

Speaking of God: Putting Faith in Words

By listening to you speak, what impression would others get of your God? Put another way, what does your attitude say about the Lord? When things go wrong, when faced with irritations or trials, we all respond—often carelessly—with stray thoughts and words. What gospel do these stray musings preach?

Paul famously declared, “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:17, NIV). Whatever we do—including the words we speak—should be done in Christ’s name with gratitude to the Father. This should give us pause. We need to tread very carefully when it comes to our speech, for our words are powerful. Everything we say—and do, and think—speaks of the God whose name we bear. If questioned, most of us would agree that God is good, loving, faithful. But do our attitudes and speech contradict our professions of faith?

At a pivotal moment in Israel’s budding history, we see this very shortcoming undermine a generation of God’s people. Camped at Kadesh Barnea, on the brink of a land flowing with milk and honey, the Israelites think and speak such evil that a veritable nation perishes in the desert as punishment. The story comes to us in Numbers 13:26-14:45. Now, some are under the impression that Numbers is one of the dull books in Scripture, probably because of the two lengthy censuses from which the book derives its name. This is an unfortunate misapprehension. Some of the most important and interesting scenes from Israel’s history are recorded in this book.

To set our story in some context before turning to it, we should note that Numbers divides neatly into three major sections: (1) preparing to enter the Promised Land, (2) everyone dies, and (3) preparing to enter the Promised Land. Obviously, it is that middle section that catches our eye. The Exodus generation—those who witnessed the signs and wonders in Egypt, who celebrated the first Passover, who crossed through the Sea of Reeds on dry land—these men and women should have

Permissions: You are permitted to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and do not make more than 1000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Brandon Cooper. ©Follow After Ministries. Website: www.followafter.net. E-mail: brandon@followafter.net.

marched triumphantly out of Egypt and into Canaan. But because of their sin, they are doomed to wander and perish in the desert, leaving the conquest of Canaan to their children. Our story details the moment when it all goes wrong.

Scene One: The Spies Report (Numbers 13:26-33)

Moses has sent twelve spies into Canaan for forty days to see if the land the Lord has promised to them is good or bad (v 19). When they return, they report to the whole community that the land is not just good, but exceedingly so. It is, rather famously, a land flowing with milk and honey. To prove the marvelous bounty of the land, they display a cluster of grapes so large that two men must carry it (v 23).

So far, so good . . . until we come to that damnable word “but” (v 28). It is a very good land, *but* the people who live there are very large and very strong, and they live in very well fortified cities. In fact, even the descendants of Anak live there. While we do not know much about the Anakim, we do know they were very tall and are associated with the Nephilim (v 33), those mysterious giants given brief notice in Genesis 6. The Israelites should be afraid. Very afraid.

Until Caleb speaks. He hushes the crowd, as the discouraging words of the ten spies have elicited audible fear from the community. He says, quite simply, that they can and should take possession of the land. Like Caleb, we will all face moments where we will be asked to voice the unpopular but godly opinion. I have known several, for example, who have had to sit down with a brother or sister recently engaged to a non-Christian to counsel a break. These are not the words most blissful brides-to-be want to hear—but they are necessary, life-giving truth.

Nevertheless, the crowd overrules him—and quickly. The faith of Caleb stands in sharp relief to the fear of the other ten. And for a moment the shadow of doubt seems to overcome the light of truth. The majority report is quite different from Caleb’s rose-spectacled view. Indeed, Moses goes so far as to call it a bad report. This report is not just incorrect, but genuinely *evil* because of the fear, disbelief and

strife it causes. Of course, we must remember that we too can produce evil reports, when we speak of God or our circumstances in such a way as to make faith seem the lesser choice. This happens often in the financial realm, when we counsel miserly prudence—saving up our “nest egg”—instead of sacrificial giving, for example.

While Caleb has insisted that the Israelites can conquer Canaan, the spies maintain the impossibility of God’s plan. Using hyperbole, they suggest the Israelites would be like grasshoppers in the eyes of the inhabitants. A strange description to be sure, but no more odd (or taxonomical) than saying, “We’re going to look like shrimps to them”—a comparison we might make today. And remember, grasshoppers—like shrimp—are edible. The Israelite army just might be eaten alive: “The land we explored *devours* those living in it” (v 32, emphasis added). The whole evil report is given in such a way as to discourage the congregation from even considering obedience to God’s will. It cannot be done.

