

The wandering was nearly at an end. It had been a very...very long haul for Moses and the people he led. Forty years wasted wandering in the desert because the people had failed to trust in God. When God told them that he would give them the land of Canaan, they saw the size of their enemies and the strength of the enemy armies instead of trusting in the power of their God. Because they feared instead of trusting, God turned them around and had them meander through that desert until most of those who doubted him died along the way.

Moses dealt with his share of grief during that time. He led the people, he spoke on God's behalf and spoke to God on their behalf. Most of what he heard from God was gracious. He would feed them. He would clothe them. He would protect them. He would answer their complaints. Most of what he heard from the people was bellyaching and whining. You would think that the ten plagues that hit Egypt, the night of the Passover when they were spared by the blood of the lamb, the parting of the Red Sea and being saved from Pharaoh's army...you would *think* that would leave some kind of unshakable impression on these people about their God. But no. Nearly every chance they had to question God's goodness or doubt his power, they took. Nearly every chance to abandon him and rebel, they went after.

Can you imagine Moses' frustration at trying to shepherd these people? Sure, there's a lot more time in between the incidents in Scripture than the impression we get from reading them one after another, but really, it seemed like the Israelites were only really happy when they had something to complain about! And always when they didn't have a leg to stand on with their complaints. God never failed them and God didn't owe them anything. And still they caused Moses and the Lord consistent heartache and grief.

But now they were just about done. They had reached the edge of the land God promised and they were ready to cross in. A new generation was raised in the desert and they were prepared by God to take possession of this new land and settle it. Prepared to drive out the enemies within. Prepared to finally reach the prize they'd been promised all their lives.

As the preparations are being made, God calls Moses aside for a private word. God says to Moses: **"Go up this mountain in the Abarim range and see the land I have given the Israelites. After you have seen it, you too will be gathered to your people, as your brother Aaron was, for when the community rebelled at the waters in the Desert of Zin, both of you disobeyed my command to honor me as holy before their eyes."** (v12-14).

In case you didn't exactly catch what God's saying there, let me paraphrase it a bit. In essence he was saying, "Moses, I want you to go up this mountain over here and take a look over the land these people are going to get. You're not going with them. I am ending your time on earth and not letting you into the Promised Land because that one time a while back you got angry at the people when I told you to treat them gently."

Now think back over Moses' history with these people. Think back over how faithful he had been to God after he got over his initial hesitation at the burning bush. Think back to everything he had to put up with from them and how he was the one who never lost his trust and faith in the Lord. Now imagine your reaction to hearing this from God. You don't get the prize that all these people get because you failed me that one time.

I have a pretty good idea of myself. I'm pretty sure I'd speak up before thinking this situation through, and that would mean objecting to how utterly and ridiculously unfair this is. How hard had Moses worked and how had all these people just coasted by, wandering this way and that, and now God was just going to give them a pass but he had to pay the price for his single error? I know how I'd react. Angry. Indignant. Why pick on me and not them? When are you going to hold them accountable, too? Does all my hard work for you mean nothing?

On and on we could go. Objections and reasons of why it is ridiculous of God to pronounce this judgment. But that is not Moses' reaction. He replies, **"May the Lord, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd."** (v16,17).

To our natural human sensibilities, Moses' reply seems as insane as God's judgment on him. Moses is worried about these people who caused him so much grief? The people who pushed him to the breaking point so that he can't enter this new land now? I mean really, it was their fault he got so mad, right? Moses, you get this chance to speak up for yourself and you waste it on *them*? Why? Or perhaps even more baffling, how?

How could Moses say such a thing after what God said? How could his heart be in that place? How was his response at all possible? To put it simply, it was because Moses valued the word of his God above everything else. Moses understood that God's word was more important than himself. It is vital and it is sufficient. And that attitude, that perspective on God's word informed every part of Moses' reaction.

