

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

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Numbers 11:1-9, 18-23, 31-34 “A Complaining, Greedy, Thankless People”

(Read vv.1-10)

Intro. We have before us today another story of man’s sin & failure in the eyes of God. In 1 Cor. 10:6 Paul explains why this particular story was included in the Old Testament, “Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted.” After giving other examples of the sins of Israel, he said in v.11, “Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition...” We should learn from their bad examples, and be wise enough to avoid the same sins that brought judgment from God.

This reminds me of one advantage of being one of the youngest children in a family. We can learn from the mistakes of our older siblings. Even so, I want us to learn to avoid the same mistakes of people of God who have gone before us.

Now, let consider the context of our story today. The children of Israel now have left Mount Sinai, where they had received the 10 Commandments. Chapters 11 and 12 tell of the march from Sinai to Kadesh. We will find that when problems arose, the people once again began to murmur and complain. This was a very serious thing, and it carries important lessons for us.

How to you respond when you face problems in your life? Do you tend to complain? Do you become fearful? Or are you able to maintain a sense of peace, knowing that God loves you, and will provide for you, and protect you? Well, the children of Israel certainly responded the wrong way, and we should learn from their bad example. We are going to see two other bad examples that we should avoid as well.

So let’s see first problem we should avoid is this:

I. WE NEED TO AVOID THE SIN OF COMPLAINING

We read in v.1 that “the people complained.” I’m sure they complained primarily to one another. In fact, the Hebrew word can refer to murmuring. We are not told exactly what the people were complaining about, except my translation leaves untranslated the Hebrew word *ra*, which in this case means hardship or trouble. They were complaining about the hardships of life in the wilderness.¹ We can sympathize with what it must have been like to live and travel in the desert of Sinai. But the problem was the fact that this was not the first time that the people complained. Previously in Ex. 15:24 they complained about not having good water to drink. In Ex. 16:2-3 they complained about a lack of food. Again in Ex. 17:2-3 they complained about lack of water. They were like a bunch of spoiled children.

We have too many criticizing, complaining saints today. They are always finding fault and nothing seems to please them. God wants you to be a happy, joyful Christian. But if you focus on your problems, & what you *don't* have, you will certainly not be happy & joyful. Then, you will spread unhappiness & discontentment to others.

Now is complaining and murmuring a sin? Indeed it can be. We are told in v.1 that their complaining “displeased the LORD.” Not only that, but we also read that “and His anger was

¹ The text literally is translated "and so the people became like those murmuring evil in the ears of the LORD."

aroused.” Don’t you think that is still true today? The reason the Lord was displeased & angry is because it says, “for the LORD heard it.” They may have directed their complaints to Moses, but God heard them as well. The same is true today, even when your complaints are under your breath.

As a result, notice what happened. We read in the last of v.1, “So the fire of the LORD burned among them, and consumed some in the outskirts of the camp.” Perhaps the fire broke out mainly against the worst of the complainers. Someone’s tent caught on fire here. Brush caught on fire at someone’s feet over there. Perhaps some were directly consumed with fire like Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:2). People were running from the rapidly spreading fire. Yet God was merciful. Fire did not break out on all the people, but only some of the people, that all may fear the Lord, and hesitate about yielding to this temptation again. God’s judgment may seem harsh. But remember, God had patiently bore with their complaints on previous occasions. When they first complained about bitter water, He did not punish them but simply met their needs by making the water sweet (Ex. 15:23-25). When they complained about not having food, He gave them manna (Ex. 16). God had proven Himself trustworthy. Yet they complained again! Here God’s patience had run out, and it was time to teach the people a lesson about complaining.

Is it ever OK to complain, or to express your displeasure at what you are going through? In America we cherish our right to free speech, and to express our grievances. That right is encoded in the 1st Amendment to our Constitution. Our founding fathers included that amendment because they knew that sinful men could use the power of government in ungodly & oppressive ways, and the people need to be free to express grievances with their government, without fear of retaliation. But for the Christian, the *Bible* is our supreme authority, not the U.S. Constitution. We are taught by example & precept not to vent self-centered complaints generally, or against God. If we see injustice, or abuse of power, we may address our concerns & problems to God in prayer, & to those in authority in the right spirit, but we need to be careful about going beyond that.

