

Pentecost

May 24, 2026

Text: Numbers 11:24-30

“Why Just Once?”

There is one small detail in today’s Old Testament reading that makes me curious. Why did the seventy elders of Israel, who received some of the Holy Spirit, prophesy when they were anointed, but never after that? *“And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied. But they did not continue doing it.”* Why prophesy just once?

We do know why God gave some of the Spirit, who rested upon Moses, to each of those men. Moses was having a meltdown. The responsibility of leading God’s stiff-necked and wayward people through the wilderness had taken its toll on him. The Israelites were chronic complainers! “We don’t have enough water to drink!” “There’s no food out here!” “How come Aaron gets to be High Priest?” “How come God took us from our happy lives back in Egypt? Does He want us to die out here in this desert?” It was a lot, and Moses had had enough. Even he joined in the complaining: *“Moses said to the Lord, ‘Why have you dealt ill with your servant? And why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give them birth, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a nursing child, to the land that you swore to give their fathers? I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me. If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favor in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness’”* (Numbers 11:11–15).

So God chose the seventy elders of Israel to form Moses' council of deputies to help the beleaguered prophet to lead the people the rest of the way through the desert to the Promised Land. God gave them the Spirit to help them to carry out that calling. At their anointing, the Spirit enabled the elders to prophesy, or to speak messages on God's behalf. We do not know what they said, only that their speech was recognized to be divinely inspired. And it was a one-time occurrence.

Did they did not prophesy again because the Spirit departed from them after their ordination day? No, for God told Moses that He intended for the elders to be empowered by the same Spirit as him in order to bear the burden of the people with him (11:17-18), so that he would not have to carry it alone. The Spirit, who had remained with Moses, would also remain with them, so that they could work with him.

So if the Spirit remained with them, why did they not continue to prophesy? Was the singular sign of prophesying meant to reveal the distinction between the elders' calling and Moses? Everyone in the camp of Israel knew that Moses was God's prophet. Since his arrival with Aaron in Egypt, in the times Israel's bondage, Moses had acted as God's prophet by speaking for Him. He preached to Pharaoh, commanding him to release God's people. He preached and taught the children of Israel to establish God's covenant with them and to lead them on their journey. When the elders prophesied, it showed the people that God's unseen Spirit was truly

with them. What then, did the cessation of that prophesying show? That the elders were called by God to share in part of Moses' prophetic office by governing with him, but that God had not chosen them to serve as His prophets or preachers. That remained solely Moses' ministry. In fact, it was not very long after that day that Moses' own sister and brother, Miriam and Aaron, opposed him, saying, "Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us also?" (12:2).

But there is a greater reason why the elders did not retain the gift of prophesy. Even Moses' ministry, though supreme for Israel at that time, was insufficient. Moses, himself, acknowledged this when he taught the people: "*The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers - it is to him you shall listen*" (Deut 18:15). Moses was a faithful servant of the LORD, but he was by no means perfect. When God first called him to go to Egypt, Moses did all that he could to refuse. When Pharaoh reacted to Moses' call to set the people free by demanding more labor from them, and they turned on Moses, he questioned the wisdom of God in sending him. He prayed on behalf of the people when God was angry with them, but he also lost patience with them when they sinned. At the sight of the Mt. Sinai-golden-calf-worship service, Moses smashed the law-bearing stone tablets that God had just given him. Angry again at the relentless craving of the people in the wilderness, Moses disobeyed God's command for providing water. It cost him his entrance into the Promised Land. Since Moses' prophetic ministry was

incomplete, a sort of shadow, then so too was that of the elders chosen to assist him.

Now one could say that Moses' promise of another prophet was fulfilled many times by men like Joshua, Samuel, David, and Jeremiah, but they too were fallen men and imperfect prophets. God's promise still awaited a greater, complete fulfilment. Jesus is that Fulfiller.

Our Lord knew the burden of bearing with the sins of people, and not just those descended from Abraham. Jesus bore the crushing weight of the whole world's sin. Jesus' forgiving patience was on full display as He lived with His often witless disciples and as He endured the blind hostility of enemies, like the Pharisees. More than just putting up with sinners though, Jesus stepped in to take our place before God the Father to carry our sin, guilt, and suffering as His own. *"Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows...he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that bought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed"* (Isaiah 53:4-5). Jesus perfectly bore the sins of the world; He suffered and died to set us free from them all.

Hebrews opens by telling us that Jesus surpassed Moses and the rest of Israel's prophets: *"Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by His Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the image of the glory of God and the*

exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (1:1-3).

Israel certainly needed another prophet after Moses died, and God gave them many. They all served God in their generations, but they anticipated the One True Prophet. Jesus remains our prophet, priest and king forever because He lives and reigns as Lord over all. Moses spoke the words given to Him by God, but Jesus speaks God’s Words as His own. Christ speaks to give us life in the forgiveness of our sins that He won for us on the cross. He speaks through baptism to declare us Spirit-anointed children of God the Father and heirs of eternal life. Jesus speaks to give us Himself with bread and wine that convey to us His body and blood to assure us of His grace and to strengthen us in faith that bears the fruit of love in us for the sake of our neighbours. .

When Jesus speaks, He gives us the Holy Spirit. At the close of today’s reading we see another interesting little detail. Eldad and Medad were late to the party, not among the other elders at the Tabernacle meeting, but the Holy Spirit still came upon them, and they also prophesied. Joshua took offense, but Moses was just amused by the anointing of the two delinquents. *“Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!”*

The prophet's seemingly offhand comment turned out to be more than that. In the days of Joel, Moses' wish became a divine promise:

*“And it shall come to pass afterward,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.
²⁹Even on the male and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit.”*

Jesus fulfilled that promise by sending the Holy Spirit to apply the saving power of His death and resurrection to the world.

The Holy Spirit dwells in you. You believe that you are a sinner who deserves God's judgement, and you trust that Jesus suffered, died and rose from the dead to spare you because the Holy Spirit has enlightened you through God's Word. The Holy Spirit teaches us as we read and hear the Word preached, helping us to confess our doubts, pride, malice, and lusts. He inclines our hearts to rely upon Christ's forgiveness and to rejoice in the peace of God. He opens our lips to give God praise, and the Holy Spirit moves us to live humbly together, to forgive each other, to live chastely, to be grateful to God and to be generous to those in need. The Holy Spirit unites us, for by His grace, we all believe in the one True God, and we worship and serve Him together as a holy congregation. And, the Holy Spirit speaks through us, helping us to bear witness to people that Jesus is Lord. He also helps us to pray for the salvation of all people, to live by God's command of love for each other, to endure temptation and

trial, and it is He who will raise us from the dead on that great day. The Spirit of the Lord rests upon us all. Thanks be to God! Amen.