

# In the Wilderness | The Gospel in the Book of Numbers

## “Grumbling” (Part One)

Numbers 11.1-6, 11-20

10.16.16

*Now the people became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the LORD; and when the LORD heard it, His anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp. <sup>2</sup> The people therefore cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the LORD and the fire died out. <sup>3</sup> So the name of that place was called Taberah, because the fire of the LORD burned among them. <sup>4</sup> The rabble who were among them had greedy desires; and also the sons of Israel wept again and said, "Who will give us meat to eat? <sup>5</sup> "We remember the fish which we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic, <sup>6</sup> but now our appetite is gone. There is nothing at all to look at except this manna.*

<sup>11</sup> So Moses said to the LORD, "Why have You been so hard on Your servant? And why have I not found favor in Your sight, that You have laid the burden of all this people on me? <sup>12</sup> "Was it I who conceived all this people? Was it I who brought them forth, that You should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries a nursing infant, to the land which You swore to their fathers'? <sup>13</sup> "Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me, saying, 'Give us meat that we may eat!' <sup>14</sup> "I alone am not able to carry all this people, because it is too burdensome for me. <sup>15</sup> "So if You are going to deal thus with me, please kill me at once, if I have found favor in Your sight, and do not let me see my wretchedness." <sup>16</sup> The LORD therefore said to Moses, "Gather for Me seventy men from the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and their officers and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. <sup>17</sup> "Then I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit who is upon you, and will put Him upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you will not bear it all alone. <sup>18</sup> "Say to the people, 'Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wept in the ears of the LORD, saying, "Oh that someone would give us meat to eat! For we were well-off in Egypt." Therefore the LORD will give you meat and you shall eat. <sup>19</sup> 'You shall eat, not one day, nor two days, nor five days, nor ten days, nor twenty days, <sup>20</sup> but a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you; because you have rejected the LORD who is among you and have wept before Him, saying, "Why did we ever leave Egypt?"'"

Last week we started a new sermon series, looking at the fourth book of the Bible. The Book of Numbers is what English speakers call it. In Hebrew it's "Ba-Midmar" – literally "In the Wilderness."

It tells the story of the Israelites...having come out of Egypt and after being at Sinai... where they met the God of Abraham...and entered into covenant with Him, with YHWH...and are, as it were married to Him.

And NOW they are moving to the Land journeying as pilgrims “ba-midbar” (In the Wilderness).

Today, we meet them JUST THREE DAYS INTO THE JOURNEY (repeat!). And while they had a good start, (see esp. Moses’ words: 10.35ff) it lasted only three days... and THEN a few bumps in the road, whatever they were (we’re not told...some difficulties...you know how road-trips go... always something) and the people (People of the Covenant)... they begin to complain... and I say, “begin” because this is only “part ONE” and there will be more.

And God takes it really seriously...leading us to conclude that grumbling is a more serious kind of offence than we normally think it is (unless someone complains about ME... then I SEE IT QUITE CLEARLY...how horrible...and destructive and wrong it is!)... So what IS it? Is all run-of-the-mill complaining THAT bad? Why are we so prone to it? Why is it so serious that God responds so severely? What’s the root of it and IS there any way to get free from it... is there a better way?

Let’s consider: 1) Outward Symptoms and Apparent Sources of Grumbling 2) A Deeper Analysis of Grumbling (the root) 3) Applying God’s solution to YOUR GRUMBLING PROBLEM

If you just kind of collect the symptoms, you’ll see a number of very common mechanisms used by compulsive grumblers (we’ve heard of compulsive gamblers... more of us are compulsive grumblers – call 1 888-ADMIT IT!)

For instance, comparison is a device we often use. The people compare what they have with what they had, “we used to have fish...all we could eat...and cucumbers...and garlic!”

They conveniently leave out that they were SLAVES! And we too find it soooooo hard to stop comparing what I have with what SHE HAS... or what I don’t have or used to have... or what everyone else has ...or what lesser people have. Comparison is a killer (fast-track to discontent).

Or control. Even Moses falls into this. He’ll soon be called the humblest man on earth (12.3)... but here he’s got some control issues and complains that HE IS HAVING TO BEAR THE WEIGHT OF ALL GOD’S PEOPLE... Notice the series of five questions (vv.11) “Lord, I’m not getting any help here – it all depends on ME and it’s too much! Are they MY children?”

And CALLING... they’ve forgotten the purpose of life. It’s not to have a comfortable, easy/safe life with watermelon and free foods and variety.

They’re called to save the world...to know God... and to represent God to all the nations. “I will make you a great nation and IN YOU WILL ALL THE NATIONS BE BLESSED.” (Gen 12.1-3)

But they've forgotten that calling and now they're wondering (last line): "Why did we ever leave Egypt?"

If you forget the purpose of life... if you let the car commercials and the beer commercials and the modern depictions of the American Dream become YOUR only purpose... of course you'll be reduced to grumbling. None of those are a worthy purpose or calling.

And if you let desires become CRAVINGS... i.e. good things become ULTIMATE things... if there's stuff you gotta have... whether it's "Me Time" ...or sex, money and power...stuff.

A number of writers I like have isolated some of the recurring things we gotta have:

Power: craving influence or recognition

Control: craving that everything go according to my plan Comfort: a craving for pleasure

Approval: a craving to be accepted/desired

If these things become MUST-HAVES... then you are set up for "compulsive grumbling" because these things will always let you down AND they ALL require YOU TO SERVE AND SUPPORT THEM.

I mentioned last week that at the center of this Book of Numbers is a series of seven very carefully organized rebellions and today we read (at least part) of rebellion one and two.

These rebellions start off sort of innocuously with very simple and non-descript complaining about evil...or hardships...or "adversity" (NASB v.1).

