



***Becoming Fully Devoted Followers
by Studying the Followers Before Us***

**WEEK 9
MOSES (3)**

FEBRUARY 26 - MARCH 4, 2007

READINGS:

DAY	<i>THROUGH THE BIBLE</i>	ABBREVIATED STUDY
Monday	Numbers 1-5, Psalm 41	Exodus 32, Psalm 41
Tuesday	Numbers 6-10, Psalm 42	Exodus 32:7-14, Psalm 42
Wednesday	Numbers 11-15, Psalm 43	Numbers 11-12, Psalm 43
Thursday	Numbers 16-20, Psalm 44	Numbers 13:30 -14:4; 14:26-35; Psalm 44
Friday	Numbers 20-27, Psalm 45	Deuteronomy 6:1-15, Psalm 45



Connecting people to abundant life.

READ

Exodus 32

Psalm 41

REFLECT

The incident of the creation of the golden calf is another of those Bible stories that kids become familiar with in Sunday school, but that continues to challenge adults with its horrific implications. With the memory of the Red Sea miracle fresh, Israel nevertheless completely abandons her God. Their motivation is implied as mere boredom or impatience, resulting in a rejection of both Moses and his God (Ex 32:1; Acts 7:39). Aaron's role in brokering the fiasco has been given a range of differing interpretations. The kindest view understands him as wishing to provide an interim solution in the context of a rising mob hysteria. He gives in to the people's request for a visible image, but still sees himself as the priest of the LORD (32:5). But the people lose all restraint (they are "out of control," 32:25) and revert to frankly pagan forms of worship. In any case, their actions convince the LORD that Israel is worthy only of destruction, and that this story of redemption will turn out to be a very short one after all (32:9-10).

One of the great questions that emerge is, how could this have happened? Part of the answer comes in God's assessment: "They are an obstinate people" (32:9). In reflecting on this part of her story, Israel came up with stronger self-condemnations: Psalm 106 sees here the whole range of human wickedness and perversity in the face of the offer of love and grace (see verses 6, 20, 21). In the New Testament, the language of this Psalm, that "they exchanged their Glory for the image of an ox that eats grass," is echoed in Paul's condemnation of all of

humanity, not only of Israel: "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, Who is blessed forever." (Rom 1:23) The short attention span of Israel is tied to the deep and resilient quandary of sin itself. How does something like that happen? For that matter (to make it practical) how does it happen so often in my own life, that I depart from what I know to be God's will for me? Maybe the best short answer is that there is no "good" response to the question "how could it happen?" There is no adequate justification at all for getting any sort of real glimpse of God and turning away. On the other hand, there are many, many fine reasons for responding to God, again and again, in His amazing offer of forgiveness and friendship. Surely the best vantage point for considering the power of sin over us, is in God's offer of forgiveness.

Our Psalm for today, 41, also explores the theme of falseness and betrayal. "Even my close friend, in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me" (41:9). This passage recalls for Christians the betrayal of the Last Supper, when Judas left the upper room to meet with the Temple priests and lead them to arrest Jesus (John 13:18). It also recalls for us the deeper answer to the question of sin: whether or not we grasp the "why," we can rejoice that our Savior has paid the ultimate price to bring the resolution of the problem. At the cross He broke the power of sin, and now He walks with us daily to draw us away from the ugliness of corruption, and into the simple beauty of life with God.

PRAY

"As for me, Thou dost uphold me in my integrity, and Thou dost set me in Thy presence forever. Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting." (Psalm 41:12-13)

D.D.

READ

Exodus 32:7-14

Psalm 42

REFLECT

As we noted, Israel's desire for a new god, and their worship of the golden calf, led God to the judgment that they were worthy only to be destroyed. He had called them into covenant relationship with Him, but now He utters the shocking words to Moses, "Let Me *alone*, that My anger might burn against them, and that I might destroy them" (32:10). He is still the saving God, however, and He is ready with a "Plan B": He offers Moses the opportunity to become the founding patriarch of a new "great nation" (32:10). Between the two of them, they can start again.

Moses is apparently not tempted even for a heartbeat by the LORD's offer. Instead he launches into one of the great intercessory prayers in Scripture, urging the LORD to stay with His original plan despite the inconstancy of Israel. Moses' intercessory prayer takes the form of a 3-point argument. First, God has already shown His possession of *this* people by bringing them out of Egypt. Second, the Egyptians will mock Him if He destroys Israel. Third, His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob still hold. The result is that God accepts Moses' prayer, and "changes His mind" (32:14).

The power and drama of Moses' intercession is clear. On the other hand God's "change of mind" is a unique occurrence in the Bible, and has meant a lot of head-scratching as the Church has tried to figure out what that could mean. After all, God is the one unchanging reality whose faithfulness we can count on. What are we to understand in this story of Him changing His mind?