Instead of complaining, there are two things we should do. First:

A. We Should Be Thankful - These people had plenty to be thankful for. God had delivered them from terrible bondage. They should have been thankful that they were not slaves anymore. They should have been thankful that God had performed mighty miracles before their eyes. God had consistently provided water and food, even in the desert. God had given to them His good law. In many ways we have even more to be thankful about. Don’t you think that God is displeased when we complain as well?

B. Look to the Lord in Prayer – If you are facing a problem or hardship, don’t complain. Pray! Believe that God will meet your needs as He had done in the past. We need to take our problems to God so He could do something about them. Php. 4:6 says, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.”

We see an example of what prayer can do. After the fire of God’s judgment broke out, the people asked Moses to intercede for them. Then in the last of v.2 it says, “when Moses prayed to the LORD, the fire was quenched.” The fire was extinguished very quickly. God answered prayer once again, & He will answer your prayer if you trust in Him.

Now notice another sinful problem that we need to avoid:

II. WE NEED TO AVOID YIELDING TO INTENSE CRAVING

When was the last time you had an intense craving for something? Sometimes it's for a particular food, like chocolate. Well, some in the camp of Israel had an intense craving for some meat. Literally v.4 reads that they "lusted a lust," i.e. they lusted greatly and greedily. Watch out when lust and desires begin to take control of your life. For example, some become controlled by their lust for alcohol. Others become controlled by their intense desire to engage in immoral sexual behavior. Some are compulsive gamblers or shoppers. Others have a food obsession. If you're not careful, compulsive desire can take over your life. When you become preoccupied with something until it affects your perspective on everything else, you have moved from desire to obsessive lust. Today we're going to see an example why you should look to the Lord to help you maintain discipline over your desires.

Notice God's reaction to the lusting & complaining in the last of v.10. There it says "the anger of the LORD was greatly aroused." Later, we are going to see that yielding to intense craving is displeasing to God, & invites judgment. So how can we avoid this problem?

A. Avoid Those Who Incite Such Cravings – Notice who incited the craving for meat among the children of Israel. We read in v.4 that "the mixed multitude who were among them yielded to intense craving." The Hebrew word translated "the mixed multitude" is found only here, so the exact meaning is uncertain.² It can refer to a collection or assembly of various peoples, the rabble and riffraff of society. Many were the products of mixed marriages between Hebrews & Egyptians. Others of the mixed multitude were not Israelites at all. They just wanted to go along with the Israelites in hopes of a new life in a new land. These were not godly people. They sought after the things of this world.

Now here's the problem. In the last of v.4 we read, "so the children of Israel also wept again and said: 'Who will give us meat to eat?'" The children of Israel became infected with this discontentment & lust for meat, and they began to weep along with the mixed multitude. Listen to the crybabies! Their complaining spread like a contagious disease which swept through the camp. The apostle Paul later said, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump." The leaven of lust easily spreads throughout a congregation of people.

Unfortunately, our churches still have people like this "mixed multitude" today. They want to mix with church people and go to church. They want the respectability of church membership. They may be attracted to the moral uprightness & love of Christian people. Yet during the week, they run with the world, & live like the world. They like to have a church banquet, but they don't want Bible study. They like to meet to play, but not to pray. And if you are not careful, they will spread their discontentment, and lead you to lust after the sins of this world. Watch out for the mixed multitude! I have discovered through my years as a pastor that the real troublemakers in any church are the mixed multitude. You can spot them by the way they lust after the things of the world, rather than seek the things of God.

B. Don't Focus on What You *Don't* Have – Not only did they have a craving for meat, but they would not even be satisfied with that. Their unfulfilled lust causes them to resume their complaints. They said in v.5, "We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic." Even though they were slaves in Egypt, they at

² Cf. Ex 12:38, "A mixed multitude went up with them also...", where the phrase is from 2 Hebrew words that more literally translates "mixed multitude."

least had some variety of food. Notice what they missed. They remembered the fish they had in Egypt. Supposedly they had all the fish they wanted there. Now, they didn't even have access to fish out in that wilderness. The cucumbers referred to here are a species differing from the ordinary cucumbers in size and color, and distinguished for softness and sweet flavor. They even had melons to eat. I love watermelon, and other types of melon, don't you? The onions which flourish better in Egypt than elsewhere have a mild and pleasant taste. Maybe they were more like Vidalia Georgia onions. Yet not one of these things was available in the desert.

