

Grumblin' the Whole Day Through

Numbers 11 – 12

Introduction

We are currently weaving our way through the Pentateuch – the first five books of the Old Testament. We are going to do it by following the life of Moses because his biography is interwoven through several passages, ending with the book of Deuteronomy. So please turn in your Bible to the book of Numbers. We will be studying chapters 11 and 12 today.

The Setting

Let us first take a look at the setting by backing up to Numbers, chapter 10. We left, in our last session, the Israelites at Mount Sinai. They have received the Ten Commandments; the Law of God. Chapter 10 begins at that point. Look at verses 11 through 13..

Now in the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth of the month, the cloud was lifted from over the tabernacle of the testimony; and the sons of Israel set out on their journeys from the wilderness of Sinai. Then the cloud settled down in the wilderness of Paran. So they moved out for the first time according to the commandment of the Lord through Moses.

Now it has been nearly a year since the Israelites exited from Egypt, so keep that in mind. They evidently, had completed the building of the tabernacle of the testimony in that time. Note that we are told they are moving out for the first time.

The People Begin to Complain – Disgruntlement!

Turn now, to the chapter that I want to focus our attention on; that is chapter 11 of Numbers. The Israelites have now begun to recognize all that is involved with following God – and it means a desert experience. They have gone through rigorous times in their own personal lives. God has been feeding them for nearly a year, with the manna from heaven. As we come to chapter 11, the Israelites begin to reveal characteristics that I can easily identify with. Look at verses 1 through 4.

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. The people therefore cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the Lord and the fire died out. So the name of that place was called Taberah, because the fire of the Lord burned among them. 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?”

Taking God for granted usually results from a short memory

Notice that last verse, verse 4, and make a note in the margin that taking God for granted results from a very short memory. That is the problem with these people at this point – they have forgotten nearly a year of provision.

Anytime you and I begin to grumble; anytime you and I begin to complain, it is a result of several things. The first that I would suggest to you is a very short memory. They forgot several things.

They forgot where they had come from

1. The first thing the Israelites forgot was where they had come from.

Let us read, in fact, verse 5 of Numbers, chapter 11, and then, I want to turn back to Exodus, chapter 1. Note the word “free” in verse 5.

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,

That sounds like a great pizza to me!

Now turn to Exodus, chapter 1. Look at verses 11 through 14. Notice how short their memories are. What they had in Egypt was not exactly “free”.

So they appointed taskmasters over them [the Israelites] to afflict them with hard labor.

And they built for Pharaoh storage cities, Pithom and Raamses. But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread out, so that they were in dread of the sons of Israel. The Egyptians compelled the sons of Israel to labor rigorously; and they made their lives bitter with hard labor in mortar and bricks and at all kinds of labor in the field, all their labors which they rigorously imposed on them.

Now, eight months later, they are saying, in Numbers, chapter 11, “We remember all that we had in Egypt and how we ate.”

The Israelites had forgotten where they had been; where they had come from.

They forgot what God was doing

2. The Israelites also forgot what God was currently doing.

Note verse 6 of Numbers, chapter 11.

but now our appetite is gone. There is nothing at all to look at except this manna.

Underline those words in your text, however it may be translated, “There is *nothing at all* to look at except this manna.”

“Well, would you explain to me what manna is?”

“Oh, you know, manna is a miracle from God. It comes down out of the sky and we’ve had it every day, faithfully, for about eight months. Big deal.”

In the midst of that daily miracle, the Israelites have the audacity to say, “God is doing this miraculous thing in our midst, but yet, we’ll sum it up, it’s nothing at all but this manna.”

Do you know why I can identify with that? Because I so often forget where I have come from and I overlook what God is doing right now. Are you that way?

I recently read a story by Ray Stedman, a great man of God. Ray was traveling in Oregon with his wife and young daughter, Susan. Susan had developed a temperature while in the hotel the night before, but it did not seem like anything serious. However, as they traveled in the wide open spaces, dotted here and there with farm houses, Susan began to go into convulsions. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she began to jerk violently. Ray and his wife knew Susan was in danger.

Ray pulled the car over and saw on the horizon, a farm house. He carried his daughter to the house, running and stumbling through the pasture, and banged on the door at six o’ clock in the morning. A lady came to the door, and he said, “My daughter needs help. Can you let me in?”

The lady, of course, hardly knew what to say. Ray rushed in and she directed him to the bathroom. He began to run water in the tub, and as he did, she dialed the doctor on the telephone. The doctor came out and everything turned out all right.

It was not until later that Ray Stedman learned that that was the only house in that little town with a bathtub and a telephone.

