

Ministry of Grace Church

Numbers Chapter 11 – Speaker Notes

In order to understand the beginning of Numbers chapter eleven, we have to look back at a few verses in chapter 10.

In the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth day of the month, the cloud lifted from over the tabernacle of the testimony, and the people of Israel set out by stages from the wilderness of Sinai. And the cloud settled down in the wilderness of Paran. (Numbers 10:11-12)

When we compare this to Exodus 19:1, we see that it has been just under a year since the giving of the Ten Commandments. Then they moved on from the wilderness of Paran.

So they set out from the mount of the LORD three days' journey. And the ark of the covenant of the LORD went before them three days' journey, to seek out a resting place for them. And the cloud of the LORD was over them by day, whenever they set out from the camp. (Numbers 10:33-34)

This then brings us to the beginning of chapter 11, where we read:

Numbers 11:1-3

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 Taberah, because the fire of the LORD burned among them.

Why in the world were the Israelites complaining? The most likely reason is the fact that they have been stationary for nearly a year and now they are on a march of unknown duration. Also, keep in mind that there was a “mixed multitude” marching with them. The Hebrew word translated “mixed multitude” is sometimes translated as “rabble,” as it is in this translation. These people were not Israelites and were coming with the children of Israel most likely as a way to escape Egypt.

Yahweh was angry at the complaining of the people and he sent the “fire of the LORD” as punishment. There has been disagreement as to what this “fire” was. Some claim that it was lightning which struck just outside the camp. Others believe that it was a burning of the shrubbery just outside the encampment. And still others believe that it was a supernatural burning that had no apparent fuel.

The words translated “outlying parts of the camp” imply the extremities or outermost parts of the encampment. Therefore, it appears that this burning took place somewhere along the edges of the encampment where it is likely that the mixed multitude were camped.

Notice the strength of Moses’ faith at this point. He does not relay the complaint to God, but simply prays to Him and God quenched the fire. Either the bushes stopped burning as they were consumed, or the flames which appeared without fuel finally stopped, or the lightning ceased to strike. Whatever the case, the fire ceased in response to Moses’ prayer.

The name “*Taberah*” simply means “burning.” Since there is no mention of this place at the end of this chapter and there is no indication between this verse and verse four that there was any traveling between this place and the place of verse four (Kibroth Hattaavah), it appears that they are one and the same

place. Taberah may have been the name given to the extremity where the burning took place and Kibroth Hattaavah was the name of the encampment as a whole.

Numbers 11:4-9

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.” 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.

Here we see that it was the non-Israelite population (the “rabble” or “mixed multitude”) that began the discontent. And their complaining stirred-up the children of Israel.

Our text says that the people had a “strong craving” A literal translation would be, “they lusted a lust.” The implication is that it was an all-consuming lust that prevented them from focusing on anything else. Instead of having their focus on the current travels where all of their needs were being met or on the Promised Land which was described as a land flowing with milk and honey, the people still clung to the world of sin in their past where their pleasures had been satisfied.

Their current lust seems to be “meat.” They had apparently forgotten that *Yahweh* had provided them meat in the form of quail just before He began providing the manna. Due to their focus on lack of meat, they also began to focus on what they had in Egypt: “fish ... cucumbers ... melons ... leeks ... onions ... garlic” These are all foods that were so abundant in Egypt that even the poorest of the people could eat them any time they desired. It is likely that the children of Israel, while still in Egypt, complained about these foods which had become their staples. When they had these staples in abundance, they likely desired the more expensive and less available foods. However, now that these staples were no longer accessible to them, that is what they craved.

Numbers 11:10-15

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 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.”

It appears that the murmuring that was started by the mixed multitude had spread throughout the entire population. When God miraculously provides for His people and they respond with mourning (weeping), it is a direct affront to God and His provision. In the case of the Israelites, it is due to a lack of faith in God’s goodness. This, once again, shows God to have expectations of His people, demonstrating that He is not just all love and grace and forgiveness, but that He has expectations for us and is angered when we do not meet those expectations.

Moses's displeasure was not just with the complaining of the people, but also with God's anger and apparent lack of provision. From the previous verses we see that Moses feels afflicted by God and feels like he, Moses, is responsible for the happiness of the people under him. Could it be that Moses forgot about God's provision of meat in the Wilderness of Sin, recounted in Exodus 16? Could it be that in the eight months since his final descent of Mt. Sinai, Moses has begun to think of himself more highly than he should?

