

In the Wilderness: The Soul's Journey to Contentment and Peace

Numbers 11–12

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The Anatomy of Complaint

The people of Israel are on the move. The silver trumpets have been blown, the tent of meeting has been packed up, and the tribes have marched forth. Then, after three days of travel, the people begin to complain — “Are we there yet?” That is not exactly their complaint, but I think we can all relate.

Numbers 11 and 12 are chapters of complaint. The people complain, Moses complains, and Miriam and Aaron complain. In response to each of these complaints, God does something. Numbers 11:1–2 describes the basic cycle:

“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.”

The pattern is straightforward: the people complain, judgment falls, they cry for help, Moses intercedes, and God relents. This Deuteronomic cycle is the pattern of the entire Old Testament. You will see the exact same movement in Judges, during the time of the kings, and into the prophets. The sins may differ, and the redeemer may be a different judge, king, or prophet — but the cycle stays the same.

Before moving into the three stories of complaint in our passage, I want to say a word about the anatomy of complaint itself, because complaining is not a neutral act. It reveals the sins of the heart. The sins uncovered in Numbers 11–12 include discontent, unbelief, ingratitude, character assassination, racism, and pride — and every one of them is brought to the surface through the act of complaining. Complaining reveals what is happening in the heart.

Now, sometimes complaining is good and right. It is good to give voice to what is unjust, what is harmful to others, or what dishonors God. There is nothing wrong with speaking plainly about such things.

But most of the time, people are not complaining about injustice. They are complaining because they did not get their way, because they are inconvenienced, because they are not in control, or because they are uncomfortable. This past week I traveled east into New Jersey to pick up Joshua from school, and everywhere I went I had to stand in line — for coffee, for a bagel, even for ice cream. And as I stood there, I overheard conversations, and nearly every conversation involved complaining. If I am honest, so did mine. *Why is it taking so long? Why don't they staff this place properly? How can it be this disorganized? Why does it cost so much?* Sound familiar?

I want to challenge you to keep track of all the things you complain about in a single day. Internet service. Slow drivers. Poor service at a restaurant. The list gets long fast. According to various studies, most people will verbally complain between twenty and thirty times a day. And the effects are not trivial. One article on these studies notes that even a few days of stress caused by sustained complaining can damage neurons in the hippocampus and impair its ability to generate new ones — which over time can result in the hippocampus actually shrinking, leading to decline in memory and the ability to adapt to new situations. In plain terms: complaining makes you less sharp. Further research has linked chronic negativity and complaint to the onset of Alzheimer's disease.

There is also a social dimension to all of this. In a group, complaining is infectious. It spreads. It wounds people and creates divisions. Churches are not immune. Complaining is bad for your health, bad for your mind, and destructive to families and communities. And as we will see in our study today, it dishonors the Lord. So why do we do it? Because there is something else happening in the heart, and complaining is the outward expression of an inward condition. Complaining is an action that reveals what is happening in the heart.

Numbers 11–12 gives us three stories of complaint. My plan this morning is to walk through each one and see what the complaining reveals. And because today is Pentecost Sunday, I want to close by looking at how this passage foreshadows the birth of the church and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Story One: The Complaint of Discontent

Numbers 11:4–6, 18, 31–34

“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.’”

The Hebrew of verse 4 is striking: the craving is literally a *craving of craving*, the most intense possible way to express the idea. And notice what the people say when God addresses their complaint in verse 18: “*For it was better for us in Egypt.*” What a thing to say.

The Lord responds by giving the people exactly what they want — all of it. They want meat, and they want Egypt. Verse 31 describes what happens:

“*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.*”

Ten homers — roughly the load a donkey can carry. Ten donkey-loads of quail, per person. The Lord gives them more meat than they can possibly eat. And then in the very next verse, he gives them a taste of Egypt:

“*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 — the graves of craving — because there they buried the people who had the craving.*”

The judgment that comes upon them there at Kibroth-hattaavah echoes the plagues that fell on Egypt. They wanted Egypt. The Lord gave them a memory of it they would not forget.

The root of their complaint is discontent, and that discontent has two causes. The first is a false memory of the past. Listen to what they said: “*We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic.*” But do they not remember the genocide against their children? Do they not remember the forced labor? Do they not remember that they were not even a nation — that they were far from God, living in the very land upon which his judgment would fall in the form of ten plagues? How in the world can anyone say, “*It was better for us in Egypt*”? It is a shocking statement, and it sits at the heart of their discontent.