Interestingly, nowhere in Numbers 13 does the theme of God’s faithfulness or his promise of the land really come up. It is only after the people rebel that the focus shifts to God’s faithfulness and the contrasting faithlessness of the people. Likewise, today we have a tendency to neglect God in our decision-making. On Sunday mornings, when listening to Scripture, God exists and we worship him. But on Monday mornings, when business presses, are we distinguishable from the rest? Are we noticeably different from our non-Christian colleagues? Or are we functional atheists? At this moment, of course, the spies are functionally atheists—and they have just preached their anti-gospel persuasively.

Scene Two: The People Rebel (14:1-10a)

So persuasively, in fact, that the whole community cowers in unanimous, unflinching rebellion. Note how complete the mutiny is: “all the people,” “the community,” “all the Israelites,” “the whole assembly” (vv 1-2) raise their voices, weep, grumble, and whine, “If only we had died.” It is fascinating to



see that the rebellion—as Moses styles it in v 9—consists merely in complaining! I suspect few of us would consider complaining a serious sin, if only because it seems so hard to control. And yet here, God views it strongly enough to consider it rebellion against his leadership.

But this should not be surprising, since the complaint springs from attributing an evil motive to God's actions: "Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword?" (v 3). How frequently we see our faithlessness as *God's* problem! If financial security does not come, if the Lord has not provided a spouse for us when the biological clock keeps ticking, we see this as God *forsaking* us, rather than *testing* us so that we learn to depend on him.

It gets worse. The Israelites not only doubt God, but hide their disbelief behind a mask of piety: "Our wives and children will be taken as plunder" (v 3). They are not thinking of their own hides, I am sure; they are just being good husbands and fathers. Of course, these are not the only followers of God who have hidden their faithlessness behind a devout façade. There are many who refuse missions, for example, or even just living in areas of the world (or city) in need of a Christian presence, because they want to keep their wives and children safe. But God does not call us to shelter our children—though he may well call us, and our families, to live in dangerous places for the sake of his name.

In any case, this fear leads them to reject God's leader (Moses) and choose a new one who will lead them back to Egypt. Yes, that's right. Back to Egypt. Where they spent the last four hundred years crying out to God to be rescued. We are a fickle lot, are we not? Whatever course of action takes the least amount of faith, inevitably that's the course we choose.

The sins of the people—so familiar to us still today—are obvious. They have implicitly denied God's providential care; they fear death at the hands of the Canaanites, so they would rather die in the desert; they foist their fear upon God to make him seem uncaring, rather than them seem unfaithful. And so they choose to go back to the land of slavery and death rather than into the land of milk and honey, because the latter takes faith.

Permissions: You are permitted to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and do not make more than 1000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Brandon Cooper. ©Follow After Ministries. Website: www.followafter.net. E-mail: brandon@followafter.net.

Shockingly, Moses and Aaron—the very leaders being rejected—fall on their faces in front of the people. They are not showing deference to the people, as if they were trying to save their own necks, but are rather interceding with God in behalf of the people. They see the doom that is swiftly coming.

At this point, Caleb and Joshua speak up. They first tear their garments as a mark of distress, an action normally performed when someone dies. It seems they see the doom that is swiftly coming too. Addressing the crowd, they preach faith and obedience using clear and effective rhetoric. They open with the same phrase used by the ten spies when they offered their evil report: “The land into which we crossed over to spy out” (v 7, translated woodenly; cf. 13:32). But though they begin the same, the speeches quickly diverge. Whereas in the majority report the land devours its inhabitants owing to the enormity of the Anakim, here “we will swallow them up” (v 9). Thus, the land is very good, they declare—the very fact they were sent to confirm. And finally, Caleb and Joshua shift the focus to God: “If the LORD is pleased with us,” which happens when we obey, he will give the land to us (v 8). There is no need to fear the people, because *God is with us*—and that pretty much means we win. (Remember Jericho?) The protection of the Canaanites, however—whether their idols, or perhaps more likely, God himself¹—has gone.

The speech is convincing rhetorically, but apparently not spiritually. The people prepare to stone Moses and Aaron (v 10). They have no legal reason for doing this, of course. Mob mentality simply consumes them, and they prepare to pour forth their unjustified indignation against God’s humble servants. And just then, right as the stones are about to fly. . .

