

God's People Grumble

Scripture Readings: Numbers 11:1-35 (Text) • John 6:47-51, 60-71

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Introduction

Grumbling is natural in this sinful world. Everyone grumbles. But grumbling is not considered a serious sin because it does not appear to cause harm to other people.

During the martial law years in the Philippines under President Marcos, people complained that the enforcement of the law was too strict. Now that there is more freedom, people grumble that there is no discipline. Children grumble that school is too hard, but when summer vacation arrives, they think being at home is too boring. When bananas and mangoes are plenty in season, we get tired of it, but we crave for them when they're out of season. Was your old job too boring, and your new job too hard?

Our sinful nature is always moaning and groaning, complaining and grumbling. Remember the British rock band Rolling Stones' "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" released when I was in high school? The title says it all: what more can this rock group crave for when they had fulfilled their dream of getting to the top of the entertainment world? But they grumble about their present riches, fame and glory because they could find "no satisfaction" in it.

No satisfaction: this is the theme of our lives. And it was the theme of Israelites in the wilderness as well. Within three days of starting their journey, they started grumbling against everything. In Chapters 11 and 12 of the Book of Numbers, we read about the Israelites grumbling about three things in their wilderness journeys: (1) grumbling about their misfortunes (vv 1-3); (2) grumbling about the food (v 4-35); and (3) grumbling against Moses' leadership (Chapter 12). We will consider the last of these next week.

Grumbling is contagious—it takes only one person to start a grumbling wildfire. And the real reason behind it lies within our doubting, unsatisfied hearts coveting what others have that God has not given us.

Because it is only symptomatic of our sinful condition, grumbling is not a sin that God winks at and forgets in a moment. God considers it as a very serious affront against his word, and the consequence is his consuming wrath.

Even Moses, the mediator between God and the people of Israel, grumbled against God. But even as he bemoaned his circumstance, he intervened on their behalf. And God was satisfied in spite of his "moaning and groaning" that the burden of this people was so great for him to carry that he pleaded to God to kill him so his exceedingly troubled situation would end.

Today, we will dwell on the theme, "**GOD'S PEOPLE GRUMBLE**"

1. **The Real Reason**
2. **The Consuming Consequence**
3. **The Moaning Mediator**

The Real Reason

After the people first started out from Mount Sinai towards the Promised Land, it took them only three days of travel through the difficult terrain and weather to begin complaining about their situation.

Do you remember that about a year before the start of their march from Sinai, Israel just came out of Egypt and had just crossed the Red Sea? As the mighty Egyptian army cornered them at the edge of the sea, they were about to be killed or taken back as slaves to Egypt. Already at that early stage of their journey, they started grumbling, *"Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt?"* (Exod 14:11) But God parted the Red Sea, the people crossed on dry ground, and the Egyptians drowned when they tried crossing the sea.

So God rescued them from certain disaster. But within three days of setting out from the Red Sea towards Mount Sinai, the people started grumbling, because the water at Marah was bitter: *"What shall we drink?"* they complained to Moses. Again, God was patient with them and made the water sweet to drink.

A year later, the grumbling started again.

The First Grumbling

"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" (v 1).

The first grumbling is about their bad experiences in general, "evil" in the desert. God of course heard, and this time, he was angry. The consequence? Some of the outlying parts of the camp were consumed by fire. This is why the place was called Taberah, which means "burning."

What prevented God from consuming all of Israel's camp? *"Then the people cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire died down"* (v 2). Moses interceded for them. His mediation was an important part of Israel's travels.

These first three verses show us the paradigmatic story of all of Israel's other grumbings in the wilderness. All throughout their pilgrimage, Israel grumbled about their present situation, which provoked God's wrath, but by Moses' intercession, his wrath was always turned away.

The Second Grumbling

The second incident is a long story about Israel's complaint against their food in the desert. The grumbling started from the "rabble," those mixed multitude of foreigners who lived on the fringes of the camp and who have not been fully assimilated into Israel's culture and values. The grumbling, like the H1N1 virus, quickly spread throughout the whole camp. What did they complain about?

Because of their hardship in the desert, they started craving for the "good old days" in Egypt where there was plenty of food to eat, *"Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we*

ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at" (v 4-6).

These Israelites now remember Egypt as the best place on earth, forgetting their hard labor in slavery and their cruel masters who surely did not provide them enough food to eat, and most likely, the food they were given were not delicious, as they now imagine. Their misery then was so great that they cried out to God, *"the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning..."* (Exod 2:23-24).

Not only were their perspective of the past distorted, their view of their present was twisted as well. They look at and eat manna, and say it is boring, tasteless and is nothing to look at. But Moses does not think so. He describes manna as attractive, since it looked like bdellium, one of the precious stones that included gold and onyx mentioned in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:12). It can be prepared in different ways by boiling, grinding, or baking. And it tasted good, *"And the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil"* (v 8). The Holman Christian Standard Bible puts it this way, *"It tasted like a pastry cooked with the finest oil"* (v 8). What could taste better than heavenly food, this "bread of heaven" (Psa 78:24)?

