

## “Between the Dead and the Living” – Numbers 16:41-50

[Please turn with me to Numbers 16:41-50]

This morning we come to a passage in the life of Israel that is both familiar and unfamiliar. It is **familiar** because it shows Israel grumbling and complaining in the wilderness because of their unbelief. God sends a plague to discipline them, Moses and Aaron intercede for the people, and God stops the plague. Very familiar. It is **unfamiliar** because of the great lengths God goes to in order to stop the plague, showing his love and fierceness to save his people in a deeper way than he has ever yet shown.

You see, we all battle **unbelief**. Simply defined, unbelief is knowing God’s promises but not living by them. It is “the human refusal to believe God’s word.”<sup>1</sup> It’s something that plagues Christians. It’s when we don’t live in light of the reality that God is good, loving, powerful, and wise. For Israel, God made promises to Abraham to bless his descendants, but they forgot them. They behaved as if God had abandoned them. Unbelief always leads to one of two things: either prideful control-grabbing, or fearful anxiety-having.

What about you and me? Do our lives reflect the past, present and future fulfillment of God’s promises? This morning, we will delve into an instance of unbelief in Israel’s history to see what it teaches us for today. And we will see this: that **beholding Jesus is the only cure for unbelief**.

To get some help with the sermon this morning, I interviewed an Israelite named Joseph. I’ll let him introduce himself and tell you about his life:

*“My name is Joseph. No, not the Joseph you’re thinking of with the coat of many colors. All my coats growing up were old and single-colored (but at least I had some!) I was 13 when we crossed the Red Sea on foot. It was amazing! You could see fish through the water, and when the walls of water collapsed on the Egyptians, Wow! That was a day of great rejoicing for my people.*

*We traveled through the desert to Mount Sinai where Moses brought down Ten Commands from God himself – I can’t believe he was brave enough to go up there! At Sinai we learned that God is holy.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Paul House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998) p. 153.

*God also commanded us to build a tabernacle to be his dwelling place among us. Whenever I saw Moses or Aaron or Miriam, I sensed that they knew God in a deep way. I longed to know him like they did. We followed a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. From these, I knew that God was always with us.*

*But even though I knew that, I doubted God a lot. I remember one time we complained about the food – manna was really good, but, I'll admit, I missed a good piece of meat. God gave us some, but he also sent a plague because we didn't trust that he could care for us better than we could ever care for ourselves.*

*After traveling for about a year, we finally made it to the Jordan Valley. We were on the brink of promise! I remember my father saying, "Son, this is the land God promised our fathers Abraham and Isaac and Jacob." We were so close!*

*That's when everything went wrong. God told Moses to send 12 men into the land he was giving us to spy it out. They brought back the most delicious looking grapes I've ever seen! But they also brought a terrifying report – giants, huge walls, powerful cities. All except Caleb and Joshua – they believed God's promises. But no one else did.*

*We all wept that night. But I remember one thing Caleb and Joshua said:*

*"The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. If the LORD delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey." My heart soared when they said this! But they added a warning: "Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them"*  
*(Numbers 14:7-9).*

*[Is there part of your life that you are giving into fear or taking control rather than believing that the LORD is with you? I wish someone had helped me see that.]*

*Instead of receiving what was promised, we wandered for 40 years, and God promised that everyone under 20, which meant me, would still enter the Land. I'll let Blake take it from here.*

Like Joseph said, God did not give up on his people in their unbelief. He was committed to go to any length to fulfill his promises to them. And he was committed to heal their unbelief, as he is in us, the new Israel. There is only one cure for unbelief.

Our passage this morning finds us in one of Israel's greatest moments of unbelief, and greatest moments of healing.

Verse 41 says "On the next day" - What happened the day before? Some leaders had rebelled against Moses and Aaron. They were hardened in their unbelief, and God made the earth open under them and swallow them up.

So now, "on the next day all the congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and against Aaron" (41). The screams of those who were fell into the depths of the earth – Sheol itself – were still echoing in the air, and yet the same sin of unbelief was re-acted.<sup>2</sup>

Their charge against Moses and Aaron? Murder – "You have killed the people of the LORD."

How is this unbelief? Didn't Moses kill those men the day before? Actually, God did. And they were only the "people of the LORD" in title. In practice, they wanted the same power that Moses and Aaron had. Their complaint wasn't against Moses and Aaron but against God, who appointed them as leaders.<sup>3</sup>

The charge reveals their unbelief – this time taking control into their own hands – in effect saying, "God made a mistake when he made you the ones in charge."

Do you see the problem here? It's the heart of Adam and Eve in the garden, who were lured in by the serpent when he said, "Did God actually say...?"

---

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Hendrickson, 1991) p. 212.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

(Gen 3:1). God is holding out on you, Eve! He doesn't actually love you, and he's not good. Or powerful, or wise.

This black thread of unbelief wove from the garden to Sarah laughing when God told her she would bear a son in her old age, to Israel believing the fearful report of the 10 spies, to the grumbling multitude in Numbers 16, **to the pews and the pulpit of this Sanctuary.**

Milton Vincent's *Gospel Primer for Christians* explains:

"Every time I deliberately disobey a command of God, it is because I am in that moment doubtful as to God's true intentions in giving me that command. Does he really have my best interests at heart? Or is he withholding something from me that I would be better off having?"<sup>4</sup>

So we see that unbelief is the heart that says, "in my present circumstance, God cannot be good, loving, powerful, wise, just... So I will either take things into my own hands, or live in a pit of fear and despair."

