

Grumbling in the Ranks

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- [0 : 0 0] Last week we were in Numbers chapter 10 and we're picking up the story as the people begin their journey into the wilderness as they head towards the promised land. And we pick it up here in Numbers chapter 11.
- 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.
- Then the people cried out to Moses and Moses prayed to the Lord and the fire died down. So the name of that place was called Tereba because the fire of the Lord burned among them.
- 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.
- [1 : 0 7] Now the manna was like coriander seed and its appearance like that of Bedlam. The people went about and gathered it and ground it in hand mills and beat it in mortars and boiled it in pots and make cakes of it.
- And the taste of it was like that of cakes baked with oil. When the dew fell upon the camp at night, the manna fell with it. 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. Moses said to the Lord, why have you dealt ill with your servants?
- And why have I not found favor in your sight that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive the 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 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.
- [2 : 1 9] 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. Then the Lord said to Moses, Gather for me 70 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.
- And say to the people, consecrate yourselves for tomorrow and you shall eat meat. For you have wept in the hearing of the Lord saying, who will give us meat to eat for what is better for us in Egypt?

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 10 days or 20 days, but a whole month until it comes out of your nostrils because 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? But Moses said, the people among whom I am number 600,000 on foot and you have said, I will give them meat that they may eat a whole month.

[3 : 45] 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? And the Lord said to Moses, is the Lord's hand shortened?

Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not. So, Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord. And he gathered 70 men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent.

Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the 70 elders. And as soon as the spirit rested on them, they prophesied.

But they did not continue doing it. Now two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad and the other named Medad. And the spirit rested on them.

They were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent. And so they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.

[4 : 48] And Joshua, the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth, said, My Lord Moses, stop them. But Moses said to 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? And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp. Then a wind from the Lord sprang up and it brought quail from the sea and let them fall beside the camp.

About a day's journey on this side and a day's journey on the other side around the camp. And about two cubits above the ground. And the people rose all that day and all night and all the next day and gathered the quail.

Those who gathered least gathered ten homers. And they spread them out for themselves all around the camp. 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 Hatava. Because there they buried the people who had the craving.

[6 : 01] From Kibroth Hatava, the people journeyed to Hazeroth. And they remained at Hazeroth. Amen. Well, do you please have Numbers chapter 11.

If you have it there open in front of you as we spend a few moments now looking at this passage together. So Numbers chapter 11. So last week we saw the Israelites make a promising start on their march through the wilderness to the promised land back there in chapter 10.

We learned that for the Israelites to make it to that land they had to keep on obeying the Lord. Keep obeying his words. And they needed to remember that the Lord was with them as they went through the wilderness fighting for them as they make their way.

And then all of a sudden here in chapter 11 we read these words. And the people complained in the hearing of the Lord. Where did that come from?

We've not seen anything like this so far in the book of Numbers. And yet we're not all that surprised, are we? The people have a bit of a track record of this sort of thing.

[7 : 24] If you were to flick back 12 months or so back into the book of Exodus, you would find a number of such episodes of grumbling and complaining just like this one. But is grumbling such a big deal?

Is it really a sin deserving of punishment? Isn't it just one of those things that we do? We complain. Surely as people we make a habit of grumbling about everything from the weather to the state of the Scottish cricket team.

Does it really matter if we complain a bit about the Christian life, about church, about God himself? You know the sort of things that people say.

I just don't like the color of the preacher's tie. The flowers this morning, they were just awful. I'm just so busy and on so many rotas.

And so and so is doing nothing. This building project is a real hassle. Now some of those are trivial, some more serious. But it's often these sorts of things that we grumble about, isn't it?

[8 : 32] Grumbling is easy to overlook because we don't think it's serious. But the thing is, the Old Testament does think it's serious and so does the New.

And this is what we have in our chapter this morning. Grumbling and complaining. It's a bit sober, but we need to deal with it. And as we'll see, grumbling against the Lord is dangerous because of two things.

Grumblers doubt the provisions and the promises of the Lord. Grumblers doubt the provisions and the promises of the Lord. And secondly, grumbling is dangerous because grumblers, as we'll see, deserve the punishment of the Lord.