Dissatisfaction results in sinful craving and covetousness. We look at the prosperity of others, even wicked people, and then we start grumbling and murmuring about our lack of the same things. This is how Israel started complaining. Grumbling skewed, clouded and distorted their vision. Doesn't this happen often to us? We see everything and all events around us—past, present and future—differently because we are always a discontented lot.

What's behind dissatisfaction, grumbling, moaning, and complaining? It is unbelief.

Unbelief not only skews our perspective of the past, it also results in doubting God's goodness to us in the present and his good promises to us for the future. This is why we complain: because we don't believe God's word. We become very shortsighted, seeing only the sufferings and trials of today. We want everything now! We want all our problems solved today! Because we don't believe that God will see us through and complete the work he has started in us.

"Before I was a Christian, my life was fun." "Before I believed, I had many things." "Before I believed, my business went well."

What did Israel not have? They didn't have faith. Faith and grumbling are opposites. The absence of faith results in grumbling. If we believe that God blesses us today even in our difficulties, we will be satisfied with what we have. If we believe in our glorious future in the heavenly city, we will be able to finish our pilgrimage in this world of sin and misery.

The Consuming Consequence

God was angered by the people's grumbling and complaining because it was a sign of their unbelief. They did not believe that God could perform all the miracles he did to free them from slavery in Egypt. They did not believe that he could rescue them from their misfortunes and hunger in the wilderness just as he rescued them from Pharaoh's mighty army. In short, because they did not believe his promises, they started grumbling.

As a result of their grumbling, judgment came down from heaven. In the first incident, God consumed the outlying parts of the camp with fire. In the second incident, God's judgment was in the provision of the quail itself. First, because they would eat the same quail for a whole month, it would become loathsome to them, just as they had gotten sick of manna.

Therefore the Lord will give you meat, and you shall eat. You shall not eat just one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, 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?" (v 18-20).

Have you ever had the same food for a whole week? Even people who work in the finest restaurants get tired of the same food—even when it is the best—they eat every day. Israel must have been so happy and excited when God sent thousands of quail to their camp. Each one of them had an equivalent of two 55-gallon drums of quail, certainly much more than what anyone can eat in a whole month!

The second judgment was this, *"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 (v 33).* Because of their unbelief, many perished because of a plague, just as God punished rebellious Egyptians with ten plagues for not letting his people go. This is why the place was called Kibroth-hattaavah, which means "graves of craving" (v 33-35).

This incident is similar to Israel's demand for a king later in her life as a nation because the people wanted to be like the kingdoms around them. And God allowed them to have their king, but warned them of judgment proceeding from the king himself. This king will take their sons away to fight their wars, and their daughters to serve him. He will overly tax them and confiscate their fields and vineyards. He will take their servants and make them slaves in his palace. And so, in the end, Samuel told the people, *"And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you in that day"* (1 Sam 8:10-18). Samuel's prophecy came true all throughout the history of the kingdom of Israel.

Paul also warns us not to grumble in unbelief, *"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men"* (Rom 1:18). God will give rebellious people exactly what they want: hardening their hearts in giving them up *"in the lusts of their hearts to impurity... to dishonorable passions... [and] to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done"* (Rom 1:24, 26, 28).

The writer of Hebrews repeats God's warning to Israel, that he is "a consuming fire, a jealous God" (Deut 4:24). He says in Hebrews 12:28-29 that since we are inheriting a heavenly kingdom, *"Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire."*

Like Israel, the ungodly will perish in unbelief in the wilderness, and will never be allowed to enter the Promised Land. And in their rebellious grumbling in unbelief, they will be tormented by fire day and night, forever and ever, but never be consumed.

Lastly, Israel's total destruction—because of their grumbling—was averted by a mediator, in spite of being a grumbler as well.

The Moaning Mediator

The people of Israel were not the only ones who grumbled. Moses their leader also grumbled,

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? 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? 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.' I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me. 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" (vv 11-15).

Moses did not grumble about the difficulties and the food, but he grumbled about these unbelieving Israelites. In effect, he was complaining to God, "I didn't deserve this people; you gave them to me. It's not my fault that they're grumbling. I didn't choose them, you did." In this short portion—only five verses—Moses used "I," "me" and "my" at least 20 times! Instead of focusing on God's goodness and promises, Moses focused on the people's grumbings.

The burden of leading two million people through their difficult wilderness wanderings was too great for Moses to bear. So he forgot his role as mediator. Instead of praying for the people to repent and see God's goodness, he grumbled that they are rebellious. Instead of asking God to forgive this people, he blames God. Instead of asking God to provide for them, he doubted God's promises that he could provide meat for all these people.

Oh how Israel is a mirror of our own sinful state! Grumbling means focusing on ourself, our troubles, and our needs, and not on God's goodness and promises. We often see only our present troubles, forgetting God's faithfulness in the past, and his promises for our future.

