

Sunday School Lesson for September 14, 2025  
Numbers 11:4-17

Welcome to Sunday School on the go from the First Baptist Church in Tallahassee. I'm Jim Glass, one of the teachers in the Pairs and Spares Class, and, on this second Sunday in September, we've begun a new series in the Old Testament Books of Numbers and Deuteronomy, tracing the steps of the Israelites as they make their way to the Promised Land. It was, as you know, a long and difficult journey that didn't have to be that way, and today's lesson from chapter eleven of the Book of Numbers gives us a prime example of the problems the people brought upon themselves because of their refusal to be content with the Lord's gracious provision for them. Once again, you would have thought that their deliverance from slavery in Egypt that was nothing less than spectacularly miraculous would have convinced them that God had a plan and a purpose for them, and that He would provide for their every need.

Following the conclusion of the account of the Israelites' movements as they followed God's plan directed by the movement of the cloud of fire in chapter nine, chapter ten provides us with the details of their departure from their encampment in the wilderness of Sinai. If you take a few minutes to read this account, you'll be impressed with the details of their departure--verse ten: "In the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth day of the month" when "the cloud lifted from over the tabernacle of the testimony, ... the people of Israel set out by stages from the wilderness of Sinai." Their first stop was in **Paran as you'll see on this map.**

Then in the next three chapters, we're told of several rebellions that occurred as the people voiced their discontent with one thing or another, culminating in the report from the twelve who were sent to learn more about

the land that they would come to possess according to the covenant given to Abraham, and the people's refusal to trust the Lord to seize the land.

We find the first of those rebellions in chapter eleven, beginning with the unfortunate story of some of the people complaining against the Lord about their misfortunes. Exactly what those misfortunes were, we don't know, but their complaints brought judgment from the Lord--verse one: "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." When the people cried out to Moses, he prayed to the Lord and the fire died down. Because of what happened there, the place was called Taberah, meaning "burning."

Now, you would have thought that, between their deliverance from Egypt, the judgment that had fallen upon them for making and worshiping the golden calf, and this most recent example of God's discipline, the people would have fallen in line with God's plan and trusted Him for whatever lay ahead. But, it wasn't to be so, for the very next thing we find in Numbers, chapter eleven, is a complaint about their food--verse four: "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! 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.'"

This "rabble" or "mixed multitude," depending on your translation, were, most likely, the non-Israelites who had come from Egypt that we read about in Exodus, chapter twelve, verse 38. This would have included any Egyptians

some of the Israelites had married as well as people of other nationalities that had been forced into slavery and took advantage of the exodus to flee Egypt. Because they had no share in the Abrahamic covenant promises and no interest in connecting their futures to those promises, it's understandable that this first, major objection would have come from those least bound and committed to the Lord. As the opportunity to forage food declined as they made their way deeper into the desert, they let their displeasure with their situation be known across the camp.

This attitude quickly spread throughout the camp to the extent that "the people of Israel also wept." The seed of discontentment sown by these foreigners soon bore fruit in the hearts of the children of God. The apostle Paul reminds us, writing to the followers of Christ in Corinth in First Corinthians, chapter fifteen, verse 33: "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company ruins good morals.'" The Israelites, however, were sucked into the same discontentment of the foreigners among them who had not trusted the Lord as they should have. And there's much more we could say about that.

Not only did the people weep, we read that they wept again. This wasn't the first time Moses had had to deal with their complaints. The previous time could have been the event that opened this chapter, but was more likely either when they complained they didn't have enough food--Exodus, chapter sixteen--and God responded by sending manna, or chapter seventeen when they complained about not having enough water, and--once again--God provided. God had provided everything they needed to sustain them through their journey to the Promised Land--but that wasn't good enough for them--they wanted meat. Before, they grumbled because it didn't appear to them that they

would even have the barest basics to sustain them. Now, they weep greedily at the absence of luxuries as they remembered them.

The manna God provided was entirely sufficient to meet their needs, but they wanted something better--something tastier, something more substantial, something that offered a better presentation when it was cooked and served. They were tired of eating what the food kitchen provided; they wanted gourmet cuisine--just like they had back in Egypt.

