

Adult Bible Class

The Book of Numbers

Lesson #7, Chapters 11 & 12

Complain, Complain, Complain!

In our last lesson from the book of Numbers we read where the people of Israel complained about the hardships of their travels soon after they left Mt. Sinai after having camped there for a year:

The people complain about hardship:

Numbers 11:1 (NLT) Soon the people began to complain about their hardship, and the Lord heard everything they said. Then the Lord's anger blazed against them, and he sent a fire to rage among them, and he destroyed some of the people in the outskirts of the camp.

The people complain about the manna:

Numbers 11:4 Then the foreign rabble who were traveling with the Israelites began to crave the good things of Egypt. And the people of Israel also began to complain. "Oh, for some meat!" they exclaimed. ⁵"We remember the fish we used to eat for free in Egypt. And we had all the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic we wanted. ⁶But now our appetites are gone. All we ever see is this manna!

The next passage in Numbers gives a description of the manna. Not only did God provide manna to eat, but the manna gave them daily work to do to keep busy.

Numbers 11:7 The manna looked like small coriander seeds, and it was pale yellow like gum resin. ⁸The people would go out and gather it from the ground. They made flour by grinding it with hand mills or pounding it in mortars. Then they boiled it in a pot and made it into flat cakes. These cakes tasted like pastries baked with olive oil. ⁹The manna came down on the camp with the dew during the night.

Moses complains about the people complaining:

¹⁰Moses heard all the families standing in the doorways of their tents whining, and the Lord became extremely angry. Moses was also very aggravated. ¹¹And Moses said to the Lord, "Why are you treating me, your servant, so harshly? Have mercy on me! What did I do to deserve the burden of all these people? ¹²Did I give birth to them? Did I bring them into the world? Why did you tell me to carry them in my arms like a mother carries a nursing baby? How can I carry them to the land you swore to give their ancestors? ¹³Where am I supposed to get meat for all these people? They keep whining to me, saying, 'Give us meat to eat!' ¹⁴I can't carry all these people by myself! The load is far too heavy! ¹⁵If this is how you intend to treat me, just go ahead and kill me. Do me a favor and spare me this misery!"

The thing about complaining is that it tends to spread. It started with the complaining of those on the outskirts of the camp about their hardships. Then the "foreign rabble" complained about the food - and then the Israelites complained about the food. Now, even Moses started to complain. Moses really feels sorry for

himself, and he lets God know about it. He tells God to go ahead and put him out of his misery.

Most of what Moses said was unreasonable - in the moment. God ignores that part. But the part where Moses asks God for help in leading the people - that part God focuses on, and He immediately answers the prayer.

Moses Chooses Seventy Leaders

Numbers 11:16 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Gather before me seventy men who are recognized as elders and leaders of Israel. Bring them to the Tabernacle to stand there with you. ¹⁷ I will come down and talk to you there. I will take some of the Spirit that is upon you, and I will put the Spirit upon them also. They will bear the burden of the people along with you, so you will not have to carry it alone.

God was going to take known, proven men in Israel - men who were already leaders - and He was going to put some of the same Spirit of God that was on Moses on them so they could help Moses. This did not mean that Moses would have less of the Spirit of God. Think of a candle lighting another candle. The original candle does not lose any of its flame.

Numbers 11:18 "And say to the people, 'Purify yourselves, for tomorrow you will have meat to eat. You were whining, and the Lord heard you when you cried, "Oh, for some meat! We were better off in Egypt!" Now the Lord will give you meat, and you will have to eat it. ¹⁹ And it won't be for just a day or two, or for five or ten or even twenty. ²⁰ You will eat it for a whole month until you gag and are sick of it. For you have rejected the Lord, who is here among you, and you have whined to him, saying, "Why did we ever leave Egypt?"'"

²¹ But Moses responded to the Lord, "There are 600,000 foot soldiers here with me, and yet you say, 'I will give them meat for a whole month!' ²² Even if we butchered all our flocks and herds, would that satisfy them? Even if we caught all the fish in the sea, would that be enough?"