To rehearse all the ways that students of the Bible have responded on this point would be impossible here. I do love the prerogative of the

writer that allows me to say, "For me, the following explanation makes most sense." And this is it: God is showing He wants human partners in the drama of redemption. Redemption, whether of the people of Israel or of the world as a whole, cannot happen without human response and human history. If the people of Israel refuse to respond, God will accomplish His goals with another group. But when Moses insists that God go ahead as planned, it amounts to enough obedience in Israel to keep the ball rolling. Moses is not perfect, but his faith at this point is enough for the realities of the covenant to remain active.

Many generations later, the full obedience of Jesus Christ will accomplish even more. Jesus, the perfect man, was able for the first time to offer up an entire lifetime of full obedience to God. In doing so He accomplished real salvation from sin itself, in life and in death. Moses' obedience was not vast enough to save Israel from sin; but it did shore up the human side of the plan at a strategic moment. The LORD said to Moses, "Leave Me alone!" Moses said, "No way!" The LORD said, "I can use that attitude!"

RESPOND

While we can never say that God's plans depend on us, we can certainly say that God invites us to partner with Him in His plans. If you are involved in Christian service at Glenkirk or somewhere else, you know how wonderful a blessing this is. In fact, God's plans for strategic blessing extend to each area of our lives: home and family, work or school, church and community, public and political – and especially our prayers.

PRAY

Dear Lord, Open my heart now to the junctures of crisis that I know about, private and public. Help me intercede in the power of Your Spirit. Your help is needed, Lord: therefore I pray that You act.

D.D.

READ

Numbers 11-12
Psalm 43

REFLECT

The people of Israel move out of the camp at Mount Sinai and begin the trip across the desert to the Promised Land. But even at this exciting moment, many among them start in on the behavior that will become characteristic of Israel in the desert: they grumble at their conditions, and complain of the inadequate provision of the Lord.

As Moses brings these problems to the Lord, the Lord offers two resolutions. On the one hand, He agrees to supplement the steady diet of manna, which the Israelites have complained about as they have remembered the more varied and tasty food of Egypt. He tells Moses that He will provide a month's worth of daily meat. This is an angry concession: He knows it will not cure their ingratitude. The quail comes, and when they stuff it in their mouths without ceremony and certainly without saying grace, they are struck down with the plague. Thus are blessings and curses used as blunt instruments to try to get this people to respond to the God who wishes to draw them near in love. The dilemma builds in intensity: how can God achieve His aim of a people praising His name, when their hearts are so dark?

On the other hand, the Lord also responds to Moses' plea for administrative help. He calls him to set aside 70 elders, and as they are gathered He causes the Holy Spirit to come on them. These then, plus the two, Eldad and Medad, who were not gathered together with the others, represent the new structure of the community of Israel, allowing its internal business to be handled well. Churches find special significance in this account, since it speaks to their need to have structures that are appropriate to their work. It is especially poignant that authority within the community is signaled by the anointing of the Spirit. The lesson is clear that, for all the natural talent available in any sizable

group, the work of the Lord remains the work of the Lord. It is His presence and guidance that qualifies the true work of the community. And the choice of leader rests with Him, finally: Moses chose the 70, but the Lord found two leaders of His own that had been left behind in the camp!

If the great question for Israel at this time is whether it will realize its identity as God's people, these two stories help the plot thicken. The people are clearly rebellious at heart, and are unworthy of the honor extended to them. But God is able to provide adequate leaders, by extending His own Spirit to rest upon them. As we will see, if this project is to be successful, God must uphold it at every juncture. The point is underlined with the problem of Aaron's and Miriam's insistence on being recognized as leaders (Num 12). God again reiterates that His will, not human desirousness, is what runs the show (12:6). Further, the real leadership is not rooted in community prestige, but rather in deep familiarity with God and His will and ways (12:7-8). In this community, the plan is God's; the work is God's; the leadership is God's; and the glory will be for God alone.

RESPOND

The different traditions within Christianity each understand community structure in different ways. Presbyterians wish to do justice to the biblical models of multiple leaders, which means we end up on the whole with more committees than tyrants. Certainly whatever forms are chosen can never guarantee a closer adherence to God's work and will; personal openness to God and to each other is far more important for the work we are called to do.

PRAY

“O send out Thy light and Thy truth. Let them lead me. Let them bring me to Thy holy hill, and to Thy dwelling places. Then I will go the to altar of God, to God my exceeding joy.” Psalm 43:3

D.D.

READ

Numbers 13:30 – 14:4; 14:26-35

Psalms 44

REFLECT

Today we read of the great fork in the road for Israel. Despite their grumbling and resistance, God has brought them in a timely way through the desert, and is ready to lead them into the Promised Land. In preparation, He asks Moses to send spies into the land to bring back news of what they find there. The news is both good and bad: the land is rich and bountiful, but it is also well-populated with a strong, settled people. The group of spies is divided in its assessment of the situation: Joshua and Caleb recognize the fulfillment of God's promise of provision, but the others react against the military threat represented by the walled cities. The problem of dissent grows as those who fear the looming battle spread exaggerated tales among Israel, turning the tribes once more against Moses and the commands of the Lord.

