

Dr. Jack L. Arnold

Lesson 10
Dissatisfaction in the Desert of Paran
Numbers 11:1-35

Christian, have you ever had a negative, complaining, murmuring attitude? Have you ever had such dissatisfaction with God's will for your life that you developed a griping spirit? If you have, then you have much to learn from the children of Israel, for God dealt severely with them for having a complaining spirit. A negative, bitter, complaining spirit is always sin. Christians are specifically told that they are not to be complainers. ***“Do all things without grumbling or disputing . . .”*** (Phil. 2:14). In fact, in 1 Corinthians 10, the whole of the wilderness wanderings of Israel is applied to the Christian in the Church Age.

“Now these things happened as examples for us, that we should not crave evil things, as they also craved. And do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, ‘THE PEOPLE SAT DOWN TO EAT AND DRINK, AND STOOD UP TO PLAY.’ Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents. Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor. 10:6-11).

Therefore, brethren, let us take heed lest we too fall into the sins of dissatisfaction and complaining.

In order to understand the reason for this event in the Desert of Paran, we must put all this together with the history of Israel. God had miraculously delivered Israel out of Egypt through the ten plagues and the Passover. God then supernaturally took the sons of Israel across the Red Sea and for two whole months supernaturally provided food, water, and protection from their enemies. Yet, before and after every supernatural provision and deliverance, the Jews complained, griped, moaned and groaned in astounding unbelief. Then God graciously gave the Israelites the Mosaic Law at Mount Sinai, which was to be a rule of life for Israel. It was the Law, which made the Israelites a separate and distinct people from all the nations of the earth. Yet, while Moses was receiving a portion of the Law on Mount Sinai, the children of Israel made a golden calf, instituted a pagan feast, and became involved in all kinds of vice, including mass fornication. Now God dealt more severely with the sons of Israel since they had the revelation of the Law, and they should have been growing up spiritually. After the golden calf incident, three thousand Jews were killed, and God disciplined the whole nation by striking them with a plague. ***“And the LORD struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made”*** (Exodus 32:35 NIV).

Israel was camped at Mount Sinai for eleven months.

“Now it came about in the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth of the month, that the cloud was lifted from over the tabernacle of the testimony; and the sons of Israel set out on their journeys from the wilderness of Sinai. Then the cloud settled down in the wilderness of Paran” (Num. 10:11-12).

It was about fifteen months since they left Egypt, but now they had received the Law, constructed the Tabernacle, developed an army, and were on the move once again as the pillar of

smoke and fire led the Jews to the Promised Land. The sons of Israel were three days in the desert (Num. 10:33), and once again they began to complain and gripe as they faced the hardships of this great and terrible wilderness. The sun was hot; there was very little water; the people were fatigued, and all they had to eat was manna. With this background, let us now look at the text.

DISGRUNTLED WITH CIRCUMSTANCES - Numbers 11:1-3

“Now the people became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the LORD . . .” The Jews, after just three days of marching, began to complain and gripe about their circumstances. They had forgotten how just a year before the Lord had supernaturally provided food and water when they needed it. These Jews had such short memories. They could only remember the bad things that happened to them and not the good things God had done for them. Israel’s complaining was a sin of the tongue.

“But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father; and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way”
(James 3:3-10).

They also had an ungrateful spirit. God had provided everything the Israelites needed and more. Yet, they were discontent and griped against God’s providence in their lives. These Jews never learned anything about godly contentment.

“Not that I speak from want; for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstance I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and being hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:11-13).

“...And when the LORD heard it, His anger was kindled...” Grumbling and complaining angered God so that He felt a need to discipline these Israelites. God hates a griping, carping, murmuring, and moaning attitude, and He must deal with it in His people because it is always sin.

“...And the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp.” God was displeased with their sin. Apparently God’s discipline came in the form of a fire that burnt up the personal belongings and tents of some of the Israelites who were living on the extremities of the camp.

Again this was a minor discipline, but God used it to warn these Jews of His hatred of grumbling and complaining. If they persisted in their negative attitudes, God would bring more severe discipline on them.

“The people therefore cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire died out. So the name of that place was called Taberah, because the fire of the LORD burned among them.” Moses immediately understood this was a form of discipline on the Jews, and he began to pray for them that God would stem the discipline. The fire subsided and they named that place Taberah, which means “place of burning.”

