

Me? A Prophet?

Numbers 11:24–29

What if God were to ask you to be his official spokesman in the world—that when he had a message he wanted to communicate to the whole world, he would deliver that message through *you*! Certainly being the official spokesman for the one only living and true God would be a very important assignment. Now some people would jump at the chance—people who like to talk, who like to feel important, who like to influence other people for bad or good. Others would shy away, feeling that there must be someone else who is far more qualified. To be the official spokesman for the God of heaven would be a demanding assignment! One slip-up could negatively impact the eternal destiny of millions of souls.

Our text this morning contains the fascinating phrase “Oh, that *all* the LORD’s people were *prophets*!”—that is, spokesmen for the living God! What does this mean, exactly? We’ll explore this as we go along, but first, we must consider the context.

Back in verse 18 God had told Moses, “Gather to Me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tabernacle of meeting, that they may stand there with you.” These were men who would assist Moses in the administrative task of leading the congregation of Israel, teaching the Word, maintaining order, and judging the hard judicial cases that filtered up to Moses, as a sort of supreme court—something that over time would develop into the Sanhedrin. As I mentioned in an earlier sermon, the number 70 was significant. This would remind the Israelites of the seventy members of Jacob’s extended family who moved down to Egypt during the severe famine of Joseph’s time—a relatively small number that 400 years later had swelled to over two million souls. Clearly, God had blessed his people numerically, literally fulfilling his promise to Abraham, “I will make you a great nation.”¹ One year before (in Ex. 24), Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel had gone part-way up Mount Sinai to worship God, though only Moses had entered into the glory-cloud to meet with the LORD for forty days and forty nights. But notice the number: “*seventy* of the elders of Israel.”

One other significant seventy was the seventy in Luke 10 whom the Lord Jesus sent out two-by-two to preach the gospel in the cities and towns of Israel where the Lord himself intended to go.

So 70 was an important number intended to arrest God’s people’s attention. But even more important than the number itself was the *quality* of men that were to be chosen: they were to be “elders”—that is, mature men of exemplary character. They were to have proven leadership ability. They were to be devout men,

¹ Gen. 12:2

dedicated to God and seeking his glory. These all are qualities that must characterize all spiritual leaders in every age of the church. Moreover, they were to be *ordained to office*. They were to gather around the tabernacle—presumably a semi-circle in front of the door of the holy place that led into the holy of holies (it couldn't really be behind the tabernacle itself, as the tabernacle—a large tent—would block their view).

Here is a foreshadowing of the ordination of elders in the church today. Elders who give spiritual oversight are not to be elected merely—that's just the first step. Yes, there *is* to be an election; the language used in the original indicates that elders are chosen by the raising of hands (χειροτονέω). That they are to be elected indicates that elders are not *imposed* on a congregation against their will. Godly men who meet the spiritual qualifications are put before the people and elected by majority vote of the congregation. Such a vote indicates the people's confidence in entrusting themselves to the spiritual care of specific men whom they know and trust. Acts 14:23 (KJV) records that “when they had *ordained* (χειροτονήσαντες, from χειροτονέω) them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.” The church is at all times to do everything “decently and in order”²—no exceptions! Elders, whether ministers of the Word ordained by a presbytery, or ruling elders ordained by a local session, must be properly elected, called to office, and ordained by the laying on of hands. This is all part of good order.

So when Moses is told to gather seventy men of the congregation of Israel and bring them before the LORD, he does so. Today's text records: “So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD, and he gathered the seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tabernacle. Then the LORD came down in the cloud, and spoke to him, and took of the Spirit that was upon him, and placed the same upon the seventy elders.” Here were men who were to be spiritual leaders of the covenant people.