They magnified the plenty and dainties they had in Egypt, as if God had done them a great deal of wrong in taking them from there. But they failed to remember the hot brick-kilns and the oppressive taskmasters, and the pain of the whip.

You can be sure that the world and the devil will attempt to make you feel unsatisfied with what you have. They will tempt you to doubt the goodness of God. They will make what the world has to offer appear attractive, and something you just *have* to have.

So instead of focusing on what you don't have, the next step is this:

C. Be Grateful for What You Do Have! – We should not be like these people, who were ungrateful for the food God had provided. They say in the last of v.6, "there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes!" Thus they say in v.6, "but now our whole being is dried up." Literally, they said their soul was dried up. Greediness longs for juicy and savory food. We long for variety. So they started to complain about the manna.

But why should they complain? They should have been grateful for the food they had. After all, God could have let them starve in the wilderness. Instead, God had faithfully provided manna for each and every day. No doubt the manna had all the vitamins & nutrients that they needed. It was God's food, bread from heaven. That manna gave them complete nourishment. Furthermore, it was tasty. We read in the last of v.8 that they "cooked it in pans, and made cakes of it; and its taste was like the taste of pastry prepared with oil." In Ex. 16:31 we read that Manna tasted like wafers made with honey. It even had a sweet taste to it, like a breakfast pastry. Furthermore, they didn't have to work hard for it. They just had to get up early (Ex. 16:21) and gather what their family needed (v.8). Then, it could be eaten as is, or prepared in various ways. Mrs. Moses probably compiled a cookbook with one hundred and one recipes for manna. The Spirit of God is saying this was a nutritious, tasty, marvelous food, and yet they despised it, and became ungrateful.

They weren't satisfied with what God had provided. They were not content with what God had provided. Yet Paul said in Php. 4:11, "I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content." He also said in 1 Tim. 6:6, "Now godliness with contentment is great gain." Heb. 13:5 says, "Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'" Are you content with what God has provided you? Or you like the Israelites?

The problem was not with God's provision. The problem was with the people. Before you complain, you need to stop & see if the real problem is your own response to the situation you are facing.

So we have discussed two spiritual problems that we should avoid: complaining, and giving in to lustful desires. Now let's see how God deals with these problems, and see what other lessons we can learn. So the last scene of our story is this:

III. GOD GIVES THEM THEIR DESIRE

God says in effect, “So you want meat? Well, I’ll give you meat.” Then He says in vv.18-20, “Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wept in the hearing of the LORD, saying, ‘Who will give us meat to eat? For it was well with us in Egypt.’ Therefore the LORD will give you meat, and you shall eat. You shall eat, not one day, nor two days, nor five days, nor ten days, nor twenty days, but for a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you....” God makes a marvelous promise of providing an abundant supply a meat out in the wilderness that would last for a whole month.

This announcement by God provides the occasion of another problem that we should avoid, and that is unbelief. In v.21 Moses expressed his amazement at the promise of God to provide flesh for 600,000 men and fill them for a whole month long, not to mention their wives & children. That number could easily swell to over 2 million people! Then he proposes a possible solution in v.22, “Shall flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, to provide enough for them? Or shall all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, to provide enough for them?” It is an objection similar to that made by the disciples when they faced the feeding of the 5000. They asked, “How can one satisfy these people with bread here in the wilderness?” (Mk. 8:4). They must have forgotten about this story in here in Numbers 11.

God gives a short but sufficient answer to the objection in that question in v.23, “Has the LORD’S arm been shortened?” That literally refers to an arm that has been cut short, and thus is weakened. God had done mighty miracles. He had delivered Israel with 10 miraculous plagues. He held back the waters of the Red Sea and overthrew the Egyptian army. Does Moses believe that He has lost His power? God said in Gen. 18:14, “Is anything too hard for the LORD?” Likewise, Jesus said in Mt. 19:26, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” His power never changes, but our faith in His power may diminish, as it did with Moses. Then God says, “Now you shall see whether what I say will happen to you or not.” We never need to ask the Lord how He is going to do something after He says He will do it.

