



Numbers - Chapter Eleven

II Numbers 10:11-12:16 - Marching from Sinai to Kadesh (continues)

Summary of Chapter Eleven

The chapter starts with a general complaint with the intervention of Moses preventing the wrath of God from falling on the people. The second popular protest concerns the manna that had been Israel's food ever since it was provided on the way to Mount Sinai in Exodus Chapter 16. On the surface, the protest is merely about the monotony of the diet; underlying the complaint, however, is a yearning for the pleasures of Egypt and a rejection of God's plans. God subsequently provided quail in vast quantities, making the people sick and bringing God's wrath upon them.

II.b Numbers 11:1-12:16 - Three protests

The whole people, including their most senior leaders, complain about the difficulties of the journey to Canaan; by implication they are also complaining about Moses' leadership and God's promises. This pattern matches the problems of the journey from the Red Sea to Mount Sinai. At that time, after a three-day trek, the people had complained about water (Exodus 15:22-25 and vv.1-3), and now they complain again. The second complaint is about the lack of variety in their diet (Exodus Chapter 16 and vv.4-35). The final protest is about Moses' leadership (Exodus 17:1-7 and Numbers Chapter 12).

II.b.i Numbers 11:1-15 - Complaining in the Desert

The people started to complain about their monotonous diet of manna and craved meat to eat, along with fruit and vegetables such as those they had eaten in Egypt. This ungracious act on the part of the people, who had been fed miraculously by God without them having to toil to grow and harvest it. Therefore God became

angry with them and it was only the intervention of Moses that prevented God's righteous anger from killing off all the people and starting again.

¹ Now when the people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes, the Lord heard it and his anger was kindled. Then the fire of the Lord burned against them, and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. ² But the people cried out to Moses; and Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire abated. ³ So that place was called Taberah, because the fire of the Lord burned against them.

Numbers 11:1-3

The people complained in the hearing of the Lord. This is just a general complaint by the people, which the prophet Jeremiah finds unjustified: <<*Why should any who draw breath complain about the punishment of their sins?*>> (Lamentations 3:39). In judgement, fire breaks out in the outlying parts of the camp, as confirmed by Leviticus 10:2 and Numbers 16:35. As on other occasions, Moses' intercession halts God's judgement; refer to Exodus 32:11-14 and 32:31-32, as well as vv.13-15 here and Numbers 14:11-25.

How can it be that a nation so blessed can still complain? God had done so much in and for Israel; yet they still murmur against him. Of course, their circumstances were not easy, but what sin it is for them to complain against God, wiping out the spirit of gratitude in their hearts! It does not even state exactly what Israel was complaining about. Perhaps here, it is because their complaining is just from a generally dissatisfied heart, complaining not for any one great reason, but because that is where their hearts are.

Then the fire of the Lord burned against them. Israel had valued the fire of God as the emblem of his presence at night; but now, that fire and the presence of God becomes somewhat of a two-edged sword; the presence of God was there to deal with sin as well as to comfort Israel: <<*O Lord, your hand is lifted up, but they do not see it. Let them see your zeal for your people, and be ashamed. Let the fire for your adversaries consume them*>> (Isaiah 26:11).

The people cried out to Moses. Ideally, they would have cried out to God himself; but their personal relationship with God was probably weak and they felt more comfortable with Moses.

Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire abated. Moses intercedes for the people, and the fire is quenched. However, the place is named Taberah, which means burning, as a reminder of God's estimation of the complaining heart. Taberah, like other place names in the Bible, commemorates the events that occurred there.

⁴ The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! ⁵ We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for 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 colour was like the colour of gum resin. ⁸ The people went around and gathered it, ground it in mills or beat it in mortars, then 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 on the camp in the night, the manna would fall with it.

Numbers 11:4-9

The rabble among them. This rabble is also identified as a **mixed multitude**, referring to the combination of Jews and non-Jews that made up the nation that had left Egypt: <<***A mixed crowd also went up with them, and livestock in great numbers, both flocks and herds***>> (Exodus 12:38). Along with the ethnic Israelites many Egyptians and perhaps other foreigners went with them, perhaps because they had been fellow slaves in Egypt, but more likely because the God of Israel has shown himself to be more powerful than the gods of the Egyptians. There is a sense also in which Israel was a mixed multitude spiritually, not all had a genuine, real relationship with God. This is true of the visible church as well, which Jesus said would contain good and bad until the final harvest; refer to Matthew 13:24-30 and 13:36-43.