You see, being a Christian is not, as many people mistakenly suppose, just a private thing between a believer and his God. Such an idea is appealing to Americans, who idealize the notion of rugged individualism—of pioneers who pushed forward in covered wagons to settle the west. It is true that each fallen son or daughter of Adam comes to God by faith, and thus justified, has access to the Father through the mediation of Christ the Son and the enabling of the Holy Spirit. We don't have to be in church to pray. The Bible instructs us to “pray without ceasing”³—not just on Lord's-day morning in the company of the church, but *all* the time. But that is only *part* of the truth. The kingdom of Christ is not only the individual but also the worshiping community. As a matter of fact, the verb in the

² 1 Cor. 14:40

³ 1 Thess. 5:17

phrase “pray without ceasing” is plural, not singular. It is not fully fulfilled in the individual prayer closet but in the communion of saints.

And as we see in our text this morning, God ordained leaders to be over his people for their good. God’s people were never to be “sheep without a shepherd.”⁴ They were not to be an uncontrollable mob. They were to follow lawfully ordained undershepherds responsible to Christ the chief Shepherd.⁵ As Johann Sebastian Bach’s lovely aria “Sheep May Safely Graze” insightfully puts it, “Sheep can graze securely where a good shepherd watches.” A sheep can safely graze in a vast, uncharted wilderness with dangerous pitfalls and rustlers, under the kindly gaze of their good shepherd who watches out for the flock. Ultimately, this is perfectly fulfilled in Christ, the good Shepherd who gave his life for the sheep and who infallibly leads them to Glory.

During the ordination service described in our text this morning, the LORD came down in the glory-cloud and spoke to Moses, and took something of the Spirit that was upon Moses, and placed it upon the seventy elders (v. 25). This, like Pentecost, was a singular, exceptional, unrepeatable event. Look with me at some of the details. First of all, it was the “LORD” (in all caps) who came down in the glory cloud (LORD in all caps represents the Hebrew word יהוה (YHWH, God’s proper name). There is one God, eternally existing in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There are not three gods, neither is there a single person.

The formal definition of the God of the Bible is expressed in the Nicene Creed: “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds . . . And I believe in the Holy Spirit, . . . who proceeds from the Father and the Son”: one God in three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Our Lord Jesus Christ commissioned his church in these words: “Go ye . . . and teach all nations, baptizing them in the *name* (not “the *names*”) of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost”—an intentionally trinitarian statement.

So in our text this morning it is “the LORD”—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—who comes down in the glory-cloud (the pillar of cloud that led the covenant people out of Egypt, deliberately shielding them from the Egyptian armies)—the LORD who came down upon Mount Sinai, speaking audibly the words of the Ten Commandments; and who hovered over the tabernacle, leading Israel through the wilderness. It was this LORD—three Persons, one God—who took the Spirit that was upon Moses and placed it upon the seventy elders.

The word *spirit* (Heb. רוּחַ, Gk. πνεῦμα) primarily means *wind* or *breath*, but secondarily refers to the vital principle within man (“Lord Jesus, receive my

⁴ Mark 6:34

⁵ 1 Pet. 5:1–4

spirit,” Acts 7:59) and also to the Holy Spirit of God (“where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty,” 2 Cor. 3:17).

So in our text the triune Lord—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—“took of the Spirit that was upon [Moses], and placed the same upon the seventy elders.” The English translations capitalize *Spirit*, but Hebrew does not distinguish between capital and small letters (Hebrew is actually written in all capitals). So the text could mean that some of Moses’ *human* spirit (his zeal and competence for the work of God) rested on the seventy elders, or that the *Holy* Spirit that equipped Moses for ministry was transferred in a sense to the seventy elders. A similar thing would later happen to King Saul; we read in 1 Samuel 10:6 of the prophet Samuel telling Saul that “the Spirit of the LORD will come upon you mightily, and you shall prophesy with them and be changed into another man” (NASB).

This is the sense in which the text speaks of what happened next: “the Spirit rested upon them, that they prophesied.” The seventy elders gave learned exhortations to the people, and instructed them in the truth of God with no prior preparation. This was evidence to the people that they were to honor and obey these men as their spiritual leaders, in obedience to the fifth commandment.