The fish, for example. Ah, the fish. Bushels of fresh-caught from the Nile River. The perch that could weigh as much as 400 pounds, the tilapia, and the catfish--so abundant that you could buy it for next to nothing. Then take that fish and marinate it with some Cumin mixed with lime juice along with a touch of coriander to give it that earthy, savory flavor. Or maybe marinate it in lemon juice and sprinkle a bit of turmeric on it before pan-frying it, and then tossing in some spring onion and dill. The burst of colors alone would be enough to make you drool. And then pair it with a fresh, sparkling Chardonnay, or maybe a Beaujolais, or a sweet Rosé wine? Ah, the fish was to die for!

And then there were cucumbers, and melons, and leeks, and onions, and garlic that was a staple of every meal in every household. And the dishes you could make with them! Because the fields along the Nile River were so fertile, the land was covered with all of these wonderful fruits of the earth, and anybody could buy them for a song. But they had forgotten the far greater price they paid of their own freedom to labor and serve the Pharaoh who had enslaved them so despicably.

But of all these delicacies they had in abundance for so little expense--or so they thought--none of it was to be found there in the wilderness of Sinai. "All

we get day in and day out is this manna.” The husband comes home after a day of tending the sheep and asks his wife, “What’s for dinner?” and she throws her rolling pin at him. In their discontentment and greed, they longed for something else--something different--something they thought they couldn’t live without: “Now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.”

Their obviously exaggerated claim alleged that they were half-starved and dying of thirst--that they were wasting away because they could no longer enjoy the delicacies that abounded in the land they had just left brought them to tears. Ah, life was so good back in Egypt. How quickly they had forgotten. How quickly do we often forget the misery of the sin we’ve been delivered from.

They did have flocks and herds, but they were reserved for the sacrifices in the Tabernacle, and no one would dream of slaughtering them for ordinary eating. Besides, we find in verse 22 that, even if all the flocks and herds should be slaughtered, there wouldn’t have been enough meat for all the two million people.

“There’s nothing at all but this manna to look at”--that was their complaint. This manna, you recall, was provided for them after a previous round of complaints that we read about in Exodus, chapter sixteen. So--verse fourteen--the next morning, “When the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground. When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.’”

Before the sun rose, there was nothing but dew on the ground. As the rising sun burned off the dew, the Israelites found fine, thin, flakes of something unknown to them covering the earth. The word “flake” or “flake-like” doesn’t appear anywhere else in our Old Testaments, which only adds to the difficulty of describing the stuff. Here in our focal text of Numbers, chapter eleven, verse seven, we find a more complete description: “Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its appearance like that of bdellium. 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. When the dew fell upon the camp in the night, the manna fell with it.”

It tasted like coriander seed. Coriander seeds come from cilantro plants, and you find cilantro leaves in dishes like cilantro rice, lime chicken, guacamole, and other Mexican dishes, but the seeds have a warm, nutty, and faintly citrusy flavor with a hint of floral sweetness. So this manna had the texture of wafers made with honey and a taste like cakes baked with olive oil. It really sounds delicious.

Its appearance was like bdellium--a semi-transparent gummy resin that’s tapped from a False Myrrh tree--think of amber or pine sap. The substance seems to have lain between something like layers, if you will, of dew.

So, when the Israelites saw this stuff lying about on the ground, they said, “What is it?” In Hebrew, the question, “What is it?” sounds like “manna,” and that’s the best name they could give to it since they didn’t know what it was. Whatever it was, there was enough of it every day, with twice as much on Friday to last through the Sabbath, to feed more than two million people. So, whether its name means ‘What is it?’ or ‘It is a gift,’ as Martin Luther and

others thought it meant, the name is equally true and appropriate, pointing us to the mystery of its nature on the one hand and to the love of the Giver on the other, while both referring directly to the hand of God in providing it.

Back to Exodus, chapter sixteen, verses fifteen: “When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.’” Once again, God had intervened on their behalf to provide for them in what appeared to be a desperate situation. The Lord had given them this bread to eat. They didn’t plant seed, water it, weed it, care for it, or watch it grow. God provided it as a free gift, and they had as much as they needed. As always, the God of the miracle is the God of the means to make the miracle possible.

