

God's Strength of Heart
Pastor Larry Kroon
Wasilla Bible Church
November 01, 2009

The Bible is, from start to finish, one grand story. We don't always read it that way, but that's what it is—a story that begins early in Genesis and finally wraps up in Revelation; a lot of twists and turns in between, but one basic story...the story of God's grand, glorious, mysterious, redemptive grace. It's easy to stay on track with that story through all the twists and turns, and ups and downs, if you remember that the main story line, the thematic center of it, the core of the action is very simply revolves around a promise made and a promise kept...a promise made and a promise kept. And if you realize that everything in the scriptures revolves around that it makes it much easier to track the story and see what is happening.

Early in Genesis the stage is set. We're given the picture of the situation in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, which are really the background that set the stage for the promise. And what we're told is that God began with a good creation, but it went bad. Man rebelled, man resisted, man decided that we will go our own way. And one act of disobedience...one act of disobedience...Adam and Eve rejected the rule of God, and sin entered into the world and has infected all of us ever since. It's a good world gone bad.

And by the time you come to the end of Genesis chapter 11 you're wondering 'What is the hope? Is there any chance? What can come out of this?' And we are met with the wondrous, glorious grace of God when He does an astounding thing. He chooses a man—one man, a wanderer, a Bedouin who worshipped pagan idols. And God approached him, and God called him, a man we would later know as Abraham. And God called him and made a promise to this man, a tremendous promise, a promise that would shape the rest of human history. It was a promise that was, first, personal. It was a promise to Abraham that he would be blessed if he would follow God's call. He would be blessed. And then, beyond that, not only was it a personal call to Abraham—it was a promise that he would become a great people, a great nation. And that people, that nation, would have a special place...a land that was theirs. And then even beyond that, there was a promise that someday all the peoples of the earth would be blessed through Abraham—that among those people, the descendants of Abraham, in that special place, there would emerge a person unlike any other person. And of that person, the seed, the descendant of Abraham, all mankind would be blessed. That's the promise God made. And all of human history up to this point, and on into the future, is the story of God keeping that promise.

We've been trying to trace it as it begins in scripture. And we followed it first as he took that people and He made them into a nation at Mount Sinai, that tremendous moment when God said "I will be your God" and they responded and they said, "We will be Your people", and the first and only pure theocracy ever to have existed was created that moment at Mount Sinai. Today we're gonna be moving on, today and the next week, and we're gonna see how that nation went, and went forward, and God took them to a special place and gave them the land—the land Israel.

Now as we've been doin' this, the story track pretty quickly like that. But it's been takin' us a long time to get this far. And that's because there's some strange twists and turns to the story. It doesn't follow that straight line. In fact, what we saw is between the promise that He would make them a great nation and that moment when they actually became a great nation at Mount Sinai they were in Egypt as slaves. And we're wondering...is everything falling apart? Are we back to ground zero? And God intervenes with His sovereignty and He brings them back, and He makes them into the nation He promised Abraham He would make them. And today, as we get ready to move on and look at His taking the people to the Promised Land, we're gonna find that there's a strange twist once again. And instead of moving right from Mount Sinai into that Promised Land and becoming the nation planted in that special place God had for 'em, they wander for forty years—forty years in the wilderness! And again we feel like it's back to ground zero. Is everything falling apart? But what we're gonna find as we look at this today...we're gonna find, I believe, one of the most glorious and grand pictures of God's power in all of scripture.

See, I don't look at these little dips and turns and twists in the story as detours that waste time. It's in some of these that we find out the most about our God. And what we're gonna find is that God, who made that promise, is seeing to the completion of that promise with a power that is unimaginable; a promise-keeper with power that is unimaginable. We need to see that. And so we're gonna move on into Numbers chapter 14 today. And I'm gonna encourage you if you have your Bibles to open up to that passage and I'm gonna set the context a bit for you, and then I'll read through a section of it, where I just want to read so you can get a feel for the story as it unfolds.

In Number chapter 14 the context is that Israel is out in the wilderness. They have left Egypt. And the idea was they would leave Egypt and go to Canaan, the Promised Land, the land God had promised to the descendants of Abraham. And they were gonna go there—that was the idea. Only instead of taking them in a straight line up to Canaan God had led them out into the wilderness, out to Mount Sinai. And it took 'em almost two years to get from Egypt to Mount Sinai. But once there God had this tremendous time with them where He spoke from the mountain, He gave 'em the commandments—the Ten Commandments and all the others that came with them—and he formed them into a nation. Instead of just a mob that had wandered into the wilderness they now became a nation, the people of God. And there, after they had gotten everything sorted out—they were prepared, they knew how they were gonna march, they were an organized group now under the living King God—they headed north. And now they were gonna enter the Promised Land. Only something happened.

