

NUMBERS – PART TWO

Grumbling and Rebellion in the Desert

Chapters 10-21

13

CHAPTER 10: Departure from Sinai

After spending a year at Sinai where they entered into a holy covenant with God, received the Decalogue and the instructions for building their mobile sanctuary and the regulations for daily living, the people prepare to move on to the next stage of their journey.

Chapter 10:14-28 recounts how the tribes set out for their journey in an orderly fashion beginning with the tribe of Judah. In verse 29, Moses asks his brother-in-law Hobab, a Midianite, for help for he knows the territory that they are about to embark on. *“The practical need for human wisdom as they journey through the wilderness balances the story that has focused exclusively on divine guidance”* (Helen Mainelli). The chapter ends with a hymn in which Moses calls out to God to protect his people and to always be with them.

Pause: Who has been a Hobab in your life, someone whose wisdom you had to look to in difficult times?

CHAPTERS 11-12: Grumbling, pity-parties, and rebellion against Moses’ leadership

Between here and chapter 21, we will read of *twelve* accounts of Israel’s grumbling and rebellion against God and his representative Moses.

The first story of rebellion gives us an example of the fourfold pattern of interaction (below) between God and the people which we will see recurring in the upcoming chapters.

1. The people complain (v.1).
2. God becomes angry and punishes them (v.1).
3. The people come running to Moses for help and Moses intercedes on their behalf (v.2). The effectiveness of Moses’ intercession is intended to show the importance of his leadership role.
4. God hears their prayer (v.2).

Pity party (vv 4-15). As we saw in Exodus 16, the people were fed up with their diet of manna. Now they crave for the “great dishes” of food they had

eaten in Egypt, seemingly forgetting all the hard work and the whippings they experienced there. The daily diet of manna from God was intended to teach the people to trust God one day at a time. We might say the manna story is behind the petition in the Lord’s Prayer that Jesus taught his disciples: *“Give us this day our daily bread”* (Lk 11:3).

When Moses hears the complaints of the people, rather than asking the Lord’s intercession as he usually does, he feels sorry for himself. For a moment he forgets the One who has provided all along for him and the people. *“Where can I get meat to give to all these people? They are crying to me”* (v.13). Rather than turn to the Lord, he becomes resentful about the position he finds himself in. Having said that, it should be noted that Moses’ words are another powerful example of his forthrightness with the Lord in baring his true feelings in a moment of desperation:

“Why do you treat your servant so badly? Why are you so displeased with me that you burden me with all this people?...I cannot carry all this people by myself, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you will deal with me, then please do me the favor of killing me at once, so that I need no longer face this distress” (11:11-15).

How many of us would be that open with God about what is really going on in our hearts? A key ingredient to a healthy relationship with God is being honest with him about how we truly feel about him and what is going on in our lives (See Ex 5:22-23 for another example of Moses’ candor with God).

Pause: Have you ever felt overwhelmed by the responsibilities of your life? If so, what was that experience like for you? What helped you to deal with it?

God’s twofold response to Moses’ lament (11:16-35). Before addressing Moses’ lament about the heavy burden of leadership he carries, God attends to the people’s cry for the meatpots of Egypt. This is very upsetting to the Lord because it is a rejection of their deliverance from the oppression of Egypt. *“Oh how well off we were in Egypt”* (11:18). *“Why did we ever leave Egypt?”* (11:20). Then God tells them: You want

meat? I'll give you so much meat that it will come out of your nostrils and be sick of it! (vv 19-20). Lesson: be careful what you pray for!

But Moses takes God's word as one more impossible burden that he must carry out. He says: We have 600,000 soldiers here, how am I going to provide meat for them and the rest of the people? (vv 21-22). God responds: "*Is this beyond the Lord's reach? You shall see now whether or not what I have promised you takes place*" (v.23).

Having settled the meat issue, God deals with Moses' complaint about being alone. He orders Moses to gather seventy elders of the people. Taking some of the spirit of the elders that rests on Moses, he bestows it on the chosen elders (v.25). Two of these, Eldad and Medad, though absent at the gathering of the new elders, receive the spirit and start to prophesy. Joshua, who is to be Moses successor, is not happy with all this and petitions Moses to stop them (v.28). Moses responds: "*Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all of the people of the Lord were prophets! Would that the Lord might bestow his spirit on them all!*" (v.29). Even though Joshua may have been trying to protect Moses' authority, Moses reprimands him for trying to have control on whom God's spirit descends. Moses wishes that *all* the people would be open to hearing God's word and sharing it.