Now, if you were to come up to Ray Stedman and say, “Hey, Ray, I heard this story about you and your little daughter. Tell me about it.”

“Ah, it was nothing.”

“It was nothing?”

“Yeah. So God performed a miracle – big deal.”

That was the attitude of the Israelites. They are saying it, and while they are saying it, manna is falling from heaven.

If you had been there, you might ask, “What’s the problem?”

The problem is that it had been happening every day for nearly a year. And when something happens in our lives as a result of God consistently blessing us, what happens to us? We begin to take Him for granted.

The Leader Begins to Complain – Discouragement!

Now would you note what the Israelites are doing? Look at verse 10 of Numbers, chapter 11.

Now Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, each man at the doorway of his tent; and the anger of the Lord was kindled greatly . . .

Get this picture in your minds. There are tents everywhere with millions of people and at the opening of many of them, there is a grown man crying.

“Why are you crying?”

“Because I don’t like the food. I want meat and all I have is manna.”

So, Moses begins to complain. I think I would too.

Before we go on, note verse 8 and 9.

The people would go about and gather it and grind it between two millstones or beat it in the mortar, and boil it in the pot and make cakes with it; and its taste was as the taste of cakes baked with oil. When the dew fell on the camp at night, the manna would fall with it.

I think they made manna in every way possible – like we might with hamburger.

We are told in these verses that the manna fell daily. This was a miracle!

Moses' four questions reveal four complaints

As a result of the weeping, Moses comes to God. He will ask four questions that reveal four attitudes that you and I have in our lives when we grumble and complain.

A complaint about God's compassion

1. First, Moses complained about God's compassion.

Look at verse 11a.

So Moses said to the Lord, "Why have You been so hard on Your servant?" . . .

We could rephrase that question, "God, do You really care about me?" Difficult times come and that is so often the first question we ask God.

A complaint about God's love

2. Secondly, Moses complained about God's love.

Look at verse 11b for the second question. Notice that Moses begins with a presupposition.

. . . And why have I not found favor in Your sight, that You have laid the burden of all this people on me?

In other words, "God, if You really love me, why would this happen?"

Moses is reaching a wrong conclusion. He is saying, "If I have found favor in Your sight, why have You laid the burden of all this people on me?"

So, in other words, in this difficult situation, his second question is, "God, if You really love me, this would never have happened."

Does that sound familiar? You had better believe it.

A complaint about God's design

3. Thirdly, Moses complained about God's design.

Look at verse 12 for the third question

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?"

Moses is saying, "Are these my babies? They're acting like it, but are they mine?"

In other words, Moses is complaining about God's design. God designed it this way and He designed Moses to lead them. God designed this arena for Moses to be in and now, He is being questioned by Moses about His own sovereign design.

We do the same thing. We question His care and His love, and say, "God, if You were really smart; if You had really planned this out, I doubt this would have happened."

A complaint about God's provision

4. Fourthly, Moses complained about God's provision.

Look at verse 13.

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!"

In other words, "God, are You really able to provide for the need? Are You really in control?"

Moses' conclusion is found in the next couple of verses. Note this intelligent conclusion in verses 14 and 15.

I alone am not able to carry all this people, because it is too burdensome for me. 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.

Moses was not really reaching the conclusion of saying, "I'm going to end my life," but rather, "God, You don't love me; You don't care about me; You haven't planned my life very well; You're not going to provide very well for me, so why don't You take the next logical step and kill me and take me home?"

Now, I can understand why he is feeling that way and how he is feeling that way. I have felt the same way myself. Haven't you?

Moses is, in effect, saying, "God, I am living a failure. I might as well die a failure."

God's prescription for Moses' discouragement

So, what is God's prescription for Moses' discouragement?

God recommended that Moses get help

Does God say, "Moses, double up on your services to the tabernacle." Or, "Memorize the book of Genesis. You just wrote it; now go back and read it again." Or, "Shame on you. You need to bring two sacrifices a day and not just the one." Or, "Spend more time praying. Invite others to the tabernacle with you."?

No. Verses 16 and 17 of Numbers, chapter 11, tell us what God says.

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. 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."

Has it ever occurred to you that part of the reason you get discouraged is because you are bearing burdens all alone? All of the verses in the Bible and all of the prayers in the world and constant attendance to church will not help. God said, "Moses, you need help."

Can you imagine one man's job being replaced by seventy-one? I would say he needed a little help.

When you and I get discouraged, one of the best things we might do is to get on the telephone, call a friend, and just tell them. For awhile, set aside

praying and do not pull out the Bible and say, "Okay, Lord, speak to me." Instead, call someone and share the burden. That is what Moses needed to do.