As they came to the borders of the Promised Land they sent in some spies. Many of us know this story from our Sunday School years. They sent in twelve spies and they said, 'Go in there and look at the land. We've heard it's a land of milk and honey. Go in and report to us. What's it like?' And the report came back, and they said, 'Truly it is a land of milk and honey. It is a grand and glorious land that God has for us. *But the people there are giants and powerful!* We're like grasshoppers in their sight.' And they said out of the twelve people who came back, the twelve spies, only two of 'em said 'We can go forward.' The other ten said 'It's hopeless. We can't do this. There is no way we can enter and conquer that land.'

And that leads us into Numbers chapter 14. It opens with the people wailing and crying as they get this report and they hear it. They are desolate; they figure they are for sure they're gonna be lost in the wilderness. And they cry out, and they say, 'Why is the LORD bringing us into the Land to fall by the sword? Why is God doing this? Why is He taking us to a place just to have us be killed, and to have our children be put to death? We can't conquer that land!' And they began to talk to one another, verse 4, and they say to one another, "*Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt.*" In other words, 'Let's turn around. Get rid of Moses, get rid of Aaron, let's get somebody else and let's go back.'

Joshua and Caleb speak up at this point. It's interesting; Moses and Aaron just...they just fall on their face. They just... 'What are we gonna do?' But Joshua and Caleb pursue the issue and they say, 'No, we can do this! The God that took us out of Egypt, the God that has provided for us, that God...we can do this! He can take...He will be faithful to us!' And we're told that the people...as Joshua and Caleb presented the argument we're told that the people finally said, 'Stone these men with stones.' That's how intense it got. The crowd said, 'Let's pick up stones and let's put Joshua and Caleb to death. Then we'll pick our new leaders and we'll go back.'

At that moment something dramatic happens. We're told that "Then the glory of the LORD appeared..." It's kinda like the argument had intensified; thing had gotten way outta control, and finally God says, 'Wait!' And He makes Himself manifest in a brightness around the tabernacle, and God begins to speak. And there's where I wanna begin to pick up our reading, and we'll be in Numbers chapter 14, and we'll pick up the reading in verse 11.

The LORD said to Moses, "How long will this people spurn Me? How long will they not believe in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst?"

I mean, think of that—ten plagues in Egypt! Think of crossing the Red Sea, and God destroying Pharaoh's army, the mightiest army of that time. Think of the water from the rock, and the provision of food in the land. God says, 'How long?'

"How long will they not believe in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst?"

And then God says this:

"I will smite them with pestilence and dispossess them, and I will make you into a nation greater and mightier than they."

God says, 'Listen, I'm done with these people. Now I'm gonna keep my promise to Abraham, but I'm not gonna do it with these people. I'm just gonna take you, Moses, and we're gonna start with you as a descendant of Abraham. I'm gonna wipe the slate clean and we're gonna start over again.'

But Moses said to the LORD, "Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for by Your strength you brought this people up from their midst, and they will tell of it to the inhabitants of this land [up ahead]. They have heard that You, O LORD, are in the midst of this people, for You, O LORD, are seen eye to eye, while Your cloud stands over them; and You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night."

These were a people who were exactly...they were actually visibly guided by God. And Moses says, 'People have heard about that! They know that You're with these people.'

"Now,"

he says, verse 15,

"...if You slay this people as one man,"

'...if You just wipe 'em out,'

"...then the nations who have heard of Your fame will say, 'It's because the LORD could not bring this people into the land which He promised them by oath, therefore He slaughtered them in the wilderness.'

In other words, Moses says, 'If they hear that You...if You wipe this people out the nations will say You couldn't do it. You couldn't get this people through the wilderness. You weren't strong enough.' And then he makes his petition, his prayer. Moses says,

"But now, I pray, let the power of the LORD be great, just as You have declared..."

'...just in exactly the way You said it would be...'

"The LORD is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generations. Pardon [Moses says], I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness, just as You have also forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now."

So the LORD said, "I have pardoned them according to your word; but indeed, as I live, all the earth will be filled with the glory of the LORD. And surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice, shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers."

Highlights—Moses prays, and this is a key verse in here. He prays, and it's not just sayin' to God, 'Hey, if You don't do this people are gonna say You can't, that You weren't able, that You weren't strong enough.' He goes on and he says this. He says, when he makes his prayer he says, *"But I pray now, let the power of the LORD be great."* 'Show Your strength,' is his request. 'Show that You are able. But do it,' and he says, this is important, he says, 'Do it just as You've declared. Show Your strength the way You said You're strong. Show us the way You have spoken of Yourself. Show us Your strength of heart,' is what he's asking, because as you go into the next verse he'll describe the LORD's heart. He says, "The LORD is slow..." This is exactly what God had said about Himself. He said the LORD is slow to anger and He is abundant in loyal love, or lovingkindness as it's also translated. He is a God who forgives, but He by no means will clear, He will by no means let the wrong go undone. He will forgive, but there will be consequences. When there's sin there's consequences felt for two...three...four generations. But that doesn't mean there wasn't forgiveness. What Moses is saying, 'You are a God who is slow to anger, You are abundant in loyal love, You will forgive, You will restore relationship; You won't ignore the sin, You won't ignore it. There will be consequences, but You will not destroy the relationship.' He says, 'God, be that God. We've seen Your strength at the Red Sea. We've seen Your strength against Pharaoh. Show us now the strength of Your heart. Show us that loyal love.' He says, 'Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your loyal love. Show us Your strength of heart.' And God responds and says, 'I have pardoned them according to your word, but I'm gonna deal with their sin.' And He does. He does not destroy the relationship. He stays their people [stays their God] and they remain His people. But He takes them out into the wilderness and for thirty-some years, thirty-eight years, they wander there. The whole generation passes away, and a new generation takes their place. God provides for them, He cares for them, He loves them throughout those thirty-eight years. He allows them to be put away and He raises up the next generation. And by the time they come and approach Canaan, and this time from the east thirty-eight years later, they are a different nation.