A reminder: whatever this adversity was...it was only three days into the journey. And these generic complaints are met with fire at the fringes of the camp. This will be mirrored in chapter 21 by ADDITIONAL general complaining and the fiery serpents (I mentioned last week).

Then there are complaints about food... also mirrored by complaints about water later on in chapter 20.

Toward the middle of these well-organized mutiny/revolt stories is two stories about leadership...and people grumbling about Moses who is NOT the leader they wanted him to be.

And then the MIDDLE REBELLION is the core of the whole book, the hinge/axis and that is the refusal to enter the Promised Land.

The point is: the writer is drawing our attention to the real issue... It's in all the seven rebellions but it's seen most clearly in the core... it's the element of unbelief. It's a refusal to take the Lord of the Covenant at His word. It's a hesitancy to TRUST HIM who had promised to carry them to the end...and it's a tacit/implied accusation that the God of Abraham is NOT trustworthy.

And the writer's design in presenting their complaints in this way is to make us notice the rotten root. He's showing us that hidden in so much of our grumbling is a deadly germ called unbelief. See it unvarnished/raw in the central rebellion.

It's a kind of analysis of their spiritual lives... It is Israel on the Therapist's couch...and the Wonderful Counselor is uncovering the thoughts and intentions of their hearts to diagnose the lethal contagion of their unbelief.

And THIS is how the rest of the Bible understands these episodes "ba-midbar", in the wilderness. That at the root of so many of our complaints is a refusal to trust God.

The Book of Numbers is quoted extensively in the rest of the Bible. Their grumbling is analyzed in a NUMBER of places. Psalm 78 retells their story "in the wilderness" (quote): "And a fire was kindled against Jacob, anger also mounted against Israel, because they did not believe in God and did not trust in His salvation." (21-22)

And again a few verses later (quote): "In spite of all this they still sinned and did not believe in His wonderful works. (Psa 78.32)

And much later... like 1500 years later, St Paul would also analyze these "unbelieving believers" in the wilderness and he writes to the Church at Corinth these words (1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 10.10-14):

"Let us not grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed... these things happened to them as an example... written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall."

And then the bottom-line diagnosis of the whole study: "Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry."

See...these writers...follow the structure of Numbers and how it's all recorded. They analyze the condition, our perennial fall into grumbling and they determine: "Grumbling is a faith issue...it's about NOT trusting God and His promises and INSTEAD trusting something else and that's the essence of idolatry."

And when you analyze it at this level... when you get past a surface kind of diagnosis; when you courageously peel back the layers and get to the core of complaining and grumbling, you can NO LONGER BE satisfied to "just say no".

It's MORE than just a behavior or a way of speaking... it's deeper...it's spiritual.

And God's solution is to give us something to stimulate our faith... it's a vision (Gal 3.1) of a

Mediator better than Moses.

Moses asks, "Why have You been so hard on Your servant? ... that You have laid the burden of all this people on me? Was it I who conceived all this people? Was it I who brought them forth, that You should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries a nursing infant, to the land which You swore to their fathers '?"

But the better Mediator says (Heb 2.12): "I will proclaim Thy name to My brethren, in the midst of the congregation I will sing Thy praise... Behold, I and the children whom God has given Me."

Moses asks, "Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me, saying, 'Give us meat that we may eat!'"

But when the disciples approached the better Mediator, Jesus Christ, and asked Him (like Moses asked God), "Lord, where will get food to feed the crowds?" THEN Jesus Christ multiplies the food and gives them bread and fish (in the wilderness).

Moses says, "I alone am not able to carry all this people, because it is too heavy for me." The Better Mediator, Jesus Christ, says, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light." (Mat 11.28-30)

Are you a compulsive grumbler (call 1-888- ADMIT IT)... when you catch yourself at it...or maybe your co-worker will help you see it...or your kids...or your husband...roommate ...wife... AND WHEN YOU'RE caught...see that it's NOT just a matter of looking on the bright-side...in fact, it's not really a behavior to be changed but a TRUST to be TRANSFERRED...

You're believing something... that your purpose is to be approved by people or to be safe and cozy...or to be in control. And those poison words that come out of your mouth originate in your heart...your unbelieving heart.

To get God's liberating solution, you really do have to ADMIT IT... to accept the analysis from "in the wilderness"... and then to receive from Him this vision of His wild, untamed commitment to YOU.

Oh, T.J., that's just it... I wish I could know that God is committed to me...that He even notices me... I'm in the wilderness, alright...but I'm not sure He even sees me.

But He does...and He gives you proof...a vision that transpired in real time and space... on a trash heap outside of Jerusalem in the days of Pontius Pilate... Jesus Christ, a Mediator better than Moses gave Himself... for people in the wilderness... people struggling with discouragement and failure, people prone to wander and complain... people broken on the wheels of living ... God

GIVES US SOMETHING WE CAN NEVER FORGET...something that makes our wounds redemptive in the lives of other people.

Moses needed to relinquish control to others... (the 70 elders) that might be part of the solution for you too... but always the real issue is TRUST... Jesus Christ was crucified...and He complained, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (He had His own question like Moses!)

And because He was forsaken... I will never be. I can trust the God of Abraham when I am in the wilderness because He swears to never leave me... the better Mediator was forsaken so I will always be received... And now whatever I want to complain about...I know that God will use this moment of pain/adversity to work out His good purposes in my life.

This moment of disequilibrium (a nail in my car tire...an unexpected night-shift... a betrayal from a friend...a chronic illness...a moral failing... a memory that is failing) the Man forsaken in MY PLACE... the vision of the Better Mediator speaks to me and says, "Only believe." (Mark 5.36)