Grumblers deserve the punishment of the Lord. At root, grumbling is an unbelief in what God has said. So let's look at these verses together, shall we?

I'm going to be focusing on the main story here in Numbers 11 from verses 4 to the end of the chapter. But just notice there in verses 1 to 3, we have a very short, grumbling scenario, which sets the scene for what is to come in the next 10 chapters.

[9 : 44] It's a familiar pattern, as we'll come to see in later chapters. But just look at that there, 1 to 3. We see complaining there in verse 1. Then the Lord is angry.

And then the people cry out because the Lord is judging. He is, the fire burns among the camp. They cry out. And Moses intercedes for the people.

And then the Lord relents. And this is a pattern we see again and again and again throughout the following 10 chapters here in Numbers. And you'll recognize some of these things as we look at verses 4 to the end together this morning.

But just notice that opening bit. It sort of sets the scene for what's to come. So let's look again. Verses 4 to 15 first. And we see here that grumblers doubt the provisions and the promises of the Lord.

Grumblers doubt the provisions and the promises that the Lord makes. Look at verse 4 there, where we see the rabble. They have a strong craving.

[10 : 47] Now the rabble, they're sort of the riffraff. They're the people on the edge of the camp of the people of Israel. It's perhaps the non-Israelites who have joined along on the exodus. And they're there on the edge of the camp.

And they develop this strong craving. But the satisfaction quickly spreads. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, oh, that we had meat to eat.

So it starts with the rabble, the riffraff on the edge of the camp. And quickly, all of Israel is complaining. They're weeping. Oh, that we had meat to eat.

What is the nature of the grumbling here? Well, it essentially boils down to a dissatisfaction with the Lord's provision. A doubting that he would do what he promised to do and bring them safely to the land.

It's a dissatisfaction that the Lord provides. They have nothing but this manner to eat in the wilderness. And they look back with fondness to the days in Egypt.

[11 : 48] Remember the fish. Remember the cucumbers. Remember the onions and garlic. They were the truly glorious days back in Egypt.

That was the pinnacle. Really? Is that really the case? You see, their present perspective on what the Lord was providing was all wrong. They grumbled because they forgot.

They didn't see things in the past as they really were. Was it really that rosy in Egypt before they were rescued? I don't think so. In Egypt, the people of Israel were under a cruel slavery.

And don't forget that infamous Egyptian no-male child policy. The Egyptians obliterated a whole generation of baby boys from the Israelites. Was it really that rosy back in Egypt?

Beware the rose-tinted glasses. The Israelites needed a trip to Spexavos. Their present perspective on what the Lord was providing was all wrong.

[12 : 54] Because they forgot the reality of the past. They thought the past was better than it actually was. Look out for that in yourself. Misremembering the past.

Harking back to the good old days. A longing for an unreal past is excellent fuel for dissatisfaction with the present. The Israelites' perspective on their present situation was all wrong as well.

Not only were they misremembering the past, but they were seeing the present all wrong as well. They were forgetting that they were camping out. They were not yet at their destination. They were marching to the promised land.

They weren't there yet. It was always going to be uncomfortable. And the Christian life might often look like a wilderness. It's often not easy. But we're not really promised in many places that the Christian life will be easy.

It's difficult. We're camping out. We're not yet at the promised land. But it may actually be the case that things are difficult now.

[13 : 59] It might actually be the case that things were better in the past. That might be true. And there is room in the Christian life for crying out in the difficulties of life.

Particularly in the Psalms. In the book of Job. We see individuals wrestling with God as they live in the pits of life. And those sorts of complaints are legitimate.

We can make those sorts of complaints to the Lord. But that's not what we have here in Numbers 11. It's a different order of complaint and grumbling we have here in Numbers. What we have in these opening verses is a vision problem.

They didn't see the past as it really was. And they didn't see the present reality for what it was either. Notice in verses 7 to 9 the reality of what the Lord was providing for them.

