

God's People Grumble

Numbers 11:1-35 (Text) • John 6:47-51, 60-71

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Grumbling is natural in this sinful world. Everyone grumbles. But grumbling is not considered a serious sin because it does not cause harm to others. When it's hot in the summer, we wish it was winter; but when winter comes, it's too cold. Children grumble that school is too hard, but when summer vacation arrives, they think being at home is too boring. When plums and apricots are plenty in season, we get tired of it, but we crave for them when they're out of season. Was your old job too boring, and your new job too hard?

Our sinful nature is always moaning and groaning, complaining and grumbling. Remember the British rock band Rolling Stones' song, "I Can't Get No Satisfaction"? The title says it all: what more can this rock group crave for when they had fulfilled their dream of getting to the top of the entertainment world? But they grumble about their present riches, fame and glory because they could find "no satisfaction" in it.

No satisfaction: this is the theme of our lives. And it was the theme of Israelites in the wilderness as well. Within three days of starting their journey, they started grumbling against everything. In Chapters 11 and 12 of the Book of Numbers, we read about the Israelites grumbling about three things in their wilderness journeys: (1) about their hardships (vv 1-3); (2) about the food (v 4-35); and (3) against Moses' leadership (Chapter 12).

Grumbling is contagious—it takes only one person to start a grumbling wildfire. And the real reason behind it lies within our doubting, unsatisfied hearts coveting what others have that God has not given us. God considers it as a very serious affront against his Word, and the consequence is his consuming wrath. Even Moses, the mediator between God and Israel, grumbled against God. But even as he bemoaned his circumstance, he intervened on their behalf. And God was satisfied in spite of his "moaning and groaning" that the burden of this people was too great for him.

Today, we will dwell on the theme, "**GOD'S PEOPLE GRUMBLE,**" under three headings: first, **The Real Reason for Grumbling;** second, **The Consuming Consequence of Grumbling;** and third, **A Grumbling Mediator and a Suffering Mediator.**

The Real Reason for Grumbling

After the people first started out from Mount Sinai towards the Promised Land, it took them only three days of travel through the difficult terrain and weather to begin complaining about their situation. Remember that about a year before the start of their march from Sinai, Israel just came out of Egypt and had just crossed the Red Sea. As the mighty Egyptian army cornered them at the edge of the sea, they were about to be killed or taken back as slaves to Egypt. Already at that early stage of their journey, they started grumbling that Moses took them out of Egypt only to die at the hands of Pharaoh's army (Exo 14:11).

God rescued them from that certain destruction by parting the Red Sea. But within three days of setting out from the Red Sea towards Mount Sinai, the people started complaining to Moses because the water in the desert was bitter. Again, God was patient with them and made the water sweet to drink. In verse 1 of our text, the first grumbling is about their hardships in the desert. God heard them, but this time he was angry. So he burned some of the outlying parts of the camp. What prevented God from consuming all of Israel's camp? Moses interceded for them (v 2). These first two verses were the pattern of all of Israel's grumbings in the wilderness: Israel grumbled; God's wrath was provoked; then Moses mediated, turning away God's wrath.

The second incident is Israel's long rant against their food in the desert: the manna from heaven. The grumbling started from the "rabble," those mixed multitude of foreigners who lived on the fringes of the camp. So the grumbling quickly spread throughout the whole camp. They started craving for the "good old days" in Egypt where there was plenty of good food to eat (vv 4-6). These Israelites now remember Egypt as the best place on earth, forgetting their hard labor in slavery and their cruel masters who surely did not provide them enough food to eat. And most likely, the food they were given were not delicious as they now imagine. Their misery as slaves then was so great that they cried out to God for help, and God heard them (Exo 2:23-24).

Not only were their perspective of the past distorted, their view of their present was twisted as well. They look at and eat manna, and find it boring, tasteless and nothing to look at. But Moses does not think so. He describes manna as attractive, since it looked like one of the precious stones in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:12). It can be prepared in different ways and it tasted good (v 8). What could taste better than heavenly food, this "bread from heaven" (Psa 105:40)?

