

## Lesson 6 – 5 June, 2011

### Murmurings in the Wilderness

**Lesson Scope:** Numbers Chapters 11 and 12.

#### Lesson Focus

This lesson begins the second section of the Book of Numbers, in which is revealed the failure of man. Moses gave these events dishonorable mention in Deuteronomy 9:22, where he stated, "Ye provoked the LORD to wrath."

Israel's memory of their rigorous servitude in Egypt was fading. In some respects the terrain of the wilderness was discouraging. Also, the influence of the mixed multitude who had accompanied them was negative. Were these indeed justifiable reasons to complain?

Israel failed despite God's goodness and faithfulness. Numbers 10 closes with a positive picture of the Lord leading His people toward the promised Land. The fact that six hundred thousand footmen and their families had survived in the arid expanses of the wilderness gave testimony to the miraculous care of God. Manna fell six days of the week: Israel's needs were being met.

The Lord amply provides for His people. When men forget and follow their own lusts, they grow dissatisfied and bitter and incur His wrath. The root of Israel's difficulty was the sin of pride. "Only by pride cometh contention" (Proverbs 13:10). Behind all murmuring is some form of dissatisfaction that has become a point of contention. We are God's workmanship; all that we are and have is a gift from Him. Complaining is actually defiance against Him.

The fruit of the Spirit is the antidote for all murmuring. Love causes contention to cease; it is the more excellent way! Read Galatians 5 and 1 Corinthians 13 and be impressed with the fact that love softens the heart and casts out pride.

The lesson text includes only a brief mention of the struggle that Moses faced because of the murmuring. You are encouraged to read the omitted verses to show how deeply Moses was affected. Instead of arguing with the people, Moses poured out his soul to God. The meekness of Moses gives a positive note to this lesson.

**Lesson Aim:** To portray the sinfulness of murmuring against the Lord.

**Theme Verses:** [Psalm 106:13-15](#). They soon forgot his works; they waited not for his counsel: but lusted exceedingly in the wilderness, and tempted God in the desert. And he gave them their request but sent leanness into their soul.

**Lesson Text:**

**They Complained**

[Numbers 11:1-2](#)

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. <sup>2</sup>And the people cried unto Moses; and when Moses prayed unto the LORD, the fire was quenched.

**They Lusted**

[Numbers 11:4-6](#)

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? <sup>5</sup>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: <sup>6</sup>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 10:16](#)

And over the host of the tribe of the children of Zebulun *was* Eliab the son of Helon.

[Numbers 11:18-20](#)

And say thou unto the people, Sanctify yourselves against to morrow, 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. <sup>19</sup>Ye shall not eat one day, nor two days, nor five days, neither ten days, nor twenty days; <sup>20</sup>*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. <sup>32</sup>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. <sup>33</sup>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.

### **They Contended**

## 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. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>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**

#### **They Complained**

1. How does God view complaining?
2. What does complaining reveal about a person's heart?

#### **They Lusted**

3. What factors contributed to Israel's wholesale involvement in complaining?
4. What effects can murmuring have upon the leaders of God's people?
5. Why is it dangerous to insist on having our own way?

## **They Contended**

6. What attitude prompted Miriam and Aaron's accusations?
7. Why is speaking against delegated authority so serious?
8. How should a person approach leaders with his concerns?

## **Analyzing the Passage**

The separate incidents in this lesson are tied together by the common denominator of a murmuring spirit. The first evidence of failure was discontent. Israel possessed a restless desire for improvement, and they complained. This word is translated from a Hebrew root meaning "to mourn." Complaining is a selfish mourning for one's own supposed disadvantages. The next incident was a more pronounced rebellion. It began with the mixed multitude (Numbers 11:4). The explanation of their presence is given in Exodus 12:38. Of varied descent, these people had accompanied Israel because they were impressed by the miraculous hand of God upon Egypt. They hankered after things left behind in Egypt, influencing the rest of the camp.

