

September 14, 2025

PROVISION: NUMBERS 11:4-17

Introductory Activity (Adapted from ETB LG, 27)

Ask: When has some difficulty kept you from doing what you needed to do? How did you feel when someone came through with a solution? (PSG, p. 19)

Read: Enlist a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 19 of the PSG. (See Notes Box)—SKIP TO TRANSITION BELOW

Introductory Activity Options 2

Object Lesson: Bring a few mismatched tools to your group time. You might bring a metric socket set and a standard-sized bolt. You might bring a Phillips head screwdriver and a flat head screw. (Think of some other tools or items that don't match up.)

Explain: "Many of us know what it's like to have a job and find out we don't have the tools we need." (ETB PSG, 19) Refer to the object you brought and say: You might have a metric socket set on hand, but you are dealing with standard bolts. Or you might have a Phillips head screwdriver, but you are working with flat head screws. Or you might get halfway through a project and realize that you have to go to town to get something that will enable you to finish and clean up.

Transition: Today, we are going to continue our study in the book of Numbers and see that while we might sometimes feel ill-equipped, God will provide what we need to accomplish His purposes.

Last week, we saw how the Israelites set out from Sinai and followed the Lord as He led them with a cloud. Numbers 11:1-3 tells us that just three days into their journey, the people began to complain about the "hardship" of the journey (c.f. NAC, 181). The Lord heard their complaint and sent fire on the outskirts of the camp. In his judgment, God was merciful because a fire sent into the interior of the camp could have killed many more people. Nevertheless, the judgment caused the people to stop complaining and turn to Moses for help. We should examine Moses' response here because it will be important for our study today. Verse 2 reports, "Then the people cried out to Moses, and he prayed to the Lord, and the fire died down." The people turned from complaining openly before the Lord (v. 1) to pleading with Moses. Moses, in turn, pleaded with the Lord on behalf of the people. This pattern of complaint has been present among the people since they set out from Egypt and will remain so throughout their journey. Here at the beginning of their journey, Moses, their human leader, prays for the complaining people. Today, we will see that in a subsequent event, Moses' prayer becomes frustrated cries to the Lord. Let's examine verses 4-17. In our examination, will learn about the people's dissatisfaction, Moses'

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Numbers* (Preaching)
- *Exalting Jesus in Numbers* (Exalting)
- *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Numbers* (TOTC)
- *Numbers* (Harrison)
- *New American Commentary: Numbers* (NAC)

"Many of us know what it's like to have a job and find out we don't have the tools we need. We start to wash clothes and discover the washing machine isn't working. Maybe we are supposed to drive for the carpool, and the car won't start. We need to turn in an assignment in the morning and realize at midnight that the printer is out of ink. We discover that the bolt we're trying to remove requires a metric socket wrench that we don't have." (ETB PSG, 19)

frustration, and God's provision. We will also learn that "God hears His leaders and sustains them for His purposes." (ETB PSG, 19)

1. DISSATISFIED FOLLOWERS (NUM. 11:4-9)

Read (or have someone read) Numbers 11:4-9.

Explain: In this passage, we see that grumbling has two qualities. It is both contagious and corrosive.

Explore: Ask the group to look back at verse 4 and discover who the grumblers were.

Explain: Verse 4 tells us that the complaining began among the "riffraff." This word is used nowhere else in Scripture. It appears to describe the "mixed multitudes" (KJV; "rabble" ESV, "foreign rabble" NLT) who had left Egypt with the Hebrews (Ex. 12:38). Duguid states that this group "had never fully assimilated and taken on Israel's values and standards." (Preaching, 148) He goes on to argue that grumbling begins with those who have "little or no spiritual insight" and are "on the edge of the community." Ultimately, the root of their grumbling is "unbelief." (cf. Preaching, 149) Verse 4 shows us that this spirit of unbelief and complaining did not persist solely among the "riffraff." It began to spread among the camp. Moses reports that "the Israelites wept again." Grumbling is contagious. The "foreign rabble" (NLT) among the people might not have the spiritual insight to grasp the gracious provision of God, but the Israelites should have. The spirit of grumbling had spread to "those who ought to know better." (Preaching, 149)