²³ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Has my arm lost its power? Now you will see whether or not my word comes true!"

²⁴ So Moses went out and reported the Lord's words to the people. He gathered the seventy elders and stationed them around the Tabernacle. ²⁵ And the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to Moses. Then he gave the seventy elders the same Spirit that was upon Moses. And when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But this never happened again.

²⁶ Two men, Eldad and Medad, had stayed behind in the camp. They were listed among the elders, but they had not gone out to the Tabernacle. Yet the Spirit rested upon them as well, so they prophesied there in the camp. ²⁷ A young man ran and reported to Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp!"

²⁸ Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses' assistant since his youth, protested, "Moses, my master, make them stop!"

²⁹ But Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them all!" ³⁰ Then Moses returned to the camp with the elders of Israel.

We see a glimpse of the future here. For the Israelite, the presence of the Lord dwelt on the mercy seat between the golden cherubim on the ark of the covenant. The presence of God led them by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

But here we see seventy men filled with the Spirit of God and prophesying. What a picture of the future covenant in New Testament days! And two of the men had not yet made it to the meeting, but they were filled where they were! In the New Testament, God pours His Spirit out on many people in many places. Men and women receive His Spirit (Acts 2). Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles receive His Spirit (Acts 2, 8, 10). While many today do receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit in church services, some receive it in other places - at home, in their cars - anywhere that a person asks God to fill him.

Moses' words, *"I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them all,"* was prophetic of what would happen in New Testament days.

Acts 2:1 (NKJV) When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. ² And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance...

Now the Lord was going to give the people meat. However, the Lord is angry that the people wanted to go back to Egypt. He gives them meat, but the situation is not good:

The Lord Sends Quail

Numbers 11:31 Now the Lord sent a wind that brought quail from the sea and let them fall all around the camp. For miles in every direction there were quail flying about three feet above the ground. ³² So the people went out and caught quail all that day and throughout the night and all the next day, too. No one gathered less than fifty bushels! They spread the quail all around the camp to dry. ³³ But while they were gorging themselves on the meat—while it was still in their mouths—the anger of the Lord blazed against the people, and he struck them with a severe plague. ³⁴ So that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah (which means "graves of gluttony") because there they buried the people who had craved meat from Egypt. ³⁵ From Kibroth-hattaavah the Israelites traveled to Hazeroth, where they stayed for some time.

Numbers Chapter 12

The Complaints of Miriam and Aaron

Numbers 12:1 (NLT) While they were at Hazeroth, Miriam and Aaron criticized Moses because he had married a Cushite woman. ² They said, "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Hasn't he spoken through us, too?"

Family quarrels and jealousies are common enough. When we are first introduced to Moses' older brother, Aaron, we see a man who speaks well and who helps Moses with his public speaking. He becomes Moses' spokesman to Pharaoh (Exodus 4:13-16). Later, Aaron was made High Priest of Israel by the command of God. When we are first introduced to Moses' older sister, Miriam, we see dutiful big sister who watches out for her baby brother who is floating on a basket on the Nile River. After the children of Israel are delivered through the Red Sea, Miriam becomes a prophetess and leads the people in praise and song (Exodus 15:20-21). The whole family is highly used by God and honored in Israel. In fact, Micah states:

Micah 6:4 (NLT) And now, O mountains,
listen to the Lord's complaint!
He has a case against his people.
He will bring charges against Israel.
3 "O my people, what have I done to you?
What have I done to make you tired of me?
Answer me!

For I brought you out of Egypt
and redeemed you from slavery.
I sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to help you.

We've read about a lot of complaining, and in the above Scripture which was given much later in Israel's history, even God is complaining about His people - but God's complaining is righteous criticism. Israel, however, was neglecting and ignoring their Lord and going after idols. But tucked into this passage we read that God sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to the Israelites!