Had a strong craving. The Hebrew word here is *ta'avah*; it is also used in passages like Genesis 3:6, 1 Samuel 2:16, Job 33:20 and Psalm 10:3 for the strong desire for something pleasant, if perhaps sinful, although not always. Israel had to yield to this intense craving; it would not be fulfilled unless they cooperated with it. The apostle writes: <<***But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it***>> (James 1:14); the attraction to sin is present within each person, yet each individual must still yield to it in choosing to sin.

If only we had meat to eat! This was a strange question to ask, considering they had a God in heaven that met their every need. It seems that Israel looked for another provider because they were not satisfied with what came to them from the hand of God, and were so distraught over this they wept! Tears of repentance or sorrow over sin or joy in the Lord can be beautiful before God; but many tears shed, even by Christians, are shed over childish disappointments. Israel could have provided meat for themselves. God did not prohibit them to hunt whatever animals they could in the wilderness; and they had their flocks, which could be slaughtered for meat. They do not want to do anything about their desire for meat, except cry about it.

We remember. In describing life in Egypt, one would think their slavery there was heaven on earth for Israel! One would think that their plates were always crammed with wonderful foods. Israel here is engaging in ‘creative memory,’ choosing to remember certain things about Egypt, and exaggerating those things, while at the same time choosing to forget other things. People often think of their memory as a mechanical ‘photographing’ process, which impartially records the facts and then impartially retrieves those records. It is not like that at all! Memory, both in recording and retrieving, is a creative process, and ‘memories’ can be created of events that never happened. This is often the cause of much pain to the families that have been wounded by ‘False Memory Syndrome,’ where childhood memories of abuse and neglect are created. Memory often romanticises the past; one may long for a return to the spiritual environment of one’s youth, when everyone seemed more right with God and more on fire. Yet, this is often confused with a simple longing for that youth, when things seemed so much simpler, when responsibilities were fewer, and everything was newer. Israel fell in love with an illusion from the past, i.e. how great life in Egypt had been, instead of looking for what God had in store for them in the future, the Promised Land, which was truly a land flowing with milk and honey, all the great food they could ever want! God’s best for his people is always ahead and never behind them.

There is nothing at all but this manna. Essentially, their complaint against the manna was, “It’s not exciting enough. It is boring.” This appalling lack of gratitude was nothing less than to have despised the Lord (v.20). God is Jehovah Jireh, the provider of all good things; to despise what he provides is to despise him. It is not God’s job to entertain his people, and they should be more than children who demand to be entertained and excited.

But now our strength is dried up. The complaining heart romanticises the past but it also exaggerates the problems of the present. Their entire strength being sapped by lack of nutrition, which is what they were basically saying, was a gross exaggeration. God would not allow them to waste away in the wilderness. In fact, God provided their every need, although he never promised every desire.

Gum resin is also known as Bdellium and is a pale yellow resin found in desert areas. It was also found near Eden: **<<A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there>>** (Genesis 2:10-12).

The taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. In fact, manna was excellent provision. Seemingly, it could taste like doughnuts, yet provided all the necessary nutrition for a long journey through the wilderness.

¹⁰ Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the Lord became very angry, and Moses was displeased. ¹¹ So Moses said to the Lord, ‘Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favour in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? ¹² Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, “Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child, to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors?” ¹³ Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, “Give us meat to eat!” ¹⁴ I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. ¹⁵ If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once – if I have found favour in your sight – and do not let me see my misery.’

Numbers 11:10-15

Then the Lord became very angry, and Moses was displeased. Moses can bear the complaining no more and protests to God about the burden of leading Israel by himself. Moses certainly had a better reason to complain to God; it was not as if he yielded to intense craving as the children of Israel did. Yet, even his complaining is not good, and shows a lapse in his trust in God. Moses seems caught off-guard; surprised that the people would be so rebellious so quickly after such a strong warning at Taberah; leaders are apt to do the wrong thing when they are caught off-guard!

Why have you treated your servant so badly? Moses responded to God the way many do in a time of trial. He essentially said, “God, here I am serving you. Why did you bring this upon me?” It is easy to say God did not bring this upon Moses, a carnal and ungrateful people did. Yet, although God did not directly afflict Moses with this, he ultimately allowed it. God allowed this for the same reason God allows any affliction in the lives of his people, to compel them to trust in him all the more, to partner with him in overcoming obstacles, and to love and praise him all the more through their increased dependence on him and the greater deliverance he brings to them for doing so. Of course, it is very hard to see this in the midst of the affliction; Christians often feel like Moses did: “Why have I not found favour in your sight?” “If you really loved me Lord, why would you bring all this upon me?” God’s response is always the same: “It is because I do love you that I am training you, building you up in faith.”

Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them? When Moses likened himself to a mother and the children of Israel as his children, he used a fitting figure of speech, because Israel was in fact acting like a bunch of spoilt children.

When Moses said for they come weeping to me it showed that Israel cried childish tears from a temper tantrum.

I am not able to carry all this people alone. Now Moses has a correct understanding, although not a correct attitude yet. He cannot bear all these people alone; God will do it in him and through him.

If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once. Moses was extremely frustrated. He poured out and emotional, pained, fed up, ‘I am sick and tired of this’ heart to the Lord. “If you really love me Lord, kill me right now” is not a correct prayer from the head, but it is an honest prayer from the heart. God will not answer Moses’ request; but he will answer the prayer of his heart. When people are overwhelmed with such feelings, it is good for them to take them to the Lord, and let go of them, rather than brooding on them themselves.

Moses had requested that the Lord should let him die before, forsaking eternal life: <<*But now, if you will only forgive their sin – but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written*>> (Exodus 32:32). Others in the OT requested that God should let them die rather than face their situation, such as Elijah: <<*But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: ‘It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors’*>> (1 Kings 19:4), Job: <<*that it would please God to crush me, that he would let loose his hand and cut me off!*>> (Job 6:9), and Jonah: <<*And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live*>> (Jonah 4:3).

Do not let me see my misery. This was a prayer God would not answer. God wanted Moses to see his wretchedness, his inability to fix this problem apart from the mighty hand of God. When Moses sees his wretchedness, his weakness, then he can be strong in God’s strength. As Paul learned, God’s <<*power is made perfect in weakness*>> (2 Corinthians 12:9b).

II.b.ii Numbers 11:16-30 - The Seventy Elders

The Lord promises to meet Moses’ need for assistance and the people’s desire for an alternative to the manna. However, God’s apparent concession to the popular appetite will in fact prove to be a judgement, because they were in effect saying, “Why did we come out of Egypt?” (v.20).

Moses’ request for assistance is met as the Lord endows seventy elders with the gift of prophecy. Unlike Moses with his unique gift of prophecy (12:6-7), these elders prophesied only for a short time, but this was enough to give them credibility as assistants to Moses.

¹⁶ So the Lord said to Moses, ‘Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you. ¹⁷ 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 along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself.

Numbers 11:16-17

Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel. God decided on a council of seventy elders to guide the nation. This would later evolve to become the Sanhedrin, which also had seventy members led by the high priest.

Whom you know to be the elders of the people. Moses was not to pick men whom he thought might become elders; he was to pick men who were already known as elders because of their wisdom, conduct, and ministry to others. Elders, are with all leaders, are made by God, but recognised by the people they serve.

Have them take their place there with you. The first call of the elders was simply to be there with Moses, standing before the Lord. They were a support and strength to Moses just by their presence.

I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them. The elders must have the same heart, the same vision, and same Spirit that was on Moses: <<**My spirit abides among you; do not fear**>> (Haggai 2:5b). If not, there would be no agreement among the leadership of the nation and disaster could result.

They shall bear the burden of the people along with you. The elders were there to help Moses carry the spiritual load, to help him care for and minister to the people, and to be a support for him in the ministry. God’s help was going to come to Moses through the support of godly men. This is a customary way for God to meet the needs of the church, through godly men and women called to serve.

¹⁸ And say to the people: Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wailed in the hearing of the Lord, saying, “If only we had meat to eat! Surely it was better for us in Egypt.” Therefore the Lord will give you meat, and you shall eat. ¹⁹ You shall eat not only one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, ²⁰ but for a whole month – until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you – because you have rejected the Lord who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, “Why did we ever leave Egypt?””

Numbers 11:18-20

Therefore the Lord will give you meat, and you shall eat. This was not a blessing. God promised to answer the desire of Israel's heart; but not in a way that would be a blessing to Israel. Sometimes the Lord chastises his people by giving them what they ask for, what their intense craving cries out for.

Until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you. God promised to give them so much meat they would become sickened by it. This was because they denied and doubted the goodness of God's deliverance. It is dangerous for a Christian to entertain the thought, "I wish I had never decided to follow Jesus. I had it better in the world." Such thoughts, if they come, must be put away immediately. Christians can never deny or doubt the goodness of God's deliverance, although it is perfectly OK to cry out in anguish for a further move of God when situations can only be rectified by him: <<*O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you 'Violence!' and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise*>> (Habakkuk 1:2-3).

²¹ But Moses said, 'The people I am with number six hundred thousand on foot; and you say, "I will give them meat, that they may eat for a whole month"! ²² Are there enough flocks and herds to slaughter for them? Are there enough fish in the sea to catch for them?' ²³ 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.'