The people wept, and Moses was deeply perplexed. He told God that his assignment was too great and that he could not bear it alone. It seems as though Moses had momentarily lost sight of God's ability to do the impossible. This shortsightedness is seen in his question. "Whence should I have flesh to give unto all this people?" (Numbers 11: 13). It shows up more pronounced in verses 21-23. God graciously gave Moses seventy men to help him, and He assured Moses that meat was on the way. The people proved their lust and greed in the way they gathered and ate of the meat. In anger, God smote the people with a plague.

The third incident involved a critical spirit on the part of Aaron and Miriam. It caused them to find fault with Moses and to lift up themselves (Numbers 12:1-2). In this context, Moses is declared to be a very meek man, and God vindicated him. The fact that Miriam became leprous suggests that she was the instigator of the criticism. Moses' meekness was demonstrated by his intercession on Miriam's behalf.

## **Principles and Applications**

### **They Complained**

1. Complaining is ingratitude, which dishonors God (Numbers 11:1). Israel did have things for which they could be thankful. The description of manna given in the context of the lesson portrays a tasty and complete food.

Israel did have more than manna. As God's children, we have no justifiable reason for complaining or being unthankful. "But godliness with contentment is great gain.... And having food and raiment let us be therewith content" (1 Timothy 6:6-8).

2. Complaining displeases God and incurs His judgement (Numbers 11:1). We are not left in doubt! The text plainly states that God's wrath was kindled and that judgment fell upon the people. We need to check ourselves and make sure that we do not have a complaining spirit. In Romans 1 we read of God's wrath being against those who hold the truth in unrighteousness and are not thankful.

### **They Lusted**

3. A murmuring spirit spreads and grows (Numbers 11:4-6, 10). The influence of the mixed multitude is obvious. The same thing can happen in church life. A few unhappy members can cause others to become restless. It can happen in the home, parents who are dissatisfied and unhappy with their church fellowship cast a stumbling block before their children.

4. Murmuring hinders the faithful administration of God's work (Numbers 11:16). The lusting of the people was a source of discouragement for Moses. It brought him much grief. What influence are we having upon our leaders? Do we make it easy or hard for them? Hebrews 13:17 speaks to the point. Our obedience contributes to their joy and increases our profit.

5. God may give murmurers what they want, but at the expense of spiritual health (Numbers 11:18-20). Psalm 106:15 states, "And he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul." This does not mean that God is responsible for spiritual failure. Rather, sometimes God grants an unwarranted request so that men may learn through experience the folly of their desires. God calls us to search our motives and to learn from our failures. How much better it is to learn from the failure of others!!

6. The lust of the flesh leads to intemperance (Numbers 11:32). Inordinate desires are inherent in our carnal nature. We must accept the responsibility for intemperance in eating, drinking, sleeping, and working. Feeling that we are underprivileged provides an excuse for intemperance and complaining. In contrast, contentment fosters righteousness.

### **They Contended**

7. Murmuring against delegated authority is murmuring against the Lord (Numbers 12:2). God thoroughly vindicated Moses in Numbers 12:6-8. He declared Moses to be more than a prophet; to him God had spoken very personally. God declared that Aaron and Miriam were presumptuous in speaking against Moses. Even though leaders are men and therefore capa-

ble of making mistakes, God placed them there and gave them their authority. We therefore should "esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake" (1 Thessalonians 5:13).

8. God hears and visits judgment on rebellious murmuring (Numbers 12:5, 9-10). Miriam's case of leprosy left no doubt about God's thoughts concerning Aaron and Miriam's failure. God does not overlook rebellion in our day. Nothing will be overlooked in the Day of Judgement (Matthew 10:26).

9. The murmuring of a few hinders the progress of the whole group (Numbers 12:15). "For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself (Romans 14:7). Each one of us influences others for good or evil. May our lives enhance rather than hinder the progress of our spiritual brethren.