In Numbers 12 we read that Aaron and Miriam criticize Moses, with Miriam as ringleader, but their criticism is not helpful nor righteous. Instead, their criticism is based in pride and envy. First, they criticize Moses' choice of a wife. This criticism was petty enough, but then Miriam and Aaron go further. "*Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Hasn't he spoken through us, too*" (Numbers 12:2)? Here we see pride and envy. Was Moses' wife criticized for any good reason, or was the whole problem that Miriam and Aaron were jealous of their younger brother, Moses, and his wife was someone to heap blame upon and to put down?

Even among people who are highly used by God or who are called by God, jealousies can occur. After Moses, Aaron and Miriam are the two most honored and influential people in the camp. Why would they criticize their own brother like this?

People who have gifts, talents, and callings must work to have a right attitude as they are placed in God's work and will. Miriam no doubt felt that she had the right to criticize her "baby brother." She saw him through the eyes of a big sister instead of seeing him as God's chosen leader of His people. She highly elevated her own gifts and talents to the point that she lost respect for Moses.

Envy and jealousy got a hold of Miriam's heart and caused her to feel and say things that she never should have allowed to take root. Someone who was her junior (her baby brother Moses) was elevated above her and she couldn't stand it. Aaron followed her just as he weakly followed the people in the golden calf incident.

Like Miriam, people down through the ages have had to battle feelings of pride and envy. Perhaps someone we know who is our junior ends up being elevated above us - in work, school, the church - it can seem so unfair. "Why him and not me? Doesn't anyone recognize my abilities, my faithfulness, my desire?"

As we read these first three verses of chapter 12 we recognize the pettiness, the sarcasm, the feelings of jealousy coming out in their words. However, it doesn't seem that Moses paid any attention to it. Perhaps Moses learned to bridle his tongue and stop his ears. The psalmist said:

Psalm 38:13 (NLT) But I am deaf to all their threats.

I am silent before them as one who cannot speak.

¹⁴ I choose to hear nothing,
and I make no reply.

¹⁵ For I am waiting for you, O Lord.

You must answer for me, O Lord my God.

In this case, God does answer for Moses.

Numbers 12:2b (NLT) But the Lord heard them. ³ (Now Moses was very humble—more humble than any other person on earth.)

⁴ So immediately the Lord called to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam and said, “Go out to the Tabernacle, all three of you!” So the three of them went to the Tabernacle. ⁵ Then the Lord descended in the pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the Tabernacle. “Aaron and Miriam!” he called, and they stepped forward. ⁶ And the Lord said to them, “Now listen to what I say:

“If there were prophets among you,
I, the Lord, would reveal myself in visions.

I would speak to them in dreams.

⁷ But not with my servant Moses.

Of all my house, he is the one I trust.

⁸ I speak to him face to face,

clearly, and not in riddles!

He sees the Lord as he is.

So why were you not afraid

to criticize my servant Moses?”

Moses was the most perfect type, shadow, and figure of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament. Hebrews says:

Hebrews 3:5 Moses was certainly faithful in God’s house as a servant. His work was an illustration of the truths God would reveal later.

There was more to this than petty criticism. Everything that Moses was doing in his ministry pointed to Jesus Christ.

Miriam and Aaron had lost their fear of God. “*So why were you not afraid to criticize my servant Moses?*” They had seen the fire break out on the outskirts of the camp to those that complained about the hardships. But they were even worse because they complained about Moses, God’s appointed servant! God spoke to Moses face to face, not in dreams or visions. God spoke to him plainly and clearly, not in riddles or parables. God took it personally when they criticized Moses.

The Lord hears. This can be a wonderful thing when we pray and bring our petitions before Him. But the same Lord who hears our prayers hears our mutterings and criticisms as well. He hears everything. This family jealousy was so unnecessary. Moses, Miriam, and Aaron all had their place. and they were all honored. There really was no need for Miriam to speak so against her sister-in-law. There really was no need for Aaron to listen to his sister and go along with her criticism. Pride rose in her heart and made her forget that she had a responsibility as a prophetess to chase evil thoughts from her mind before they became ugly words. Miriam and Aaron, through pride, convinced themselves that they were

badly treated. Sometimes the person who “has it all” wants even more because of pride.

