
Complaining from Discontentment

Numbers 11:1-30

There are many sins for which we have created acceptable masks to hide them under. We create a descriptive vocabulary full of verbs and adjectives that do not accurately depict what is actually going on. Complaining is one of these.

What is complaining? At its simplest it is expressing or is an expression of dissatisfaction or annoyance about something or someone. Grumbling? It is an action or fact of complaining in a bad-tempered way. So grumbling is complaining in an amplified way.

But there is another way the word may be used. We use it in a more formal way. We register a complaint at the police or the solicitor. We may register a complaint at a store. These are thought of as acceptable processes. What makes it right or wrong is the validity of the content of the complaint.

Which is it for you? When are you registering a complaint (maybe, in prayer) or when are you just complaining and grumbling? One of the ironies of this issue is that most people are blind to it in themselves, but it is painfully obvious to others.

Let me remind you that no single sermon in this series is meant to stand alone. However, do not dismiss the impact of each text while waiting for the sermon that will excuse you.

No study of complaining would be competent without examining Numbers 11. The aim of this text is to show the direct effect of sinful beliefs and wants as it emerges in complaining about the difficulties of life. What happens in this chapter is important for our understanding of the roots, responses, results, and remedies of complaining.

Complaining about Uncertainty and Difficulties (v.1-3)

This short cameo provides the structure to think through Israel' as complaining and grumbling before the Lord.

11 And the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes, and when the LORD heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. ²Then the people cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the LORD, and the fire died down. ³So the name of that place was called Taberah, because the fire of the LORD burned among them.

Situation – what is their life like?

They have much adversity and difficulty of the wilderness. We must not lessen the difficulty. Living in tents with 1 million plus people on the move cannot have been easy. Think of your last camping trip. I don't mean, in an RV. I mean, backpacking, tents, kids, in a harsh environment. Now, do that for 40 years.

Response – what do they do and feel?

The complain about their misfortunes. But note, they were complaining to each other. But the Lord was listening. Always remember, your complaining is always in the hearing of the Lord.

Heart Issues – what is in their hearts?

They don't believe God's promises. It was failure to believe God in an obeying way that put them on this long, long journey.

They don't want the hardships. They do not submit with joy to difficulties. We are not talking about imagined difficulties. We are talking about real stuff. But their own disobedience has put them there under God's chastening. God has led them in the wilderness. This is His providence. But they do not seem to care. They don't like it and they have a lot to say about it to one another.

Consequences – what is the result?

The Lord responded with anger. He poured out the judgment of fire around the outskirts of the camp. This was symbolic. The Tabernacle where God dwelt was at the center of the camp. On the outskirts were those who carried the banner flags for each tribe. But the judgment beginning on those at the outskirts represents those who were far from God in their hearts.

With the people Israel, God often chastens and punishes. Chastening is generally the word associated with God disciplining His true people. Punishment is what God does to the unbelievers who might be mixed in with God's true people. The same action by God may be both punishment for the sinner and chastening for the saint.

Provisions – how does God provide?

The people who turn to Moses and seek his help. We don't know who this was but it makes sense that it was the core complainers in the outlying areas of the camp where the fire was burning.

God provided Moses who believes God's promises and intercedes. He does what he has done many, many times.

God provides a mediator who stands between God's wrath and the sinner. What a picture of our great Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Complaining about Boredom and Sameness (v.4-10, 18-23, 30-35)

Moses highlights how the heart is driving their complaining About their food. They are complaining about what God had supernaturally provided for them (v.4).

⁴ Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, "Oh that we had meat to eat!

⁵ We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. ⁶ But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."

⁷ Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its appearance like that of bdellium. ⁸ The people went about and gathered it and ground it in handmills or beat it in mortars and boiled it in pots and made cakes of it. And the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. ⁹ When the dew fell upon the camp in the night, the manna fell with it.

¹⁰ Moses heard the people weeping throughout their clans, everyone at the door of his tent. And the anger of the LORD blazed hotly, and Moses was displeased.

...

¹⁸ And say to the people, 'Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat, for you have wept in the hearing of the LORD, saying, "Who will give us meat to eat? For it was better for us in Egypt." Therefore the LORD will give you meat, and you shall eat. ¹⁹ You shall not eat just one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, ²⁰ but a whole month, until it comes out at 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 come out of Egypt?" ' " ²¹ But Moses said, "The people among whom I am number six hundred thousand on foot, and you have said, 'I will give them meat, that they may eat a whole month!' ²² Shall flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, and be enough for them? Or shall all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, and be enough for them?" ²³ And the LORD said to Moses, "Is the LORD's hand shortened? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not."

³¹ Then a wind from the LORD sprang up, and it brought quail from the sea and let them fall beside the camp, about a day's journey on this side and a day's journey on the other side, around the camp, and about two cubits above the ground. ³² And the people rose all that day and all night and all the next day, and gathered the quail. Those who gathered least gathered ten homers. And they spread them out for themselves all around the camp. ³³ While the meat was yet between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD struck down the people with a very great plague. ³⁴ Therefore the

name of that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had the craving. ³⁵ From Kibroth-hattaavah the people journeyed to Hazereth, and they remained at Hazereth.

Situation – what is provoking their heart?

They are complaining about having the same old food over and over again. Unless they work hard at it, the manna is tasteless. This is their primary provision. They collect everyday but the Sabbath. They can only collect enough for what they need for the day. If they try to collect more, it spoils overnight.

How do we feel about things like this? How much variety in life must we have otherwise we are dissatisfied?

Response – what do they do and feel?

They weep and complain. They unfavorably contrast their present and past circumstances. They diminish the difficulties of the past and exaggerate the pleasures of Egypt and the pains of the present.

