival. I think one of the greatest verses on the subject of revival in the Bible is Psalm 23, verse 3, where David says this, he restoreth my soul, he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

When I get burned out because I've neglected my body or because I've neglected my spirit, or I've neglected something else, and I end up burned out, and I need to be restored, I was brought up in a church where that was a very simple thing. You went down to a mauler and prayed a prayer. You had a revival, and it only took about five minutes.

But a lot of times that revival, and we should put that in quotes, didn't really solve your problem. You were still depressed. You were still burned out.

It didn't really solve your problem. Well, God is a whole lot more practical than that. When you come to God burned out like Moses is here in Numbers 11, God says you need to have your soul restored.

Now let me show you how I do that. I'm going to show you these paths of righteousness, and I want you to come and walk in these paths of righteousness, maybe for three years, maybe for five years, and the paths of righteousness will restore your soul. That's the way God restores somebody who's burned out.

It isn't instant pudding, instant tea, instant coffee, instant cake. We live in an instant-itis culture. We want everything instantly.

God doesn't give us things instantly, in my opinion. He may give us some things instantly, but I like the restoration that we see in the experience of Moses here. It's very, very practical.

God says, let me show you the paths of righteousness that will restore your soul. Get 70 men to help you. Share the load.

Let's get a little organization around here, and let's deputize some people and delegate things to people. That's very practical, just like his prescription for Elijah was practical. I find it arresting that a man as great as Moses could sin, and a man as great as Moses could get burned out.

I find great consolation in that. I don't know about you, but when the humanity shows up in these biblical characters, it's a great consolation to me. It warms my heart, because when I see their humanity hanging out, then I realize that my humanity is not such a catastrophe after all.

You know, when you meet your humanity, it can be a disastrous thing if you don't think you're human. A lot of people think when they become a Christian, they're not human anymore. They think they're neuter or something.

They're not masculine. They're not masculine or feminine anymore. They're neuter, you know, and it's a shocking thing to meet your humanity, but I find it realistic and very reassuring to see the humanity come out in these Bible characters.

These are not mythological characters. These are very real people, just like you and me, who have the very same humanity that we have, but that humanity was controlled by the Spirit of God, and that's why they were able to do the great things that they did. Now, there's one other thing in the book of Numbers that's arresting, to which I would like to call attention.

In chapter 22, we have the story of the prophet Donkey. We made reference to him when we talked about the commissioning of Moses. God wants to do something on this occasion, and he can't find a man who can see him or come to perceive him and what he wants to do.

God has a message he wants delivered, and he can't find a man who will speak it for him, so God finds a little jackass who can see him and a little jackass through whom he can speak. Balaam's jackass, Balaam's donkey. When I was in seminary, I had tremendous theological problems.

I had a question mark for a brain, and I doubted the inspiration of the scripture, and one of my worst problems was this little story in Numbers 22. For some reason, I just fixated on this story, and I asked my professors in a very conservative seminary, do I have to believe that God spoke through a jackass to be saved? I don't know why it focused down to that question, but they started a prayer meeting for me, and they were greatly concerned about me because I asked that question. Frankly, I thought it was a very valid question.

Are you saved because of your view of inspiration, or are you saved because you believe the gospel of Jesus Christ? That was really my question, but I kind of focused it upon this little jackass because it was hard for me to believe that God would speak through a jackass. Have you ever seen a jackass? If you travel, especially in Haiti or the Philippines and some of these places, and you hear one of them braying down in the village making all that noise, there's not much of a compliment to call somebody a jackass when you realize what a jackass is really like, and it kind of staggered my faith to believe that God could speak through one. But after a lot of prayer and a lot of spiritual pilgrimage and a lot of study, one night in a city where I was a pastor, I was attending a banquet for innkeepers.

It was a tourist city, and the primary source of income was from, you know, the inns and the innkeepers, and I was asked to give the invocation at this innkeeper's banquet. And, you know, a minister gets in a spot sometimes in these situations. I gave the invocation.

Then the banquet turned out to be kind of risqué. The master of ceremonies had a lot of risqué jokes, and every time he told one of these risqué stories, everybody would look to see what did the padre think of that, you know. And I found myself wondering, you know, how should I respond to this? They know I'm a minister.

Now, should I just break up and laugh? I didn't feel good about that. Should I look very angry and disturbed, you know, about these stories that are being told? How should I respond? And then I had this thought. How did Jesus handle this? I knew from reading the Gospels that Jesus frequented groups like that.

He went to banquets with publicans and sinners. He made a point of going, and he was not a wet blanket. They enjoyed him being there.

They liked him being there. And I sat there in that predicament thinking, how did he handle that? And I even began to pray, Lord, how did you do it? And the revelation came to me. He loved them.

And so it occurred to me, I wonder if I love these people, and I wonder if they know that I love them. Well, I was sitting across the table from a man who was then the mayor of the city, and this was quite some time ago, and he had a drinking problem, and he was pretty well blitzed that night, frankly. He was gone, really, you know.

We were having a great conversation, but he wasn't really with it that much. And it occurred to me, you know, do I really love him? And does he know that I love him? And I began to pray, God, give me some kind of an opening so that I can show this man that I really love him. We were sitting right across from each other.

Well, right at that moment, he turned to me, and he said, Padre, I've got some advice for you. He said, when I went into politics, somebody told me, don't call them like you see them, call them like they are. And I said, Mayor, I really appreciate that.

That really is good advice. As a matter of fact, I like that so well, I think I'm going to preach a sermon on that. Don't call them like you see them, call them like they are.

He said, son, if you preach on that, he said, I'll be there. Just tell my secretary when you're going to preach on that, and I'll be there. Well, I was so impressed that he had said this to me that then it occurred to me, and so I turned to him and said, you know, Mayor, you've solved a big theological problem for me tonight.

And he said, what's that? I said, well, when I was in seminary, I really had a problem believing that God could speak through a jackass, but I said, I'm absolutely sure he just spoke to me through you, and so you solved this big problem. Well, he thought that, he just thought that was a riot. He just laughed, and he promised me he'd come when I preach that sermon.

And he did come when we preached the sermon on, call them like they really are. But you know, that night, I believe I had a revelation, and it's centered around Numbers 22 and the mayor of our fair city, and the revelation was really this. Where did we ever get this idea that God only uses superstar saints? That

God does super-duper things through super-duper people because they're superstar saints.

As we said when we looked at the commissioning of Moses, that's a myth. That's not true. God wants to do very extraordinary things through very ordinary people because they're available.

And I believe what we really need is people who will offer God their availability. As a pastor, I've noticed this in the church. Sometimes you have people who are very, very short on ability, but very long on availability.

It seems that those that are short on ability are longer on availability. And then sometimes you have people who are very long on ability, but very short on availability. They're gifted, talented people, but you can't get five minutes of their time.

Now, I believe the important thing is whether we're long on ability or short on ability, the important thing is that we belong on availability. In the Christian life, I believe the most important ability is availability. That's what God really wants.

If it's true that God is the one who does it, and we are not the ones who do it, and that is true, then the most important thing we ever offer God is our availability. I find it arresting in the book of Numbers to see the greatness of Moses and to see the burnout of Moses and the sin of Moses, but then realize that just as God used that little jackass, God used Moses because he was available. And God will use you and God will use me because we're available.

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