

NUMBERS

Chapter 11

The People Complain

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. 2 Then the people cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the LORD, and the fire died down. 3 So the name of that place was called Taberah, [a] because the fire of the LORD burned among them. 4 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! 5 We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. 6 But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” 7 Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its appearance like that of bdellium. 8 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. 9 When the dew fell upon the camp in the night, the manna fell with it. 10 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. 11 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? 12 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? 13 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.’ 14 I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me. 15 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.”

11:1 *people complained.* The first ten chapters of Numbers repeatedly emphasize the complete obedience of Moses and the people to the dictates of the Lord. But only three days into their march, the people reverted to disloyal complaints. They had expressed the same complaints a year earlier only three days after their deliverance at the waters of the “Red Sea” (Ex 15:22–27) and subsequently had complained about manna (Ex 16) and a lack of water (Ex 17:1–7). (CSB)

Comparatively few incidents along the way are recorded. Almost all are variations of the same theme: Israel complains (“murmurs”) and revolts against God’s guidance. The story of the chosen people is not an epic of national heroism nor the glorious record of a people willing to suffer hardship for the sake of freedom. (TLSB)

their misfortunes. They complained (vv 1–3); wept over the food (vv 4–35); rebelled against Moses (chs 12; 16); “raised a loud cry” (14:1) after hearing the report of the spies (ch 13); disobeyed an express command not to enter Canaan from the south (14:39–45); “quarreled with Moses” because of lack of water (20:2–5); even after reaching Moab, they “spoke against God and against Moses” (21:5). So it had been from the beginning (cf Ex 14:10–12; 15:22–25; 16; 17). And so it is with us. Only because “the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,” because “His mercies ... are new every morning” (Lm 3:22–23), do we remain His true children and not turn back to the slavery of self, materialism, and the demonic bondage of evil (Mal 3:6) (TLSB)

fire from the LORD. By God’s mercy, this purging fire was limited to the outskirts of the camp. The phrase sometimes refers to fire ignited by lightning (as probably in 1Ki 18:38). (CSB)

11:4-6 In contrast with what the Israelites had experienced in Egypt, the wilderness was a completely different setting with new hardships. The food they had brought from Egypt more than a year earlier was now long gone, leading them to un-thankfulness. Luther: “We may know and judge how full the world is nowadays of false preachers and false saints, who fill the ears of the people with preaching good works. There are indeed a few who teach them how to do good works, but the greater part preach human doctrines and works that they themselves have devised and set up...These men are parasites and hirelings; slave, not sons; aliens, not heirs. They turn themselves into idols, whom God is to love and praise and for whom He is to do the very things they ought to do for Him. They have no spirit, nor is God their Savior. His good gifts are their Savior, and with them God must serve them as their lackey. They are the Children of Israel, who were not content in the desert eating bread from heaven, but wanted meat, onions, and garlic, too (Num:4-6)” (TLSB)

11:4 *rabble*. An apt term for the non-Israelite mixed group of people who followed the Israelites out of Egypt, pointing to a recurring source of complaints and trouble in the camp. Those who did not know the Lord and his mercies incited those who did know him to rebel against him. (CSB)

Lit, “the gathered ones,” a unique term in Hbr Scripture. Likely non-Israelite slaves who escaped with the Israelites and believed in the Lord because of the miracles and plagues. (TLSB)

These were non-Israelites who had followed them out of Egypt. They did not know the Lord and unfortunately misled those who did know the Lord. These are mentioned in Exodus 12:38. Because they have little or no knowledge of God or faith in him, they are quick to react poorly to difficult situations. It shows how easy it is for Christians to be swept along by the world and its cravings.

Acts 17:5 “But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason’s house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd.”

had a strong craving – The history of man-kind is that of never fully appreciating what they have been given and always looking for something better instead of being thankful (Adam & Eve, David & Bathsheba, Solomon, Judas).

Luke 17:17-18 “Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”

Romans 1:21 “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.”

oh that we had meat to eat! As in Ex 16, the people began to complain about their diet, forgetting what God had done for them (see Ps 106:14). Certainly meat was not their common fare when they were slaves in Egypt. Now that they were in a new type of distress, the people romanticized the past and minimized its discomforts. (CSB)

This is the same as Exodus 16. They forgot several things: (1) What God had done for them, and (2) that they didn’t have it all that good in Egypt and very likely didn’t have much meat there either.

They still had their herds and flocks, but the consumption of meat from these animals had to be reduced in the wilderness; moreover, their appetite was whetted for other delicacies. (Kretzmann)

11:5 *fish ... cucumbers ... garlic.* Suggestive of the varieties of foods available in Egypt, in contrast to the diet of manna in the desert. (CSB)

The Egyptian text “In Praise of the City Ramses” celebrates a similar bounty in a food list. Fish was an important source of protein for Egyptians and Israelites. (TLSB)

A variety they knew about but probably which they did not have very often when they were in Egypt. This is some more of the thankless theme.