The second cause of their discontent is a failure to live by the real and certain hope of God’s promises. The Lord has saved them and called them to be a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a treasured possession. He is leading them to a land of remarkable bounty — a land where there is no king except the Lord himself, where everyone is given land to own except those who hold the most power, where cities of refuge break cycles of revenge, where the poor are cared for, where Sabbath rest is given, and where the Year of Jubilee provides for economic renewal. This is a nation unlike any the world had ever seen. But the people are not looking toward it.

They are looking backward — backward to slavery, to statelessness, to the place of judgment — and saying, “*We want to go back to that.*”

Instead of living in the present with the assured hope of things yet to come, they lived discontented lives shaped by a false memory of the past.

Does this describe our world today? I think it does. People live in the present without a living hope for the future, and so they function by the immediacy of their cravings in the moment. The craving of cravings. What shapes how you experience life? Is it a distorted memory of the past? Is it the relentless negativity of the news cycle? Is it a past wound so deep that it has colored everything since? These are the things that have created our culture of complaint and discontent.

If that is where you are, I want to tell you: it does not have to be this way. Those who follow Jesus are to be people of hope — and being a person of hope means that you are not living by false memories of the past but by a firm confidence in the future promises of God. We are to be people shaped not by what is behind us but by what is ahead of us: a creation untainted by human sin, a city not built by human hands, a river of life flowing through it, the Lord himself dwelling among men and women, and death no more. When that is what shapes you, the manna the Lord gives each day is sufficient — even if it comes without a side of cucumbers.

Story Two: The Complaint of Depression

Numbers 11:10–15

The second complaint in our passage comes not from a crowd but from one man: Moses.

“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.’”

“Displeased” is not quite the right word for what Moses is experiencing here. He is depressed — genuinely, severely depressed. He hates his job. He is overwhelmed by it, he feels

inadequate to it, and he cannot meet the expectations being placed on him. Notice how his complaint differs from the first one. In the first complaint, the people's expectations are not met. In the second, Moses cannot meet the people's expectations. That feeling of inadequacy, of being crushed under a weight he cannot carry, drives Moses into a depression from which he prays: *"Lord, I am not able to do what is being asked of me. I want to die."*

And crucially — this is not a sin. Look at how the Lord responds to Moses, and you will see that clearly.

First, the Lord encourages Moses by reminding him who is actually responsible for the people's needs. It is not Moses — it is the Lord. God tells him directly: *I am the one who will provide the meat. Your job is to trust me.* We read this in verses 18 and 23:

"And say to the people, 'Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat...' 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.'"

Second, the Lord cares for Moses by raising up help. He does not simply tell Moses to get tougher. He addresses the structural reality that Moses is trying to carry something he was never meant to carry alone:

"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."

And it happens, in verse 25:

"Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied."

These seventy receive a portion of the Spirit in order to help Moses care for the people. That is their purpose.

Looking at these first two complaints side by side, I think it is worth pausing to draw a distinction — because there is a real difference between discontent and depression.

Discontent says, *Lord, I do not like where you are taking me. I do not like your plan for my life.* Depression says, *Lord, I need your strength for the journey I am on.*

Discontent says, *Lord, you do not care for me. You have overlooked me.* Depression says, *Lord, I need you.*

Discontent says, *Lord, I am unhappy with my life.* Depression says, *Lord, fill me with joy in your presence.*

Discontent says, *Lord, I need you to do something for me in order for me to be happy.* Depression says, *Lord, I need you — it is you alone that brings contentment to my soul.*

If you are suffering with depression today, I believe the Lord responds to you the same way he responded to Moses. He will give you the strength for what you are going through. If he has called you to it, he will provide what is needed. And he will give you others to help bear the burden with you. You are not alone.

Story Three: The Complaint of Pride

Numbers 12:1–16

The third complaint comes from Miriam and Aaron, Moses' own siblings.

“*Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. And they said, ‘Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?’ And the LORD heard it.*”

Miriam and Aaron are offended at not having been among the seventy who received a portion of the Spirit. They feel slighted. They have been in leadership, and now seventy others have been elevated alongside them — or worse, ahead of them. “*Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?*” The heart condition their complaint reveals is pride and envy, a craving for more power and authority. And the way they reach for that power is by attacking Moses' character.

