



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for August 2, 2009  
Released on Wednesday, July 28, 2009**

**"Complaints and Cravings"**

**Lesson Text: Numbers 11:1-6, 10-15.**

**Background Scripture: Numbers 11.**

**Devotional Reading: Psalm 142.**

**Numbers 11:1-6, 10-15**

1 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 mixed 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 garlic:

**6 But now our soul is dried away: there is nothing at all, besides this manna, before our eyes.**

.....

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.

**11 And Moses said unto the Lord, Wherefore hast thou afflicted thy servant? and wherefore have I not found favor in thy sight, that thou layest the burden of all this people upon me?**

12 Have I conceived all this people? have I begotten them, that thou shouldest say unto me, Carry them in thy bosom, as a nursing father beareth the sucking child, unto the land which thou swarest unto their fathers?

**13 Whence should I have flesh to give unto all this people? for they weep unto me, saying, Give us flesh, that we may eat**

14 I am not able to bear all this people alone, because it is too heavy for me.

**15 And if thou deal thus with me, kill me, I pray thee, out of hand, if I have found favor in thy sight; and let me not see my wretchedness.**

**Lesson Aims**

**After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:**

- 1.** Tell why the Israelites complained and why Moses complained to the Lord about them.
- 2.** Give a modern example of people who complain as they are greatly blessed.

**3.** Make a list of recent complaints and commit to seeing God's blessing in each situation that has produced a complaint. Learn and express the virtue of thankfulness and gratitude.

### **Introduction**

Does your church have a complaint department? Unfortunately, most churches do have such a department, which is staffed by one person: the preacher. The preacher hears it all. The music is too loud. The church is cold; the church is hot. The sermon was too long. There is a misspelled word in the bulletin. There's no toilet paper in the men's restroom. Someone left a light on downstairs. The new carpet is a dreadful color. And on and on and on.

People sure seem to find plenty to complain about! Traffic, coworkers, weather—you name it, and there is someone ready to grumble. This complaining occurs in the most technologically advanced, prosperous, and safest society that has ever existed in the history of the world!

Complaining has a long and extensive history. The Bible itself is full of complainers and grippers. One of the more startling examples, though, is found in the history of Israel during God's transplanting of the nation from Egyptian bondage to the promised land. The Israelites were promised a place that flowed with milk and honey. But when we read the book of Numbers, we are tempted to conclude that the Israelites spent most of the time griping and grumbling on the way there. This lesson will look at one such incident. By examining it, we will better understand God's perspective on our complaining.

### **Lesson Background**

The book of Numbers takes up the story of Israel a little more than a year after the departure from Egypt (Numbers 1:1), or about 1445 BC. The nation was still encamped in the "wilderness of Sinai," meaning the area around Mount Sinai where Moses received the tablets of stone from the Lord (Exodus 24:12; 31:18).

The book of Numbers derives its name from the lengthy census data that occupies the first few chapters. Yet there is much more to the book than lists of numbers and names. It has a great deal of narrative, telling the story of the various adventures of Israel while in the wilderness period. Moses was clearly the leader of the nation, although his leadership was challenged from time to time (as in today's lesson). Within a few weeks of the beginning of the book of Numbers, the Israelites left the area around Sinai and relocated to the "wilderness of Paran" (Numbers 10:11, 12). Eventually, they seemed to settle in the "desert of Zin" at a place named Kadesh (Numbers 20:1, compare Deuteronomy 1:46). This exact location is unknown today, but it would have been somewhere in the southern extremity of modern Israel, perhaps in the vicinity of the town of Beersheba.

Israel at this time was a very large group of people, with traditional estimates placing their number at more than two million. To camp in such an isolated place created enormous logistical problems in meeting daily needs for food and water. The food needs were met through a miraculous provision of God called manna. This was a bread-like substance that appeared in the camp in sufficient quantities to feed everyone.

Manna was white and had a honey-like flavor (Exodus 16:31). It was processed in various ways and seemed to have had oil within it (see Number 11:8). This was Israel's primary diet for the 40 years in the wilderness before entry into the promised land (Exodus 16:35). God also made miraculous provision at various times for the people to have water while in the wilderness (example: Exodus 17:1-7).