But there were two of the elders who failed to appear with the others in front of the tabernacle. Their names were Eldad and Medad. But significantly, the sovereign Spirit poured out the same manifestation on these two men as he had on the other seventy, and these two prophesied as well. This illustrates the truth summarized in Westminster Confession of Faith 5.3: “God, in his ordinary providence, [makes] use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure.” One of the proof texts cited is Hosea 1:7, where God says, “I will have mercy upon the house of Judah, and will save them by the LORD their God, and will not save them by bow, nor by sword, nor by battle, by horses, nor by horsemen.” The God of heaven does not need weapons of war or human forces to save his people. He can *use* means, but he is not *limited* by means. This truth encourages his saints as we face conflicts and difficulties in this life. As we sang in Psalm 56 before the sermon: “Boldly my many foes against me wage their fight; all day they trample me, attacking me in pride. . . . In God the LORD I trust; in God, whose word I praise. What can man do to me? I will not be afraid.”⁶

Here were two men who had not gathered with the other elders in front of the tent of meeting. They were not in the presence of the glory-cloud. Yet God gave them the gift too. This was a confirmation of their divine calling as officers over the people. God reserves for himself the right to work without, above, and against ordinary means, at his pleasure.

⁶ *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* 54, “O God, Be Merciful”

But in this particular case, Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' assistant, one of his choice men, spoke up and said, "Moses my lord, forbid them!" Joshua the son of Nun was Moses's trusted and loyal assistant—his right-hand man, so to speak. Perhaps Joshua feared that the presence of seventy Spirit-filled, discerning, capable men might diminish Moses's honor in the eyes of the people, so Joshua says, "Moses my lord, forbid them!" (Though he calls Moses "my lord," he does not use the plural *יְדֻיִם*, which is reserved for God, but the singular *יְדֻיִם*.)

Moses replies: "Are you zealous for my sake?" The marginal note, as well as the English Standard Version, give *jealous* instead of *zealous*. Either sense does the original justice. Joshua was jealous for Moses' honor. No doubt this was well-intended, for he recognized that Moses was a unique Spirit-filled leader. And on the basis of Joshua's jealousy to guard Moses' honor, he was zealous that Moses would acknowledge the imminent threat to his people's loyalty and forbid these two men who were prophesying without having been present with Moses at the tabernacle. Joshua's jealousy was a godly motivation, akin to the apostle Paul's attestation to the Corinthian church: "I am *jealous* over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (2 Cor. 11:2). There is a godly jealousy that results in a zeal for God's glory and a desire that the saints would behave as committed, respectful servants of God.

Here, we come to the text that I referred to in my introduction. Responding to God's miraculously pouring out his Spirit upon the seventy elders, Moses says, "Oh, that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them!"

Far from being jealous that other Israelites besides himself had been endowed with the gift (and gifts) of the Spirit, Moses genuinely desires the expansion of the LORD's kingdom. If the LORD wants to pour out his Spirit on others besides himself, he is OK with that. Here, Moses gives evidence of a servant's heart. His zeal was for the glory of *God*, not *self*-glory. All of us—even a great man like Moses—should have a zeal for the glory of God. God says, "I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another" (Isa. 42:8).

Christianity is not the religion of earthly glory. The true Christian desires the glory of God above anything else. "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." Hallowed be the LORD's name; my reputation is secondary! As John the baptist put it, "*He* must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). If you are a Christian because you think that God is going to lift *you* up in the eyes of men, you are misled. The Bible does promise, "Them that honor me I will honor" (1 Sam. 2:30), but the true Christian does not honor God *in order that* he will receive honor; rather, the true Christian honors God because he is profoundly convinced that only

God is worthy of honor. If God chooses to lift you up and honor you in the eyes of men, that will be a *byproduct*, and not the primary purpose, in honoring God. God must be honored for his own sake, because he is worthy of honor. “Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.”⁷ Amen!

