

Ministerial Burnout

Numbers 11:4–15

There are a lot of wonderful truths to preach on in this eleventh chapter of Numbers, so we're going to spend some time here. The title of my message is "Ministerial Burnout." I have three points this morning: (1) Believing God's goodness, (2) Laboring in service, (3) Encouraging your leaders. First,

1. Believing God's goodness

Last week's message was "Complaining Is Catching." We saw that "when the people complained, it displeased the LORD." Here were former slaves who had been rescued from Egyptian bondage and brought into the very presence of God at Sinai. They had done nothing to merit his mercy. They were saved by free grace. So likewise we too have been rescued from the kingdom of darkness and brought by grace into the kingdom of God's dear Son—not of our own deserving, but of the Father's mercy to us in Christ. Whatever evil and discomfort we experience in this vale of tears is temporary, while eternal life in the presence of the Lamb is forever. Our duty is to live for him and put our trust in him, moment by moment. He loves to give gifts to his children and will never let us down if we look to him in faith.

The Bible tells us that "without faith it is impossible to please him."¹ So whatever happens in life, our first instinct should be to trust in the LORD. If we experience an unexpected mercy, it should make us trust God more. If we experience an unexpected trial, it should make us trust God more. No matter what happens to us, it is always right to trust the Lord. Trust is always right. Trust must be fixed on the right object—the promise of God, not our own personal deserving.

Many people mistakenly believe they deserve nothing but good in this life. If evil or adversity or trouble occur; if we get bad news, if we are in difficult straits and we see no way out; if we have death or disease or financial reversal, or a lawsuit, or injustice; if our dearest friends forsake us, if we lose our reputation unjustly—whatever happens!—our responsibility is to trust in God's goodness and know that his way is perfect. When he has tried us, we will come forth as gold.² We should pray daily, "Lord, I am your servant. Whatever you have for me in this life, I accept that. Give me grace to lean upon you. O LORD, I give you thanks, for you are *good*. Amen."

Israel failed to do that. Verse 4 observes: "the mixed multitude who were among them yielded to intense craving; so the children of Israel also wept again and said: 'Who will give us meat to eat?'" The mixed multitude had not grown up in multigenerational covenant families. They had not been steeped in the truth of God from their youth. They were new to the ways of the LORD. Rather than counting

¹ Heb. 11:6

² Job 23:10

their blessings; rather than saying, “Look how the Lord has been taking care of us in this vast wilderness! God has blessed us with manna from heaven—perfect food, every day, morning and evening. He has been providing us with fresh, pure water that miraculously follows us through the desert. He has given us safety and protection. He has given us a priesthood that offer sacrifices for sin and pure worship to the God who is in covenant with us. We alone of all the peoples of the earth have forgiveness of sins and fellowship with our Father in heaven. God himself goes with us and promises us his special presence.” Rather than looking at all their blessings, they started focusing on what they *didn’t* have—the fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic they enjoyed back in Egypt. God had been giving them “angels’ food,”³ but they wanted variety!

And it was not just the mixed multitude. Verse 4 notes that “*the children of Israel* also wept.” God’s people were plainly feeling sorry for themselves. In essence they were saying, “*I am king. I deserve to have my needs and wants met.*”

And what a time to be doing this! To paraphrase Calvin, “There was something particularly shameful in the people’s behavior, that, when they had so recently been severely chastened, and part of the camp was even still smoking, and when God was clearly angry, that they should then crave better food. After all, the remains of the fire were still before their very eyes.” The people were tempting the God of heaven! God would have been well within his right to have destroyed them all right then. But he is merciful!

Now there would have been a proper way to request more variety! They could have approached God as humble petitioners. Peter says, “Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God.”⁴ You might say, “Hey, that had not been written yet,” and you would be right, but the principle was there all along. It’s implied in the first commandment, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” *God* is God. *He* is the Creator, and *we* are mere creatures. While we are invited into his holy presence to have fellowship with him—a blessed privilege!—we must never forget that we are mere creatures, unworthy. We are not peers! He will always outrank us. Paul sought the Lord three times to take away his thorn in the flesh, but he did not experience God’s wrath; rather, the Lord said to him, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.”⁵ But notice the bitterness and self-centeredness in the Israelites’ response: “Now our whole being is dried up; there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes!” Here are men and women with no gratitude. In the midst of abundance, they complain that they are dry. Calvin’s analogy is apt: “Thus the rain, washing the hard rock, wets it not

³ Ps. 78:25

⁴ 1 Pet. 5:6

⁵ 2 Cor. 12:9

within.”⁶ The stony heart does not receive the grace of God. Let us be good soil that receives the early and latter rain. Hosea 10:12 advises: “Break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the LORD, till He comes and rains righteousness on you.” The soil of our hearts needs to be plowed and broken up by conviction, humiliation, and godly sorrow for sin, that it may be ready to receive the good seed of the Word.⁷