We can imagine that this was a terribly frustrating period for many Israelites. True, they had been rescued from being a nation of slaves and had witnessed mighty

acts of God in their deliverance. But few people play the waiting game very well. The Israelites found themselves parked in the middle of nowhere (literally) without a clear understanding of their future. Their focus quickly shifted away from God and His mighty works to their own plight. This is the backdrop for today's lesson, where the focus of grumbling was the marvelous manna itself.

### **Complainers (Numbers 11:1-3)**

#### **1. What is the book of Numbers about?**

The book of Numbers contains the numbering of the people after their departure from Egypt. The main account of this book is the wilderness wanderings of Israel, which covered forty years. Though this book's primary focus is on Israel's experience in the wilderness, we must not forget to notice the guiding, delivering, sustaining, and protecting hand of God among His people. In this lesson, we will notice that disobedience is punished, but repentance results in God's pardon.

#### **2. Why was the Lord displeased with the people of Israel? (Numbers 11:1)**

God is in the process of delivering the people from Egypt to their promised land. We must remember that Israel had an opportunity to enter the land, but their lack of faith caused the entire nation to wander in the wilderness for 40 years (cf. Num. 14:33). Thus, Israel is in the wilderness. God provided Israel with everything they needed. He has shown Himself as the One and Only True God multiple times in Egypt. However, Israel begins to complain.

The exact nature of this particular complaint is not stated. But it probably is directly critical of God, for it causes His *anger* to be *kindled*. God's anger is manifested as a supernatural *fire* on the fringes of the *camp*; the fire is of such a nature as to kill some of the Israelites. It is among these "fringe dwellers" that the criticism is probably the deepest, so that is where God directs His anger. The primary purpose of God's actions, however, is not to dispense justice. Rather, the main intent is to get the attention of the people concerning a serious problem that needs to be corrected.

#### **3. When the people cried out to Moses, what did he do? (vs. 2,3)**

The spirit of complaining is transformed into a desperate cry for help. The people do not cry to God, however, but to *Moses*. Moses has to intercede for them with God. His prayer is effective, and the *fire* threat passes.

As happens at other times, this *place* is given a symbolic name: *Taberah*, which means "burning place." This and other places are remembered as the sites of Israel's disobedience and rebellion, where the nation provoked the wrath of the Lord (see Deuteronomy 9:22). Many centuries later, the apostle Paul will use some of these incidents as warnings to the Corinthians to stop their grumbling (see 1 Corinthians 10:10, 11).

#### **4. Under what circumstances, if any, is it proper to complain to God?**

Attitude is everything! Humble, heartfelt expressions of need are fine; "give us this day our daily bread" is an example. That doesn't really fit the idea of complaining. But expressions of need that come across as bellyaching are out of line.

Taking time daily to say *thank you* to God from the heart is the best way to refocus. We will find ourselves greatly blessed as we develop grateful hearts. The apostle Paul found himself under severe conditions time after time, yet he considered himself blessed. Since very few of us will ever face the stress and deprivations that he did, should we be any less grateful than he was?

## **Grumblers (Numbers 11:4-6)**

### **5. Who were the "mixit multitude"? (v. 4)**

The "mixit multitude" were those people who were with the Israelites in the wilderness. They are not full-blooded Hebrews. They were the people who decided to follow the Israelites out of Egypt (Num. 10:29-33).

This group was the source of murmuring that spread throughout the camp. While it was true that they instigated several dissatisfaction among the Israelites, the rest of the people bore responsibility for joining with the troublemakers.

As dramatic and traumatic as the Taberah incident must be, it is quickly followed by another complaint. It is easy for us to condemn Israel for folly in this matter. Yet we should not think ourselves above falling into similar patterns of ingratitude. The new round of grumbling is a *lusting*, but this has nothing to do with sexual desire. It is the lust for favorite foods. In particular, the people of *Israel* want a diet that includes meat. They are apparently unwilling to eat any of the livestock that remains from when they left Egypt (Exodus 17:3). Thus their only source of nourishment is the daily provision of manna.