Scene Four: The Mediator Reacts (14:10b-19)

. . . the glory of the Lord, the visible manifestation of the Presence, appears.

¹ The word “protection” is normally used of God, as in Psalm 91:1 (there translated as “shelter”). This interpretation makes sense theologically as well, as the Lord determines the length of empires (cf. Daniel 2:21). Permissions: You are permitted to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and do not make more than 1000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Brandon Cooper. ©Follow After Ministries. Website: www.followafter.net. E-mail: brandon@followafter.net.

Like bickering, petulant children who fall silent before an approaching parent, the Israelites hush themselves. The Lord puts his finger on the sin: they have shown contempt for and disbelieved him (v 11). To show contempt here suggests spurning or rejecting God, as they had most certainly done to him and his covenant in v 4. Disbelief fuels the apostasy, and is especially unforgivable in light of the signs and wonders God had performed among them in Egypt. How many weeks have passed since the Lord brought them out of Egypt miraculously?

In light of their rejection and belief, God decides to strike them down with a plague. One is tempted to see this as a reminder of Egypt: because they forgot the plagues, God will send them another one. However, Moses employs a different word here—perhaps “pestilence” instead of “plague.” The difference is important. God uses the same, stronger word in Egypt, in fact: “For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a *plague* [pestilence] that would have wiped you off the earth” (Exodus 9:15). Thus, while plagues function as signs in Egypt, a pestilence would have wiped the Egyptians out completely. So when God speaks this to the Israelites, he is declaring comprehensive judgment on the people—and not just the firstborn.

Then the Lord promises, in words eerily similar to those spoken on Sinai, to obliterate them and turn Moses (not Jacob) into a great nation: “I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they” (v 12). The parallels between this episode and what happened at the foot of Sinai, when the Israelites prostituted themselves to the golden calf, are too strong to be coincidental. Has the Lord’s patience finally worn thin? Certain doom would come were it not for Moses, God’s appointed mediator.

As he did at Sinai, Moses stands between God and man. Again he begs forgiveness; again he pleads naught but God’s glory. His only concern is God’s fame, as he prays, “Then the Egyptians will hear about it! . . . And they will tell the inhabitants of this land about it” (vv 13, 14). If the Egyptians hear of what happened, they will share their slander with Canaan. God had appeared to his people like no other

god in history: he had saved them with a mighty hand, he goes with them, leading them by day and by night, and he has even been “seen face to face” (v 14), a Hebrew idiom for profound intimacy. The inquisitive awe of the surrounding peoples is palpable; but if God should destroy Israel, whither curiosity? Rather than marvel at the Lord, they would deride and dishonor him.

Moses does not pray for Israel. He prays for God. He prays for the sake of his name.

Of course, when Moses asks forgiveness, he is not asking that God cancel Israel’s punishment, only that the fundamental covenant relationship would not be severed. Both God’s mercy and God’s judgment should inspire awe and be taken seriously. So Moses asks pardon on the basis of God’s character. Our God is “slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion,” yet not leaving the guilty unpunished (v 18). These are almost the same words spoken just after the incident with the golden calf, when Moses asked to see God’s glory (Exodus 34:6-7). The glory of God is his perfect character—and on the basis of that glory, Moses seeks God’s forgiveness.

That our prayers often fall short of Moses’ pattern here would seem self-evident. We have an innate selfishness that seeks God not on the basis of his glorious character, but rather as a sort of cosmic errand boy send to do our bidding: heal my friend, get me this job, smite my irritating co-worker. But didn’t our Lord Jesus Christ teach us another way to pray? The prayer he taught us begins *not* with our needs, our daily bread, but with God’s glory: “Our Father in heaven, sanctify your name.” Make it holy. Make it great. Make it glorious. God’s chief end is his own glory—that is the uniform witness of Scripture—and thus, our chief prayer must be his glory too.

Does the Lord answer prayers like these? Well, . . .

Scene Four: The Lord Responds (14:20-38)

As Moses prays on the basis of God’s glory, so the Lord swears on the basis of his glory—a unique action in the Old Testament: “I have forgiven them as you asked. Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely



as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth, not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert . . . will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers” (vv 20-23). Of course, the glory of the Lord filling the earth suggests the moment when the whole world will grasp the marvelous character of God—that he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, yet not leaving sin unpunished. And to that punishment he quickly turns.