Then in v.31 we read how God accomplished His promise, “Now a wind³ went out from the LORD, and it brought quail from the sea⁴ and left them fluttering near the camp, about a day’s journey on this side and about a day’s journey on the other side, all around the camp....” The Lord had sent them quail before (Ex. 16:13), but this time He delivers fresh meat to the people by airmail in remarkable quantities!⁵

Next, notice the magnitude of the fulfillment. In the last of v.31 we read that these quail were “about two cubits above the surface of the ground.” That’s 3 feet. It’s difficult to interpret what that means. The Hebrew text simply says that the wind “left” the quail around the camp about two cubits “above/on” the surface of the land. That would make them easy to catch. Or does it mean that in some places they were piled up 3 feet high? Perhaps they were so tired from flying from the Sea that they fell down & piled up on the ground! We don’t know for sure.

Then in v.32 we read, “And the people stayed up all that day, all night, and all the next day, and gathered the quail (he who gathered least gathered ten homers); and they spread them out for

³ The Spirit of God had blessed the 70 elders with prophetic gifts, and now the wind (same Hebrew word) of God would bless the people with food provisions.

⁴ Probably the Gulf of Aqaba.

⁵ It is not certain these were quail. This Hebrew word is only found in conjunction with this story. Some scholars suggest that they were locusts. But I believe that they were birds of some sort. After all, v.33 refers to the meat or “flesh” that they were chewing.

themselves all around the camp.” The people greedily gather quail around the clock all day, all night, and all the next day. I can’t even imagine quail in abundance like this. Many people have gone quail hunting all day and only killed two or three quail. But in v.32 we read that the *least* anyone gathered during a 2 day period was 10 homers. That is about eighty-six gallons of quail! What could they do with that many quail? Some would have been cooked and eaten immediately. As for the rest, the last of v.32 indicates that they spread it out and dried it in the sun, in the same manner in which the Egyptians were in the habit of drying fish.⁶ It would become quail jerky!

This story reinforces the fact that God will provide for their every need. Even so, let us claim the promise of Philippians 4:19, "And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus."

Now God would turn what was seen as a great blessing into a judgment. Remember, He had warned this would be the case. In the last of v.20 God warned that for a whole month they would eat meat, "until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you." So let's see what happened. In v.33 we read, "But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the wrath of the LORD was aroused against the people, and the LORD struck the people with a very great plague." For a while the people no doubt stuffed themselves with the abundance of quail. Many were down right gluttonous. But then, God's judgment hit and the people suffered some kind of a plague. Perhaps it was a stomach or intestinal sickness that resulted in vomiting. Do you know what happens sometime when you vomit? It comes out your nose. That is likely what happened in light of what God warned in v.20, that it would come "out of your nostrils."

Have you ever eaten so much of a particular food that you became sick of it? That's what happened to Israel. Furthermore, quite a number must have died from the disease, for in v.34 we read that the place was called, "Kibroth Hattaavah", which means "the graves of lusters."

There is an important lesson here. Be careful what you lust after & ask God for. Psalm 106 is an historic psalm, and there we read in v.15, "And he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul." Sometimes we pray for things that aren't the best for us. If we beg and complain, God may answer our prayer but give us leanness in our soul.

Illustration: See p.482 McGee.

Conclusion: Do you remember the story of King David's son Amnon, who was in love with his half-sister Tamar? He wanted her so badly. He had such strong lust for her. Finally, after she refused his advances yet again, he forced himself on her. Then, when he finally got what he wanted, he realized that he did not really want her any more. He wasn't happy. Tamar was shamed. And Tamar's brother was full of hatred toward his brother, & thoughts of revenge.

That's the way it is when we lust for something outside of the will of God. He may let you have what you want, and then you will find that you are not really happy with what you have. You may experience God's judgment for insisting on getting your own way. If you want to be blessed & happy, stay in the will of God. Be content & thankful for what He provides. Pray, "Not my will, but Your will be done."

Sources: Ronald A. Beers, ed., *Life Application Study Bible* (Tyndale House & Zondervan, 1991); R. Dennis Cole, *New American Commentary: Numbers* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000); C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978 reprint); Roy Gane, *The NIV Application Commentary: Leviticus, Numbers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 1

⁶ The Greek historian Herodotus described the Egyptian practice of salting and laying the fish and fowl out on the sands in the hot sun for drying the meat.

(Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1981); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:10] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2011); Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

For further study, read sermons & commentaries on Ex. 16:1-18; Ps. 78:26-32.

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