They're complaining about the manna. They want to go back to Egypt. But here we get the reality. And we get a little aside. It's almost like a little Wikipedia article on what manna is.

[15 : 05] It could be prepared in a variety of ways. It could be boiled. It could be baked. It could have manna pie or manna curry. It's like a summary of the Great British Bake Off.

All these different ways you can create different things from manna. It tasted nice as well. It was free. It came down every night.

This was a remarkable provision of the Lord. And yet the people weren't satisfied with what he was providing. I wonder if this is something you might recognize in yourself.

A dissatisfaction with what the Lord is giving you right now. We all struggle with that, don't we? I know I'm always looking over the fence to my neighbor's garden.

The grass is always greener. Quite literally, it is greener. But that's just the nature of us, isn't it? We don't see what God is providing for us now.

[16:01] Often all I can see is the things that God isn't giving now. And I suppose if you look at the Israelites' complaint here, if you took it on its own, complaining about eating manna instead of the meat and all the stuff they ate in Egypt, if you took that complaint on its own, if you took these verses out of the context of the bigger story, then you might actually think their complaint is fair enough.

I think most of us would agree, wouldn't we? I'd rather eat meat and garlic and cucumbers than manna. What's wrong with wanting a bit of variety in the diet? It's probably a legitimate complaint if you forget all that God had done for these people in the past year.

And even before that, if you forget about the plagues he brought down on the Egyptians, if you forget about the wonderful Exodus escape, if you forget about the crossing of the Red Sea, if you forget about the covenant made it stay, if you forget about the land he's promised, which is just 11 days march away, if you forget all that stuff, then yeah, fair enough, these are legitimate complaints.

But we can't forget, the Israelites shouldn't have forgotten that all that the Lord had provided for them, all that he had been doing, all that he was continuing to do, all that he was promising to do, they, and indeed we, need to remember that this is a God who has proved himself again, and again, and again in their history.

He's a God who has proved himself to us as a church, again, and again, and again, he is trustworthy. So regardless of present circumstances, which taken on their own, might be deserving of a good grumble, look on the God who has provided everything.

[17:56] He has proven himself, ultimately in the past, for us on the cross, and ultimately in the future, when he returns again, as we go to that land he has promised.

But also in a million different ways daily, he provides for us. So remember those things, if we're tempted to grumble, if we're tempted to forget the provisions and the promises of the laws.

Before we move on, a quick observation. Look again at the start of our section, verse 4. Grumbling is a disease, that spreads, and it spreads quickly.

Grumbling is contagious. Starting with the rabble. It isn't long before all of Israel is joining in. It started with the rabble on the edge of the camp, and quickly everyone was joining in.

So watch who you associate with. Hanging out with a grumbler. Before you know it, you'll start sympathizing, then understanding, then agreeing, and then joining in.

[19:06] Quickly spreads. I know that from my own experience. I'm sure you know the same. So watch out for the grumbler. Well, that's the people of Israel grumbling away.

But also notice Moses, in verse 10, hearing the people's weeping, he turns to the Lord and unloads his burden. Why have you dealt ill with your servants?

And why have I not found favor in your sight that you lay the burden of all this people on me? I'm not able to carry this burden alone. The burden is too heavy. He even goes so far as to say, if you will treat me like this, kill me at once.

Moses cannot bear this burden. Hundreds of thousands of people grumbling, and it's all on his shoulders. What to make of this? Is Moses joining in the grumbling of the people here?

Is Moses deserving of criticism as well as the people? Well, I don't think so. Remember who Moses is. He's God's chosen leader of the people of Israel.

[20 : 10] He's the mediator between God and Israel. He feels that great burden of this huge mass of grumblers. He cannot bear it. He'd rather die.

Yet, Moses doesn't find his pals and start having a whinge. No, he turns to the Lord and he brings his concerns to him. James Philip puts it this way.

Moses is not so much abdicating or throwing off his own responsibility for the people as he is pleading with God that the duty of providing for Israel's needs lies with him as their redeemer rather than with himself.

So Moses is recognizing that it's the Lord who must provide. It's him. So there's Israel and Moses, a grumbling people who forget the provisions of the Lord.

