

NUMBERS

Chapter 11

Fire From the Lord

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.

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)

11:3 *Taberah.* See NIV text note. (CSB)

Quail From the Lord

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. 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.” 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. ¹⁸ “Tell the people: ‘Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow, when you will eat meat. The LORD heard you when you wailed, “If only we had meat to eat! We were better off in Egypt!” Now the LORD will give you meat, and you will eat it. ¹⁹ You will not eat it for just one day, or two days, or five, ten or twenty days, ²⁰ but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it—because you have rejected the LORD, who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, “Why did we ever leave Egypt?”’” ²¹ But Moses said, “Here I am among six hundred thousand men on foot, and you say, ‘I will give them meat to eat for a whole month!’ ²² Would they have enough if flocks and herds were slaughtered for them? Would they have enough if all the fish in the sea were caught for them?” ²³ The LORD answered Moses, “Is the LORD’s arm too short? You will now see whether or not what I say will come true for you.” ²⁴ So Moses went out and told the people what the LORD had said. He brought together seventy of their elders and had them stand around the Tent. ²⁵ Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took of the Spirit that was on him and put the Spirit on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied, but they did not do so again. 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. 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. ³⁵ From Kibroth Hattaavah the people traveled to Hazereth and stayed there.

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."

BEGAN TO CRAVE OTHER FOOD – 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.”

If only 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 (see Ex 16:31 and NIV text note). 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 EACH AT THE ENTRANCE 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)

The LORD became exceedingly angry. 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 was troubled. 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 these 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 KEEP WAILING TO ME – They behaved like screaming, self-willed infants, who will not listen to reason. (Kretzmann)

11:14 I CANNOT CARRY ALL – 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 PUT ME TO DEATH – 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)

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 BRING ME SEVENTY OF ISRAEL'S ELDERS – 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 will 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 (see **note** on 1:46). 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 arm 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)

GATHERED SEVENTY MEN – Possibly the same men chosen on Jethro’s advice (cf Ex 18:21; 24:1). (TLSB)

11:25 LORD CAME DOWN IN A CLOUD – 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)

but they did not do so again. 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 CAMP – They had not made it to the consecration rite. (TLSB)

WERE LISTED – ESV has “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)

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.* See NIV text note. 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)