Dissatisfaction results in sinful craving and covetousness. We look at the prosperity of others, even wicked people, and then we start grumbling and murmuring about our lack of the same things. This is how Israel started complaining. Grumbling skewed, clouded and distorted their vision. Doesn't this happen often to us? We see everything and all events around us—past, present and future—differently because we are always a discontented lot.

What's behind dissatisfaction, grumbling, moaning, and complaining? It is unbelief in God's promises in his Word, which skews our perspective of the past. And it also results in doubting God's goodness to us in the present and his good promises to us for the future. We become very shortsighted, seeing only the sufferings and trials of today. We want everything now! We want all our problems solved today! We don't believe that God will see us through and complete the work he has started in us.

What did Israel not have? They did not have faith. Faith and grumbling are opposites. The absence of faith results in grumbling. If we believe that God blesses us today even in our difficulties, we will be satisfied with what we have. If we believe in our glorious future in the heavenly city, we will be able to finish our pilgrimage in this world of sin and misery.

The Consuming Consequence

As a result of their grumbling, God punished them. In the first incident, God consumed the outlying parts of the camp with fire. In the second incident, God's judgment was in the provision

of the quail itself. First, because they would eat the same quail for a whole month, it would become loathsome to them, just as they had gotten sick of manna (vv 18-20). Have you ever had the same food for a whole week? The last month, we had Chipotle almost every week, and it was delicious! But now, we decided we will not eat there for the next couple of months. Even people who work in the finest restaurants get tired of the same food—even when it is the best—they eat every day.

The second judgment was a plague by which many perished from the quails. This is why the place was called Kibroth-hattaavah, which means “graves of craving” (v 33-35). This incident is similar to Israel’s demand for a king later in her life as a nation because the people wanted to be like the kingdoms around them. And God allowed them to have their king but warned them of judgment proceeding from the king himself. This king will take their sons away to fight his wars, and their daughters to serve him. He will overtax them and confiscate their fields and vineyards (sound familiar?). He will take their servants and make them slaves in his palace. In the end, Samuel prophesied that the people will cry out to God because of their oppressive kings (1 Sam 8:10-18). His prophecy came true all throughout the history of the kingdom of Israel.

Paul also warns us not to grumble in unbelief, *“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men”* (Rom 1:18). God will give rebellious people over to the *“the lusts of their hearts to impurity... to dishonorable passions... [and] to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done”* (Rom 1:24, 26, 28). This is called “hardening of the heart”: Because ungodly people choose to rebel against God and his Word, he will “harden their hearts” by taking away the restraining power of the Holy Spirit. Today, we see this “hardening of hearts” of unbelievers all around us in our anti-Christian culture, that Paul, writing about them 2,000 years ago, says in Romans 1:29–32:

They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

Many do not consider aborting fully-developed babies in the womb, even killing a newborn baby, as first-degree murder. Some “conservative” churches now do not consider homosexual tendency and practice as sexual immorality. Fake news and social media are not lying. Fraud is not stealing. Hateful and racist speech are commonplace among those in high offices. Respect for parents, teachers, law officers and other authorities is gone. And those who do these deeds double down on their ungodliness when called out. Worse, they encourage all others to do the same.

The writer of Hebrews repeats God’s warning to Israel in Deuteronomy 4:24, that he is *“a consuming fire, a jealous God.”* He says in Hebrews 12:28-29 that since we are inheriting a heavenly kingdom, we are to *“offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”* Like Israel, the ungodly will perish in unbelief in the wilderness, and will never be allowed to enter the Promised Land. And in their rebellious grumbling in unbelief, they will be tormented by fire day and night, forever and ever, but never be consumed.

A Grumbling Mediator and a Suffering Mediator

Lastly, Israel's total destruction—because of their grumbling—was averted by Moses the grumbling mediator and leader. In verses 11-15, he also grumbled. He did not grumble about the hardship, but he grumbled about the faithless and rebellious people. In effect, he was complaining to God, "I didn't deserve this people; you gave them to me. I didn't choose them, you did." In this short portion—only five verses—Moses used "I," "me" and "my" at least 20 times! Instead of focusing on God's goodness and promises, Moses focused on his miserable burden.