They zero in on the one thing people were probably already whispering about: his marriage to a Cushite woman. A Cushite is a person from the region south of Egypt — what we would call Sudan or Ethiopia today. The point of this attack is that the woman Moses married is Black. That is the complaint. *Moses, you married a woman of a different race, a woman who does not look like us.* This deserves a direct word.

If you accept God's Word as true, then you must accept that there is only one race: the human race. All of humanity descends from Noah and his wife, and before them, from Adam and Eve. There is no biblical prohibition against what we call interracial marriage. The prohibition in

Scripture is against marrying someone of a different *faith*. That is the line. If a person does not share your faith in Jesus Christ, it does not matter how much else you have in common — Scripture warns that they will lead your heart away from the Lord. And if you are already married to someone who does not share your faith, the Bible’s instruction in 1 Corinthians 7 is clear: love that person, care for that person, and pray that the Lord will work in their heart to bring them to saving faith.

What Miriam and Aaron are doing here is weaponizing Moses’ marriage to a Black woman in order to tear him down and elevate themselves. It is racism in service of pride.

What does God do? First, he defends Moses — directly, unambiguously, in person:

“*And suddenly the LORD said to Moses and to Aaron and Miriam, ‘Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting.’ And the three of them came out. And the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the tent and called Aaron and Miriam, and they both came forward. And he said, ‘Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the LORD make myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?’”*

The logic of that final question is pointed: if you think little enough of Moses to attack him this way, you must think little of me. To speak against my servant is to speak against me. And verse 9 tells us: “*And the anger of the LORD was kindled against them, and he departed.*”

Then comes what I can only call poetic justice. Miriam is so concerned about skin color — and so the Lord makes her as white as she could possibly be:

“*When the cloud removed from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous, like snow.*”

She is made as white as snow. But she is unclean, and so she is exiled from the camp — the one kept away from the presence of the Lord is the one who attacked his servant. Aaron panics: “*Oh, my lord, do not punish us because we have done foolishly and have sinned. Let her not be as one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes out of his mother’s womb.*” And then, in one of the most moving moments in the passage, Moses — the man they just attacked — cries out: “*O God, please heal her — please.*” The Lord does heal her, but she must remain outside the camp for the shame she brought upon herself.

There are two things to take from this third story. First, if you are obedient to where the Lord has placed you, and someone is attacking you — trying to tear you down, trying to discourage

you — know this: the Lord will fight for you. He will affirm his calling on your life, and he will defend you.

Second, if you are the one tearing another person down in order to advance yourself, be warned: what you measure out will be measured back to you. Jesus says it plainly in Luke 6:37–38:

“Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.”

A Word for Pentecost Sunday

Before I close, I want to look at our passage in the light of this day, because today is Pentecost Sunday.

The word *Pentecost* is a Greek term applied to what the Old Testament calls the Feast of Weeks. This feast was to be celebrated seven weeks — fifty days — after Passover, at the place where, in the words of Deuteronomy 16:11, “*the LORD chooses to make his name dwell.*” Its purpose was to celebrate and remember the covenant the people had entered into with the Lord as defined by the Law given at Sinai in Exodus 19 through 24. In our passage in Numbers 11, the outpouring of the Spirit upon the seventy elders takes place at approximately the time when the Feast of Weeks would have been observed. And right in the middle of it all, Moses says something prophetic. Verse 29:

“*Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!*”

In Acts 2, those words are fulfilled. The Lord pours out his Spirit upon all who have faith in Jesus — not seventy elders, but all his people. And just as Jesus sent out seventy disciples in Luke 10 to heal the sick and declare “*The kingdom of God has come near to you,*” so the Spirit is poured out upon the church to minister to the world.

These parallels and prophetic fulfillments lead me to read Numbers 11 as a passage that speaks directly to us today. The Lord is not now building a new nation for one people — he is bringing about a New Creation that encompasses all peoples. The Israelites in our story represent not the church but all nations. And just like then, the world today functions not by a living hope but by the immediacy of its cravings in the moment. The craving of cravings — that is our world.

So how does the Lord respond to a world that functions this way? He pours out his Spirit upon the church, to minister to that world. The Spirit has been given to you not only for your sake but for the sake of those around you who need the Lord. Be his people in this world. Be people of a living hope.

Amen.