DISSATISFACTION WITH GOD'S PROVISION - Numbers 11:5-9

“And the rabble who were among them had greedy desires...” The “rabble” literally means “swarm of foreigners” and is translated “mixed multitude” in the King James Version. They were Gentiles who came out of Egypt with Israel because they wanted to follow Jehovah, Israel’s God, even though many of them were probably only professors and not possessors of salvation. These Gentiles, because they were not slaves, remembered well the delicacies of Egypt and began to have greedy desires for Egyptian food.

All the trouble Israel faced began with a group of people who had evil desires. Their motives were lousy, but no one knew that but God and perhaps Moses.

“...And also the sons of Israel wept again and said, ‘Who will give us meat to eat?’” The complaining of the rabble began to affect the Israelites so they began to complain as well. Misery loves company, and this indicates how infectious a complaining attitude can be. The Jews wept. Weeping is not always bad, for our Lord Jesus is said to have wept three times, but in this case the Jews wept in a bad sense. They were unstable, fell apart emotionally, and gave way to their feelings rather than trusting in the living God. They were weeping in frustration because they longed for the food they had had in Egypt. God provided manna for them, which was the greatest health food ever with proper vitamins and minerals. Furthermore, it was a delicacy and it tasted like honey before it was cooked and like olive oil after it was cooked. God had given them all the provision they needed in manna, but the Israelites were not satisfied with God’s provision. They wanted something else besides God’s best.

One of the great problems with Christians today is that they are dissatisfied with God’s provision for them. They either want more or something different. Christians who are dissatisfied with life do a lot of complaining and griping and sometimes it is difficult to tell them from the unsaved world. A Christian can never be happy in this world and stable in this life as long as he is dissatisfied with divine provision. To be obsessed with the wanting of more or something different shows that a Christian is completely disoriented in his understanding of the plan of God. Satisfaction is found only in Christ and not in people, things, or activity. **“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain”** (Phil. 1:21).

Notice carefully that the complaining of a few affected a multitude to complain even more. This was a complaining congregation. Theodore Epp, in his book, *Moses*, makes an interesting comment about complaining and complainers in the local church

“Many pastors have had their hearts broken, and church work has been greatly hampered by a few disgruntled people who influence the entire church. Every church group seems to have a few people who find it easy to complain about anything. Unless the other believers are mature, they will soon follow the pattern of the murmuring, weak believer.”

“We remember the fish which we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic . . .” The Jews began to let their minds wander back to Egypt and then remembered the food they ate there, but now their minds remembered better things than really were so in Egypt. They were in a fantasy world about their food in Egypt. The Jews were slaves in Egypt and their food was horrible. They got the fish that no other Egyptians wanted. It was stinking fish, and they had to cover up the rotten taste by smothering it with leeks (chives), onions, and garlic. In their memories of the food in Egypt, they made it to be a whole lot better than it actually was.

Christians can and do have cravings for the world out of which they were saved. There will be temptations and yearnings to go back and do many of the things we did before we were converted to Christ. The world will glitter in our fantasies, but if we flirt with the world and go back into it, we will not find freedom as our fantasies tell us, but only bondage to sin. In fact, the world will leave us so empty that we will be brought to the place of despair.

“...But now our appetite is gone.” This literally says, “But now our life is dried up.” They had no appetite for God’s provision of manna. Their souls were dried up spiritually because they were craving for the things of the world. They were filled with self-pity as they pined for what they left behind in Egypt. They felt sorry for themselves because of what they thought they gave up after God delivered them from Egypt.

Christian, if we are consumed by self-pity, we are less and less able to recognize what we have and become more and more aware of what we do not have. If God is not our joy, we develop an insatiable desire for the good things of this life and feel short-changed if we do not get them. A Christian with one foot in the world is headed for some heavy discipline from God’s hand. Furthermore, a Christian who is straddling the fence is the most miserable person on the face of the earth.

“There is nothing at all to look at except this manna.” These Jews became fed up with God’s provision of manna. They didn’t even want to look at it. These rebels were dissatisfied in their souls, for they could not be content with God’s circumstances for their lives. They said that God’s provision was “nothing at all” when in reality it was “all in all.” These people wanted stinking fish rather than delicious manna.