What is clear, from verse 14, is that Moses felt the burden of leading the people. This burden would consist of ensuring that they had sufficient water (God provided the food each day) and being constantly on the lookout for enemies. Also, Moses was responsible for dealing with the breakdown of the carts, the fatigue of the people, the welfare of pregnant women and those who are sick, and the safety and care of the flocks and herds. And even though God guided them with the pillar of cloud by day, Moses had to be constantly scouting the route ahead to ensure that they were not walking into a blind canyon or into an area that would be otherwise dangerous for the people. It is clear that Moses's responsibilities extended well beyond being the spiritual intercessor between the Israelites and God and being the judge of issues among the people.

Whether right or wrong, it is clear that Moses felt responsible for providing meat to the Israelites. The implication is that even Moses had been caught-up in the desire for the meat which had been in abundance in Egypt. He even appears to be at a point of desperation whereby he considers death to be preferable to the position he is currently in.

And - Moses had already forgotten the favor that God had shown him previously. During the past year Moses has enjoyed closer fellowship with *Yahweh* than any other Israelite. Twice he spent forty days in His presence, and he had the unique privilege of meeting with Him face to face and talking with Him as a man talks with his friend, in the tent of meeting. However, now that the Tabernacle had been built and the responsibility of making offerings within the holy place given over to Aaron and his sons, it appears that Moses' face to face meetings with God had become limited. Now that Moses was once again leading the march (which he had not done for nearly a year), he felt the pressure of the people apart from the presence of God.

Moses almost sounds like a child who has forgotten the love of his or her parent because he or she is not currently getting what is desired, "You don't really love me. If you did, you would ..."

Numbers 11:16, 17

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."

One has to wonder whether Moses' complaint was justified or not. Based on God's response, it appears justified.

God's solution to Moses's request to be killed rather than having to lead this rabble any further, was to ordain a group of the elders who would function under Moses's direction for the administration of the people. But God not only devised the structure for Moses, He also enabled them with a measure of His Spirit for the bearing of the burden along with Moses.

This is not the first occurrence of seventy elders. When Moses ascended part way up Mt. Sinai he was accompanied by seventy of the elders:

Then he said to Moses, “Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar. (Exodus 24:1)

Some believe that these seventy appointed by Moses were the initial members of the Sanhedrin, the religious rulers through the time of Christ and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. If this is true, it only goes to show how man corrupts even those things that were originally ordained by God, for it was the Sanhedrin who condemned Christ and insisted on His crucifixion. The Sanhedrin was actually composed of seventy-one, and sometimes of seventy-two, but it was always referred to as the seventy. This number also showed-up later in history as seventy (perhaps seventy-two) of the religious leaders of Israel who were selected to translate the Hebrew Tanakh into Greek, that document which we refer to as the Septuagint (meaning seventy).

Numbers 11:18-20

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. You shall not eat just one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, 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?”’”

Yahweh commanded the people to: “Consecrate yourselves.” The word consecrate comes from the Hebrew word *qadash*, meaning “to become separate.” This is the equivalent to the Greek word, *hagiadzō*. Both words imply separation from sin and from the world. The implication is “to be set apart from common use and set apart to use in the service and worship of God.” Therefore, both words carry the idea of being clean and holy.

The children of Israel, having been stirred-up by the mixed multitude (rabble), complained about not having meat to eat. This was, in effect, an accusation that God was not providing for them as He should. They were not content with what God provided and wanted more than they really needed. Paul promises the believers in Philippi that God will provide all our needs. We are never promised that He will provide all our wants.

And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:19)

In this case, the people did not “need” meat, because the manna provided them with all the nourishment that they needed for their wandering through the wilderness. Nonetheless, God provided them what they asked for. In fact, He provided in abundance. Not only did He provide them with meat for the day but for a month of days, so much so, that they would eventually loath the sight of such meat.

It’s fairly certain that if any of the Israelites were asked if they despised *Yahweh* they would have said, “certainly not!” However, their lack of faith in *Yahweh* and their complaining about how He provided for them are one and the same as despising Him. The Hebrew word translated “rejected” in our translation means “to despise, disdain, reject, or loathe someone or something.” Here’s how the Modern King James Version translated this.

Even a whole month, until it comes out at your nostrils, and it is hateful to you, because you have despised Jehovah among you, and have wept before Him, saying, Why did we come out of Egypt? (Numbers 11:20) [MKJV]

Notice that it is not just their displeasure with God’s provision that demonstrates their attitude toward God, but their displeasure with their present situation in general. They even complained that they would

rather be back in Egypt under the whip of the taskmasters instead of free and under God's divine guidance.