Well, all this moaning and groaning came to Moses’ attention--verse ten: “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.” It seems that the complaints were universal--every person stood outside the door of his or her tent and complained to the neighbors and anyone passing by how boring it was to eat this same manna all the time. Never mind that, less than two years ago they had been miraculously delivered out of the hands of the most powerful nation on earth by the supernatural intervention of God Who had led them across the Red Sea on dry ground only to turn around and watch as the entire Egyptian army was swallowed up by the waters as they returned to their natural course. Never mind that, although there were about two million of them traveling together, they all had water to drink and food to eat as they journeyed toward a land flowing with milk and honey along a trail that should only take them about two years to get there.

But they had been so conditioned by the life they so longingly--and, it seems wistfully but inaccurately--recalled back in Egypt. It was hard, they probably thought, but it was predictable. We knew what to expect every day when we woke up--working on the Pharaoh's latest construction project, either building or gathering materials, or foraging for enough food to feed your family. If you moved fast enough and your work was acceptable, you lived to do the same thing the next day. There was something comfortable about the unchanging rhythm of life back in Egypt.

But here in the wilderness, you didn't know if you were going or staying. If you stayed, you didn't know when you'd have to pack up and move again. If you were moving, you didn't know if there'd be water in the next place you stopped. You could be sure that there was this manna stuff, but that was getting so old. Besides that, nobody seemed to be listening to their suggestions. It may have been easier to go north along the Mediterranean Sea where the sea breeze would have provided a more temperate climate to travel in and plenty of fish, but they were headed south through the desert. This wasn't what they had signed up for when Moses went to the Pharaoh and told him, "The Lord has said, 'Let My people go.'" So, everyone complained.

"And the anger of the Lord blazed hotly." In what way did the people know that the anger of the Lord blazed hotly? If you skip down to verse 31, you read that God sent a wind to blow quail into the camp. Through the night, quail fell dead for a day's journey in any direction around the camp, and the pile of quail was three feet deep. They wanted meat, they got meat. But, as they started to eat it--verse 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."

Needless to say, Moses was “displeased,” “provoked,” or “troubled--depending on your translation--both by the petty childishness of the people but also because of the Lord’s response to their complaint. One commentator writes, “[T]his was one of the greatest defeats of the people of God, a moment far more [despicable] than the history of the golden calf, .... Was Moses to go to Canaan, conquer the promised land, [establish] the kingdom of God, with the people in this state of mind?”

So, what does Moses do? He knows his own limitations. He can’t provide a variety of gourmet meals for these people, especially not for a mass of two million. Even if he could, they had a higher purpose, a greater mission than to sit around and dine on Egyptian delicacies.

What does he do? He takes his complaint to the Lord and lays it all before Him--verse eleven: “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.’”

Holding nothing back, Moses pours out his heart before the Lord. His complaints were obviously exaggerated and overblown, but he’s pretty upset at what’s unfolding before him. Somehow, Moses appears to have felt comfortable enough in his relationship with the Lord to say these things that, to us, would clearly seem to cross the boundaries of the respect Moses should

have given to the Lord. After all, there's a lot of history between the Lord and Moses, beginning with that meeting at the burning bush that didn't burn back in Exodus, chapter three.

It was the same with Elijah in that great story in First Kings, chapter eighteen. After that great moment when God sent fire to burn the sacrifice covered in water after the priests of Baal had failed to get a response from their gods, and he had all the priests of Baal killed, then Jezebel found out about it and she called for his immediate arrest, Elijah went and hid in a cave.

But God spoke to him hiding there in the cave--chapter nineteen, verse nine: "Behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said to him, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He said, 'I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.'" Soon afterwards in this extended conversation, the Lord let Elijah know that he wasn't the only one who had not bowed to Baal. There were seven thousand others who had remained faithful to the Lord. He wasn't alone, and the fate of the Kingdom of God and the fulfillment of His promises didn't rest on Elijah alone.

Moses seems to have been pretty well fed up with the task the Lord had assigned to him. He first asks, "Why have you dealt ill with your servant?" He then follows this question by asking, "Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me?" In reality, God hadn't thrown the responsibility of getting the people safely to the Promised Land or of providing meat for them to eat upon Moses. It was a selfish and egotistical complaint to think that this great mission of the Kingdom of God and the future of the entire race of Abraham's descendants rested on him.