The further a Christian gets out of fellowship with God, the more disoriented he becomes to God’s plan for his life. It is dumb and stupid for any Christian to give up God’s provision for him in Christ and go back into the world, but Christians are doing this every day. Why? Because of unbelief, which makes the Christian disoriented to God’s plan.

“Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its appearance like that of bdellium. The people would go out and gather it and grind it between two millstones or beat it in the mortar, and boil it in the pot and make cakes with it, and its taste was as the taste of cakes baked with oil. And when the dew fell on the camp at night, the manna would fall with it.” The Israelites got tired of eating the same food day after day. They complained because they had to eat the most perfect food ever prepared by God. Such fickle Jews!

Yet, how many Christians get tired of living on God’s Word, His perfect provision, and go back to the world? Such fickle Christians!

DEJECTION OF MOSES - Numbers 11:10-15

“Now Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, each man at the doorway of his tent; and the anger of the LORD was kindled greatly, and Moses was displeased.” Moses became angry with the Jews because he saw them weeping as a bunch of complaining crybabies. Moses got fed up with negative attitudes and was very displeased.

“So Moses said to the LORD, ‘Why hast Thou been so hard on Thy servant? And why have I not found favor in Thy sight, that Thou hast laid the burden of all the people on me?’” Moses, under the load of this rebellious, critical and negative congregation, fell into great

discouragement. God had not afflicted Moses nor was he not favored by God, but Moses felt the burden and responsibility of these people and fell into complaining himself. This shows us that the best of God's servants are prone to the sin of discouragement at times.

There is probably not a preacher alive who has not prayed this prayer at one time or another. Discouragement over people is an occupational hazard for all ministers in the Lord's work. I can just hear it now. "Why, Lord, do I have to pastor this congregation? Why have you given me this mob? Why do I have to carry my burden and their burden too?"

Moses' complaining was a little different from that of the children of Israel. Moses complained to God. He poured out his heart to God. ***"I pour out my complaint before Him; I declare my trouble before Him"*** (Psalm 142:2).

"Was it I who conceived all this people? Was it I who brought them forth, that Thou shouldest say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries a nursing infant, to the land which Thou didst swear to their fathers?'" Moses got a little up-tight with God. In fact, it appears that he was trying to blame God for his own negative spiritual condition. It is easy to understand why he was upset with the Israelites. After all, Moses had two million people under his charge and all he heard for fifteen months was griping and complaining. Moses had the world record for sticking with a bad congregation. He obviously wanted to leave, pull back from responsibility and escape reality, but he didn't. Yet, in his discouragement, he did blame God and find fault with God. This always happens when any Christian gets out of fellowship with the Lord.

"Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me saying, 'Give us meat that we may eat!'" Moses was a tried and tired servant. When he was physically exhausted, his patience became exhausted. In a weak moment, he lost sight of the sovereignty of God. Self-pity became destructive to Moses' spiritual life. Even Moses forgot for a brief moment that God had done all kinds of supernatural things for Israel, and it was no problem for God to provide meat for Israel. What happened was that Moses was trying to be the provider rather than letting God be the provider. He had fallen to self-effort rather than trust in the sovereign God.

"I alone am not able to carry all this people because it is too burdensome for me. So if Thou are going to deal thus with me, please kill me at once, if I have found favor in Thy sight, and do not let me see my wretchedness." Moses, out of fellowship, had his reasoning completely twisted. In self-pity he said, "Lord if you love me, kill me!" He put his eyes on circumstances and complaining people and not on God. The result was extreme dejection, discouragement and despondency.

DELEGATION OF AUTHORITY - Numbers 11:16-17

"The LORD therefore said to Moses, 'Gather for Me seventy men from the elders of Israel, whom you know to be elders of the people and their officers and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you.'" Because God understood what Moses was going through (and only God really understood), he did not rebuke Moses but gave him some help. Seventy elders were appointed by Moses to help him with the people.

Before this time, seventy elders had been chosen by the people and approved by Moses, but apparently this system of choosing leaders by the people broke down. They were unable to make good judgments and chose bad leaders. Now God told Moses to choose the elders to lead the people.

“Then I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit who is upon you and will put him upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you will not have to bear it alone.” God gave Moses relief by giving elders to help him guide, rule and administrate the congregation of Israel. God, in Moses’ day and also in our day, never intended for one man, whether a pastor or some leader of a Christian organization, to do all the work. God always supplies qualified leaders to help carry the lead. No pastor is worth his salt without qualified leaders.