11:7–9 Moses illustrates just how fine the Lord’s provision was for His people. (TLSB)

11:7 *manna.* Several naturalistic explanations for the manna have been given. For example, some equate it with the sticky and often granular honeydew that is excreted in Sinai in early June by various scale insects and that solidifies rapidly through evaporation. But no naturally occurring substance fits all the data of the text, and several factors suggest that manna was in fact the Lord’s unique provision for his people in the desert: 1. The meaning of the Hebrew word for “manna” suggests that it was something unknown by the people at the time. 2. The appearance and taste of the manna (see Ex 16:31) suggest that it is not something experienced by other peoples in other times. 3. The daily abundance of the manna and its regular periodic surge and slump (double amounts on the sixth day but none on the seventh day, Ex 16:22, 27) hardly fit a natural phenomenon. 4. Its availability in ample supply for the entire desert experience, no matter where the people were (Ex 16:35), argues against a natural substance. 5. The keeping of a sample of the manna in the ark for future generations (Ex 16:33–34) suggests that it was a unique food. (CSB)

11:10 *at the door of his tent* – The contagion of dissatisfaction had spread throughout the camp like a virulent pestilence. (Kretzmann)

The people’s discontent led to discontent between the Lord and Moses. (TLSB)

anger of the Lord blazed hotly. The rejection of his gracious gift of heavenly food (called “bread from heaven” in Ex 16:4) angered the Lord. God had said that the reception of the manna by the people would be a significant test of their obedience (Ex 16:4). In view of the good things he was to give them (10:32), the people were expected to receive each day’s supply of manna as a gracious gift of a merciful God, and a promise of abundance to come. In spurning the manna, the people had spurned the Lord. They had failed the test of faith. (CSB)

This was more than a diet issue. God had given them manna as a test of their faith in him and they had failed badly. By grumbling about manna they were also rebelling against God which was a much larger problem. It meant that they did not trust his promises.

Moses...why have you dealt. The people’s reaction to God’s provision of manna was troubling to Moses as well. Instead of asking the Lord to understand the substance of their complaint, Moses asked him why he was given such an ungrateful people to lead. (CSB)

With this second outbreak of dissatisfaction, Moses felt the whole wrath of God in his inmost soul, and he feared that his entire mission was a failure. (Kretzmann)

Even God’s selected leader became overwhelmed by this problem. Instead of leading, he too, complained to God about his lot in life. Verses 11-15 detail Moses’ complaints.

11:11–15 A prayer of distress and complaint, filled with urgency, irony and passion. (CSB)

11:11 *why* – He felt that the care of the entire people in governing and leading them was so grievous as to seem an unmerciful treatment on the part of God. This was the language of despondency, not of the kind that murmurs against the Lord in secret, but of that which seeks help and strength from Him alone. It is the complaint of weakness, but not the grumbling of unbelief. (Kretzmann)

Israel's complaints stretched Moses' patience to the breaking point and caused him to complain, resembling Israel's murmurings and weeping. Because Moses turned to the Lord in his feelings of insufficiency and frustration, his complaint did not degenerate into rebellion. (TLSB)

11:12 *Did I conceive all this people?* The implication is that the Lord conceived the people of Israel, that he was their nurse and that their promises were his. Moses asks that he be relieved of his mediatorial office, for "the burden is too heavy for me" (v. 14; cf. Elijah, 1Ki 19). Even death, Moses asserts (v. 15), would be preferable to facing the continuing complaints of the people. (CSB)

It was not natural, it was not meet that Moses should bear the responsibility for the entire people alone; he meant to imply that God, as the Creator and Father of Israel, Ex. 4, 22; Is. 63, 16, should make some provision by which he, a poor weak man, might be relieved of his great burden. (Kretzmann)

This is irony. The Lord had provided Moses with his own mother as a nurse (Ex. 2:7-9) and had stayed with Moses throughout the recent struggle from Midian to Egypt to Sinai. (TLSB)

11:13 *weep before me* – They behaved like screaming, self-willed infants, who will not listen to reason. (Kretzmann)

11:14 *I am not able to carry* – His feeble strength could not hold up the burden which had been laid upon him. (Kretzmann)

11:14 Note Jethro's advice to Moses in Ex 18. (TLSB)

11:15 *kill me* – Death would be a merciful deliverance in the circumstances. This great misfortune, which would surely kill him by inches. The experience of Moses and his manner of acting is that of many spiritual leaders of the people to this day, if all their efforts in behalf of the souls entrusted to them meet with little or no appreciation. Fortunate is the man who at that time turns to the Lord, even with an importunate prayer, and lays the matter entirely in the hands of Him who rules all things. (Kretzmann)