Even though he had identified himself as the Lord's servant in the previous question, he makes it seem that he had forgotten the limits of his responsibilities. He forgot that he was merely the messenger who served the One Who sent him, and, in his indignation at the sin of the people, he committed the same sin himself by complaining and assuming that the success of this mission depended solely on him.

What a prideful statement this was to think that the care of each and every of the two million people lay with him--that if they were to be saved, he would save them; if they were to perish, he would be charged with their deaths. But God never laid that burden on him. All God had called Moses to do--all God calls us to do--is to be faithful to His calling in our lives, and leave the final results to Him.

Besides this, Moses had completely forgotten the dishonor that the Lord was experiencing in the complaints of the people. He had delivered them from four hundred-thirty years of bondage to the Egyptians, and they're complaining that all they have is manna to eat? Really? Didn't they fear God enough to know that they owed their very existence to Him and that, if they were bothered by the way things were going as they made their way to the land promised to them by the Lord so long ago, and complained about the discomforts and petty irritations along the way that God could destroy them all and choose another people? After all, He was about ready to do just that before Moses interceded on their behalf after the incident with the golden calf back in Exodus, chapter 32.

Moses continued his complaint in verse twelve: "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?” Am I responsible for them as a parent would be responsible for his own children? But they come to me as if there was something I could do to answer their complaints and give them what they think they so desperately need. So they come to me demanding something besides manna. “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.’”

And so, he repeats his own complaint in verse fourteen: “I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me.” After all this prideful complaining and whining and frustration with the whole journey to the Promised Land thing, he proposes a solution in verse fifteen: “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.” “Lord, I’ve had it. I don’t have the resources, the ability, the patience, to deal with the peoples’ complaints and Your judgment on them that ultimately reflects back on me and my failures. If this is the way it’s going to be, kill me now and let me be free of all this shame and blame.” He seems to have thought, since everything depended on him, and he had made such a mess of things, that he was a complete failure--he was only a hindrance to God bringing the Israelites to the Promised Land.

I don’t usually include story illustrations in these lessons, but this one just might help us apply Moses’ experience to our own lives. In the book, *My Most Memorable Encounter with God*, Major Ian Thomas, who served with the British in World War II and went on to establish the Capernwray Missionary Fellowship, tells of his own experience with frustration serving the Lord. Even though his family attended church with some regularity when he was growing up, he knew that there was something more to a relationship with God than just showing up on Sunday mornings. Even though he felt what he called an

indefinable urge within his heart--a longing after God--, he felt that God was out of sight, beyond his reach, and his prayers only echoed into space.

He went to a church camp one summer with a friend, and it was there that God spoke to his heart, and his life was forever changed. He threw himself into serving the Lord--leading a Christian group at his high school, dedicating his studies to become a missionary doctor to Africa, and starting a Christian club for underprivileged children near his home in London. But the harder he worked, the more futile his efforts seemed to be. After years of frustration and heartache, he was drawn to a simple passage of scripture in the Old Testament book of Haggai where God said to the nation of Judah, "Consider your ways." Thomas writes that at that moment, "in tears of hopelessness, I considered mine." "What a relief it is to discover that you have never been a greater failure than God always expected you to be. I unburdened my soul to a loving, understanding Savior."

"I told Him how utterly discouraged I had become. I could look back only upon seven years of barrenness; any further effort now seemed futile." "'God knows,' I thought to myself, 'how hard I have tried--desperately hard, and yet all to no avail. ... Noble longings and strivings after godliness had withered at the roots. In deep despair I prayed, 'Lord Jesus, I love you with all my heart and I shall never cease to be thankful that You died upon the Cross for me. I know that you are my Redeemer. I know that my sins are forgiven. I know that I am on my way to heaven. I know that I have cherished only one ambition--to be used in Your service to bring others to Yourself and bring glory to Your Name. But I am beaten. I just don't have what it takes, and I am on my back. I'm sorry, but I quit!'"

But then, he writes, “I thought the Lord Jesus would be greatly disappointed, but I almost heard Him sigh with relief. It was as if He said to me then, ‘Thank you! I have been waiting for this for seven years. All that time, with great sincerity but with misguided dedication, you have been trying to live *for* me a life that I can only live *through* you.’”

