

The Sin of Complaining

Lesson Scope: Numbers 11-12

References in brackets refer to the lesson scope unless otherwise noted

Lesson Focus

After staying at Mount Sinai for about a year, the children of Israel were on the move again (Numbers 10:11-13). The rigors of the journey through "that great and terrible wilderness" (Deuteronomy 1:19) were wearing the people down so much that they began to look at the positive things of their past life. They quickly forgot their bondage in Egypt and saw only their past pleasures and comforts and their present difficulties.

This lesson illustrates areas where human nature is most likely to complain. People want to have their physical needs met, and they want to manage things. These concerns may have a place. But complaining is always self-centered. It comes from a wrong view of self and of God. It sees self as able to meet one's needs rather than allowing God to work out what is best.

The Lord amply provides for His people. When men forget God and follow their own lusts, they grow dissatisfied and bitter and incur His wrath.

"If wisdom's ways you wisely seek, / Five things observe with care: / Of whom you speak, / To whom you speak, / And how, and when, and where." What you say is of course important, but these five considerations are just as important.

Lesson Aim: To see the seriousness of harboring a complaining spirit.

Theme Verse: Jude 16. These are murmurers, complainers, walking after their own lusts; and their mouth speaketh great swelling words, having men's persons in admiration because of advantage.

Lesson Text

God's Provision Despised

Numbers 11:1-6 And *when* the people complained, it displeased the LORD: and the LORD heard *it*; and his anger was kindled; and the fire of the LORD burnt among them, and consumed *them that were* in the uttermost parts of the camp. ² And the people cried unto Moses; and when Moses prayed unto the LORD, the fire was quenched. ³ And he called the name of the place Taberah: because the fire of the LORD burnt among them. ⁴ And the mixt multitude that *was* among them fell a lusting; and the children of Israel also wept again, and said, Who shall give us flesh to eat? ⁵ We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlick: ⁶ But now our soul *is* dried away: *there is* nothing at all, beside this manna, *before* our eyes.

Numbers 11:10 Then Moses heard the people weep throughout their families, every man in the door of his tent: and the anger of the LORD was kindled greatly; Moses also was displeased.

Numbers 11:16-20 And the LORD said unto Moses, Gather unto me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom thou knowest to be the elders of the people, and officers over them; and bring them unto the tabernacle of the congregation, that they may stand there with thee. ¹⁷ And I will come down and talk with thee there: and I will take of the spirit which *is* upon thee, and will put *it* upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with thee, that thou bear *it* not thyself alone. ¹⁸ And say thou unto the people, Sanctify yourselves against tomorrow, and ye shall eat flesh: for ye have wept in the ears of the LORD, saying, Who shall give us flesh to eat? for *it was* well with us in Egypt: therefore the LORD will give you flesh, and ye shall eat. ¹⁹ Ye shall not eat one day, nor two days, nor five days, neither ten days, nor twenty days; ²⁰ But even a whole month, until it come out at your nostrils, and it be loathsome unto you: because that ye have despised the LORD which *is* among you, and have wept before him, saying, Why came we forth out of Egypt?

Numbers 11:31-33 And there went forth a wind from the LORD, and brought quails from the sea, and let *them* fall by the camp, as it were a day's journey on this side, and as it were a day's journey on the other side, round about the camp, and as it were two cubits *high* upon the face

of the earth. ³² And the people stood up all that day, and all *that* night, and all the next day, and they gathered the quails: he that gathered least gathered ten homers: and they spread *them* all abroad for themselves round about the camp. ³³ And while the flesh *was* yet between their teeth, ere it was chewed, the wrath of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD smote the people with a very great plague.

God's Leader Derided

Numbers 12:1-2 And Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married: for he had married an Ethiopian woman. ² And they said, Hath the LORD indeed spoken only by Moses? hath he not spoken also by us? And the LORD heard *it*.

Numbers 12:5 And the LORD came down in the pillar of the cloud, and stood *in* the door of the tabernacle, and called Aaron and Miriam: and they both came forth.

Numbers 12:9-10 And the anger of the LORD was kindled against them; and he departed. ¹⁰ And the cloud departed from off the tabernacle; and, behold, Miriam *became* leprous, *white* as snow: and Aaron looked upon Miriam, and, behold, *she was* leprous.

Numbers 12:15 And Miriam was shut out from the camp seven days: and the people journeyed not till Miriam was brought in *again*.

Questions for Study

God's Provision Despised

1. Since no serious shortage threatened Israel at this time, what was the problem?
2. What do people complain about besides food?
3. In light of our own natural motives, what do you think motivated the Israelites to gather as many quail as they did?
4. How does God rebuke complaining today?

God's Leader Derided

5. By what logic did Aaron and Miriam justify their complaints against Moses?
6. What was at the root of their complaints?
7. Why was leprosy a suitable punishment?
8. How can we keep a complaining spirit from taking root among us?

Analyzing the Passage

The "mixt multitude" (11:4) included Egyptians who had come along with the Israelites when they left Egypt.

Manna was likely whitish yellow, and had the consistency of small seeds (11:7). Perhaps for variety, the people ground it and made pancakes (11:8). The reference to "fresh oil" suggests that it tasted good.

The fact that God's anger was "kindled greatly" (11:10) means this was more than something God noticed in passing.

God's command to Moses to gather men who would "stand there with [him]" (11:16) speaks of unity in purpose, unity in worship, and unity in authority.

