

## “A Deed of Power in My Name”

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29 • Psalm 19:7-14 • James 5:13-20 • Mark 9:38-50

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Today’s reading from the book of Numbers features Moses throwing a temper tantrum. He is complaining to God. “Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me?” He is trying to lead the Israelites through the wilderness to the Promised Land, but they have had one problem after another. Right at the minute, the pressing issue is food. God has been feeding them with manna for a long time, but the people want more. “If only we had meat to eat!” they whine. “We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic, but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” They’re hungry, they’re frustrated, and they are taking it out on Moses. It’s too much for him, so he starts complaining too. “Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me, saying, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery.” Strong words! Notice what Moses is *not* doing: he’s not *asking* God to provide meat. He’s not coming to God in prayer. He’s just *complaining*. Throwing a temper tantrum. Consider: are there times when *you* complain to God, or throw a temper tantrum, instead of approaching God in humility and prayer?

God hears Moses’s complaints. God *always* hears our complaints. The question is, what – if anything – does God choose to *do* about them? God is not some *servant*, not someone at our beck and call whose purpose is to fulfill our every want or desire. God is not a short-order cook. God doesn’t work like that! God always *does* hear our complaints. Sometimes, God doesn’t respond immediately. When Isaac and Rebekah asked God for a child, it took *twenty years* for God to grant their request. When the Israelites were suffering in bitter slavery, they cried out to God a *long time* before God acted. Sometimes God gives us what we want right away; sometimes we have to wait; at other times, God doesn’t give us what we want at all. In Moses’s case, he desperately wants God to provide *meat*.

But God doesn’t give Moses what he wants. God instructs him: “Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting and have them take their place there with you.” This is not what Moses was asking for, but he obeys: “He gathered seventy of the elders of the people and placed them all around the tent. 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 when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied.” God doesn’t *give* something to Moses; rather, God *removes* a portion of the spirit that God had bestowed on him, and distributes it among the elders. Like what happened to the disciples on the day of Pentecost, the seventy elders are each suddenly granted a new spiritual gift. Moses and the people want *meat*; God

gives them the *spirit*. Even two elders who *hadn't* come to the tent are granted the ability to prophesy. Joshua, Moses's protégé, objects and tells Moses to make them stop, but Moses recognizes the gift of God for what it is. It's *better* than meat. "Would that *all* the LORD's people were prophets," he says, "and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!" Sometimes – no, actually, I think it's *all* the time – God knows what we *truly* need better than we ourselves do. Sometimes we ask for the wrong things.

Something similar happens in the Gospel passage. The disciples have seen someone who isn't among Jesus's group of followers cast demons out of people by using the name of Jesus. To the disciples, it looks like someone who doesn't belong to the faith is usurping the power of the faith for their own purposes. But Jesus isn't the least bit bothered by this. "Do not stop him, for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us." From Jesus's point of view, at least three things are happening: (1) people are being healed, (2) the person wielding Jesus's name rightly recognizes the *power* of that name, and (3) word about Jesus is being spread. All of those are good. Jesus recognizes that there are some people "out there" who honor Jesus but who aren't "in here." We should be careful drawing boundary lines. Plenty of Christians try to define "who's in" and "who's out," who's *really* a Christian and who's not, who will get to heaven and who will not. None of that is for *us* to determine. *God* knows "who's in" – and that's *all* that matters.

Jesus says: "If any of you cause one of these little ones who believe in me to sin" (or "stumble"), "it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea." Jesus appears to be referring to *anyone* who honors or respects Jesus, even if they aren't among Jesus's followers, even if they don't come to church. Jesus is urging *caution*. He doesn't want us to *turn people off* who have some degree of faith or who are coming to faith. The church is very guilty of this; so many terrible things have happened under the banner of Christianity that should *never* have happened. How many *millions* of people have abandoned their faith because of the sins that happen in the church?

Next, Jesus says one of the most difficult teachings in the entire Gospel: "If your hand causes you to sin" (or "stumble"), "cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell" (literally, "Gehenna"), "to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin" (or "stumble"), "cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell" ("Gehenna"). "And if your eye causes you to sin" (or "stumble"), "tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell" ("Gehenna"), "where their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched." This is hard. Let's walk through it.