Moses reached a new level of distress, different from that experienced earlier. (TLSB)

11:1–15 The grumbling begins only three days into the journey. Perhaps aching muscles or sore feet cause their discomfort. God provides guidance to the Promised Land and manna to eat on the way; in return for His love, He receives grumbling. Sometimes, obeying God causes pain and suffering. When tempted to grumble, think of Christ at Gethsemane and how He turned His pains into prayers. Meditate on how He willingly submitted to the Father's will for the sake of our salvation (Mt 26:39). • "How sweet the name of Jesus sounds In a believer's ear! It soothes our sorrows, heals our wounds, And drives away our fear. It makes the wounded spirit whole And calms the heart's unrest; 'Tis manna to the hungry soul And to the weary, rest." Amen. (LSB 524:1–2) (TLSB)

Elders Appointed to Aid Moses

16 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. 17 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. 18 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 it was better for us in Egypt.” Therefore the LORD will give you meat, and you shall eat. 19 You shall not eat just one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, 20 but a whole month, until it comes out at your nostrils 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?”’” 21 But Moses said, “The people among whom I am number six hundred thousand on foot, and you have said, ‘I will give them meat, that they may eat a whole month!’ 22 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?” 23 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.” 24 So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD. And he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent. 25 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 seventy elders. And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied. But they did not continue doing it. 26 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. 27 And a young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.” 28 And Joshua the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth, said, “My lord Moses, stop them.” 29 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!” 30 And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

11:16–34† The Lord’s response to the great distress of his prophet was twofold—mercy and punishment: 1. There was mercy to Moses in that his responsibility was now to be shared by 70 leaders (vv. 16–17). 2. There was a punishment on the people that was analogous to their complaint: They asked for meat and would now become sick with meat (vv. 18–34). (CSB)

11:16 *gather for me seventy men* – The Lord came to the aid of His weak and distraught servant, giving Moses a twofold solution to his problem. Moses’s task of administration was lightened by the appointment of 70 elders of Israel who were to “bear the burden of the people” with him (v. 17). By a supply of meat, the Lord also removed the immediate cause of Israel’s irritating weeping. (TLSB)

God acts to resolve the problem. Fortunately he never tires of us or our continued short-comings. By doing it this way he helps Moses in two ways: (1) He shows Moses that God has heard his concerns and (2) he spreads the load with the elders.

11:17 *some of the Spirit*. God’s Spirit equips the spirits of His servants in various degrees. Moses’ assistants were to work in harmony with him in carrying out God’s will. They were to be endowed with the same spiritual gifts that Moses possessed in extraordinary measure, but they were not to supplant him as the sole leader of the people. Aphrahat: “God and His Christ, though they are One, yet dwell in men who are many.... When He took away some of the Spirit of Moses, and the seventy men were filled with it, Moses nothing lacked, nor could it be known that anything was taken away from his Spirit” (*NPNF* 2 13:370). Cyrus of Jerusalem: “It was not Moses who bestowed the gift, but the Spirit.... He secretly alluded to what was to happen among us on the day of Pentecost; for He Himself came down among us. He had however also come down upon many before” (*NPNF* 2 7:122). (TLSB)

11:18 *you shall eat meat.* Their distress at the lack of variety in the daily manna had led the people to challenge the Lord's goodness. They had wailed for meat. Now they were going to get their fill of meat, so much that it would make them physically ill (v. 20). (CSB)

11:20 *until it comes out at your nostrils.* Humorous hyperbole expressing God's displeasure (TLSB)

you have rejected the LORD. The principal issue was not meat at all, but a failure to demonstrate proper gratitude to the Lord, who was in their midst and who was their constant source of good. (CSB)

A serious and somber condemnation. (TLSB)

11:21 *six hundred thousand men on foot.* The numbers are consistent: A marching force of this size suggests a total population of over 2,000,000 Moses' distress at providing meat for this immense number of people (v. 22) is nearly comical—the task is impossible. (CSB)

11:23 *Is the LORD's hand too short?* The human impossibility is an occasion for demonstrating the Lord's power. (CSB)

11:24 *went out* – Namely, from the Tabernacle, where he had brought his complaint before the Lord. (Kretzmann)

on the seventy elders – Possibly the same men chosen on Jethro's advice (cf Ex 18:21; 24:1). (TLSB)

11:25 *Spirit rested on them* – This is how he had been with them as they left Egypt and would continue to show his presence in this manner. His presence today can be found as we come to church and receive his gifts in the Word and Sacraments.