Verse 33 speaks of the Lord's wrath and the great plague. Scholars are not sure what got God so mad that he sent a plague. Greed and gluttony must have provoked God's anger on the people who had gone wild over the quail God sent down for the meat they craved. The place was aptly named for the "greedy people" buried there. The moral of the story: too much of a good thing can kill you.

Pause: What are the cravings that can hurt our relationship with God? Comment on the following statement: "Better to be enslaved in the midst of security than to have freedom with uncertainty."

CHAPTER 12: Rebellion within the family

Moses' siblings, Aaron and Miriam, speak against him and challenge his authority for two reasons: his marriage to a non-Jewish woman and his unique position as the sole spokesman for God. But the real reason for their defiance may be that they are jealous

and resentful of Moses' exclusive role as the mediator between God and the people.

Moses does not defend himself. But the author of Numbers comes to his defense stating that Moses was by far the meekest man on the face of the earth. God also stands by Moses. We can image God as a non-nonsense dad calling his three kids together: "*Come out, you three, to the meeting tent*" (v.4). Then he calls Aaron and Miriam outside (v.5).

In verses 6-8, God makes a distinction between how he communicates with a prophet (through *visions and dreams*) and with Moses (*face to face and plainly*). When God says that Moses beholds the "presence of the Lord," he is underlining Moses' special role as *unique* mediator between God and his people. Then comes the clincher: "*Why, then, did you not fear to speak against my servant Moses?*" (v.8). After the tongue-lashing comes the consequence for rebellious behavior. Miriam is turned into a snow-white leper (v.10). (A snow-white leper is like a still-born baby).

When Aaron learns about Miriam's fate, he immediately begs Moses for help, admitting his own role in the rebellion against his brother: "*please do not charge us with the sin we have foolishly committed*" (v.11). Moses asks God to heal his sister. God answers his prayer but only after Miriam is banished outside the camp for seven days. The whole event would have left Aaron and Miriam in no doubt as to whom God has chosen to be his lead general amongst the Israelites. One question remains especially for all female readers: Why wasn't Aaron dished out the same punishment as Miriam? The incident reflects a double standard that was customary in a male-dominated culture. In his commentary on Numbers, Dennis Olson writes: "*The unfairness of Miriam's burden of suffering continues to find echoes in cultures where women work more, own less, and suffer greater abuse than their male counterparts*" (p.74).

Pause: If you hear someone is badmouthing you, how do you think you would respond?

The continuing drama of the Israelites rebellion (Chapters 13-14). Chapters 13 and 14 are one unit in Numbers. They present the continuing drama of the people's rebellion even when they are in sight of the Promised Land. Chapter 13 functions as an introduction to the rebellion that we read about in chapter 14.

CHAPTER 13: Scouts are sent to reconnoiter the Promised Land

“The spy story is one of the most elaborate narratives in the whole of Numbers. Its several scenes and dialogues are carefully constructed. Suspense, irony and dramatic dialogue give the reader a sense of the heightened importance of this narrative moment” (Dennis Olson).

God tells Moses to *“send men to reconnoiter the land of Canaan that I am giving the Israelites”* (v.1). A leader from each of the twelve tribes sets out for Canaan on their spying mission and returns after forty days with their report.

The “spies” meet with Moses and Aaron in the presence of the whole community to report on the situation in Canaan (vv 25-33).

The majority report (vv 27-29) confirms that the land is indeed good and flowing with milk and honey, that the cities are well fortified, and that the people who live there are big and fierce.

The minority report given by one of the twelve leaders, Caleb, is a simple affirmation of confidence in God: *“We ought to go up and seize the land, for we can certainly do so”* (v.30).

The majority group, despite its positive report, rejects Caleb’s recommendation, saying: *“We cannot attack these people; they are too strong for us. ...The land we explored consumes its inhabitants. And all the people we saw are huge men, veritable giants....”* (vv 31-33).