The Scripture states that Moses was the meekest man (KJV), the most humble man on earth (verse 3). Sometimes people take advantage of meek individuals. Miriam did. She knew she could get an audience with Moses with her prideful grudge (because Moses was meek). But - the Lord heard her!

God was not going to let his chosen leader be slandered this way without taking charge. He *humbled* Miriam and Aaron and he *exalted* Moses. Maybe Miriam did not know these things about Moses - that God spoke with him face to face, that God trusted him more than anyone else in Israel. Maybe Moses was so meek that he didn't tell his sister all that he had experienced. At any rate, Miriam was humbled, and now she knew that God was going to side with his chosen, faithful leader.

Numbers 12:9 The Lord was very angry with them, and he departed. ¹⁰ As the cloud moved from above the Tabernacle, there stood Miriam, her skin as white as snow from leprosy. When Aaron saw what had happened to her, ¹¹ he cried out to Moses, “Oh, my master! Please don't punish us for this sin we have so foolishly committed. ¹² Don't let her be like a stillborn baby, already decayed at birth.”

¹³ So Moses cried out to the Lord, “O God, I beg you, please heal her!”

¹⁴ But the Lord said to Moses, “If her father had done nothing more than spit in her face, wouldn't she be defiled for seven days? So keep her outside the camp for seven days, and after that she may be accepted back.”

¹⁵ So Miriam was kept outside the camp for seven days, and the people waited until she was brought back before they traveled again. ¹⁶ Then they left Hazereth and camped in the wilderness of Paran.

Sin separates. *“The Lord was very angry with them, and He departed.”*

In the Old Testament, leprosy was a disease inflicted by God as punishment for a particular sin. Gehazi became a leper for lying to the prophet. King Uzziah became leprous for presuming to take the priest's office. These are both examples of people lifting themselves up above the office of God's minister.

Here, Miriam became a leper, and so much that her flesh was starting to decay. How horrible! Moses' face shone with the glory of God, but Miriam's face was deformed by leprosy! What a contrast of humility and pride!

Why was Miriam stricken and not Aaron? Miriam was the ringleader. God puts a difference between *those who mislead* and *those who are misled*. Aaron humbles himself to Moses and asks for forgiveness, speaking very respectfully to him. God had departed as the cloud moved from above the Tabernacle, yet Moses cries out to God. Moses did not accuse Miriam to God, but stood as he had in times past - as intercessor.

Through repentance, God shows mercy on Miriam and she is healed. Justice takes place in that Miriam is humbled. She must remain outside the camp for seven days. Even chastisement by an earthly father would require this - all the more that she should suffer this after being chastised by her heavenly Father. All Israel knew

what had happened because the camp must wait for seven days before it can go forward.

In Exodus 15, we saw Miriam, the prophetess, praising God at the head of the congregation after they had just walked through the Red Sea on dry ground and after their enemies were drowned behind them. Now, in Numbers 12, we see Miriam the prideful expelled from the camp, filthy with leprosy - completely stopping the progress of the camp. She must take seven days to dwell in her shame.

But there is another way to think on this. The camp must wait seven days for Miriam - they can't just go without her! She is too important for them to leave her. They will wait for her, and then they will continue. Paul said of one who had sinned greatly in the Corinthian church:

2 Corinthians 2:5 I am not overstating it when I say that the man who caused all the trouble hurt all of you more than he hurt me. ⁶ Most of you opposed him, and that was punishment enough. ⁷ Now, however, it is time to forgive and comfort him. Otherwise he may be overcome by discouragement.
⁸ So I urge you now to reaffirm your love for him.

After Miriam and Aaron were humbled, after repentance, after a time for reflection, after cleansing according to the law of Moses, the camp continued on toward Canaan.