DETERMINATION BY GOD - Numbers 11:18-20

“And say to the people, ‘Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wept in the ears of the LORD saying, “Oh that someone would give us meat to eat! For we were well-off in Egypt.” Therefore the LORD will give you meat and you shall eat. You shall eat, not one day, nor two days, nor five days, nor ten days, nor twenty days, but a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you...” The Jews wanted meat, and God would grant that request so much so that meat would run out their noses. This was an unusual type of discipline, but it was very effective. Hopefully, their lust for meat would be so filled that they would never ask for it again.

“...Because you have rejected the LORD who is among you and have wept before him saying, ‘Why did we ever leave Egypt?’” This discipline came because of their rejection of God’s provision and plan for them. This verse clearly shows that the Jews real problem was that their hearts had never left Egypt even though their bodies were wandering around in the desert. God had every right to bring the most severe discipline on the rebellious Jews.

DOUBT OF MOSES - Numbers 11:21-23

“But Moses said, ‘The people, among whom I am, are 600,000 on foot; yet Thou hast said, “I will give them meat in order that they may eat for a whole month.”’“ Now Moses showed a lapse in faith. He said, “There are two million Jews and 600,000 of them are infantry. Have you ever tried to feed a hungry army, Lord?” Moses had forgotten all the miracles God had done for Israel the past fifteen months. Moses got his slide rule out and came to the conclusion that it was impossible to feed these Jews meat for a month. Moses developed a human viewpoint, which never expects God to do anything supernaturally.

“Should flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, to be sufficient for them? Or should all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, to be sufficient for them?” Moses was not only saying, “Where shall we get the food?” but, “If we get it, it would still not satisfy this stiff-necked people!”

“And the LORD said to Moses, ‘Is the LORD’S power limited? Now you shall see whether My word will come true for you or not.’” God had to remind Moses that He was the Almighty, the sovereign God of the universe and He can do anything He pleases to do.

DELIGHTFUL ATTITUDE OF MOSES — Numbers 11:24-30

“So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD. Also, he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people, and stationed them around the tent. Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him; and He took of the Spirit who was upon him and

placed Him upon the seventy elders. And it came about that when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do it again.” God took the Holy Spirit who rested upon Moses and put it on these seventy elders so they also had the Spirit in special power for a particular duty. Sixty-eight of these elders began to prophesy which is a reference to receiving divine revelation from God and declaring it to others. Moses was still the leader, but these elders were empowered by God to help Moses lead the people.

“But two men had remained in the camp; the name of one was Eldad and the name of the other Medad. And the Spirit rested upon them (now they were among those who had been registered, but had not gone out to the tent), and they prophesied in the camp. So a young man ran and told Moses and said, ‘Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.’” Apparently Eldad and Medad were on sick call, but in the camp the Spirit of the Lord came upon them and they began to prophesy.

“Then Joshua the son of Nun, the attendant of Moses from his youth, answered and said, ‘Moses, my lord, restrain them.’” Joshua, who was jealous for his leader Moses, wanted Moses to squelch this prophesying by Eldad and Medad, for it appeared that they were taking some of Moses authority and glory.

“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 upon them?’ Then Moses returned to the camp, both he and the elders of Israel.” Moses was back in fellowship with the Lord and looking at life from a divine viewpoint. He was a great man and he harbored no jealousy. Envy found no lodging in his heart. Moses wanted all Israelites to have what he had and more. Moses was a very secure servant of God, and he was in touch with God.

There are so many insecure Christian leaders who are always threatened by other leaders in a congregation or organization. However, a spiritual leader in touch with God does not need to be concerned about his own glory, authority, prestige, or prerogatives. He can trust his life and ministry into God’s hand as did Moses.