We're told as they come up and approach it the King of Moab looked and he said, we're told that it was "*great fear of the people, for they were numerous, and Moab was in great dread of the sons of Israel.*" And they go on, and the King of Moab describes it this way to one of the neighboring countries. He says to the elders of Midian, 'Now the hoard will lick us all up, will lick up all those around us like the ox licks the grass of the field.' He says 'This hoard is gonna come up and they are just gonna wipe us clean.' The nations are not gonna say 'God couldn't do it.' They are trembling in fear. And the strength that accomplished it, the strength that brought that people in, was the strength of God's heart. The strength of God's heart would deal with sin and yet remain devoted to the sinner. That's the power behind God's promise. That's the strength Moses asked to see, and he saw it.

Question: how do you respond to a God like that? When they were there, poised to enter the Promised Land on the east side, Moses was near his death. And he gathered the people and he gave them two last, great speeches where he addressed the nation as the great leader of the...the deliverer that had brought them out of Egypt. And he knew he wasn't going to cross into the land with them, but he spoke to them. And he called this next generation to loyalty in God. And he put the Law in front of them again; that's why it's called Deuteronomy—the second law. He just repeated the commandments once again and reviewed it with them. And there's one point in there as he calls to the nation to hear him. And as he reviews their history he makes a statement to them in Deuteronomy chapter 6, beginning at verse 4. This became a formative call upon the nation of Israel, still given within that land. Moses said,

"Hear, O Israel!"

'Listen! The Lord is our God! Other people have other gods, but the LORD, the creator of heaven and earth, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Yahweh, the One who is, He is our God! He's the One to whom we belong.' And then he adds this statement—

"The LORD is one."

Now an element of that means that in a world of many gods it's clear that this is only one. He's the only one. It's an affirmation of monotheism, that there's only one God. But there's more to it than that. And the nuance of the idea here is He is...He's one. He's unique. There's none like Him. It's the word 'holy' is the idea. He's totally set apart. Look at all the gods that men have made up. Look at all the idols that men have made. Look at all the gods that have been worshipped throughout the centuries, and there is none like this One, who is supreme in strength and can call the world into being by His own words; at the same time is strong of heart, able to deal with the sinner while being devoted to the sinner.

How do you respond to that one-of-a-kind God? The answer comes back, 'You shall love that LORD, that God. And you shall love Him with all your heart, with all your affection, and you shall love Him with all your soul, and you shall love Him with all your might, with all your strength. A God that loves you like that—how do you respond? You simply love Him right back. That's how you respond to the God of scripture.

Now, when we read that, one of our reactions can be 'But wait a minute. I'm not Israel. We're not Israel. How can we say that is our God, that God who is so strong of heart, with a loyal love that just will not quit? How can we say He is our God? We're not Israel.' And here you have to listen well, because this is the gospel, so listen very carefully. The God who meets us in Jesus with the promise of unending grace is that God. He's that God. Jesus, descendant of Abraham, born among that chosen people in the chosen land. When we respond to Him, when we exercise faith in Jesus and we trust Him as the way, the truth, and as the life, and we follow His words to the One He called the Father, we find that God, that God of the strong heart, that God who will deal with your sin. But He'll do so with a devotion to you that will never end.

How do you respond to that God? Following the words of Jesus to the wonder and the glory of Him, you love that LORD, that God, with all your heart, with all your strength, and with all your soul. And the amazing wonder and grace of it all is that when you, as your faith takes hold and as your faith develops, and you keep seeing more and more of what we have in Jesus, you will find that your heart will love that God, that your mind will continually go in wonder to that God, and you will find that your strength is devoted to that God. You don't have to grit your teeth and make it happen. You don't have to say, 'I need to be...I need to be...' You exercise faith in Jesus Christ, trusting Him as the way, the truth, and the life, and follow His words to the One He called Father—you will find that God, and you will love Him. You will love Him with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all your strength. That isn't theory. That isn't speculation. That's the reality of God making good on His promise.

[Congregation sings the prayer song and is dismissed]