So how does God respond? What's the response to the people? Well, let's look on to the second half of our section, verses 16 to the end. And we see here that grumblers deserve the punishment of the Lord.

[21 : 18] Grumblers deserve punishment. So we see here how God responds. In response to Moses' demand for help, God graciously provides.

And in response to the people's demand for meat, God gives them over to their desire and they are punished. God gives them over.

They're punished. So Moses is graciously provided for the people are handed over. They're punished. Let me just whiz through the section just to show you how it works.

Verses 16 to 20, we see the Lord setting out his response to both Moses and to the people. He says, what am I going to do? And then verses 21 to 22, we see Moses doubting.

He puts it on himself again. I can't provide for all these people. How will I give them meat? And then in verse 23, we have a key verse where the Lord reminds Moses that he always does what he promises.

[22 : 25] Verse 23, let me read that. And the Lord said to Moses, is the Lord's hand shortened? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not.

Moses and indeed the people were doubting that God could do what he said he would do. But here the Lord is very clear. I am able to do what I say I will do. Just watch.

And then verses 24 to the end, we see that this is indeed the case. The Lord delivers on his promises. So let's look first at how the Lord responds.

First to Moses and then to the people. To Moses, the Lord shows great grace. He provides a way for Moses' burden to be reduced. He instructs Moses to gather 70 of the elders of the people to come together and he will take some of the spirit that is on Moses and put it onto the people, onto the 70 elders so that they can share the burden, they can share the load so that it's not all on Moses.

And this is exactly what happens. Look down to verse 24 and following. God delivers on his promise. It's a slightly strange incident, isn't it? These elders gather, the spirit goes on and they start prophesying.

[23 : 43] What's going on here? Well, God takes from Moses some of the spirit that he's placed on him and transfers part of it to the 70 elders.

And when they receive the spirit, they start prophesying for a time. And that's to demonstrate that the Lord has indeed empowered these people for leadership along with Moses.

It authenticates their leadership. They were given God's stamp of approval. The great burden of leading the people is shared. What then of the people?

That's Moses. God is gracious. He helps him with leading the people. What about the people then? Well, God grants their wish for meat. And boy, does he grant it.

Look at verse 18. Say to the people, consecrate yourselves for tomorrow you shall eat meat. For you have wept in the hearing of the Lord, saying, who will give us meat to eat? For it was better for us in Egypt.

- [24 : 42] Therefore, the Lord will give you meat and you shall eat. You shall not eat just one day or two days or ten or twenty, but a whole month until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you because you have rejected the Lord who is among you.

The Lord delivers on that promise from verse 31 to the end of our passage. Enormous quantities of a quail land beside the camp and while the meat was yet between their teeth, the Lord struck the people down with a very great plague.

Do we see here the seriousness of the people's grumbling? Their complaining. Verse 20 is key. This is the Lord's verdict on the people and the Lord's verdict is the one we need to pay attention to.

Underlying it all was a rejection of the Lord. That's what their grumbling amounted to. Rejection and unbelief in his promise.

They believed their eyes. They believed what they saw around them rather than what God had promised, what he had said. They doubted that God would do what he said he would do. They were basically saying God doesn't actually know what's best for us.

- [26 : 01] We know better. We want to go back to Egypt. And the Lord's response is decisive. It's judgment. He gives them over to what they wanted. He grants their meat.

It's rather sobering, isn't it? But we need to ask why does Moses include this in the book of Numbers? Why does this account appear?

Remember who he was writing for. Moses was writing to that second generation who stood on the brink of the promised land. He includes this section to warn them against grumbling because in reality grumbling is a rejection of the Lord and it deserves punishment.

Don't do it, says Moses. Rather than grumble, believe in what God has said. Act in response to what he has said, not what you see. That's his message. Go on what God has said.

What about for us? That was Moses' message for them and it's basically the same for us. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul makes reference to this very incident here in Numbers and he writes this, now these things took place as examples for us that we might not desire evil as they did.