These cravings for a steak or lamb chop are so strong that the people "wept again." Their behavior has passed the boundaries of rationality and moved to childishness.

### **6. What did the people miss that they had in Egypt? (vs. 5,6)**

The list of cherished foods includes many items that apparently had been common to them, even as slaves, in Egypt. Assuming that they are not viewing the past through rose-colored glasses in this regard, they remember having had plenty of *fish*, for the Nile produced fish in abundance. They also had grown juicy vegetables and fruits in their gardens. Some of the produce of Egypt could be cooked into stews to provide savory flavors.

It is doubtful that the people of Israel loved these foods so dearly while in Egypt. They are like American travelers of today who may spend an extended time in an isolated country, and then long for a cheeseburger. It is not that the cheeseburger is such fine food; it is just familiar.

Tastes in food may change, but there is no excuse for being ungrateful for God's provision. For people to become distressed to the point that their souls are "dried away" over a repetitive diet is not acceptable.

The underlying problem here is a spiritual problem. The people of Israel are deeply dissatisfied with the way God is treating them, and they use their lack of diet options to express discontent and, ultimately, lack of faith.

### **7. What lesson can Christians draw from the way the people tired of the manna?**

As Christians we must always remember to "count our blessings." We must remember the times God has blessed us. Though we may not always have what we want, God will always provide Christians with what they need. No one has the right to complain to God for any reason. Gratitude is a lesson everyone must learn.

A common human foible is that we are rarely satisfied with what we have. A sign of certain spiritual maturity is a heart that can honestly say as Paul did, "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content" (Philippians. 4:11).

## **Moses Grumbles and Complains (Numbers 11:10-15)**

### **8. How did Moses respond to all of the complaining of the people? (vs. 10,11)**

Moses was not happy with leading a people who are nothing but complainers. He started to get frustrated.

Despite the recent incident at Taberah, *the people* of Israel persist in their petty complaining. The complaint is universal, being expressed by *every man*. They are tired of manna!

Yet, again, we must remember that at its core this is not a problem with diet. It is a spiritual problem, a lack of faith in Moses' leadership and therefore in God. The Lord has a plan to create a people for himself. He will allow the Israelites to populate the land He had promised to Abraham, but the plan seems to be going awry because of the people's attitude and behavior. This causes God's wrath to be *kindled* anew.

Moses takes his complaint directly to God, asking why *the Lord* has saddled him with a nation of grumblers.

### **9. How can complaining by church members affect church leaders? What corrective action is appropriate?**

Relentless complaining can discourage church leaders, as it did Moses. Hebrews 13:17 offers at least a partial solution: "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you." That word *unprofitable* should warn chronic complainers that causing grief in church leaders may make things worse, not better.

### **10. How discouraged was Moses over the situation? What did He ask God to do? (vs. 12,13)**

Moses' litany of complaints grows deeper as he lays bare all of his frustrations before the Lord. That's the attitude behind the questions *Have I conceived all this people? have I begotten them?* All this is as if to ask, "Am I their father?"

The answer to this question obviously is *no*, he is not their father. The only one who fits the role of father is God himself. Moses is tired of babysitting these whiners. So he too gives in to the spirit of complaining.

Moses then confronts God on the practical level. He knows the people are clamoring for *flesh* (meat) in their diet, but he has no solution (v. 13). He cannot seem to quell their grumbling, and he has no resources to meet their requests.

While we may criticize Moses' attitude at this point, we should appreciate that his impulse to turn to God is a step in the right direction. In church leadership roles, it is tempting to turn first to our own skills; it is easy to think that we have all the answers, that we should be able to fix all conflicts in short order. Or we simply turn a deaf ear to complaints and hope they will go away.

Moses does neither of those. Instead, he takes the concerns seriously, turning to God for help. As with Paul, Moses understands his personal limitations, knowing that solutions can come only from God (compare 2 Corinthians 12:10).

