

Numbers 11:16-25

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Verses 16 – 25 contain the LORD’s answer to Moses’ question.

Responding to Moses’ petition in verses 10 – 15, *the Lord therefore said to Moses* (v. 16). Ignoring the venting of Moses, the LORD told him to *gather for Him seventy men*. Moses had stated in verse 14, “I alone am not able to carry all this people.” Rather than argue with Moses, God simply provides a plan that answers Moses’ actual need. He will supply *seventy men* to help bear the administrative load of leading Israel. It seems there was already a precedent for there to be seventy top elders from among the people of Israel, as seventy elders accompanied Moses part way up Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:9). Jesus sent out seventy disciples to minister to the cities of Israel (Luke 10:1). This might have been a picture that Jesus was the fulfillment of the prophecy that God would raise up another prophet like Moses who would speak to Israel plainly (Deuteronomy 18:17-18).

The men were to be selected *from the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and their officers*. In other words, these were to be men with proven leadership capabilities. The term *elder* indicates a leader. This term is also used in the New Testament, when it refers to those who are to lead the church (1 Timothy 5:17, Titus 1:5, James 5:14).

Moses was instructed to *bring the elders to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you*. Moses, as in Exodus 4, lacked the confidence to do what the LORD wanted him to do without some assistance. So, just as He appointed Aaron to help Moses in Exodus 4, the LORD appointed seventy men to help Moses in dealing with the people and their current needs.

Once assembled, the LORD told Moses that He would *come down and speak with you there* (v. 17). He also would *take of the Spirit who is upon you, and will put Him upon them*. The *Spirit* was the Holy Spirit which the LORD had given to Moses. The purpose of the Spirit coming upon them was so that *they shall bear the burden of the people with you*. In the New Testament, believers are given the Spirit of God, who comes down and indwells them, giving them resurrection power to walk in the new life. Much of the New Testament is devoted to helping believers understand the importance of walking in that power, and setting aside the desires of the flesh (Matthew 6:24-27).

Moses was still the LORD’s chosen leader of Israel, but now he did not have to *bear it all alone*. This was yet another example of the LORD being gracious to His servant Moses. God does not seem to mind Moses expressing his frustration. But God ignores the emotion and goes straight to the solution.

The LORD then commanded Moses to *say to the people, “Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat”* (v. 18). He reminded them that they had *wept in the ears of the Lord, saying, “Oh that someone would give us meat to eat! For we were well-off in Egypt.”* By saying

this, the people were rejecting as sufficient the LORD's gracious provision of delivering them from Egypt and miraculously providing them manna.

Israel also appears to have forgotten that they were in oppressive, inhumane slavery and that He was taking them to a "land flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:8, 17). This is an excellent illustration for New Testament believers (1 Corinthians 10:11). The Israelites took their eyes off the new country to which they were going, and became obsessed with comfort in the present. New Testament believers are also on a journey to a new land, a new earth. They are promised they will inherit that earth if they will walk faithfully (Matthew 5:5; Revelation 3:2). But to please God requires walking in faith (Hebrews 11:6). This story is an illustration of what not to do. God will teach Israel a lesson and judge them, as He often does, by giving them what they asked for.

Moses was to also tell the people that *the Lord will give you meat and you shall eat*. In fact, He would supply enough meat for them to *eat, not one day, nor two days, nor five days, nor ten days, nor twenty days* (v. 19). In other words, the LORD's provision was not one that lasted a very short time. Instead, the people were to eat meat for *a whole month* (v. 20).

Though the provision of meat for a month appears to be the LORD's blessing on His people, it was also an instrument of judgment, because the people would gorge themselves on this meat *until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you*. That which first appeared to be a blessing became a source of suffering.

This is a pattern in scripture, that the instrument of God's judgment is often through giving people what they asked for. Romans 1 states that God's wrath is poured out on unrighteousness by giving people over to their own lusts (Romans 1:24) which leads to what we might today call addictions (Romans 1:26) and ultimately what we might call today a loss of mental health (Romans 1:28).

The meat became sickening because *you have rejected the Lord who is among you and have wept before Him, saying, "Why did we ever leave Egypt?"* This was the real problem—the desire for meat was a rejection of the person and work of the LORD. The Israelites rejected His work of delivering them from Egypt and guiding them to the Promised Land, protecting them and providing for them during the whole journey. They gave themselves over to the human tendency to place their happiness in having "more." When we define happiness as "more" then we can never be happy, by definition, because "more" is always "that which we do not have."