Numbers 11:21 - 23

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!' 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."

Moses' response to God's words was to question His ability because Moses was only looking at the physical circumstances (which God is not bound by). This is amazingly similar to the reaction of Jesus' disciples when told to feed the multitudes:

In those days, when again a great crowd had gathered, and they had nothing to eat, he called his disciples to him and said to them, "I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way. And some of them have come from far away." And his disciples answered him, "How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?" **Mark 8:1-4**

It is also interesting to note that Jesus' disciples questioned His ability to feed the people in the "wilderness." If they had but remembered *Yahweh's* ability to feed 600,000 in the rugged wilderness of Sinai, they might not have thought it so unreasonable for Jesus to feed a few thousand where they were.

Yahweh's response to Moses, "Is the LORD's hand shortened?" indicates the true attitude of his heart. Moses didn't believe God was able to provide as He had promised. God's response was a challenging question to Moses. In effect He said, "Do you think I am not able to do as I have promised?"

Numbers 11:24 - 26

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. 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. 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.

According to verse sixteen, the place where Moses gathered the elders was the "Tent of meeting," or "Tabernacle of the congregation." These words are used to describe two different structures. The first was the Tent of Meeting where Moses met alone with Yahweh, outside the camp. The other was the Tabernacle of the Congregation that was constructed in the center of the camp. This is where the Ark of the Covenant, the lampstand, the table of showbread, and the altar of incense were located. (See **Exodus 27:21; 28:43; 20:4, 10, 11, 30, 32, 42, 44; 30:16, 18, 20, 26, 36; 31:7** and elsewhere.) This, along with the fact that the Israelites would eat meat for an entire month, indicates that they remained in this place for a sufficient length of time for the tabernacle to have been set-up. And - the cloud which normally remained over the tabernacle now moved down to the door of the tabernacle where God spoke to Moses.

We are told that all these elders prophesied. The nature of their prophetic utterances is not described, so any attempt to define it as foretelling the future, speaking in an unknown tongue, or simply preaching the truth of God is futile. We are also told, "But they did not continue doing it." Some translations render this as "and did not cease." Although the Hebrew text could possibly be rendered either way, the translators of the Septuagint render this as we have it in our translation here. It seems that this moment

of prophesying was a demonstration of the presence of God's Spirit on them and even though God's Spirit remained on them in their official capacity, they did not prophesy as part of their assigned function.

Numbers 11:27 - 30

And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." 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.

Joshua's concern does not seem to be jealousy on his part for not having been included in the seventy (we are not told whether Joshua was one of them or not), or concern that these two refused their commission and so disqualified themselves, for there are no statements made to support this either. Instead, it appears that Joshua was concerned for Moses' sake that the Spirit which rested on him was somehow diminished by having been spread among even some in the camp or that Moses's authority was somehow put in question when these two in the camp began prophesying. This fact is corroborated by Moses's statement of his desire for all of the people to be prophets, indicating the special measure of God's spirit on them with no diminishment of his authority at all.

Numbers 11:31-35

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-hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had the craving. From Kibroth-hattaavah the people journeyed to Hazeroth, and they remained at Hazeroth.

What does Moses mean by the expression, "about a day's journey on this side and about a day's journey on the other side" Depending on whether this refers to the journey of a small group of travelers unheeded by women, children, and flocks, or whether this refers to the distance the Israelites could have traveled in a single day of their wanderings, the area in which these birds were gathered could be from fifteen to thirty miles. Whatever the case, there were enough birds to permit all the people to have enough for an entire month.

"Therefore the name of that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah" – The meaning of this name is, "Graves of Craving." According to the previous chapter, this was a three day journey from Mt. Sinai:

So they set out from the mount of the LORD three days' journey. And the ark of the covenant of the LORD went before them three days' journey, to seek out a resting place for them. (Numbers 10:33)

Traveling at a nominal speed of two miles per hour, the Israelites could easily have traveled forty-five to fifty miles from the encampment at Mt. Sinai to Kibroth Hattaavah. Their next encampment at Hezeroth would likely be another forty-five to fifty miles away. According to Deuteronomy chapter one, it was an eleven day journey from Mt. Sinai (Horeb) to Kadesh Barnea:

It is eleven days' journey from Horeb by the way of Mount Seir to Kadesh-barnea. (Deuteronomy 1:2)

So What?

Despising God or Living by Faith

Do you despise God? I'm quite certain that none of us would say that we do. Yet, according to verse twenty, the net effect of the complaining on the part of the Israelites was that they despised *Yahweh*.