### **Important Teachings**

1. Complaining is ingratitude, which dishonors God (Numbers 11:1).

2. Complaining displeases God and incurs His judgment (Numbers 11:1).

3. A murmuring spirit spreads and grows (Numbers 11:4-6, 10).

4. Murmuring hinders the faithful administration of God's work (Numbers 11:16).

5. God may give murmurers what they want, but at the expense of spiritual health (Numbers 11:18-20).

6. The lust of the flesh leads to intemperance (Numbers 11:32).

7. Murmuring against delegated authority is murmuring against the Lord (Numbers 12:2).

8. God hears and visits judgment on rebellious murmuring (Numbers 12:5, 9-10).

9. The murmuring of a few hinders the progress of the whole group (Numbers 12:15).

10. Dissatisfaction for the provisions of God results in a desire for the world (Numbers 11:5).

11. Complaining is actually a spurning of God's goodness (Numbers 11:20).

### **Answers to Questions**

1. How does God view complaining?

The text simply states that God was displeased. His anger was kindled, and He brought judgment upon the complainers. We may deduce from this that God views complaining as a very serious matter—a breach of faith. It constitutes a denial of His goodness and a failure to trust His providential care.

2. What does complaining reveal about a person's heart?

Complaining reveals an unthankful heart. In himself man is undeserving and helpless. Consequently, he is dependent upon God's mercy and grace. God is always faithful. To blame God for difficult circumstances and experiences reveals a heart that is unwilling to accept the responsibility for failure.

3. What factors contributed to Israel's wholesale involvement in complaining?

The leading factor evidently was the "mixed multitude." A murmuring spirit is contagious! Another basic factor was man's carnal nature; they "fell a lusting." Their weeping was an indulgence in self-pity; they felt deprived.

4. What effects can murmuring have upon the leaders of God's people?

In this case, Moses became very disheartened. The text states that Moses was displeased. His work seemed too heavy to continue by himself. God graciously gave him help. When church members are dissatisfied or discontent, it makes the work of administration much more difficult. It also can adversely affect sermon preparation. In Hebrews 13:17 we learn that disobedience can be a source of grief to those who are over us in the Lord.

5. Why is it dangerous to insist on having our own way?

This is dangerous because we do not always know what is best for us. The human heart is deceitful, and we must beware of its tactics. Sometimes we must learn the hard way, because we insist on having our own way (Psalm 106:15). We should be more ready to accept the direction of God and our fellow Christians.

6. What attitude prompted Miriam and Aaron's accusations?

Miriam and Aaron's attitude was judgmental and critical. Such an attitude caused them to find fault with Moses. They not only found fault with Moses concerning the woman he had married, but they also challenged his position as the sole spokesman for God. This took on a more serious dimension and gives reason to believe that they were jealous of Moses' position and authority.

7. Why is speaking against delegated authority so serious?

Speaking against delegated authority is actually speaking against the one who delegated the authority. In this case it constituted an affront to God, because Moses had received his authority from God. The same is true today in regard to governmental and church authority. We must beware lest we become guilty of speaking against God. God's judgment upon Miriam shows the seriousness of such uprising.

8. How should a person approach leaders with his concerns?

Such an approach must be made in love. This will eliminate a judgmental and critical spirit. Love in the heart enables one to approach leaders in meekness and humility. Ulterior motives must surely be put aside. The approach should also be preceded by prayer. Depending upon the nature of the concern, it may be wise to take someone else along (1 Timothy 5:19).

### **Summarizing the Lesson**

"He had commanded the clouds from above, and opened the doors of heaven, and had rained down manna upon them to eat, and had given them of the corn of heaven. Man did eat angels' food: he sent them meat to the full.... He rained flesh also upon them as dust, and feathered fowls like as the sand of the sea: and he let it fall in the midst of their camp, round about their habitations. So they did eat, and were well filled: for he gave them their own desire; they were not estranged from their lust. But while their meat was yet in their mouths, the wrath of God came upon them, and slew the fattest of them, and smote down the chosen men of Israel."  
(Psalm 78:23-25, 27-31).

### **Research Guide**

1. Read the passages listed under "Murmuring" in Nave's Topical Bible.
2. Read 1 Corinthians 10:1-14. "These things ... are written for our admonition."