DISCIPLINE FOR THE JEWS — Numbers 11:31-35

“Now there went forth a wind from the LORD, and brought quail from the sea, and let them fall beside the camp, about a days journey on this side and a days journey on the other side, all around the camp, and about two cubits deep on the surface of the ground. And the people spent all day and all night and all the next day, and gathered the quail (he who gathered least gathered ten homers) and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp.” God supplied the meat for Israel by bringing about supernatural results by using natural means. In the spring quails migrate in immense numbers from the interior of Africa northwards. God caused a southeast wind to blow across the Arabian Gulf, which drove vast quantities of quail over the camp of Israel (Psalm 78:26). In fact, the quail swarmed over a twenty-five mile radius. The quail may have been exhausted from the flight and fell to the ground, stacking up thirty-six inches, or it may mean they came in low and flew about thirty-six inches off the ground so as to make them easy to catch. Whatever, supernatural provision was made by God.

“While the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the anger of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD struck the people with a very severe plague. So the name of that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had been greedy. From Kibroth-hattaavah the people set out for Hazeroth, and they remained at Hazeroth.” God brought more discipline to the whole nation for their lustful

cravings for meat and rejection of God's divine provision for them. The nation was struck with a plague, probably dysentery, and some died. Apparently those people who lusted the most for the quail did not even bother to dress it or cook it. They just took the live quail and ate it, feathers and all. Apparently it was this group who died in the plague.

CONCLUSION

Saved

God wants us as Christians to learn two lessons from this section. These lessons, if not learned, will bring us shipwreck in our Christian lives.

First, we might lust or long for something so badly that God will give it to us in abundance as a form of discipline so as to cause us great spiritual emptiness. God's divine commentary on the wilderness wanderings of Israel is found in the Psalms. Psalm 106:13-15 says, ***"They quickly forgot His works; they did not wait for His counsel, but craved intensely in the wilderness, and tempted God in the desert. So He gave them their request, but sent a wasting disease among them."*** This literally says, "So He gave them their requests but sent wasting or leanness to their soul." God gave them their craving until it ran out their noses, but they were not satisfied. They were emptier and more dissatisfied because they had not learned that God's provision is perfect and best.

How many wives, who pushed their husbands to the top professionally and socially, ended up losing their husbands to the company, another woman, or alcohol? God gave them their desires and punished them with their own sins. How many single people have wanted a husband or wife so badly they have compromised biblical principles to get one? God lets them marry, but the marriage is a fiasco and leanness is brought to the soul. How many athletes long for success only to be destroyed by their own success because of pride? How many Christian parents have craved material things and got them at all costs but in the process lost their children for Christ because they loved things more than God? Yes, my friend, God may give you your lusts, cravings, and longings only to bring leanness to your soul. Is it worth it?

Second, we learn from Numbers 11 that only Christ, God's provision for our spiritual health, satisfies. Futility is the end for the Christian who goes back into the world, hoping to find satisfaction.

"Therefore the Lord heard and was full of wrath, and a fire was kindled against Jacob. And anger also mounted against Israel; because they did not believe in God, and did not trust in His salvation. Yet He commanded the clouds above, and opened the doors of heaven; and He rained down manna upon them to eat, and gave them food from heaven. Man did eat the bread of angels; He sent them food in abundance. He caused the east wind to blow in the heavens; and by His power He directed the south wind. When He rained meat upon them like the dust, even winged fowl like the sand of the seas; then He let them fall in the midst of their camp, round about their dwellings. So they ate and were well filled; and their desire He gave to them. Before they had satisfied their desire, while their food was in their mouths, the anger of God rose against them, and killed some of their stoutest ones, and subdued the choice men of Israel. In spite of all this they still sinned, and did not believe in His wonderful works. So He brought their days to an end in futility, and their years in sudden terror" (Psalm 78:21-33).

No thing, person, or activity can satisfy our deepest spiritual longings. Only Jesus Christ can meet the Christian's needs, for He is our hope and salvation.

Unsaved

For you who are not Christians, the author of Hebrews has a comment, using the children of Israel as your example. He says, “. . . **TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS**” (Heb. 4:7). Jesus Christ is the way of salvation and you cannot be saved apart from Christ. **“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved”** (Acts 4:12 NIV). When the Jews died in the wilderness, they experienced physical death, but if you die without Christ, you will experience spiritual death for all eternity.

Trust Christ and come alive spiritually. Is God speaking to you today about your need of trusting Christ alone for salvation? Respond, trust, believe in Christ as your Savior from sin and bow to Him as your Lord and King. Remember, **“Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts,”** lest you perish in your sin for all eternity. Christ is God's provision for salvation; eat of Him by faith and live in God's presence forever.