Numbers 11:21-23

The people I am with number six hundred thousand on foot. Moses reacted as people so often do, trying to figure out how God would perform a particular promise. Moses could not figure it out; but God never asked him to. God will provide, because his arm has not been shortened, nor has he lost any strength.

Although God can provide all the solutions, there are times when he asks people to figure out the answer, even though he knows that providing that solution will be beyond them: <<*When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do*>> (John 6:5-6).

Is the Lord's power limited? God had not suddenly become weak or limited. God has resources that Moses knew nothing about. Christians might say that God likes to meet their needs in completely unexpected ways.

²⁴ So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all 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 when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again. ²⁶ 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 son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, 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, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!’ ³⁰ And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

Numbers 11:24-30

Moses’ request for assistance is met as the Lord endows seventy elders with the gift of prophecy. Unlike Moses with his unique gift of prophecy (12:6-7), these elders prophesied only for a short time, i.e. they did not do so again, but this was enough to give them credibility as assistants to Moses.

Their prophesying would have involved some kind of speaking under the influence of the Holy Spirit, showing their similarity to the prophet Moses.

It is unclear whether or not Eldad and Medad were attached to the group of seventy elders. In any case, they prophesied in a different place, i.e. in the camp, whereas the seventy had prophesied around the tent. This made their prophesying much more obvious to the other Israelites, which was a concern to Joshua which he voiced to Moses (vv.27-28).

However, Moses’ prayer: would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them, anticipates Joel’s vision of ‘the Day of the Lord,’ when: <<*your sons and your daughters shall prophesy*>> (Joel 2:28), which Peter quoted on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17). When this passage, like most of the OT, speaks of the work of the Spirit, it is focusing primarily on the empowering of the Spirit for service to the people of God, more than an internal, personal experience. For example: <<*The spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel; he went out to war, and the Lord gave King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim*>> (Judges 3:10), <<*Then the spirit of the Lord will possess you, and you will be in a prophetic frenzy along with them and be turned into a*

different person>> (1 Samuel 10:6), and: <<*The spirit of God came upon Azariah son of Oded. He went out to meet Asa and said to him, ‘Hear me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin: The Lord is with you, while you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you abandon him, he will abandon you*>> (2 Chronicles 15:1-2).

II.b.iii Numbers 11:31-35 - The Quails

In answer to the peoples demand for meat, God provides an overabundance of quail, sufficient to make them sick of eating so much meat.

Quail, small partridges, migrate north across the Sinai Peninsula in the spring and return in the fall so, although the Israelites had eaten some in the previous year (Exodus 16:13), these were not a regular dish.

³¹ Then a wind went out from the Lord, and it brought quails 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, all around the camp, about two cubits deep on the ground. ³² So the people worked all that day and night and all the next day, gathering the quails; the least anyone gathered was ten homers; and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp. ³³ But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people, and the Lord struck the people with a very great plague. ³⁴ So 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.

Numbers 11:31-35

Then a wind went out from the Lord, and it brought quails.The migration of quail in the second year was such that the Israelites were able to catch enormous quantities of them: they were piled two cubits, i.e. 3 feet or 0.9 m high on the ground; thus anyone could collect at least ten homers, roughly 2,200 litres!

Let them fall beside the camp. The quail came all around the camp, that is, on the perimeter. When the Holy Spirit was poured out, it drew men into the centre of the camp, right into the middle of the people of God. To get the quail, they had to go outside of the camp, away from the people of God. God’s best for his people is always toward the centre of the camp, not on the outside: <<*And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching*>> (Hebrews 10:24-25).

But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people. The people, with great effort and excitement, gathered the quail and prepared it for eating. But when they ate, while the meat was still between their teeth, the Lord sent a plague among them and many died: *<<he rained flesh upon them like dust, winged birds like the sand of the seas; he let them fall within their camp, all around their dwellings. And they ate and were well filled, for he gave them what they craved. But before they had satisfied their craving, while the food was still in their mouths, the anger of God rose against them and he killed the strongest of them, and laid low the flower of Israel>>* (Psalm 78:27-31), *<<But they soon forgot his works; they did not wait for his counsel. But they had a wanton craving in the wilderness, and put God to the test in the desert; he gave them what they asked, but sent a wasting disease among them>>* (Psalm 106:13-15).

This greed was punished by a very great plague. The form of the plague is unexplained, but it led to many deaths among the strongest people as just quoted in Psalm 78, and the place being named **Kibroth-hattaavah**, which means 'graves of craving'.