Yet the poison of selfishness is within the hearts of all of us who fell in Adam. We tend to put our own needs first. But what is that? Clearly, it is a violation of the first commandment. In our sin and fallenness we make *ourselves* god. We convince ourselves that God is stingy and we are deserving. We pout and blame God for not giving us something that he has withheld from us for our own good. He is a loving Father. “No good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly.”⁸ When, out of love and mercy, he tells us “No” or “Wait”; rather than remembering that he is wise and it is for our good, how apt are we, like the ancient Israelites, to blame God for our troubles and harbor bitterness and resentment against the One who loved us with an everlasting love! How quick are we to forget that *all* things—even our current troubles and trials, disappointments and thorns in the flesh—work together for our ultimate good! Our wise and loving Heavenly Father has not forgotten us! He is remaking us in his own image. When he has tried us, we shall come forth as gold.

My dear one, commit yourself to Christ. Never stop believing in God’s goodness. Never interfere with the Spirit’s working in your heart. Amen!

2. Laboring in service

Our text continues: “Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its color like the color of bdellium. The people went about and gathered it, ground it on millstones or beat it in the mortar, cooked it in pans, and made cakes of it; and its taste was like the taste of pastry prepared with oil. And when the dew fell on the camp in the night, the manna fell on it.”

Here is a description of the manna that fed 2½ million Israelites—without fail—every morning and evening. According to Easton, *manna* means “What is that?” the name given by the Israelites to this miraculous food (Ex. 16). The color of bdellium is described variously. But whatever it was, the Israelites had no trouble recognizing it. But I want you to notice something. God didn’t deliver fully-prepared meals via Door Dash! The people had to *work* to prepare their food. While they didn’t have to plant crops or hunt for game, they did have to prepare and cook meals for themselves and their families. Their daily nourishment was

⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, at Num. 11:6 (Logos Bible Software)

⁷ Adapted from Benson Commentary, Hosea 10:12, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/benson/hosea/10.htm> accessed 9-13-26

⁸ Ps. 84:11

supplied by *labor*. Even in the wilderness, God wanted his people to labor. This may make perfect sense to many of us, but sadly, we live in an age where many people have swallowed the lie that the world owes us a living. Politicians of both parties try to buy votes by promising people free goodies, whether it is Medicare for all, or a \$5,000 check in the mail. Yet such base appeals devalue the work ethic and undermine public morality. They make people dependent—which may be the intent.

Remember the fourth commandment: “Six days shalt thou *labor*, and do all thy work.” God has built this principle into the rhythm of creation. Work was a part of the original creation. God put Adam into the Garden “to work it and keep it.”⁹ That was before the creation was cursed on account of sin. Work is *not* a punishment. But since the Fall, the ground has become cursed for man’s sake, and work has become *toil*. Thank God that this is not absolute. As part of God’s goodness to man the creature—what theologians call *common grace*—man can look with satisfaction on a job well done. Blessed is the man, woman or child that has experienced this. Let me ask you: Have *you* experienced the satisfaction of a job well done? The other day I made myself go out and do some yard work. Believe me, there were plenty of projects I would have rather tackled, but the yard work sorely needed doing, and I decided it would be better to do it when the weather is nice than later when it’s cold. So I put on some old clothes and trimmed some very overgrown forsythia bushes and mowed the lawn. I resisted the urge to grumble that the bushes were growing so prodigiously this year. When I finished, I came in and showered. Later, when Norma and I went for a walk, we came around a corner and I happened to look at my yard and I thought to myself, *boy, that looks really nice*. For a moment I appreciated the satisfaction of a job well done. This is a blessing from our Creator God. He brings blessing out of the curse. This principle is operative during the present age. The Bible says, “And whatsoever ye *do*, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men.” We are told to “know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.” At the final day Christ’s faithful servants will be told, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant . . . enter thou into the joy of thy lord.”¹⁰

Such are the benefits of common grace—we live in a world where progress is possible, where our labor is valuable, where humans can sell their labor to the highest bidder. Some people speak of a world where computers and robots and AI will do all the work, but I do not believe that is likely. God put us into a beautiful world. It is still beautiful, in spite of the curse. God put us into this world to work it and to keep it. That is part of our DNA, so to speak. Our job as Christians is to leave the world a better place than it was when we were born. In a culture that is

⁹ Gen. 2:15 ESV

¹⁰ Col. 3:23, 1 Cor. 15:58, Matt. 25:21

increasingly hostile to God, Christians with a good work ethic stand out. Whether it is manual labor, doing chores around the house, working with our minds at business, education, literature, music, art, architecture, the church, charity, agriculture, or whatever, the Christian must keep in mind that whatever we do, we are to do it *heartily*—with all our heart—to the glory of God. We should do our work, not just to get by, or to please the boss! Our job is to please *God*. We want to hear his “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Furthermore, we ought to labor for the Lord, as we faithfully represent him in our families, neighborhoods and workplaces. We ought to serve in such a way that we model Christ. When we give a cup of cold water, we give it as an expression of the love of Christ. Israel’s taking the raw ingredient of manna and grinding it, beating it, cooking it, and making delicious cakes of it—cakes whose taste was like the taste of pastry prepared with oil!—was supposed to be done heartily, as to the LORD, as an expression of gratitude for his great salvation.