We have the same tendencies in each of these responses. Our circumstances are not nearly so hard, yet we are so discontent with a lot of our lives. It is very important for us to relate what is going on here to how we tend to do this as well.

Heart Issues – what are they saying to themselves?

They are not speaking truth to themselves: They have a deeply distorted view of Egypt's pleasures. They have a very selective memory of Egypt's hardships.

What a phrase is used here, "They craved a craving". They had a sinful craving for Egypt's varied and flavorful foods.

Consequences – what happened as a result?

Several consequences flowed from their complaining...

They provoked the displeasure of their spiritual leadership tempting him to sin.

They incurred the anger of the Lord against their sin.

They failed the test of the quail. The quail was not God's provision because of their complaint. It was a test of whether they were satisfied with manna. How do we know this? Those who ate were sickened by a plague.

Provisions – how did God deal with them?

The Lord teaches them contentment by the sickening satiation of their craving for meat.

The Lord chastens them to prune and to purify His people.

Much to think about, yes? But there is one more important aspect of complaining that is evident in this text.

Complains about Stress and Demands (v.10-30)

Israel's sin is contagious – Moses now complains about his own lot.

¹⁰ Moses heard the people weeping throughout their clans, everyone at the door of his tent. And the anger of the LORD blazed hotly, and Moses was displeased. ¹¹ Moses said to the LORD, "Why have you dealt ill with your servant? And why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? ¹² Did I conceive all this people? Did I give them birth, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a nursing child,' to the land that you swore to give their fathers? ¹³ Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me and say, 'Give us meat, that we may eat.' ¹⁴ I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me. ¹⁵ If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favor in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness."

¹⁶ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them, and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. ¹⁷ And I will come down and talk with you there. And I will take some of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you may not bear it yourself alone. ¹⁸ And say to the people, 'Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat, for you have wept in the hearing of the LORD, saying, "Who will give us meat to eat? For it was better for us in Egypt." Therefore the LORD will give you meat, and you shall eat. ¹⁹ You shall not eat just one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, ²⁰ but a whole month, until it comes out at 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 come out of Egypt?" ' "

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²⁴ So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD. And he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent. ²⁵ Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied. But they did not continue doing it.

²⁶ Now two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the Spirit rested on them. They were among those

registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷ And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." ²⁸ And Joshua the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth, said, "My lord Moses, stop them." ²⁹ But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" ³⁰ And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

Situation – what is the means of temptation?

Moses is responding to two intertwined difficult situations. He is having to deal with the complaining of the people he is supposed to be leading. He is also dealing with the righteous anger of the Lord which he sympathizes with.

Response – how does he experience this and express himself?

Experience (feel) – frustrated, angry, overwhelmed, can't win

Express (say, do) – complains to about God, the people and his responsibilities.

Heart Issues – how does he view his situation?

Moses questions God's wisdom and goodness in giving him the job. It is God who has put him in this position.

He sees himself as an overburdened parent with bad kids. This may be true but Moses seems to have reached an exasperation level with these people.

He believes that the burden and responsibility is too great. Is it? Yes. And here is the point. His complaint is accurate. But, it is misplaced.

Sadly, he agrees with the people's assessment of the problem. He bows to their complaint and asks God about getting meat.

Moses wants to escape so badly asks God to kill him (suicidal thoughts). Is this idle talk or is Moses serious? Is he trying to manipulate God? How much of our complaining is simply functionally trying to manipulate others?

What does Moses want? He craves an easy ministry and good people.

Consequences – how does God deal with him?

God speaks to Moses to instruct his heart and re-organize his thinking. This is always how God deals with His people. Through His Word, we renew our thinking and reorient our hearts.

God sanctions the leaders Moses should have been helped by all along. Moses' problem is of his own making. He has 70 elders who should have been helping him carry the burden. The solution to Moses' complaining is to make use of what (in this, a who) God had already provided.

Provisions – what has God provided for Moses?

God affirms the necessity of a plurality of leadership. Moses cannot and should not try to do this alone. The result is "burn-out" that gets exposed when the people are discontented and complain.

God enables the leaders by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The leadership m=Moses needed *was already in place*. But now, God publicly affirms them and enables them with the taking of some of the “spirit” from Moses and giving it to them.

God humbles Moses to recognize the equal work of the Spirit. So often our discontents are rooted in a kind of pride. We think we ought to have or deserve something different. Humility thinks about “deserve” in an entirely different way.

Reflect and Respond

Principle: God may in a single set of circumstances be testing different people in different ways.

The situation here exposes Israel’s dissatisfaction with God’s provision and Moses’ dissatisfaction with God’s people. The very same situation is being managed by the exquisite wisdom of God to expose very different heart issues. God is working like this in all our relational dynamics: home, school, work, and church.

You complain in the midst of hardship and difficulties. You tend to exaggerate your troubles and minimize your blessings. So, you grumble and complain. Your situation may be real. But your response is displeasing to God.

You grumble because of your discontent. You want something different than God is giving you. So, you complain to others. You may even complain to God. If you think or speak in any way that questions God, His wisdom, sovereignty, or goodness, then you will incur His chastening.

Sometimes you complain about people in your lives. We will think more about this next week when we consider Philippians 2. Think about over the last weeks or months... how often have you had a complaint about a person in your life?

We must be very careful with what appears to be God’s provision as a response to our complaining. It may well be that God is testing us to see whether we will be content.

Many of you are beginning to be concerned, and possibly even convicted, that your sharing concerns about your situation, people around you, your hardships may actually be complaining and grumbling. Good. It is time for some deep and careful reflection.