Not only is grumbling contagious, it is also corrosive. Note that the complaining begins with a desire for "other food." (v. 4) "Literally, they 'craved a craving.' In this form, the verb denotes inappropriate desires." (ETB LG, 28) This word is parallel to the word translated covet in Deuteronomy 5:21. The sense is they wanted something *more* or something *different*. In verse 5, they begin to spell out their craving. First, they cry out for something different than manna. They want meat (v. 4). Then they cry out for something more, as seen in the buffet of desires from fish to leeks to melons (v. 5). If we want to think of a modern example, we might imagine a family who are tent camping. The kids are tired of ham sandwiches and want to go to the Golden Corral. The corrosive nature of their complaint is first **a denial of God's goodness**. In Exodus 16, the people had complained to the Lord about food. Moses reports their complaint in verse 3 of that chapter, "The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the Lord's hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by pots of meat and ate all the bread we wanted. Instead, you brought us into this wilderness to make this whole assembly die of hunger!' In response, God began to send a daily (excluding the Sabbath) supply of manna for the people. In Numbers 11:7-9, Moses provides an aside to describe the greatness of God's good provision. He explains manna's delicious nature, the ease with which it is gathered, and its free

Notes:

Moses' description of manna "stands in stark contrast to the people's complaint of how much they disliked manna." (ETBC, 23)

Psalms 78:24-25

24 He rained manna for them to eat; he gave them grain from heaven.

25 People ate the bread of angels. He sent them an abundant supply of food.

abundance. But this was not good enough for the people. “In the wilderness of Sin, it was lack of food that prompted complaint (Exod. 16:3); [here] it was the lack of variety.” (TOTC, 121) God’s goodness did not satisfy their cravings. So, first, their complaint was a denial of God’s goodness. It was also **an exaggeration of Egypt’s goodness**. In their dissatisfaction, “Egypt was now transformed into a land flowing with milk and honey—or at least the land of free fish and varied vegetables—cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic (v. 5). Meanwhile, the people complained that in the wilderness all they had to taste and look at was boring old manna (v. 6)” (Preaching, 148) The corrosive nature of complaining caused them to question God’s goodness and extol the “goodness” they experienced as overworked slaves in Egypt.

Apply: Grumbling and complaining can take place in many areas of life, but in our current setting, we should probably take a moment and apply this to the church.

First, we should note that complaining began with those having “little of no spiritual insight.”

- **Ask:** In what ways does this manifest itself in the church? (Sometimes church leadership will determine a path forward to reach more people with the gospel or an effort to help move God’s people forward in Christlikeness. Those with little or no spiritual insight might complain because of the financial cost or because “we’ve never done it that way before.” Their unwillingness or inability (due to their lostness) to hear from the Spirit will cause them to complain. Since their arguments might sound “reasonable” or logical, those who ought to know better begin to listen to them.)

Second, we should note that complaining diminishes God’s goodness.

- **Ask:** In what ways does this manifest itself in the church? (Sometimes the blessings of God can become humdrum to those in the church. We forget the great blessing of some aspect of our church and begin to “crave a craving.” We want more or we want something different. We forget how good the preaching is, or we forget how blessed we are to have talented musicians. We complain that the sanctuary is too hot or too cold. We forget about the baptism resulting from the Spirit’s work and focus on our desires.)

Summarize Transition: Moses begins the chapter by telling us about a complaint concerning the hardships of the journey (vv. 1-3). In verses 4-9, he provides an example of their escalating complaints and shows us the contagious and corrosive nature of those complaints. We should remember that complaining was not just a malady of the Israelites. It can affect us today as well. We should be reminded that “Believers should be careful not to take God’s provisions for granted.” (ETB PSG, 27) But our lesson does not end here. The complaining will continue in the next passage.

2. FRUSTRATED LEADER (NUM. 11:10-15)

Read (or have someone read) Numbers 11:10-15.

Explain: One thing we should remember about this passage is that it was written *by Moses*. Sometimes, when a person writes about themselves, they highlight only the good thing and their wise decisions. Here, Moses is revealing a time when he underperformed as a leader. To help us understand this, let's take a moment to review verses 1-3. These three verses provide a **Paradigm For complaint**.

Read: Number 11:1-3 (See Notes Box)

Explain: An outline of the Paradigm will help us understand the pattern.