Remember the word translated as "despise" means "to despise, disdain, reject, or loathe someone or something" Though we certainly don't intend to treat God as being loathsome, when we complain to Him, we are rejecting Him.

Do you complain about His provision? Do you cry before God because of the situation that He has put you in? Do you complain about the path He has led you down? These are all things that the children of Israel did, and God was not pleased. In one of the greatest faith chapters in the Bible, the writer of Hebrews tells us:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. **(Hebrews 11:1)**

To put this verse in the vernacular, "Believing is seeing!" Without faith we are blind. Without faith we are selfish. Without faith we complain about the path God has put us on. Without faith there is no future, only the past. And, without faith, though we see the past, we fail to see God's past provision for us and fail to expect the same provision in the future. Without faith we fail to see God for who He really is, and we fail to believe that He truly loves us. Without faith we cannot walk the path that God calls us to walk. Instead, we reject God. Instead, we complain. Instead, we focus on what we don't have. Instead, we follow our human senses and take the path that looks like the best one. But we can't see beyond the next turn whereas God can see the end from the beginning. And, when we do get stuck in the miry clay because we took the wrong way, what do we do? We complain, don't we? "God, why did you let this happen to me?" If we were to truly listen to His answer, we would probably hear, "Because you rejected Me, you didn't believe Me, and you didn't listen to Me. Because you despised me!" Ouch!

When God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans, he had no idea where God would lead him. But he knew that God would not lead him where He could not keep him. Abraham believed God and he followed the call. And when Abraham arrived in the land promised to him, he continued to live in tents without a permanent place to call home because, according to Hebrews chapter eleven, he was waiting for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker *is* God. Abraham never really felt like he had arrived. Instead, he continued to seek God's guidance and believed the promise that he would become the father of a multitude. At the age of 99 God repeated the promise that He had been making to Abraham for more than twenty years. Listen to it from Genesis chapter seventeen:

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly." Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. **(Genesis 17:1-4)**

Abraham didn't waver in his faith, even though he was too old to father children anymore and Sarah was too old to conceive. Yet Abraham did father a child. Sarah did conceive just as God promised. And Abraham continued to have children even after Sarah died ... thirty seven years later.

So, let me ask you these questions again. Do you complain about God's provision? Do you cry before God because of the situation that He has put you in? Do you complain about the path He has led you down?

It's all about faith, my friend. It's all about believing the promises that God has made to you. He hasn't promised you that you will have everything you want (in fact He hasn't promised you that you will have anything you want) but He has promised that you will have everything you need.

It's all about faith. It's all about believing that God has allowed you to be in the situation you are currently in, because it can bring glory **to Him**. We need to learn that wherever we are, whatever situation we are in, we are to be content, just as Paul had learned:

Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content:
(Philippians 4:11)

And in his gospel account, Matthew shares with us what Jesus said about God's provision of our needs:

Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (Matthew 6:31-33)

Being free from the bondage of the law and free from the penalty of sin does not mean that life will be easy and that we will have everything we want. We need to spend less time complaining about what we don't have. Instead, we need to spend more time thanking Him for what we do have. And we need to spend more time asking God what it is that He wants us to do with these things. Not so we will receive recognition for what we have done with the stuff God has given us. Not even because it will make us feel good to help someone less fortunate than we are. It's not about us feeling good with stuff or feeling good without stuff. It's about listening to God and doing what He asks us to do. Let me say that again. It's not about us feeling good with stuff or feeling good without stuff. It's about listening to God and doing what He asks us to do. Even if we were to give everything away or sell all we have and give it to the poor, as the rich young ruler was instructed to do, it's meaningless unless it's what God has told us to do.

We need to spend less time complaining about where we are and seek God's direction as to where He wants us to be. We need to boldly step out in faith when He tells us where to go and what to do. Not because it makes sense, not because it will benefit us, but because it is His direction and taking that path will bring Him glory.

Remember, though, that we have to do these things by faith. We have to learn to live each and every day by faith, because that's the only way we can please Him:

And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. (Hebrews 11:6)

The word translated "seek" means more than just to casually look for something. It means to diligently seek for something. This verse tells us, we can't just casually seek God and His direction for our lives. We have to **diligently** seek Him. That means we have to put effort into following God. It means we have to listen intently to what He tells us in His still, small voice. It means that we have to be more focused on Him than on ourselves.

Were the children of Israel diligently seeking God? Or... were they just following their own selfish desires?

We all need to be better at diligently seeking God's direction for our lives and we need to quit despising Him for giving us a life different from what we want.