"A day's journey" (11:31) could be anywhere from ten to thirty miles, so there were plenty of quail. "Two cubits" is about three feet, which was the flying altitude of the quail. "As it were" allows room for approximation.

A homer was a donkey load, nearly eight bushels. "He that gathered least gathered ten homers" (11:32).

Principles and Applications

God's Provision Despised

1. A complaining spirit kindles the wrath of God (11:1-2). And why not? Complaining does not square with the facts. God supplies all that we need, and much more: He "loadeth us with benefits" (Psalm 68:19). He also has the right to test us sometimes by bringing supply levels low. This should teach us to cast ourselves on Him, not to show a bitter spirit.

2. A complaining spirit distorts one's view of present blessings by taking an unrealistic view of past experiences (11:4-6). "It is distance that charms the past." The Hebrews forgot the long, hot, miserable days of slavery; the beatings; the insults; the dangers to their children. All they remembered was the food! Every temptation to sin is a temptation to cast envious eyes back on the old life. How easy it is to forget the miseries we escaped from when we first chose to follow the Lord! "The time past of our life may suffice us" (1 Peter 4:3) means we ought to be fed up with the old life.

3. A complaining spirit influences the attitudes of the rising generation (11:10). These people wept, not into their pillows at night, but at their

tent doors where everyone could see them. Their children were, and our children are, very susceptible to the attitudes of their elders. If you see your children showing a poor attitude, ask yourself, "Is that because of me?"

4. A complaining spirit moves God to give persons what they desire, to their own hurt (11:18-20). "He gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul" (Psalm 106:15). Certainly it is right to lay our needs and even our wants before God, but there is a right way to do it. "In every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God" (Philippians 4:6).

5. A complaining spirit leads to a greedy outlook and a loss of rationality (11:31-32). What could the people possibly have been thinking when they caught quail for a day, a night, and another whole day, gathering no less than eighty bushels each? The modern spirit that "it's all about me" is equally irrational because, quite simply, it is not all about us.

6. A complaining spirit brings divine judgment (11:33). God brought judgment on some of the people slowly (11:20), and on some of the people instantly, as we see here in 11:33. Either way, He got His point across.

God's Leader Derided

7. A complaining spirit leads to rebellion against established authority (12:1-2). Moses had shown himself eager to share his authority (11:16-17, 24-29), but Aaron and Miriam ignored this. Had the negative spirit of the multitude finally begun to have its effect on Aaron and Miriam? Let us beware of absorbing a complaining spirit from others. Much less should anyone else absorb it from us.

8. God notices a complaining spirit and takes action (12:2, 5). Patient as God is, He is not absent-minded. In the case of negativity among leaders, He often speaks "suddenly," as He did in 12:4.

9. One must repent of a complaining spirit and be cleansed by God before he can experience divine guidance (12:10, 15). Miriam was given seven days to think, as were the rest of the people. Once they were in a more sober frame of mind, God led them on.

Important Teachings

1. A complaining spirit kindles the wrath of God (11:1-2).

2. A complaining spirit distorts one's view of present blessings by taking an unrealistic view of past experiences (11:4-6).
3. A complaining spirit influences the attitudes of the rising generation (11:10).
4. A complaining spirit moves God to give persons what they desire, to their own hurt (11:18-20).
5. A complaining spirit leads to a greedy outlook and a loss of rationality (11:31-32).
6. A complaining spirit brings divine judgment (11:33).
7. A complaining spirit leads to rebellion against established authority (12:1-2).
8. God notices a complaining spirit and takes action (12:2, 5).
9. One must repent of a complaining spirit and be cleansed by God before he can experience divine guidance (12:10, 15).

Answers to Questions

1. Since no serious shortage threatened Israel at this time, what was the problem?
The people decided they were tired of what they had. They could not imagine that God was good enough to give them anything unless they complained loudly enough.
2. What do people complain about besides food?
People complain about the boss, the taxes, the cost of living, the politicians, the weather, the school, the church, and so on. (To acknowledge a problem is one thing; to grumble is another.)
3. In light of our own natural motives, what do you think motivated the Israelites to gather as many quail as they did?
The more they could have, the more they thought they had to have. They considered the future uncertain because they did not trust God to provide more, so they piled up more than they needed.
4. How does God rebuke complaining today?
Mostly He does it by sending rain on the just and the unjust, showing that after all He is good! But sometimes He takes blessings and securities away for a time to remind people how good the everyday blessings have been.
5. By what logic did Aaron and Miriam justify their complaints against Moses?

They said the Lord had spoken by them too, implying that they had enough authority to stand up to Moses.

6. What was at the root of their complaints? It seems they had allowed the spirit of the day to affect their thinking.

7. Why was leprosy a suitable punishment?

It destroyed the authority Miriam thought she had and reminded her how good it was to find her own place in life without asking for more.

8. How can we keep a complaining spirit from taking root among us? "Be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Hebrews 13:5).

Summarizing the Lesson

Complaining presents itself as a release and relief, but it only feeds on itself and makes the complainer more miserable. We should indeed call attention to problems, but we must do it with a gracious spirit, as Jethro did in Exodus 18:13-27. This will help preserve us from getting answers that we do not want, and will make us eligible for answers from a God who "is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20).

Research Guide

Locating a photo of Mount Sinai can give you an idea of the rough and largely bleak country the children of Israel were now passing through. The people needed to supply their own cheer by looking to the Lord, which, as we know, they did not do.