Here we find too the second and last moment, alluded to earlier this week, in which God declares His readiness to "dispossess" Israel and to start again with another people, and again Moses persuades Him to keep going. The exchange produces this wonderful affirmation on God's part: He will go ahead with His plan for Israel, "But as surely as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord" (Num 14:21) God affirms He will not again "repent" of His choice of Israel, and instead will find a way to work with them. The result will be no glory for Israel, but it will mean that the whole earth will enjoy the proclaimed and manifest glory of the Lord. In other words, if God goes forward with the plan at this point, He will not stop until He fulfills the whole of it: salvation for the world.

God's way of working with Israel is to place them in an extended teaching environment. He will keep them in the wilderness for 40 years,

that is, until all the men responsible for balking at the command to enter the Land have died. The interim will also mean that "your sons shall be shepherds for forty years in the wilderness" (14:33) – an interesting prospect that at first sounds like a threat or punishment, but actually may be intended to restore peace and dignity to the experience of Israel. We remember that Moses himself, after 40 years in the palace, escaped to the life of a shepherd for 40 years under Jethro's watchful eye before being called back to Egypt as deliverer. Here too, there is a strong implication that much more can be learned of the love of God in the context of a simpler life, than in a life distracted by urban demands and exotic comforts. Surely there is a correlation between the Israelites' demand for instant gratification, and the command of the Lord for an extended period of rethinking life.

RESPOND

The phrase "urban demands and exotic comforts" cuts close to the bone for me, I admit. After a day of battling crowds and freeways, surely a plate of sushi is an earned reward. Over against that sense of entitlement, though, we may well hear God's still, small, and maybe even exasperated voice asking, what does this "reward" have to do specifically with our service of the Gospel? In many ways, this is not a bad challenge to hear at the beginning of our 40 days of Lent, which is nothing if not an extended opportunity for rethinking life.

PRAY

Dear Lord, Thank you for the abundance of your provision. Thank you also for the beauty of life and the joy we can take in it. Help us to accept all these gifts from Your hand, and be ready to enjoy them as gifts from you.

D.D.

READ

Deuteronomy 6:1-15

Psalms 45

REFLECT

After the 40 years of wandering, Moses readies the people for entry into the Land. This preparation has several distinct elements. First, a census is taken to number Israel, and to ensure that truly a new generation is ready for the new land. Second, details are dealt with about the conquest of the land itself, and its settlement by the families and tribes. Third, Israel is reminded to return worship to God upon entry into the Land. Fourth, the important issue of the transition of leadership is addressed with the appointment of Joshua as successor to Moses. And fifth, Moses gives a long farewell address (basically our book of Deuteronomy) rehearsing the history of this people, and warning about the coming challenges Israel will face. Thus, at this time of major transition, he reminds them of their identity as God's people on the border (as one writer has put it) between the past and the future, slavery and freedom, fear and faith. Having accomplished this, he dies, and is buried by God Himself (Deut 32:6).

Moses' final address in Deuteronomy has many compelling passages and features. In it, Moses is absolutely clear that the conquest is being accomplished by the Lord (9:1-6). He calls for Israel's constant obedience, affirming that obedience will bring its blessings (28:1-14) and disobedience its consequences (28:15-68). The consequences of disobedience will include not only all the pains of the plagues of Egypt (28:27), but even removal from the Land itself (28:36). In short, Deuteronomy sets the agenda for understanding the later history of Israel in its good and bad times, in its years of growth under David and Solomon and its captivity in Babylon, and in the need for some greater solution to the problem of human rebellion and sin. The anguished

relationship of God and Israel remains in many ways an unfinished story in the Old Testament.

But also in Deuteronomy we find the great promise that God in His faithfulness will continue to supply leaders in Israel to guide her and recall her to the Lord. In one passage, Moses declares that one Leader in particular would be raised up whose words would be the very Word of God. The writers of the New Testament found the fulfillment of this promise in Jesus Christ. (Deut 18:18-19; Acts 3:19-26). As Christians then we may see the resolution of this historical anguish in the coming of God Himself to lead the nation, born as a baby in Bethlehem, preaching as a prophet, dying as a priestly sacrifice, rising as the true king.

And Deuteronomy also reiterates the heart of the matter, in a way that ever afterwards became the great heart cry and confession of the Israelite nation: "Hear, O Israel! The LORD your God, the LORD is one; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (6:4-5). Not finally obedience, but love, makes the world go 'round, as Moses knew, and Jesus re-expressed, and as we in the Church hope we are learning.

RESPOND

Identity has been a theme for our church in our own time of leadership transition. To receive and return God's love, to live in firm allegiance to what we know of God's holy plans, to walk in creative partnership with others in fostering a community where these are understood – surely these are some of the cornerstones of our identity as Christians, as Presbyterians, as human beings.

PRAY

Lord, thank you for the gift of identity our in you, together in the church community. We affirm today that our relationship with you is the most important element of our lives; help us live it more and more consistently in our relationships with others.

- Dave Dorman