Does this describe you? If not, then confess that sin and ask God for grace to reclaim your labor as a gift to be presented to God. The Lord Jesus worked for years in his father Joseph’s carpenter shop. He did his work as an act of service to God. His labor sanctified forever the value of hard work. When he went to the cross to accomplish the work of redemption he prayed, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup be taken from me.” But it could *not* be taken from him! As he went to the cross to die for our sins and give to his people his perfect righteousness, he did it as to the Lord. “Even so, Father, for it seemed good in thy sight.” The Father was pleased with his work; it earned the Father’s “Well done.” And if you, dear sinner, look to him in faith, you will be saved. For by one offering he hath perfected forever them that are sanctified. Hallelujah!

Dear brothers and sisters, let us do our work—whatever God has called us to do—as to the Lord and for his glory. Amen!

3. Encouraging your leaders

Consider the last part of our text: “Then Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, everyone at the door of his tent; and the anger of the LORD was greatly aroused; Moses also was displeased. So Moses said to the LORD, ‘Why have You afflicted Your servant? And why have I not found favor in Your sight, that You have laid the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I beget them, that You should say to me, “Carry them in your bosom, as a guardian carries a nursing child,” to the land which You swore to their fathers? Where am I to get meat to give to all these people? For they weep all over me, saying, “Give us meat, that we may eat.” I am not able to bear all these people alone, because the burden is too heavy for me. If You treat me like this, please kill me here and now—if I have found favor in Your sight—and do not let me see my wretchedness!’”

Clearly, Moses was discouraged. Here were the people the LORD called him to lead out of Egypt, crying and pouting like spoiled children because they were dissatisfied with the wonderful gifts that God had freely given them. They were weeping each one in the door of his tent. They were not ashamed of their sin but practicing it openly. Here was a huge spiritual problem in the hearts of the covenant people, and Moses knew that he did not have the power to solve it on his own. Moses was doubting whether he would be able to lead such an unruly and unbelieving people through the vast Sinai desert. Surely they faced many perils ahead, and if they scattered as sheep without a shepherd, it could be deadly for the whole nation.

But Moses himself was not without fault. After all, God had personally chosen him for this task. When the Angel of the LORD appeared to him in the burning bush, and Moses had said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?” the LORD had promised: “I will certainly be with you.” When Moses had protested: “O my Lord, I am not eloquent . . . but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue,” the LORD had said, “I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall say.”¹¹ God had given his solemn promise, and he was not going to go back on his word.

But here was a moment of crisis, and Moses didn’t see any way forward. He accuses God of afflicting his servant, and of laying the entire burden of leadership on himself alone. He protests, “Did I conceive all these people? Did I beget them?” Obviously not. He felt the burden of his calling, that it was his responsibility to carry the people in his bosom, as a guardian carries a nursing child. This anticipates what the LORD would tell the prophet Isaiah many years later: “And kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and their queens thy nursing mothers” (Isa. 49:23), when the church would be so blessed that civil rulers would as it were take the church under their wing.

But this whole section illustrates a fundamental truth: Being a leader can be a thankless task. Moses was experiencing ministerial burnout.

There is a principle in Hebrews 13:17, where God tells his people, “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. *Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.*” In other words, church members have a responsibility to submit to their ministers and elders in such a way as to *lighten* their load, not *add* to it. By their complaining and unreasonable demands the Israelites in the desert were making Moses’ work more difficult, while God’s plan was for his people to willingly submit to faithful spiritual leadership.

¹¹ Ex. 3:12; 4:10, 12

And so it is today. The permanent officers in the church are ministers of the Word, ruling elders and deacons. Every Christian has a responsibility to submit to them in the Lord. And when both officers and people do this, there is peace and harmony within the body, and the cause of Christ is advanced. The Lord is lifted up in his people's worship, and sinners are attracted to the Savior.

Ministerial burnout is real. We have experienced it in our own presbytery. There are ministers among us that give themselves wholeheartedly to the work of the gospel, even to the neglect of their own hearts. The minister of Christ must himself be nourished and transformed by the Word before he can minister to others.

Pray for God to raise up selfless ministers of the Word who can shepherd his people. Amen.