- A. The people complain (v. 1a)
- B. The Lord becomes "angry" and judges the people (v. 1b)
- C. The people come to Moses for help (v. 2a)
- D. Moses intercedes for the people (v. 2b)
- E. The Lord relents (v. 2c)

That is not what we see in verses 4-17. Instead, the people complain (vv. 4-6, 10a), the Lord gets angry (10b), and Moses is "provoked" (v. 10c ff.). While the complaint of the people was rebellion against the Lord and deserved His anger, the actions of Moses were also inappropriate. Let's try and understand what Moses was really doing while he complained to the Lord.

First, He Amplified His God-Given Assignment. In verses 11 and 12, Moses compares the nation to needy children. He asked the Lord why He had saddled Moses with the job of caring for the people. He says, These are not my kids. Why have you commanded me to take care of them? It's like he is saying, "I didn't ask for this responsibility." But the reality is, God did not saddle him with that responsibility. To use New Testament language, Moses was the "under shepherd" and God was the Shepherd. In his complaint to the Lord, Moses was taking on the role of supreme leader of the people. We saw last week that God was the supreme leader of Israel, and He led them *through* the commands of Moses (Num. 9:23). Moses was negating his true calling by elevating himself to a role God never asked of him.

Apply: Sometimes God will call us to a position or ministry that is more than we imagined. Maybe the ministry of evangelizing your co-workers is more daunting than you imagined. Maybe the task of teaching a small group and raising new leaders is more challenging and frustrating than you imagined. Maybe teaching a children's group is more work than you imagined. Sometimes we will get frustrated that God would ask us to attempt such a difficult ministry assignment. We should remember that when we perform these ministry assignments, we do so under the leadership and guidance of the Lord. Likewise, that frustration comes not only when trying and

Notes:

Number 11:1-3

Now the people began complaining openly before the Lord about hardship. When the Lord heard, his anger burned, and fire from the Lord blazed among them and consumed the outskirts of the camp. ²Then the people cried out to Moses, and he prayed to the Lord, and the fire died down. ³So that place was named Taberah, because the Lord's fire had blazed among them.

Numbers 11:13-14

¹³ Where can I get meat to give all these people? For they are weeping to me, 'Give us meat to eat!' ¹⁴ I can't carry all these people by myself. They are too much for me.

supplant God's position but when trying to do God's job for him. That is what Moses did next. Look at the next few verses.

Reread Numbers 11: 13-14 (see Notes Box)

Second, He Appropriated God's Responsibility For Himself. In the original language, Moses "refers to himself no fewer than twenty times" in verses 11-15 (cf. Preaching 151). He asks God, "Where can I get meat to give all these people?" Instead of performing as he did in the paradigm set in verses 1-3 and praying for the people, Moses turns his attention to himself. This began in the preceding verses in which he took on the role of supreme leader of the people. Not only was Moses negating his responsibility as the "under shepherd," he was also attempting to take on the responsibility of providing for the people when that was God's job all along. It was not Moses's job to provide meat and anything else for the people. Just as it was God's "job" to lead them, it was God's "job" to feed them.

Apply: As leaders, we often try to provide for our people what only God can provide. Likewise, as small group leaders, we try and provide spiritual growth for our group members. As witnesses for the gospel, we try and "get people saved." It is not the leader's job to produce fruit in people. It is not the small group leader's job to produce Christlike group members. It is not the evangelist's job to "save" people. These are the jobs of the Lord. When we take on God's assignment, we will be frustrated just like Moses because we do not have the ability to perform God's job.

Third, He Attempted To Abdicate His Calling. He attempts to "resign from this post." Finally, in his frustration over failing to do God's job, Moses turns in his resignation. Actually, he asks God to kill him because that was the only way to get out. But here is the essential point: Moses was not resigning from the job God *gave* him; he was resigning from the job he *appropriated* for himself.

