

Leviticus-Numbers
July 26, 2009
Leadership Tested
(or “Bread from Heaven. YUCK! Give Me Meat.”)
Numbers 11

I. Brief Review

The Jews have left Egypt and are traveling in the wilderness. God is leading them and providing for them. All is well...correct? No, we see rebellion after rebellion as the Israelites as a total group appear unable to trust fully in God. Today's episode is the first of rebellions recorded in Numbers, but from Exodus, we know that others have preceded it.

In Numbers 10, after over a year at Mt. Sinai and the Golden Calf incident, the Israelites set out towards the Promise Land. The cloud of the LORD went before them, not only providing direction but more importantly, giving constant assurance of His Presence. In light of this, it seems incredible that after only three days of travel, dissension sets in...or is it? While much of the following chapters describe God's wrath, let us focus on the evidence of His grace through out these times of discipline.

As God of the universe, did He have to put up with endless rebellions from the Israelites? From us today?

II. God's Fire: 11:1-3

Num 11:1-3

11:1 Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the LORD, and when he heard them his anger was aroused. Then fire from the LORD burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp. 2 When the people cried out to Moses, he prayed to the LORD and the fire died down. 3 So that place was called Taberah, because fire from the LORD had burned among them.

NIV

“Why me, O Lord?” Have you ever said these words or thought them?

We do not have a lot of detail about this rebellion; for others, we will have more. Yet, it is evident what happened. The Israelites had not been traveling for a long time. When they started to do so, walking or in wagons, loaded down with their possessions, plus water and perhaps other things, they would have had difficulty. Per the end of Chapter 10, it appears to have only taken three days for this to have happened:

Numbers 9-23-24

33 So they set out from the mountain of the LORD and traveled for three days. The ark of the covenant of the LORD went before them during those three days to find them a place to rest. 34 The cloud of the LORD was over them by day when they set out from the camp.

NIV

The text indicates that only “some” were consumed, although per the NIV’s interpretation of “them” in the text, no one died at this time because of rebellion, but apparently some of their things were destroyed by fire from the LORD. In either case, we might think of this a “warning shot.”

III. Nostalgia over the Past: Num 11:4-9

Num 11:4-9

4 The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, "If only we had meat to eat! **5** We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost — also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. **6** But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!"

7 The manna was like coriander seed and looked like resin. **8** The people went around gathering it, and then ground it in a handmill or crushed it in a mortar. They cooked it in a pot or made it into cakes. And it tasted like something made with olive oil. **9** When the dew settled on the camp at night, the manna also came down.

NIV

Was the past so great? What can you remember of the plight of the Israelites in Egypt? Actually, the comment on Egyptian food might have been true, but slaves were not typically overfed. Have they forgotten their treatment? Have they forgotten their call for a deliverer?

We have a parallel of the food complaint from Ex. 1:1-3. The answer then was manna from heaven. There is a reminder of it in verses 7-9 above. No one knows what is it...its very name means “What is it?” Despite their complaint, it could be used a lot of different ways.

The ability of human beings to find reasons for complaints is truly amazing. Even the richest person will have many!

IV. Moses’ Complaint: 11:10-15

Num 11:10-15

10 Moses heard the people of every family wailing, each at the entrance to his tent. The LORD became exceedingly angry, and Moses was troubled. **11** He asked the LORD, "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? **12** Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their forefathers? **13** Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, 'Give us meat to eat!' **14** I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. **15** If this is how you are going to treat me, put me to death right now — if I have found favor in your eyes — and do not let me face my own ruin."

NIV

If you were Moses, how would you have reacted to the situation? Was he reacting to the people’s complaint, or was he complaining to the LORD about the work that he had been given...that is he was “troubled” by the LORD’s reaction?

Moses has had it! The grousing of his charges on top of all his leadership burdens sends him into a deep pity party. Note God's response and the parallel to Elijah in I Kings 19.

NOTES: Although he was undoubtedly whining, his words are generally true, at least through verse 14.

Why does Moses become exasperated? Is it all right to complain to the LORD? If you feel that Moses acted improperly, what suggestions would you make to him for future interactions? By now, he (and we) must realize that he will have to deal with a lot of these rebellions in the future.

V. Help for Moses: Numbers 11:16-17

Num 11:16-17

16 The LORD said to Moses: "Bring me seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the Tent of Meeting, that they may stand there with you. 17 I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit that is on you and put the Spirit on them. They will help you carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone.

NIV

God responds to Moses' complaints with practical advice. First, concerning carrying the burden, He provides for helpers to provide leadership under Moses. God asks Moses to select them but also points out that He will be with them to enable their help,

We have seen Moses weaken before. In Exodus 17, we see Aaron and Hur helping Moses to hold up his hands so that Joshua will be successful in leading the army to defeat the Amalekites. In Exodus 18, Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, suggests additional leaders be appointed.

In the Exodus 18 chronicle, we also see them being appointed:

Ex 18:24-27

24 Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said. 25 He chose capable men from all Israel and made them leaders of the people, officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. 26 They served as judges for the people at all times. The difficult cases they brought to Moses, but the simple ones they decided themselves.

Note because of the way in which Hebrew uses past participle and past tense with the same verbs, we cannot really tell when the leaders were appointed, but I think that these two episodes occur at the same time. The Numbers chronology (as we tend to infer) seems to fit a little better and this also agrees with Deut 1:19ff, but the Exodus one is not impossible.

Why does Moses attempt to manage two million, or more, people without help? Do we ever try to do too much when there are a lot of people out there who might be

able to help us? Why does the Lord use others to help us? When should we let others help us? When should we offer to help others?

VI. An Aside: Two Men : Numbers 11:18-25

26 However, two men, whose names were Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp. They were listed among the elders, but did not go out to the Tent. Yet the Spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. **27** A young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp."

28 Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses' aide since youth, spoke up and said, "Moses, my lord, stop them!" **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 on them!" **30** Then Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

NIV

Apparently two men do not follow Moses' orders and therefore appear to be operating under the LORD outside Moses' leadership. Joshua is bothered by this, but Moses is not bothered by it since they are doing the work of the LORD. Moses' complete selflessness is demonstrated here. If the LORD is choosing to work through them, how can Moses be critical of them without being critical of the LORD?

VII. Give Them What They Want: Numbers 11:31-34

31 Now a wind went out from the LORD and drove quail in from the sea. It brought them down all around the camp to about three feet above the ground, as far as a day's walk in any direction. **32** All that day and night and all the next day the people went out and gathered quail. No one gathered less than ten homers. Then they spread them out all around the camp. **33** But while the meat was still between their teeth and before it could be consumed, the anger of the LORD burned against the people, and he struck them with a severe plague. **34** Therefore the place was named Kibroth Hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had craved other food.

NIV

Having dealt with Moses' complaint, God now addresses the Israelites' complaint (in chiastic order). The LORD gives them what they wanted...and a little something extra. The food makes them sick; we do not know fully how the LORD chose to accomplish this, but it is clear that the sickness is from Him.

Earlier, no one is recorded as having died. Here some do die. From this lesson, we should learn the importance of heeding warnings from the Lord today. How do these warnings come to us?

VIII. Different Treatment of Moses' and Israelites' Complaints

In this lesson, we see three ways in which the LORD dealt with complaints:

- Warning concerning difficulty in traveling
- Deaths because of complaints about food
- Help because of exasperation from being overburdened.

Why do you think that we see these differences in the LORD's response? How will He respond to our complaints? When should we complain? If we do complain, how should we complain? What do we need to keep in mind when we discuss difficulties with the LORD?