I mentioned earlier that the basic meaning of the word *prophet* is *spokesperson, speaker*. When the LORD appeared to Moses out in the desert and sent him to Egypt, he said to him, “I am the LORD: speak thou unto Pharaoh king of Egypt all that I say unto thee.” When Moses hesitated, the LORD added: “See, I have made thee a god to Pharaoh: and Aaron thy brother shall be thy *prophet*.”⁸ Notice what transpired: God called Moses to go deliver his message to Pharaoh. The message he would bring to Pharaoh would be not be merely Moses’ personal opinion but the word of the living God, and Pharaoh would reject it at his own peril. But when Moses heard this, he felt the weight of God’s assignment for him. Who was he to go to Pharaoh and deliver the word of Almighty God? To go before the man who at that time was the most powerful monarch in the world, and tell him something that Pharaoh did not want to hear, was a risky assignment, and Moses felt the full weight of this mission. What if he suddenly became tongue-tied? What if Pharaoh were to say, “Off with his head!” Since Moses felt he was not up to the job, the LORD bolstered him by promising that his older brother, Aaron, would be there to help him by being his “prophet”—his spokesperson.

Moses says, “Oh, that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them!” Notice that God does not rebuke him in any way for saying this. What Moses expresses is the will of God for every age. God is glorified as his kingdom comes, and his will is done, on earth, as it is in heaven. God is glorified as the kingdom of Christ is extended into all the earth. “Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets!”

Not every Christian can be a prophet in the sense of being an ordained minister of the gospel or ruling elder. These are special offices and special callings. Those who are called to these offices give evidence of godly character, gifts for ministry, and a competent knowledge of the Holy Scriptures. The Bible does not permit women to hold these offices, nor does it permit every man to hold these offices. A man called to the special offices must possess an inward call. “If a man *desire* the office of a bishop [spiritual overseer], he desireth a good work” (1 Tim. 3:1). He must satisfy a presbytery, composed of ministers and elders, that he possesses the gifts for ministry. He must be called by a congregation of God’s people. He must take vows promising submission to his brethren in the Lord.

⁷ Rev. 5:13

⁸ Ex. 6:29, 7:1

But every Christian *can* be a prophet—a spokesman for God—*informally*! All of us are called to be witnesses among our families, friends and neighbors. Our speech should be “always with grace, seasoned with salt” (Col. 4:6). The word of Christ should be always on our lips, as we teach and admonish one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Col. 3:16). We ought always to be ready to give an answer to every person who asks us a reason for the hope that is within us (1 Pet. 3:15). We may stumble at first, but with prayer and practice we can do better. Each of us can be a better prophet as we spend time with the Lord in his Word, in prayer, and in worship.

Sometimes Christians can be spokesmen for God when things are going well; sometimes they can be spokesmen for God under crushing grief. As I was finishing this sermon I came across a news post:

“New England Patriots tight end Eli Raridon and his wife, Anna Raridon, shared an update regarding the birth and death of their newborn son, stating that while they were ‘absolutely devastated’ that their son couldn’t come home with them, they were ‘grateful to have loved him deeply’ for the past nine months.

“In a joint Instagram post, the couple explained that at their ‘20-week anatomy scan’ they discovered that their son, Peter James Raridon, ‘was diagnosed with anencephaly.’ The couple also acknowledged that it is ‘easy to glorify the Lord when life is going well,’ while adding that ‘it is in our deepest trials that we are drawn closest’ to God.

“‘Our angel, Peter James Raridon, was born on September 11th,’ the couple said in the post. ‘When Eli and I went in for our 20-week anatomy scan, excited to see our sweet baby boy, our hearts were forever changed. Our little one was diagnosed with anencephaly, a fatal condition in which he would not survive outside the womb.’

“‘While we are absolutely devastated that we were unable to bring our baby boy home, I am grateful to have loved him deeply, kept him safe, and been his home for the past 9 months before he was called back to Heaven.’”⁹

As we in the OPC pray that God would send forth laborers into his harvest, we can each pray: “Lord, make *me* a spokesman for you within my sphere of influence.” Ministers and elders cannot reach everyone. There are people you can reach whom nobody else can reach. We who know the story of Christ can tell his story. Amen.

⁹ <https://www.breitbart.com/sports/2026/10/03/infant-son-patriots-star-eli-raridon-dies-during-childbirth-devastated/>