Matthew 17:5 “While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

Luke 21:27 “At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”

they prophesied.† The Hebrew verb here is not in the form in which it is usually found to express the mediation of a prophetic message through the Spirit. It probably means that they gave ecstatic expression to an intense religious experience (see 1Sa 10:5–6; 18:10; 19:20–24; 1Ki 18:29). (CSB)

The extraordinary manifestation of divine power took place only to validate the authority of the 70 elders. When they left the tent, this miraculous gift was no longer available to them. (TLSB)

God supplies all that we need. Jesus did not leave his disciples or us alone when he ascended into heaven. He sent the Holy Spirit. He has given us the Spirit through Baptism and we have the strength to live for him as we daily remember our Baptism.

This filled them with the same wisdom and understanding which characterized Moses, though not in the same degree. (Kretzmann)

did not continue. It seems that the temporary gift of prophecy to the elders was primarily to establish their credentials as Spirit-empowered leaders. (CSB)

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The word for prophecy means to speak or sing something inspirationally. This was not like the prophets who taught and foretold events, but more of an emotional lift for that particular situation. Here, too, God provided what was needed to help Moses and the Israelites get past this problem.

11:26 *remained in the camp* – They had not made it to the consecration rite. (TLSB)

registered. It implies a written record. (TLSB)

11:28 *Joshua...stop them* – Joshua feared that Eldad and Medad were assuming authority in competition with Moses (a threat that would arise in ch. 16). However, Moses assured him that the Lord gives His Spirit under various conditions for the same purpose (cf Lk 9:49-50). (TLSB)

11:29 Moses reiterates his exhaustion due to leadership (vv 11–15). (TLSB)

Are you jealous for my sake? Here the true spirit of Moses is demonstrated. Rather than being threatened by the public demonstration of the gifts of the Spirit by Eldad and Medad, Moses desired that all God's people might have the full gifts of the Spirit (cf. Php 1:15–18). This verse is a fitting introduction to the inexcusable challenge to Moses' leadership in ch. 12. (CSB)

As a true servant of God, who was not jealous for his own honor, but desired only the extension of God's influence and power, Moses wished only for a further extension of the Lord's gift of grace. A little more of this same Spirit in our days would help to solve many of the problems of the Church. (Kretzmann)

1 Corinthians 10:33 “even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.”

all ... prophets. Fulfilled at Pentecost (Ac 2). Even so, the Lord provides His people with leaders (Eph 4:8–16). (TLSB)

11:30 *returned to camp* – They all returned to their own tents, which were at some distance from the Tabernacle. Moses had his assistants, and he felt the relief. At present the Lord also gives understanding and wisdom to the men that are holding various offices in the Church, if they but use proper meekness in their work.

11:16–30 Earlier, we learned of Moses' helplessness as Israel's leader—one man amid a throng of rebellious people. Mercifully, God grants 70 elders to help Moses. Like Moses, you may at times feel frustration and become angry with the Lord. Thanks be to God, He is “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ps 86:15). In His mercy, the Lord provides for you and calls you to repentance and faith through His faithful servants. • Lord, You command us to call upon You in times of trouble, and You promise to deliver us. We thank You for hearing our prayer through Christ, our Lord. Amen. (TLSB)

Quail and a Plague

31 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. 32 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. 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. 34 Therefore the name of that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had the craving. 35 From Kibroth-hattaavah the people journeyed to Hazeroth, and they remained at Hazeroth.

11:31–32 Cf. the great provision of Jesus in the feeding of the 5,000 (Jn 6:5–13) and the 4,000 (Mt 15:29–39). In those cases the feeding was a demonstration of God’s grace; in this instance it was of God’s wrath. (CSB)

11:31 *quail from the sea.* A southeast wind over the gulf brings a large flock of migrating birds into the wilderness. The region is well known as a migration route for African, Asian, and European species. (TLSB)

a day’s journey. Distance over which the flock spread. (TLSB)

two cubits above the ground. C 36 in. Exhausted, they could not flee. (TLSB)

11:32 *spread them out.* Either sharing or drying the meat for preservation. (TLSB)

11:33 *between their teeth.* Bitter irony; they did not enjoy the food they so craved. (TLSB)

11:34 *Kibroth Hattaavah.* These graves marked the death camp of those who had turned against the food of the Lord’s mercy. (CSB)

11:31–35 The Israelites greedily hoard the quail, gathering at least 6 bushels per person. They eat some and dry the rest to eat later. Meat replaces God in their minds, just as wealth replaces God in Christ’s parable of the rich fool (Lk 12:16–21). As Job noted, “The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away” (Jb 1:21). In all circumstances, the Lord leads us to confess, “Blessed be the name of the LORD” (Jb 1:21), for He truly does bless us and supply our needs (cf Mt 6:11). • Father, with our daily bread, grant us faithful hearts, ever set on You. Amen. (TLSB)