Israel also rejected God's timing. God's plan was to bless them with "milk and honey" when they inhabited the Promised Land. They were not content to follow God's plan, or accept His timing as being in their best interest. Rather, they desired God to follow their timing, and do their bidding.

Apparently, Moses questioned the credibility of the LORD's instruction to tell the people they were about to have all the meat they desired, because he *said, "The people, among whom I am, are 600,000 on foot* (v. 21). *600,000* was the number of men who left Egypt according to Exodus 12:37. Add to this number of men the number of women and children and one could conclude

that there were between 1.5 million and two million Israelites in the camp. In Moses' perspective, there was not enough livestock to meet the need to feed all of the people.

Even in light of these number, Moses quotes the LORD—*yet You have said, 'I will give them meat, so that they may eat for a whole month.'* Moses again questioned the LORD by telling Him that there were not enough animals in their herds to feed the people meat for a whole month. He asked the LORD (perhaps sarcastically) *should flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, to be sufficient for them? Or should all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, to be sufficient for them?* (v. 22). Implied in these questions was that, given the current size of the flocks and herds that existed, there was no way that all two million people could be fed meat for a whole month.

The LORD's response is pointed. He *said to Moses, "Is the Lord's power limited?"* (v. 23). The Hebrew text reads "Is the LORD's hand shortened?" or "Is the hand of the LORD too short?" This is an anthropomorphism (describing an attribute of God using a human characteristic). The LORD, in essence, is asking Moses "Do you think that I am not able to feed My people?"

God then told Moses that he would *see whether My word will come true for you or not*. Notice that He did not tell Moses how He was going to supply the people with meat for a whole month. He just challenged Moses to watch what He would do. This was a clear statement of the LORD's power and sovereignty over nature. It was also an opportunity for Moses to grow some faith.

Responding to the LORD's statements, Moses obeyed the LORD. Moses offered his questions to God, but when the LORD commanded, Moses set aside his doubts and obeyed. *Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord. Also, he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people, and stationed them around the tent* (v. 24). Even though doubtful, Moses was obedient. He did as he was told. It appears that God worked with Moses' reluctance because of his faith.

Once the seventy were assembled at the tabernacle, *the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him* (v. 25). The *cloud* was how the LORD manifested Himself to the Israelites (Exodus 13:21, 40:38; Numbers 9:15). Next, *He took of the Spirit who was upon him* (meaning Moses) *and placed Him upon the seventy elders*. Thus, the seventy were given the ability to do what the LORD commanded.

And it happened that *when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied*. What the seventy said in their prophecies was not explained, but this was visible evidence of the Holy Spirit being *upon* them. The fact that they *prophesied* once and *did not do it again* demonstrates that the seventy were not given the Holy Spirit to be prophets but to serve the LORD in administering the needs of His people. It also showed that the seventy were not on the same level as Moses, because the LORD still spoke through Moses and him alone. It seemed to be a sign of their special anointing.

This brings to mind the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples in Acts 2. Like the seventy in this chapter, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples to equip them to do the work of the LORD upon the earth.

Biblical Text

¹⁶ The Lord therefore said to Moses, “Gather for Me seventy men from the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and their officers and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. ¹⁷ Then I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit who is upon you, and will put *Him* upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you will not bear *it* all alone. ¹⁸ Say to the people, ‘Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wept in the ears of the Lord, saying, “Oh that someone would give us meat to eat! For we were well-off in Egypt.” Therefore the Lord will give you meat and you shall eat. ¹⁹ You shall eat, not one day, nor two days, nor five days, nor ten days, nor twenty days, ²⁰ but a whole month, until it comes out of 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 ever leave Egypt?”’” ²¹ But Moses said, “The people, among whom I am, are 600,000 on foot; yet You have said, ‘I will give them meat, so that they may eat for a whole month.’ ²² Should flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, to be sufficient for them? Or should all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, to be sufficient for them?” ²³ The Lord said to Moses, “Is the Lord’s power limited? Now you shall see whether My word will come true for you or not.” ²⁴ So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord. Also, he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people, and stationed them around the tent. ²⁵ Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him; and He took of the Spirit who was upon him and placed *Him* upon the seventy elders. And when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do *it* again.