The burden of leading some a multitude through their difficult wilderness wanderings was too great for Moses to bear. So he forgot his role as mediator. Instead of praying for the people to repent and see God's goodness, he grumbled that they are rebellious. Instead of asking God to forgive this people, he blames God. Instead of asking God to provide for them, he doubted God's promises that he could provide meat for all these people.

Oh, how Israel is a mirror of our own sinful state! Grumbling means focusing on ourself, our troubles, and our needs, and not on God's goodness and promises. We often see only our present troubles, forgetting God's faithfulness in the past, and his promises for our future. What was God's answer to Moses' grumbings? He gave them an overwhelming number of quails. And he also had an organization plan. Leadership would not only be a burden on Moses' shoulders; 70 elders of Israel will share the leadership, some of them filled with the Holy Spirit (vv 16-17).

Do you remember the story in John 6 of the five thousand people whom Jesus fed from five loaves of bread and two fish? This Gospel story has many parallels with our story in Numbers 11. Just as Moses asked God where he would get meat (v 13), Jesus asked Philip where they could buy bread (v 5). Just as Moses doubted that God would be able to provide meat (v 22), Philip also doubted that Jesus would be able to feed over 5,000 people (v 7). Jesus told the people that he is the manna, the bread from heaven, who gives eternal life. But the Pharisees and even his disciples grumbled and were offended by his claim to be the Messiah (vv 41-43). *Therefore, Numbers 11 and John 6 show us that Jesus as our Mediator is better than Moses the mediator between God and Israel.*

Even in his darkest hour in the Garden of Gethsemane, he did not grumble against God about the rebellious people he was saving. Instead, he prayed for their salvation and for God to be with them. Moses complained about the burden God gave him, but Jesus willingly bore the burden of his people. He alone is the only Mediator between us and God. He did not need 70 elders to bear the burden of the sin of his people, because he alone is able to save them. Instead of you and me being consumed by God's wrath, Jesus suffered God's wrath on our behalf on the accursed cross. Because of our unbelief and grumbling against God, Jesus bore the full burden of our sins on the cross: eternal hell.

He offered his body and blood for us. Unlike the supply of manna and the quail which could run out, his body and blood were more than sufficient to feed all the multitudes of those who would believe in him until he returns in glory. And in the heavenly feast that awaits us, the bread and wine would be sufficient for a multitude from all nations, peoples, languages and tribes of the earth.

Moses prayed that all Israel would be given the Spirit of prophecy. Because of Christ's offering of his body and blood on the cross for us, Moses' prayer was answered. Instead of only some of the 70 elders who were given the Holy Spirit, God poured out his Spirit on all those who believed on Pentecost Sunday and until Christ returns from heaven (Acts 2:17-18). This was also the fulfillment of Moses' prophecy that God would raise a better Prophet than him (Deu 18:18-19). *Again, Numbers 11 and John 6 show that Jesus is the better Prophet than Moses (Heb 3:1-6).*

As with the Israelites in the wilderness, preaching God's Word results in two opposite responses: some rebel in unbelief, and others obey in trust (John 6:63-64). To those who believe, his words are the words of life through the Spirit (John 6:68-69). But to those who do not believe, Jesus' words are loathsome words of judgment. Rebels who will not listen to him and grumble in unbelief will give account of themselves and will be burned by eternal fire.

Dear friends, Christ as your Mediator willingly gave his life so that you may not suffer God's wrath because of your grumbling and unbelief. Christ as the better Prophet has poured out his Spirit on you. Because of this, he has given you all the blessings of salvation today. He has also promised to complete your salvation when he returns.

If this is so, the challenge for you today is, "Why should I continue to grumble when difficult days come? And how should I live my life as I continue my pilgrimage to heaven?"

Instead of grumbling, be thankful for your salvation and spiritual blessings. Instead of grumbling about your present troubles, focus on God's goodness in the past and his promise of blessing for the future. Instead of grumbling, pray that God will give you a measure of his Spirit so you may have strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. *Amen.*