In my marriage that is a shell of what it once was.

In my singleness.

In my chronic pain.

My wayward children.

My job situation.

My fractured relationship.

For me, in my sermon preparation this week. All week, I have swung from anxious to self-reliant in preparing for this morning. Ask Danielle.

"You killed the people of the LORD" – and think, not long ago they received laws at Sinai, but this didn't change their hearts – as Matthew Henry said: "**Love will do what fear could not.**"<sup>5</sup> And so it will.

(42) In verse 42, the congregation gathers against Moses and Aaron, a vast multitude, and they turn towards the tabernacle.

Suddenly, a cloud covers it and the "glory of the LORD appeared."

---

<sup>4</sup> Milton Vincent, *A Gospel Primer for Christians: Learning to See the Glories of God's Love* (Focus Publishing, 2008) p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Henry, *Mathew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 212.

The cloud is the LORD's presence among his people showing that he "has the ability to be both present and separate at the same time."<sup>6</sup> You can see a cloud, but it is not human – it is otherworldly, heavenly.

And the glory of the LORD always inspires awe – In Exodus 33:18, Moses prays, "Please show me your glory." And God responds with his character: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty..." (Ex. 34:6-7). Highlighting God's grace and justice.

In verse 43, Moses and Aaron come to the front of the tent of meeting, "and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Get away from the midst of this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment."

Does this sound harsh? Consider God's character, that he is loving, gracious and just. And he will prove his love and justice.

When Moses and Aaron heard this, they fell on their faces, interceding for the people. Praying for their enemies. What is our response when our enemies are about to get what they deserve?

Why would God say this? He is acting according to his character – merciful and just. Yannick, a friend from school said, "There is always mercy in his judgment." Consider that **if they didn't believe him in the desert, they won't believe him in the Promised Land.** God's wrath is his just response to sin – so when God has mercy, it is astounding, because all have sinned.

What happens next? Verse 46, Moses tells Aaron to take a censer with fire and incense and carry it into the middle of the crowd and make atonement for them – the plague has begun.

God's wrath takes many lives, but his mercy saves many who deserved wrath.

Joseph was there, and he experienced this mercy firsthand:

---

<sup>6</sup> House, *Old Testament Theology*, p. 156.

*I was far back in the crowd, but if I stood tall I could see Moses and Aaron. I was furious at them for what they did yesterday – I knew some of those who got swallowed up. Why are they leading us?*

*Then I saw it. People in front of me gasped, and I did too when I saw people falling to the plague – hundreds of them. I couldn't run because the crowd was too thick, and the plague was spreading so fast.*

*No! Not this close to the Promised Land! I've dreamed of it every since I was thirteen.*

*What would Moses and Aaron do now? Probably go hide in the tent of meeting.*

*Wait...where's Aaron? And who is that old man running through the crowd carrying fire? He must be at least 100 years old! Wait, it couldn't be... that's Aaron! He's running into the midst of people who hate him. What's he thinking, he's gonna die too.*

*It's getting closer...*

*My heart is full of rage at him for all of this. And why would God make these promises to us and then leave us here like this?*

*Then I saw him. He stopped right in front of me, his eyes filled with tears of fierce love and compassion. He turned to face the oncoming plague that would soon sweep both of us away. I closed my eyes. Nothing happened. Am I still alive?*

*When I opened my eyes, I saw Aaron, through smoke from the incense, standing between the dead and the living. The plague had stopped, and I was alive. How? Why?*

*What would move Aaron to run – RUN – into a crowd of his enemies, including me? Why was I spared? My grumbling and unbelief were melted by divine mercy. I am undone*

As Joseph shared this, it hit me: **I'M JOSEPH.**

All of you are Joseph, you who have looked to Jesus Christ for rescue from the plague of sin.

Joseph's disbelief in God's goodness, love, justice, power – I battle this everyday.

Wit Paul, I was dead in my trespasses and sins in which I once walked...I was a child of wrath like the rest of mankind (Ephesians 2:1-3).

I was heading for destruction, to receive the divine wrath that I deserved, for "the wages of sin is death" (Ro 6:23).

Until Jesus, the better Aaron, the Great High Priest, obeyed the will of his Father to go dwell with his enemies. "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

He ran to rescue us, "for the joy set before him enduring the cross" (Hebrews 12:3).

Like the Father running to the prodigal son.

Like the shepherd leaving the 99 to bring home the one lost sheep.

When the plague came upon him, he did not just stop it, he took it on himself – he became a curse for us (Gal. 3:13).

Why?? Peter says that "he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (I Peter 2:24-25).

**Behold Him.** I urge you.

Beholding this Jesus who stood between the dead and the living is the only cure for unbelief.

For we see that "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things" (Ro 8:32).

Behold this Jesus, who hung between the dead thief and the living thief on the cross. Both deserved crucifixion.

Behold him who stands between the dead and the living today, and calls us to run with him into the harvest fields to make his enemies into friends.

Behold him who one day very soon will stand and separate the spiritually dead unto eternal destruction and the spiritually living unto eternal delight in the new Promised Land of the new heavens and the new earth.

Only beholding this Jesus will melt your unbelief.

“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (Revelation 1:5-7).