Summarize and Transition: We should not proceed from this discussion of Moses' complaint without pausing to note how God responded. We are going to study that next, but we should mention one aspect here. In the following two verses, God is going to answer Moses. In his answer, there is no mention of anger toward Moses. This clues us in to the heart behind Moses' complaint. I think Moses loved the people. I also think Moses truly wanted to accomplish the task God had given in. Nevertheless, in his enthusiasm to perform his God-given task, Moses had taken on too much responsibility. In the complaining prayer of Moses, we can see that he was simply crying out to God for help, and it appears that God understood his heart. This can remind us that "we can always take our concerns to God, telling Him what we need." (ETB PSG, 27)

3. GRACIOUS PROVISION (NUMBERS 11:16-17)

Read or have someone read Numbers 11:16-17

Notes:

"In the Hebrew original, in these five verses of complaint Moses refers to himself no fewer than twenty times. This is not coincidental. Whereas faith looks to God, unbelief turns in on ourselves and our inability." (Preaching, 151)

"Rather than responding in anger toward the complaint of Moses, God graciously took the steps necessary to provide for the needs of the situation." (ETBC, 27)

Notes:

The men chosen early by Moses, at Jethro's suggestion, in Exodus 18:25-26, "were to help in administration and judicial matters. These seventy chosen and endowed with the Spirit of God were to assist Moses in bearing the burden of spiritual leadership." (ETBC, 29)

"Since his administrative duties were already shared with others (Exod. 18:13ff.), these elders must have been intended to give him spiritual support (cf. Exod 24:9)." (TOTC, 122)

Explain: In this passage, we see that God answered Moses' prayer. Later in the chapter, he will both provide the people with meat and judge them for their rebellious complaining, but this passage focuses on God's gracious provision to Moses. Moses had complained to the Lord that the burden of leading the people was too much for him. As we saw previously, it was too much because he had taken on more than he was meant to take on. Nevertheless, God was gracious and provided him with help.

This is not the first time Moses has needed help in leading the people. In Exodus 18, his father-in-law visited him in the camp. On the visit, Jethro noticed that Moses was overburdened performing all the administrative duties of leading the people. Jethro encouraged Moses to appoint leaders to perform the administrative duties. The 80 elders God provides in Numbers 11 appear to have a different function. In this case, the 80 were to serve Moses by providing spiritual support to the leader (c.f. ETBC, 29 and TOTC, 122). "God's remedy for this situation was shared leadership." (ETBC, 29) They were endowed with the Holy Spirit, which, prior to Pentecost, was given by the Lord to fulfill a specific task or assignment. We can imagine this group of men would go about their day interacting with the people with the purpose of addressing concerns and quelling any rising complaints.

Discuss: How can we in the church function in a like manner to bear the burden of our pastor?

Explain: Wise, Spirit-filled church members can respond to complaints or questions in a manner that reduces people's concerns. One key in this process is to provide both perspective and information. The people of Israel had forgotten they were camping on the way to the Promised Land. The land of milk and honey (and meat) was within their grasp. Wise counselors would remind them of this and help them maintain the right perspective. Similarly, wise counselors in the church can help people maintain the right perspective when new initiatives or changes are proposed. Information is also key. We can imagine that the 80 spiritual advisors would meet with Moses and hear about future plans or any information delivered from the Lord. They could then disseminate that information to the people and "keep them in the loop." Similarly, in the church, those who make an effort to keep up with information like financial figures, staff initiatives, or upcoming events can pass that information on to less informed individuals. The reality is that when people do not know what's happening or do not have all the facts, they are likely to have the wrong perspective. Wise, Spirit-filled church members can help quell any descension by keeping others informed.

Summarize and Transition: The Lord was gracious to Moses in appointing these leaders. Moses did not *need* their help. The Lord had already given him everything he needed to accomplish the task, but in overreaching and taking on too much, he overburdened himself. However, the Lord was gracious and provided these men to compensate for Moses's leadership deficit. Likewise, "we can trust God to provide what we need to carry out the tasks He gives us." (ETB PSG, 27)

CONCLUDE

Today, group members might find themselves in one of two spots. They might be in a place where they have lost perspective on something. This loss of perspective might have led to a place of complaining or grumbling before the Lord. Encourage group members to reflect on the blessings of the Lord and focus on where He is taking them, not on where they might currently be. Other group members might be in a leadership or ministry role that feels overwhelming. Encourage these group members to go to the Lord with their struggles, and instead of complaining to the Lord, ask Him to provide them with the skill or wisdom necessary to succeed.

Provision: Numbers 11:4-17

Lastly, every group member can function as the 80 elders did and provide spiritual support to their pastor and staff members as they bear the burden of leading in God's Kingdom.