### **11. To what point did Moses break down? (vs. 14,15)**

Leadership can be thankless, isolating, and lonely. When it gets to this point, any leader will say *it is too heavy for me*. And that leader will be correct. No one is able to survive the pressures of leadership without help. In this case, the pressure has crushed Moses to the point that he longs for death. Again, he reminds us of Paul, who admits that in his circumstances he "despaired even of life" (2 Corinthians 1:8); Paul ultimately learns that "we should not trust in ourselves, but in God" (1:9).

Christian leaders often face a similar dilemma. When the people under them are not following the will of God, they will get frustrated. This causes pastors to step down and other church leaders to call it quits. The Bible never guarantees that the

people will always respond positively to any leader. It is every leader's responsibility to lean on God's strength so that they can adequately nurture His people.

If we read beyond today's lesson text, we learn that the Lord directs Moses to create a leadership council of 70 elders to help him deal with the people (Numbers 11:16). God's intention is that this group of men will "bear the burden of the people with thee, that thou bear it not thyself alone" (11:17). It is never God's intention to abandon those who are leading His people.

What about the grumblers? God takes care of them too. The rest of this chapter reveals that God causes a miraculous deluge of quail to fall on the camp so that the tasty birds are three feet deep (Numbers 11:31). Israel's enjoyment of the meat is short-lived, though. Very soon—while the meat is "yet between their teeth"—God brings a "very great plague" on the people and many die (11:33, 34).

## **Conclusion**

### **Complaining**

Don't we have a right to complain? Don't we have an obligation to complain? We all know people who have refined their complaining skills to a very high level. Such individuals seem to enjoy complaining simply for the sake of complaining. There are limits to this, though, as the people of Israel found out while in the wilderness.

God does not reward ungrateful complaining. Yet we should never hesitate to express our discouragements and hurts to the Lord, for He truly cares (1 Peter 5:7). It is difficult, however, to have much joy in our lives if we focus on our complaints. There is no more effective joy stealer than griping and grumbling. On the other hand, if we pause to reflect, then we will better appreciate the many ways God has blessed us and is blessing us.

### **Counting Blessings**

The hymn writer Johnson Oatman, Jr. (1859–1922) advised Christians to "count your blessings, name them one by one." Oatman knew that we would find blessings "wealth can never buy."

Our materialistic world tends to equate blessings with wealth. We think we are blessed if we have abundant possessions. Yet this is not what the Bible teaches. Jesus teaches that material possessions are fleeting and perishable (Matthew 6:19–21). Jesus knows that we can become enslaved by possessions (6:24). The desire for money can become insatiable.

If we go through the exercise of counting our blessings, we may list some very mundane things. We have clothes to wear. We have homes to live in. We have food to eat. But our most precious blessings are nonmaterial. In God's economy, we are truly wealthy if we are rich in relationships. We should never take for granted the blessing of family and friends. We should never minimize the power of loving others and being loved by them.

Even more important are the mighty spiritual blessings we have been given by the grace of God. He has bought our salvation through the blood of His Son, Jesus. God has given His Holy Spirit to comfort us in times of distress. He has given us His Word to guide us and help us understand His will for us. He loves us deeply. These are blessings that wealth cannot buy. When we tire, we are tempted to go into complaint mode. But we are better served and more acceptable to God if we resist this temptation and thank God for the many blessings He has showered into our lives.

### **Prayer**

God, from whom all blessings flow, we are too often guilty of letting life's disappointments steal our joy. We become grumblers, never satisfied. May we be

content with Your care. May You remove the spirit of grumbling from us. Keep us from falling into the sin of the Israelites in the wilderness, who were not satisfied with Your miraculous manna. We pray this in the name of the true living bread from Heaven, Jesus. Amen.

### **Thought to Remember**

Focus on your blessings, not your lack.

### **Anticipating Next Week's Lesson**

It appeared that having a slave mentality was hard to dislodge from the Israelites' thinking. An amazing proposition was made by them in the wilderness to pick a leader to lead them back to Egypt. Even advice from Joshua and Caleb was rejected.

Study Numbers 14:1-12 "**Dissatisfaction and Rebellion.**"

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