Pause: Which report would you have listened to? Why? How can faith in God diminish the obstacles we may have when faced with a big task? Do you have a personal story that you can link to this?

CHAPTER 14: The people’s response to the spy’s reports

On hearing the reports, the people lose their faith in God and his representatives, Moses and Aaron (vv 1-4). Once again, they voice out their preference for life in Egypt, demanding: *“Let us appoint a leader and go back to Egypt”* (v.4). These words are a total breach of their covenant with the Lord.

When Moses and Aaron hear what the people have said, they fall on their faces. Caleb and Joshua, the

faithful spies, tear their garments. They make one more plea with the people to not rebel against God, but to place their trust in him. In the end, the question is really not about size or strength or capability but trust in God’s promise to give them the land he vowed to their father Abraham. Sadly, the people fail to heed Moses’ and Aaron’s pleadings. *“In answer, the whole community threatened to stone them”* (v.10).

The Lord’s sentence (vv 11-12). The people may well have stoned Caleb, Joshua, Moses and Aaron if the Lord had not intervened. When the Lord comes, he is mad and frustrated. *“How long will this people spurn me? How long will they refuse to believe in me, despite all the signs I have performed for them?”* (v.11). It is God saying to the faithless people: You saw what I did for you at the Red Sea. You saw how I fed you in the desert and you still do not believe that I can give the land that I promised you. Then God hands down a death sentence on the people: *“I will strike them with pestilence and wipe them out”* (v.12). Like Pharaoh, the rebellious Israelites refuse to believe in the power of God to make good on his word. As a result, they will suffer the same fate as Pharaoh.

Moses acts as go-between (vv 13-35). Moses intercedes for the people just as he did after the golden calf incident (Ex 32:11-13). He makes a three-pronged plea to God:

- 1) He appeals to God’s reputation with all nations of the world (vv 13-16).
- 2) He appeals to the promises God made to Israel (vv 17-18).
- 3) He appeals to God’s steadfast love by reminding God that he is a *merciful* and just God.

God’s response to Moses is twofold:

- 1) He will forgive the people: *“I will pardon them as you have asked”* (v.20).
- 2) But there is a catch to the first response. God vows that none of the people who have *seen* his mighty deeds in Egypt and in the wilderness *“shall see the land that I promised on oath to their fathers”* (v.23). In 14:2, the people say: *“Would that we had died...in the desert.”* Now they will get their wish: *“Here in the desert shall your dead bodies fall”* (14:29).

Two other events occur. The ten spies who brought back a negative report and spread scary rumors among the people die from a plague (vv 36-38). In verses 39-45, the Israelites attempt an unsuccessful invasion of Canaan. Even though Moses has warned them that they will not succeed because they are going without God, they anyway set out for battle, and suffer defeat.

Pause: What spoke to you most in chapter 14? What image of God do you take from this chapter? How does your chosen image impact your relationship with God?

CHAPTER 15: More regulations regarding the daily life of the Israelites

In her commentary on Numbers, Helen Kenik Mainelli writes:

“As a kind of interruption to the dramatic action of chapters 11-14, the author inserts some regulations in chapters 15,18,19. There is no apparent connection between the content of the narratives and these cultic regulations. They are directed to future generations, providing them with guidelines for living a holy manner in the presence of a holy God (p.52). ...Every dimension of life belongs to Yahweh; therefore, all laws are directly attributed to Yahweh. Each directive is the Lord’s explicit instruction (v.1). Each focuses on the time when Israel will have entered the land” (v.2). (p. 67)

Since much of the material in chapter 15 is somewhat like sections of Leviticus, we will not comment on the individual sections. If interested in a commentary on this chapter, see Mainelli’s Collegeville commentary.

CHAPTER 16: Two more rebellions

One would think that by now, the people would have learned not to mess with Moses and Aaron and, more importantly, not to rebel against God. Yet here, God has to deal with two more rebellions.

In the first rebellion, Korah gathered 250 leaders in the community to challenge Moses and Aaron: *“Enough from you. The whole community, all of them are holy; the Lord is in their midst. Why then should you set yourselves over the Lord’s congregations?”* (v.3). Two issues are involved here: 1) the recognition of the holiness of each member of the community and 2) the privileged status of the priesthood.