First: *Gehenna* was historically a name for a geographic region, a valley surrounding the Old City of Jerusalem and Mount Zion on the west and south. In Hebrew it was called *Gē' ben-Hinnōm*, "the valley of the son of Hinnom," sometimes shortened to *Gē-Hinnōm*, "the valley of Hinnom." Hinnom must have been somebody's *name*. Several passages in the Old Testament suggest that there was in that valley a shrine to a Canaanite god called Molech, and that child sacrifice took place there. Two of the kings of Judah made their children "pass through the fire in the valley of the son of Hinnom." That seems to be referring to a religious ritual that probably resulted in the deaths of those children. A later king, Josiah, as part of his effort to reform religious practices, destroyed that shrine; 2 Kings 23:10 says that he "defiled Topheth, which is in the valley of Ben-hinnom, so that no one would make a son or a daughter pass through fire as an offering to Molech." Some scholars think that after that shrine was destroyed, it became the rubbish heap for residents of Jerusalem, where they deposited not only their

trash but also the corpses of animals and criminals, and that there was a fire perpetually burning there to consume all that. In later Judaism, Gehinnom became a figurative name for the place where the spiritual purification of wicked dead people took place. It was a kind of Hell, distinct from “Sheol” or “Hades,” which referred to the abode of *all* the dead. Jews believed a purifying fire perpetually burned in Gehenna – except on the Sabbath day, when the wicked dead got a break. The wicked were not consigned to Gehenna forever; most rabbinical Jewish sources say each wicked person only had to endure the fiery punishment for a period of up to twelve months. This is the Gehenna that Jesus is referring to, “where their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched.” Whether Jesus understood Gehenna to be a *temporary* place of purification for the wicked dead, as rabbinical Jews understood it, or a place of *eternal* damnation, as it came to be understood in later Christianity, is not clear.

Now we come to the hardest part of this passage: Jesus’s teaching that “if your hand causes you to sin” (or stumble), “cut it off;” and “if your foot causes you to sin” (or stumble), “cut it off;” and “if your eye causes you to sin” (or stumble), “tear it out,” for “it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God” maimed than to be whole in body while you live and consigned to Gehenna when you die. What does he mean? Does he really want us to chop off body parts? If he wants us to pluck out our eye every time we feel the least bit of jealousy or lust, we’d all be walking around blind! But there is *no* indication *anywhere* in the New Testament that the early followers of Jesus actually *did* this in any literal sense. When Simon Peter lied about knowing Jesus – three times! – did he cut out his tongue? No! This is a *metaphor*. Jesus sometimes spoke in *metaphors*. This is important. It means we need to be *careful* when we are trying to make sense of the Gospel message. *Not everything Jesus says* – not everything the *Bible* says! – is to be taken *literally*. Often there is a *spiritual* teaching that is presented in the form of a *metaphor*, to help us understand. In this case: *if there’s something in your life that is a temptation for you*, something that invites and beckons you to head down the wrong path, *get rid of it!* If you’ve got a serious problem with alcohol, for example, *don’t keep it in your house*, and be mindful where you go. If you’ve got a gambling problem, *don’t go to the casino*. If your mouth keeps offending other people, learn to *think* before you *speak*. Set some *boundaries*. Be aware of what *tempts* you, and what you need to do to stay clear of those temptations. Learn how to keep yourself from going off the deep end.

One last word for today: “Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?” (Or: “How can you restore its saltiness?”) I think the *fire* that Jesus is referring to is the *spiritual fire* that burns within us when we have faith. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit; it’s what caused those elders in the Numbers passage to prophesy; it’s what has inspired Christians around the globe to do a whole host of *good* over the last twenty centuries. “Everyone will be salted with fire.” It’s a gift that comes to all of us who trust in Jesus. But: what happens “if salt has lost its saltiness”? What happens if your faith wanes? What happens if you no longer feel as spiritual or as connected to God as you once did? What happens your passion for following Jesus seems to burn out? How can you restore your “saltiness”? Jesus doesn’t answer the question. He simply says, “Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.” But what if you have run out of salt? I’ll tell you the truth. This has happened to me, more than once. There have been times when it felt like the weight of the world and the personal challenges I was facing were more than my faith could withstand. When that has happened, the best thing I have found to do is to just *keep going back to the well*. Jesus is our *living water*, and *he* will never run dry. Keep going back to that well, my friends. Keep going back to *Jesus*.

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