- [27 : 24] We must not put Christ to the test as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble as some of them did and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction on whom the end of the ages has come.

That's Paul writing to the New Testament church in Corinth. Paul holds up the Old Testament people here as an example to avoid. And people are the same whether it's over 3,000 years ago, these people here in the wilderness, whether it's 2,000 years ago in Corinth, or today, here and now, we're the same sorts of people.

The temptation to grumble will always be there. Don't do it is Moses' message to the second generation. Don't do it is Paul's message to the Corinthians. Same message to us, to you.

Don't do it because it belies a distrust in who God is and what God has said he would do. It reveals a forgetfulness of what God has done in the past.

We, as a church, are entering a tricky few months with the building project next door. It started this week. There was lots of banging and bashing going on. It's only going to take a few months, but it doesn't take long for grumbling to take root.

[28 : 53] As a church, we have prepared well. People are on board, but beware. Beware of looking back to the so-called glory days, particularly things about buildings.

Don't look back when we had the building on Buchanan Street. Those were the glory days. Don't look back with rose-tinted glasses as we endure the temporary discomforts of the building work over the next few months, the dust, the noise, the inconvenience.

There'll be plenty of things to grumble about, but think carefully before jumping in. Ask yourself some questions. Is it a legitimate concern?

Is it a concern like that of Moses, an unbearable burden? Or is it more like that of the people who just forget what God has promised and done? Is it concern that needs to be mentioned to Willie and the other leaders?

Do they need to be made aware of it? Who are you making your concern known to? Have you brought your concern first to the Lord in prayer? Or is it making its first public outing with friends grumbling away?

[30 : 03] Be careful because grumbling is contagious. So as we head into this time as a church, just remember the example of the Israelites. Don't do it.

Don't grumble. But what hope for us? What hope? Because in reality we all grumble, don't we, from time to time?

What can we do in the face of past grumbling? And what can we do to guard ourselves against future grumbling? Well, just as the army of Israel had a mediator between them and God, we too have a mediator, but a far better one.

We have the Lord Jesus Christ. He stands between us and our Heavenly Father. He does not give up on his people after one incident of grumbling. He doesn't need 70 helpers to share the burden.

He is always there. He is always able to intercede for us. But more than that, we have seen that grumbling is serious and deserving of judgments.

[31 : 11] And Jesus has taken on himself the punishment for all our sin, including our grumbling. It is because of our grumbling and other sins that Jesus went to the cross where he experienced the full weight of God's wrath on himself.

Our sin is counted to him. Our grumbling is counted to him. And his goodness, his obedience, is wonderfully counted to us. There is hope for the grumbler.

There is hope for all of us. And doesn't this also give us resources to fight the temptation to grumble in the future? As we see all that God has provided for us in Jesus Christ, as we see all that, all that we have in him, all that he has secured for us, the promised land to come.

What right have we to complain about the rations along the way? We're living through the wilderness of life, but we have great promises, great security. We have a certain hope that we will reach that promised land.

God is with you. We saw that last week. His Holy Spirit is with every believer, strengthening you for the journey, keeping your eyes fixed on Christ, what he has done for us, what he has done for you, what he is doing now and will do in the future.

[32 : 36] God is with us. Don't forget what we have in Christ. We have forgiveness, we have the resources to fight future temptation. So grumbling, it's a big deal, as we've seen here, but learn the lesson of Numbers 11.

Don't do it. learn to see things rightly. Look back without the rose-tinted glasses. Look to the present without dissatisfaction for all that the Lord has given you now.

And look to the future, remembering that God delivers on his promise. They are sure and certain. Give grumbling no grounds to take root here in the Tron Church.

Today, tomorrow, over the duration of the building project and beyond. Give grumbling no grounds. Amen. Let me pray.

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for your word. even sobering words like the ones we've read in Numbers 11. Help us to take note.

[34 : 00] Help us to learn from their example. And so focus our attention on all that you do for us, all that you provide. You are a good God. And in the wilderness of life, you have given us all we need as we camp out in this wilderness.

Keep our eyes focused on the glory to come. We ask it for your sake. Amen.