None of those who saw God’s glory or the signs performed in the Exodus event will enter the Promised Land. Only Caleb and Joshua will escape this fate. The community must now turn back along the way of the Sea of Reeds—an aspect of the punishment that comes from Israel’s own mouth. They wanted to return to Egypt, so God has them turn around and head right back towards it, instead of into the Promised Land. God makes this irony clear: “I will do to you the very things I heard you say” (v 28). Because they thought it better to die in the desert (v 3), God promises that every adult over the age of twenty will do just that. Because they feared their children would be taken as plunder, God will bring them in to enjoy the land’s goodness, after they live as nomads for forty years, suffering for their parents’ fornications. They had blamed God for loving their children less than they did, when in fact they loved them not at all, consigning them to desert wandering and keeping them from God’s abundant provision.

We must remember that our children do frequently suffer the consequences of our sin. Divorce is undoubtedly the clearest example, though there are many others. Do we love our children enough to trust God before them, to obey him completely even when we find it difficult? Perhaps the more penetrating question is, have we, by our words, thoughts, or deeds, taught our children to pursue God’s best for their lives? Or have we taught them double-mindedness and faithlessness?

Voddie Bauckham, in his excellent book *Family-Driven Faith*, shares a heart-wrenching story that brings out this very issue.² A father had pushed his son to succeed in baseball at all costs. Frequently, the cost was spiritual vitality. If games were on Sunday, they skipped church; conversations centered on this subject at the expense of discipleship; there was no time for family devotionals. Once his son went away to college, the devastating consequences of his father’s faithlessness became obvious. Not only was the young man failing most of his classes—who has time for studying when baseball is all that matters?—but he had also been kicked off the team for using steroids. Unable to cope with being a bench-warmer, he had taken a sinful shortcut to superficial success. Have our children learned from us commitment or compromise?

These are questions parents need to wrestle with, especially when we consider how God punished those who led the “little ones” astray. The ten spies who had brought the evil report are punished immediately and decisively; there will be no wandering about in the desert for them. Because they “made the whole community grumble against him by spreading a bad report about it” (v 36)—that is, because they fostered fear instead of faith—they are struck down by a plague.

I find it interesting that though the whole congregation sinned, only some are punished immediately. Certainly this must be a lesson for leaders: those who lead God’s people must be very careful how they speak of God and following him, lest they lead the whole congregation into sin. But I think this has broader relevance, for every one of us who has influence in another person’s life (which is unquestionably all of us). How do we wield our influence? For God’s honor or dishonor? for faith or fear? When breaking the traffic laws and seeing those familiar red and blue lights behind us, how do we respond in front of our children? Do we teach cheerful submission to authority or grumbling, finger-pointing, hard-heartedness? When things don’t go so well as we might like, do we prove our

² *Family-Driven Faith: Doing What It Takes to Raise Sons and Daughters Who Walk with God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007): 33-36.

faithlessness by slipping into complaining and bitterness, or do we remain joyful and grateful in the light of God's grace? How do we wield our influence? "As for me and my house," well, I hope we want to be like Joshua and Caleb.

Epilogue: The People Repeat (14:39-45)

We would like the story to end. The Lord has spoken, the punishment has started . . . but things have to get worse before they get better. Once God declares his judgment, the people "mourned bitterly" (v 39). They weep and wail and confess their sin, but this is outward demonstration only, bereft of inward change—as is clear in light of their continuing disobedience. Instead of genuine repentance, they disobey again by trying to take the land in their own power. This is a bit like a child breaking a vase and then "making it better" by crudely gluing it back together again: too little, too late. Perhaps they hoped their mourning rites would change God's mind—a foolish thought. Yes, they have acknowledged their sin, but they still seem to think atonement requires mere confession and not real repentance.

Paul makes the distinction clear when he speaks of the sorrow his rebuke caused the Corinthians. He says,

Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your *sorrow led you to repentance*. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. *Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation* and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. (2 Corinthians 7:8-10, emphasis added)

The Israelites experience sorrow here, but not the kind that brings repentance. It is a worldly sorrow, bringing literal death for them.