God provided Moses with seventy Spirit-filled men

Now, God helped Moses in a second way as well. Moses did not just go out and select seventy guys and say, "Oh, that sounds good. I'd like to join you."

No. There were seventy Spirit-filled men. Look at verses 24 and 25.

So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord. Also, he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people, and stationed them around the tent. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him; and He took of the Spirit who was upon him [Moses] and placed Him [the Spirit] upon the seventy elders. And when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do it again.

Now, it is interesting that God is basically saying, "Moses, you need help. Moses, you need spiritual companions. You need someone to pray with. You need someone to encourage you. You need someone to talk to. You're doing this all by yourself."

Perhaps God brought Moses to the end of himself because if He had previously suggested, "Moses, how about seventy people to help you?" then Moses would probably have said, "I can handle this myself. I don't need help. Look, I've been leading them for almost a year."

Perhaps it was the complaining of the people that God used to bring Moses to the realization that, "Yes, I need spiritual companionship. I need help."

Two evidences that Moses' symptoms were "cured"

Did God's prescription help Moses? There are two evidences that let us know it did help "cure" Moses.

Moses responded with a spirit of confidence

1. The first evidence is that Moses responded to a very difficult situation with a spirit of confidence.

Look at verse 26 of Numbers, chapter 11.

But two men [of the seventy helpers] had remained in the camp; the name of one was Eldad and the name of the other Medad. And the Spirit rested upon them (now they were among those who had been registered, but had not gone out to the tent), and they prophesied in the camp.

Now, this is not in the program. The plan was that God's Spirit would come along and rest on these seventy men and then, they would be stationed about. However, two of these men stayed behind and were holding evangelistic meetings in the camp.

So, Moses' young assistant, by the name of Joshua, is about to learn a great lesson. Look at verse 28.

Then Joshua the son of Nun, the attendant of Moses from his youth, said, "Moses, my lord, restrain them."

In other words, "Moses, these men are over here. They're not part of your program."

Now what would a discouraged person do? "Who? Where? What? They're not fitting in?"

A discouraged person is incredibly insecure because he is insecure about his relationship with God, insecure about his relationship with other people, and, as a result, will grab, and grasp, and hold. Yet, amazingly, in verse 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 upon them!"

Boom! There goes Joshua – he just faints.

"Would that everybody could do this. Wouldn't it be wonderful if everyone could speak for God? I'm not intimidated. I'm not insecure."

This is a different Moses now. He is not about to end his life by crying in his soup, "Oh, God, take me home."

Now, Moses is saying, "We've got a job to do, so let's do it."

Moses revealed an attitude of humility

2. The second evidence that strikes me as even clearer, is that Moses responds to a very difficult situation with an attitude of humility.

The first evidence of his cure is that Moses responds with a spirit of confidence, not jealousy.

The second evidence is that he responds with an attitude of humility, not hostility.

Look at verses 1 through 12 of chapter 12. By the way, as you may remember, Miriam and Aaron are Moses' sister and brother. They apparently did not like the Cushite woman Moses had married.

Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married (for he had married a Cushite woman);

and they said, "Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?" And the Lord heard it.

The Lord always does hear. Continue to verse 3.

(Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth.)

Suddenly the Lord said to Moses and Aaron and Miriam, "You three come out to the tent of meeting." So the three of them came out.

Then the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the doorway of the tent, and He called Aaron and Miriam. When they had both come forward,

He said, "Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, shall make Myself known to him in a vision. I shall speak with him in a dream.

"Not so, with My servant Moses, he is faithful in all My household;

"with him I speak mouth to mouth, even openly, and not in dark sayings, and he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against My servant, against Moses?"

So the anger of the Lord burned against them and He departed.

But when the cloud had withdrawn from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous, as white as snow. As Aaron turned toward Miriam, behold, she was leprous.

Then Aaron said to Moses, "Oh, my lord, I beg you, do not account this sin to us, in which we have acted foolishly and in which we have sinned.

“Oh, do not let her be like one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes from his mother’s womb!”

Aaron’s attitude is a little different now. Continue to verse 13a.

Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, “O God, . . .”

“. . . let her have it.”

That is the “Davey International Version” because that is what I would have said. Or maybe I would have cloaked it a little bit differently; a little bit more religiously, “Oh, Lord, may she never forget Thy power. May she never again speak against Thy humble servant.”

I would have said something like that. Yet, Moses responds, in verse 13b,

. . . “O God, heal her, I pray!”

Do you know that it is impossible to pray for someone else when you are discouraged? That is one more evidence that he was not discouraged. You cannot pray for someone else when you are so wrapped up in what we see Moses wrapped up in, according to verse 15 of chapter 11,

. . . do not let me see my wretchedness.