God Answers Moses' Grumbings

What was God's answer to Moses' grumbings? First, he promised to provide meat for them, fulfilling his promise with an overwhelming number of quails.

Second, God had an organization plan. Leadership would not only be a burden on Moses' shoulders; seventy elders of Israel will share the leadership. God even provided some of the filling of the Holy Spirit to these 70 elders, although not the same measure that Moses had. The 70 elders only prophesied for a time so the people would know that, like Moses, they were specially chosen by God to lead them.

A highlight of this incident comes in two men, Eldad and Medad. After the elders gathered in front of the Tabernacle, they started prophesying. While Eldad and Medad were not part of the 70 elders who gathered around the Tabernacle, they too started prophesying. Thus, their prophesying appeared to the people as unauthorized. When Joshua saw this, he urgently asked Moses to stop these two men from prophesying. But Moses answered 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!*" (v 29).

Moses now saw what God was doing for the people. If only God would give a portion of his Spirit to all the people, instead of grumbling, they would repent of their unbelief. Instead of murmuring against God's provisions for them, they would speak of God's goodness and mighty works in redeeming them from slavery. Instead of craving for the pleasures of Egypt, they would start thanking God for the heavenly manna, and believing his promise of rest and good life in the land that he would give them. Then Moses' great burden would be lightened.

Christ a Better Mediator and Prophet

Do you remember the story in John 6 of the five thousand people whom Jesus fed from five loaves of bread and two fish? This Gospel story has many parallels with our story in Numbers 11.

Jesus asked Philip, *"Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?"* (v 5) Our Lord was only testing him, because he knew his power to create more than enough bread and fish for all the people. In contrast, Moses really doubted God's power to provide, *"Where am I to get meat to give to all this people?"* (Num 11:13)

Philip also doubted that Jesus would be able to feed so many people, *"Two hundred denarii [200 days' salary] would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little"* (v 7). But Moses also doubted God, *"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?"* (Num 11:22).

Jesus told the people that he is the bread from heaven – the manna from heaven – that they have to eat to have eternal life. Because of this teaching, both Pharisees and disciples grumbled and were offended. This is because they knew that Jesus was claiming to be the Holy One who comes from heaven (vv 41-43).

Numbers 11 and John 6 show us that Jesus as our Mediator is better than Moses the mediator between God and Israel.

Even in his darkest hour in the Garden of Gethsemane, he did not grumble against God about the rebellious people he was saving. Instead, he prayed for their salvation and for God to be with them.

Moses complained about the burden God gave him, but Jesus willingly bore the burden of his people. Instead of you and me being consumed by God's wrath, Jesus suffered God's wrath on our behalf on the accursed cross. Because of my unbelief and grumbling against God, Jesus bore the full burden of our sins: eternal hell.

He offered his body and blood on the cross for us. Unlike the supply of manna and the quail which could run out, his body and blood were more than sufficient to feed all his multitudes of believers until he returns in glory for us. And in the heavenly feast that awaits us, the bread and wine would be sufficient for a multitude from all nations and tribes of the earth.

He alone is the only Mediator between us and God. He did not need 70 elders to bear the burden of the sin of his people. He alone is able to save his people from sin and rebellion and grumbling.

Numbers 11 and John 6 also show us that Jesus as our Prophet is better than Moses the prophet of Israel.

Moses prayed that all Israel would be given the Spirit of prophecy. Because of Christ's offering of his body and blood on the cross for us, Moses' prayer was answered. Instead of only 70 elders who were given the Spirit of God, the Spirit was poured out on Pentecost Sunday on sons and daughters, young and old, and on all of God's servants (Acts 2:17-18). And the Spirit will continue to be poured out on all of God's people throughout all the nations of the earth until Christ returns (Matt 24:14).

Moses himself prophesied that God would raise a prophet better than him,

"I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him" (Deut 18:18-19).

As with the Israelites in the wilderness, preaching God's word results in two opposite responses: some rebel in unbelief, and others obey in trust. Jesus said to his disciples, *"It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe"* (vv 63-64). His words give life through the regeneration worked in a believer's heart by his Spirit. For Peter and the other apostles who believe, our Prophet's words are words of life, *"Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God'"* (vv 68-69).

But for those who do not believe, Jesus' words of eternal life become loathsome words of judgment. Rebels who will not listen to him and grumble in unbelief will give account of themselves and will be burned by eternal fire.

Conclusion

Dear friends, Christ as your Mediator willingly gave his life so that you may not suffer God's wrath because of your grumbling and unbelief.

Christ as the better Prophet has poured out his Spirit on you. Because of this, he has given you all the blessings of salvation today. He has also promised to complete your salvation when he returns.

If this is so, the challenge for you today is, "Why should I continue to grumble when difficult days come? And how should I live my life as I continue my pilgrimage to heaven?"

Instead of grumbling, be thankful for your salvation and spiritual blessings. Instead of grumbling about your present troubles, focus on God's goodness in the past and his promise of blessing for the future. Instead of grumbling, pray that God will give you a measure of his Spirit so you may have strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. *Amen.*

*Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!*