“How gloriously simple!” he wrote. “Christ does not *give* me strength, He *is* my strength. He does not *give* me victory, He *is* my victory.” “That, without a doubt, was my most memorable encounter with God. ... He waited only for my availability to demonstrate His marvelous all-sufficiency.” “[Now], every day becomes more exciting in the growing experience of discovering just how great God is.”

It looked like Moses was ready to throw in the towel--which was probably a good thing, because it may have been that he was beginning to understand his limitations and his need to depend upon the Lord completely and leave the results of his work to the Lord. So what did God do? Verse sixteen: “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. 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.’”

We don’t know why Moses hadn’t figured this out before. After all, it wasn’t so long before that Jethro, his father-in-law, asked him one day why he was spending so much time dealing with the peoples’ problems--Exodus, chapter eighteen. Moses told him--verse fifteen: “Because the people come to me to inquire of God; when they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide

between one person and another, and I make them know the statutes of God and his laws.” Jethro told him, “You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone.” So, he laid out a plan for Moses to teach the people about the Law of God, but appoint men over the people in groups of hundreds, fifties, and tens--verse 22: “And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure, and all this people / also / will go to their place in peace.”

Now, it's not Jethro that proposes a solution, but God Who tells him what to do here in verse sixteen: “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. 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.’” The one part of Moses’ prayer that was actually reasonable and not a prideful complaint / God readily answered. The rest He just passed over as if He hadn’t even heard it.

The plan? “Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them.” Although the number seventy has symbolic importance elsewhere in the Bible, we shouldn’t try to find some special meaning of the number here. Jewish writers of centuries later would look to this appointment of seventy to trace the origin of the Sanhedrin that we read about in our New Testaments, but we can’t say for

sure. It's possible that this group of seventy was the same group that Moses had taken up to Mount Sinai about a year before, but again, we can't be sure. What we do know is that these men were selected for having been recognized for their faith and their dedication to serving the Lord.

For these seventy, the Lord would take some of the Spirit that was on Moses and put it on them, and they would bear the burden of the people with him, so that he would not bear that burden alone. The gifts of administration and proclamation that Moses had been given would be shared with others. Moses, of course, lost nothing in the distribution of these gifts; the seventy elders simply drew from the same fountain and fullness of the spirit granted to Moses, just as from a single flame a thousand candles may be lit without diminishing the light of the original flame, as one commentator suggests.

With this selection of the seventy in answer to Moses' complaint about the difficulty of caring for so many people, the Lord responds to the complaints of the people in their demand for something to eat besides manna. And they got exactly what they wanted--quail in superabundance; however, God used that as a teaching moment to let them know that their failure to trust Him for His provision in His time and the manner of His choosing brought judgment--verse 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. Therefore the name of that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had the craving."

So, it's often a good thing to thank God for unanswered prayers since He knows what's truly best for us. Alexander MacLaren ends his thoughts on this passage with these words: "All that [we] need is found in Him and in Him

alone. All that men have failed, and must always fail, to be, He is. Those eyes are blessed that ‘see no [one] any more save Jesus only.’ We need One who can satisfy our desires and fill our hungry souls, and Jesus speaks a promise, confirmed by the experience of all who have tested it when He declares: ‘[The one who comes to] Me shall never hunger.’ We need One who will dry our tears, and Jesus, when He says ‘Weep not,’ wipes them away and [checks] their sources, giving ‘the oil of joy for mourning.’ We need One who can hold us up in our journey, and minister strength to fainting hearts and vigour to weary feet, and Jesus ‘strengthens us with might in the inner man.’ We need One who will bring us to the promised land of rest, and Jesus brings many sons to glory, and wills that they be ‘with Him where He is.’ So let us turn away from the multiplicity of human insufficiencies to [turn to] Him who is our one [and] only help and hope, because He is all-sufficient and eternal.

Thank you for being part of our brief look at the journey of faith the Israelites followed as they made their way to the homeland God promised to them through Abraham. Next week, we turn to the Book of Numbers, chapter thirteen, verses seventeen through 31 where we’ll discover the backstory of why the Israelite’s brief, two-year journey to the Promised Land turned into a forty-year marathon.

As always, as it’s still a good thing to do, keep calm, trust in the Lord, and wash your hands! God bless you!

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