Moses response?—you probably guessed it. He throws himself down on the ground in disbelief. We should remember that Moses was not primarily upset over the people’s questioning *his* authority but, rather, their defiance of God. This time Moses does not intercede. Rather, he hands the matter over to the Lord and let him decide *who* is holy. Then he challenges Korah and his rebellious leaders to a showdown at the tent of meeting on the following day. In the meantime, Moses pulls Korah aside and gives him a bit of a tongue-lashing for his rebellious behavior (vv 8-14).

Rebellion of Dathan and Abiram (vv 12-15). Moses summons Dathan and Abiram to help resolve the issue of Korah and his 250 rebellious leaders. Abiram and Dathan are in no mood to help Moses, telling him that they will not go. Then they add insult to injury by accusing Moses of leading the people out of Egypt, “a land with milk and honey.” We can imagine Moses saying: Egypt! A land of milk and honey? You’ve got to be kidding. What short memories you have!

Korah, Dathan and Abiram receive their comeuppance (vv. 16-35). Verses 16 to 24 and 35, describe the showdown between God and Korah in which the fire of God’s holiness consumes them. (Verse 25 picks up the story from verse 15.) The ground opens up as in an earthquake and swallows the rebels. The above two rebellion stories should have settled once and for all the questions of authority in the community. Let us see if it does.

Pause: How can the craving for power create chaos in a community? What is the proper way to express grievances within a church family?

CHAPTER 17: When will the grumbling end?

After the events narrated in the past several chapters, it would have been clear to the Israelites that Moses and Aaron were God’s chosen leaders, which should have prompted them to quit complaining against the two. But in verse 6, we read: *“The next day the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron saying, ‘It is you who have slain the Lord’s people.’”*

We have seen from previous chapters how God does not like grumblers. He is ready to consume the whole community—this time, with some kind of a plague (v.13). Whenever God threatens to bring about chaos on those who spurn him and/or his representatives,

Moses and Aaron intercede on behalf of the disgruntled ones. On this occasion, Aaron's attempt to atone for the sins of the people saves the vast majority from God's wrath. Still when the dust settles, over 14,000 die from the plague. Verses 16-26 are intended to be a positive affirmation of Aaron's priesthood.

Pause: Why are some people such persistent grumblers? What is the best cure for such an attitude?

CHAPTER 18: More instructions on the priesthood

The people are in a despairing mood. They are especially scared that their presence in the Lord's sanctuary could bring death to them.

In response to their concern, the Lord makes it clear that only Aaron and his sons may draw near the sanctuary to perform priestly functions and anything that has to do with the altar (vv 1, 5, 7). No one else can come near the sacred vessels or the altar lest they die. Associates appointed by Aaron are charged with the care of the meeting tent.

Verses 8-24 describe in detail the remuneration due to the priests and their families for their services on behalf of the people.

CHAPTER 19: Remaining ritually clean in the presence of dead bodies

From Numbers 5:2, we know that contact with dead bodies made one unclean and endangered the ritual purity of the whole community. But with so much death and pollution from corpses in their midst, how are the Israelites to remain ritually clean? God prescribes to Moses and Aaron very specific instructions on ritual purification for those who had physical contact with the dead body of a human being.

CHAPTER 20: Moses and Aaron disobey God

This chapter has a series of dramatic events: the death of Miriam; defiance of Moses and Aaron; announcement that Moses and Aaron would not live to lead Israel into the Promised Land; refusal of Edom, a brother nation, to allow Israel safe passage through its territory; and finally, the death of Aaron.

The Israelites settle at Kadesh where Miriam dies and was buried. We last heard of Miriam in chapter 12 when she and Aaron rebelled against their brother Moses.

Water famine at Kadesh. In his introduction to the Kadesh incident, Dennis Olson notes "that by this stage in Numbers we are primed to think that every time we hear the first hint of whining from the people in Numbers, we automatically assume that the people's complaint is illegitimate, that the attack on Moses and Aaron is unjustified, and that God's anger and righteous judgment on the people will follow like clockwork" (p.125).