Obviously, as Moses points out, they will not succeed, for they are disobeying and the Lord is not with them. And so, in a bit of irony, they will fall by the sword as they had initially feared. Moses warns them of this, but *nevertheless* they go (v 44). We all have our "nevertheless" moments: those times when we know the truth but refuse to live by it, willfully embracing death when the offer of life

sits unattended. To go back to an earlier illustration, this is like pleading with a Christian woman engaged to a non-Christian not to disobey. Nevertheless, she did—and after three brutally unhappy years of marriage they were divorced.

So it is with the Israelites. They go up anyway, and they are routed. Moses is sure to note that the ark of the Lord's covenant does not move from the camp (v 44), symbolic of the fact that the presence of God does not attend the army. The army is routed as far as Hormah, a word which comes from the same root as "destruction." It is interesting too that this place name has the definite article with it; thus, it is "the place of destruction"—a literal place, but symbolically, the place where the Israelites meet their own destruction.

Significance

That's the story—and a rollicking good one at that. But is this just a story of some past historical event, interesting to hear about, but too far removed from our lives to really matter? I suspect not. I believe this story is deeply relevant to our lives today, for we face the same temptations, struggle with the same faithlessness, and are loved by the same gracious God.

Actually, Paul explicitly connects this story to the life of a New Testament saint:

God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert. Now *these things occurred as examples* to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. (1 Corinthians 10:5-6, emphasis added)

These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the age has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. (1 Corinthians 10:11-13)

God is still faithful; we are still tempted with faithlessness.

Although it has much to say of humanity, this is—as every story in Scripture is—first and foremost a story of God. The revelation of his character—gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, punishing sin—is given not just in propositional form but in story as well. Here we see in vivid narrative

Permissions: You are permitted to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and do not make more than 1000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Brandon Cooper. ©Follow After Ministries. Website: www.followafter.net. E-mail: brandon@followafter.net.



what we will see most clearly at Calvary: the perfect balance between God’s holiness and love, his justice and grace. He punishes the guilty, he will not abide sin, but his plan of redemption will not be thwarted.

I know we’ve already had the epilogue, but the story goes on—and in remarkable ways. Looking ahead just two verses, we read, “Speak to the Israelites and say to them, ‘After you enter the land I am giving you as a home . . . ’” (15:2). Despite Israel’s impressive faithlessness, God will still bring them into the Promised Land. What wondrous love is this! This is the God we serve.

But how do we serve him? To return to our opening question, if people were to listen to us speak, to “hear” our attitudes, what would they think of our God? What strikes me most about the Israelites in this passage is their lack of faith and gratitude. These are issues we all face: a lack of gratitude for God’s past redemptive acts, a lack of faith in God’s future redemptive acts. How long has it been since God brought Israel out of Egypt with a mighty, outstretched arm? A few weeks? One would think they would remember what God had already done for them and trust that he would continue to pour out his goodness and power upon them. But no, they forget what God has already done, and instead whine and complain because he is not doing what they want him to be doing right now. Ungrateful, faithless brats.

Are we any different? Perhaps we have not seen the awesome signs and wonders—the Nile turned to blood, the plague of locusts, the angel of death passing over our house—but have we not seen so much more? We have all the information we could ever need about God’s unfailing love in our lives, for we have the cross of Christ. In the light of the cross, we have the sure and certain knowledge that God loves us perfectly, that he will rescue us assuredly, that he will pour forth his grace abundantly.

So what are we complaining about? Why are we grumbling and timid when the Lord tests our faith to grow us up in this perfect love lavished upon us? We will face nothing, absolutely nothing in this life—no matter how hard, no matter how painful, no matter how scary—that can separate us from the

Permissions: You are permitted to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and do not make more than 1000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Brandon Cooper. ©Follow After Ministries. Website: www.followafter.net. E-mail: brandon@followafter.net.



love of God that is in Christ Jesus. We have perfect proof that God loves us, that he will make a way for us, that he will bring us to glory. His plan is perfect, his promise is sure, his purpose never fails. “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32).

Does your life say as much? Do your words and thoughts and actions preach this incomparable, impossible, inimitable love? *Our speech and attitude should reflect our faith and gratitude.* Everything we say and everything we think—everything that oozes out of us especially in the midst of trial and tribulation—should preach the gospel to those around us. If God is for us, who can be against us? What can we not face joyfully, gratefully, faithfully in the light of the cross? Our speech and attitude should reflect our faith and gratitude. Do yours?