Moses did not object to God's judgment on his sin at Meribah. Why? Because God was right. God had given Moses a command on how to handle that situation and Moses had defied that command. He was supposed to demonstrate the goodness and love of the Lord to the people by speaking to the rock to bring water from it. Instead he reprimanded the people for their whining and struck the rock with his staff in anger. Oh, God still sent the water, but the message was ruined by Moses. Moses defied God's word. And God's word is serious business. Breaking it just once is enough. Moses deserved what was coming, he understood that. And it didn't matter what judgment God might bring on everyone else. That was not in his scope of authority. That belongs to the Lord alone. What mattered was that God's judgment on Moses was just. Moses did not deserve anything from God, including entry into this new land.

But then again, was this really *punishment*? No. It was a consequence of Moses' actions. Moses wasn't going to get to go into Canaan. But did you notice what God said Moses would get in the very same sentence? **"You too will be gathered to your people."** (v13). God didn't mean Moses' body in a graveyard somewhere alongside everyone who went before. In fact Moses would be buried alone by God himself. No, Moses would go to be with the people who went before him. In other words, Moses would be taken to heaven. Yes, there was a consequence to Moses' actions but in the same breath that God announced this consequence, the word of God assured Moses that his sin was forgiven and he would still receive eternal rest. Yes, that was unfair. But it was completely unfair in Moses' favor.

And so by his trust in the promise of God's word, Moses did not concern himself with the consequences he must face. His concern was still as a shepherd for his sheep. He understood that *he* was not the essential shepherd for them, but he knew the people needed a shepherd or they would wander and be lost. And so his prayer was that God replace him with someone equal to the task. And of course we see here that God in his mercy did just that. The people did not deserve this either. But God, in his love for them, saw to it that they were cared for.

Moses rested securely in the word of our Lord. The same is still true for us today. It is not an understatement to say that the word of God is sufficient for us. In every way that it was enough for Moses, it is enough for us.

The word teaches us about our God. That his word is supreme and to be valued above everything else in this world. To break or defy his word carries with it the ultimate punishment. We know through the word that our God is just. He must punish the wicked for their crimes. And we are the wicked. There is nothing so awful that could happen to any of us where we would be justified in saying, "I don't deserve this!" We do deserve every consequence our sin brings.

But the word also teaches us that God is unfair to us. Justice was satisfied, but not through the punishment of us who broke his word. Through the punishment of his innocent Son in our place. He bled and died where we should have hung. It is a shame to look at the cross and understand we caused this, but it is a joy to know that because God did this willingly, in love for us, we do not have to endure that end. Instead, the word of God promises us a joyful and blessed end. An eternity of perfect comfort and rest from our weary labor.

And so that suffices. No, really. There is nothing else any of us need once we have been brought to trust our Lord who saved us. In that trust we live forever in peace, and that can't be taken away or changed by anything that happens to us now. We have what we need. This sets us free to stop caring about our own justice or our own wants and needs because they have all been met. Instead, like Moses we are free to show love for others. To be concerned about their welfare instead of our own. Our needs are met by the word of our God, now we can see to the needs of others. Doesn't matter how much they may deserve worse than our earthly lot. Doesn't matter how much frustration or grief they've given us. The heart full of love for God and his word can still pour out love for them in all things.

And like Moses, we can recognize what is invaluable to us, and what are simply the trappings that go with it. The pure and unaltered word of God is what matters. That we study it, learn it, share it and teach it...that's what matters. The messenger that brings that word to us is largely irrelevant. When we need to be comforted with God's word it doesn't matter if it comes from our pastor, a church elder, a stranger, a child or a bumper sticker. What matters is that God brought us his word. When we wander, it doesn't matter who is calling us back, what matters is that they call with the voice of our Savior through his word.

It is the word of God that we have, and it is the word of God that we should be concerned about. Take it seriously, and understand that God takes his word very seriously, just as we should. Rest securely in the knowledge that this true word of God is all you truly need. God may give and God may take during your earthly path. He may allow trouble and pain, he may bring you moments of joy and rest. God may chastise you for your sin to keep you from it again. God may tell you to walk a lonely and dangerous path for the sake of someone who has only ever hurt you. But in the same breath that God asks these earthly things of you, God will remind you of the truths that will not change.

You are a sinner who has broken his word and does not deserve one good thing from his hand. But you are loved by your God, loved enough that he died for you. And that death has brought you forgiveness and eternal peace.

Now those are words worth hearing. Amen.