The people's complaint about the lack of water is a legitimate one, different from other unreasonable complaints such as monotonous food, power struggle, and envy. When they hear of the people's grumbling, Moses and Aaron go to the tent of meeting and fall prostrate on their faces (v.6).

The sin of Moses and Aaron. Whenever God appears, we expect him to be mad, ready to announce some plague or fire. Instead, he orders Moses to "take the staff and assemble the community, you and your brother Aaron. In their presence order the rock to yield its waters...." (v.8). Moses tries to do as he is told though not completely, seemingly wanting to assert his own authority. First, he gives the people a tongue-lashing "listen you rebels....," judging that their complaint is not legitimate. Second, instead of "speaking to the rock" as he was commanded, he strikes it not once but twice. If he had spoken to the rock, he would have been a) obedient to God's command and b) shown trust in God to provide water for the people. Instead, in anger he struck the rock as if he were the one bringing about the water. We can assume that Aaron agreed with Moses action and thereby also received the same punishment.

Following the Kadesh event, God delivers the guilty verdict and punishment for Moses and Aaron, namely, that neither one will be allowed to lead the people into the Promised Land (v.12).

We may wonder if the punishment was too severe for a man who had been God's faithful foot soldier for so many years. A footnote in *Life Application Study Bible* reads: "Moses was the leader and model for the entire nation. Because of this great responsibility to the people, he could not be let off lightly. By striking the rock, Moses disobeyed God's direct command and dishonored God in the presence of his people" (p.234). Judaism teaches that the greater the person, the stricter the standard of judgment.

Edom's refusal (vv 14-21). On their journey to the Promised Land, the most direct route for the Israelites is through Edom, the land of the Edomites who are the ancestors of Esau (Jacob's twin brother). Moses uses all his diplomatic skill to get the King of Edom to allow his people safe passage, but the king turns down Moses' request (v.18). A second appeal to the king meets with no success.

Death of Aaron (vv 22-29). Aaron's death is a fulfillment of God's vow barring him and Moses from reaching the Promised Land because of their infidelity to God. Before he dies, Aaron is stripped of his High Priest's garment which is transferred to his son, Eleazar, his named successor. The community weep for forty days, the same number of days that they will weep for Moses.

CHAPTER 21: God-given victories; people-driven rebellions

A Canaanite king engages the passing Israelites in a battle. This time, the people consult first with God and vow to follow standard holy war procedure and dedicate all the towns they capture to God after totally destroying them (vv 2-3). We will read more about this disturbing *modus operandi* of ancient times in the next article. For now, we can say that the practice of wiping out whole towns after defeating them came from Israel's primitive understanding of God and what God expected of them. They believed that their enemies were also God's enemies. In destroying whole cities and massacring their inhabitants, the Israelites believed they were doing God a favor. It was standard operation procedure in those times.

The Bronze Serpent (vv. 4-9). In this story, we see the same pattern of rebellion, punishment, intercession, and forgiveness that we have come across many times in this book (11:1-3, 17:6-15). Detours and delays often frustrate people, and the Israelites are no exception. This time they complain not only against Moses, but also against God (v.5). The people drag out their well worn laundry list of complaints about their deplorable condition and harrowing experiences in the desert, lack of water, wretched food, etc.

In response, God sends poisonous snakes which bite the people, killing many of them. They run to Moses and say: "We have sinned...pray for us" (v.7). Moses, intercedes for his rebellious people. This time God instructs Moses to make a bronze serpent and place it on a pole. All who look at it will be

saved from the snake's venom. We note a communal dimension in the people's confession of their sin ("We have sinned...") and an individual dimension in God's forgiveness ("each one who looks at the serpent..."). The bronze serpent in itself has no power of healing. What has saved them is their admission of guilt and God's mercy.

This incident is one of the best known stories in Numbers because it is mentioned by Jesus in the gospel of John 3:14-15: "*and just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in me may have eternal life.*"

The rest of chapter 21 describes two military victories achieved by the Israelites as they get closer to their destination.

Pause: The bronze serpent, the symbol of death for the Israelites, becomes the symbol of healing just as the cross, the symbol of suffering and death, leads to new life. Can you recall from your life or the lives of others similar ironic events?