This was not the problem. Moses’ wretchedness had nothing to do with his discouragement. The problem was that Moses had focused his eyes on the wrong person and taken them off of God.

Can a person who is bound by their own feelings of wretchedness and wickedness and feelings that they cannot get any lower, pray for someone else? No.

Can you imagine being discouraged and praying, “Lord, James requested prayer at church for his new job. It’s going to mean more money for him. He’s going to be able to stay home on the weekends. This isn’t fair, Lord.”

No way. It is the person who is not wrapped up in himself and who is secure in what God is doing in his life who can pray for someone else.

Moses prays for Miriam in verses 13 and 14.

Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, “O God, heal her, I pray!” But the Lord said to Moses, “If her father had but spit in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut up for seven days outside the camp, and afterward she may be received again.”

In other words, “Let Miriam think about what she has done.” Continue to verse 15.

So Miriam was shut up outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not move on until Miriam was received again.

Moses responded to this situation with humility, instead of hostility. What a tremendous example of humility this man is. What a tremendous challenge his response is to us.

I recently read these words by the great author, Andrew Murray. Listen carefully.

Humility is perfect quietness of heart. It is to expect nothing, to wonder at nothing that is done to me, to feel nothing done against me. It is to be at rest when nobody praises me, and when I am blamed or despised. It is to have a blessed home in the Lord where I can go in and shut the door and kneel to my Father in secret, and have His peace, as in a deep sea of calmness, when all around and all above is trouble.

The humble person is not one who thinks little of himself. The humble person simply does not think of himself at all.

Application

Let me tie it up our discussion today with two thoughts, by way of application.

Grumbling is often an expression of loneliness

1. First, grumbling is often an expression of loneliness.

Do not ignore loneliness – in your life or in the lives of others. If you are around someone who is complaining, and grumbling, and not happy, do you know what they are expressing? They need a companion; they need help; they need a shoulder.

The person who is secure in Jesus Christ, is the person who recognizes that Jesus Christ is in total control. Then, when difficulty comes, that person will be able to have a proper perspective.

So, when you are grumbling or complaining, or when you hear someone else doing so, do not ignore it – it is a plea for help.

One of the greatest reasons we meet on Sunday is not just because we have to. Preachers love to quote Hebrews, chapter 10, verse 25,

not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, . . .

However, what does the rest of that verse say?

. . . but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day near.

Do you know why we meet? Because we are going to shake a hand. We are going to smile. We are going to say, “How is it going?” And we are going to mean it.

Grumbling is brought on by a short memory

2. Second, as I mentioned earlier in our discussion, grumbling is brought on by a short memory.

Do not forget what God has done – in your life or in the lives of others.

I want to make an admission to you. There are times in my life when I am incredibly discouraged. We are so much alike, aren't we? We can have one of the most wonderful Sundays and things can be going great, and yet, afterwards, I can go into my office and sit behind my desk in a puddle of, “Woe is me.” However, I know myself well enough now, to know that this is usually brought on by a very, very short memory, and that I need to do something about it.

An exercise that I want to develop in my life, and would encourage you to develop in yours as well, is the exercise that I will call “mementos”. You need to get a journal and write on the front, “Journal of Spiritual Miracles,” or “Blessings”. Then, every time God does something for you, even though everyone else might think it is insignificant, write it in the journal. And when discouragement comes along, read your journal and recall the miracles, the blessings that God has done in your life.

I have never talked to a discouraged person yet, who is in the process of remembering what God has done. So, when I decide that I am going to stop grumbling, I get up from behind my desk and get my “blessings” journal and file. I stop everything else and read and pull out a number of things. I will pull out the first church membership candidate class sign up sheet. I will pull out the little napkin on which I wrote out, with another church member, the skeleton for our Sunday school classes. I will pull out a picture of about sixty-five or seventy church members on our first anniversary. I am standing in that picture holding my newborn terror, or daughter rather, along with my

two-and-a-half year old twin boys. I will look at those mementos and think, “Wow! God, You are involved, You are working.”

Use your imagination for a minute. Where do you think David put Goliath's sword? Do you think he left it out on the battlefield? I do not. I think he had it hanging over his fireplace. He would walk into that room and stand on his bearskin rug – made from the bear he had killed, as you may remember. And in that room as well, mounted on the wall, would be the head of the growling, snarling lion that he had killed with his bare hands. When discouraged, David would walk in that room perhaps, and view the panoramic display of God's work in his life, and he would leave a different David.

Are you discouraged? Do you need to take a trip – into your memory. Start writing down all that God has done for you. Soon, grumbling will be replaced by expressions of gratitude and songs of praise for what God is doing for you.