

## **You Don't Know How Good You've Got It**

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Numbers 11

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Good morning! It is always good for me to see my church family and worship our Lord together. I believe that God is moving in our midst, and as we get to know him more by investing in him as our top priority, he is going to continue to bring about spiritual renewal or revival in our lives.

The message today is from Numbers 11. This is the first time I have been able to preach a message from the book of Numbers. But as you probably know, we have been going through a Bible reading plan together as a church, and each week we are preaching a message from the upcoming week's plan. So, I get the blessing of preaching from Numbers.

I had many topics to choose from in considering the message, but I felt like God kept bringing me back to one that is difficult. It is difficult because many of us deal with this problem at some point. But, if you would say that you don't really struggle with it, I can say with certainty, that you have dealt, or currently deal with someone who does.

Today we are talking about complaining. Other terms that are similar to this are grumbling, or murmuring. And, have you ever heard it said, "You don't know how good you've got it!"? Perhaps you have heard similar expressions if not that one precisely. It is certainly not proper English to say it that way.

But, the phrase is usually said after someone complains about something. For instance, folks from an older generation will typically say that when they have heard a younger person complain about something that is actually better than what it was in their day. I'll give you a personal example.

My dad and I were having a conversation about school one day. I was in seminary, and I was so frustrated about the way they require students to cite bibliography information in papers. And, Microsoft Word, at the time, and even now, doesn't like the way the seminary wants you to cite papers.

So, there I was complaining about software and how it sometimes affects the way I print, etc. And sure enough, my dad said it to me, "Son, You don't know how good

you've got it!" And then the comment is usually followed by a story about how their situation used to be worse, right?!

So, my dad said, "When I was in seminary, everything had to be done on a typewriter. You should be most thankful that you have a backspace button on the computer. I didn't have that. You can save documents on a harddrive. I didn't have that."

"And when I did my dissertation, I had to pay someone to type all my work on a typewriter using a specific font ball that goes in the typewriter. After I finished my dissertation, my professors told me that I had to make some corrections, and the typist wasn't available and I couldn't find the same fontball."

He said, "So my sister had to go to every office on campus to find the right one. The last place she went was the president's secretary, who thankfully had the correct one, or else, I would have had to type the entire thing again to make the font consistent. So, you complain, but you really don't know how good you've got it!"

While reading the story of the Israelites, God's chosen people, I couldn't help but think about that phrase. But, before we read our text we need to understand the context of what is happening here.

A brief history. Numbers is a book that is written by Moses. It is part of the Pentateuch, which is the first five books of the Bible, all written by Moses. The book of Numbers continues to follow the story of God and a covenant, a promise that he gave to Abraham. It is part of God's story to redeem a fallen world from sin.

And, If you recall, in Genesis 12, God promised Abraham three things:

### **Abrahamic Covenant**

- 1. Land**
- 2. Descendants**
- 3. Blessing**

First, he promised Abraham a land, a specific location for his people to inherit. Secondly, he promised Abraham descendants. And, contextually, God is promising Abraham he'll have descendants that will be righteous. And the third part of the covenant, God promises blessing. Through his descendants, God will ultimately bring blessing to all the nations.

So, Abraham miraculously has a son, Isaac, who miraculously has a son, Jacob who is renamed Israel. And it is Israel's descendants who are displaced to Egypt and begin to grow in number. Eventually they become enslaved to the Egyptians for 400 years until God uses Moses and some incredible miracles to free them from slavery.

God brings the plagues to Pharaoh and the Egyptians, ultimately leading to Israel's release. He parts the red sea so they could walk across on dry land. And, he destroys the Egyptians who were giving chase. And now, after 400 years as slaves, they are free! And within three days they start to complain. After three days, they create a false idol and worship it.

But, God, rich in mercy, continues to fulfill his promise. He gives them the Ten Commandments and gives them instructions for the arc of the covenant, and the tabernacle as the means by which the Lord will dwell in the midst of his people.

So, where are they going to go now? God is leading them to the land that they will inherit: The Promised Land. And in the book of Numbers, this is where we enter the story today.

The first nine chapters of Numbers involves the people of Israel following instructions from God to prepare themselves for the journey to the Promised Land. In chapter 10, they depart and off to a good start making their way to the Promised Land. And, three days into the journey, the people start complaining again. They have already forgotten how good they've got it.

This is where our story continues today. Let's read in Numbers 11:1-3.

**Num. 11:1 Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the Lord, and when he heard them his anger was aroused. Then fire from the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp.**

**Num.. 11:2 When the people cried out to Moses, he prayed to the Lord and the fire died down.**

**Num. 11:3 So that place was called Taberah, because fire from the Lord had burned among them.**

Our series is all about finding freedom. And what we learn right away is that complaining is so detrimental to the freedom that God gives to his people. But, why? Why is complaining so detrimental? The first reason is that complaining is a virus.

### **1. Complaining is a Virus (11:1-3)**

All of us have had some sort of virus at one point or another. And, unless you've been out of tune with what is happening in the world, you know that there is a coronavirus outbreak. And we need to be praying for those affected by it, but also for continued wisdom as we discern how to respond and safeguard ourselves as best as possible.

But the reality is, at any given time, any one of us could get a virus. So, we need to be smart in how we handle this one, but we also need to rest assured in our faith that God is with us. We can trust the Great Physician. Amen?!

As I was preparing this message, I couldn't help but think about the correlation that complaining is just like a virus, and perhaps we don't focus on finding a resolution and safeguarding ourselves from a spiritual virus as much as we do for a physical virus. But, complaining is a virus, first of all because it is out in the open.

#### **a. In the Open**

It says in verse one that the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the Lord. The Christian Standard Version is translated like this:

**11:1 Now the people began complaining openly before the Lord about hardship. (CSV)**

The complaining was in the open with each other. Just like a virus would not cause problems if it is contained, the complaining was not contained, it was out in the open. Isn't that the truth, that complaining loses its power, loses its air if it is contained. So, complaining is in the open, and secondly, it is contagious.

#### **b. Contagious**

It doesn't say here that a couple of people, or a small group was complaining. No, it says the people began complaining. It implies a larger number of people were joining in, and it's gaining traction. You know what I'm talking about. Have you ever complained and had someone immediately one up your complaint with a bigger complaint.

“Man, my workplace is so bad because of this and that.” “Well bro, that’s nothing, let me tell you about my work...horrible and so on.” You think about it and you probably can recall numerous examples. And such is the case with complaining--it grows and gets louder with company.

The Israelites’ complaints about their hardships were contagious, and grew in number and volume, so much so, that the anger of the Lord was aroused. And this leads us to a third reason why complaining is a spiritual virus, because it is destructive.

### **c. Destructive**

It is destructive because it is sinful at its core, but why is it sinful? The type of complaining that is happening here has two destructive ingredients involved: unbelief and ingratitude. A Bible Scholar, Dr. Irving Jensen, writes that this type of complaining is also murmuring or grumbling in unbelief and ingratitude.

**“Unbelief, because the people were beginning to doubt whether God would really fulfill His promises. Ingratitude, for they had already forgotten what a favored people they were and how many blessings were coming their way. How soon in the life of a believer do such sins arise!” Dr. Irving Jensen**

This is the point where a distinction needs to be made. I really want you to hear this. There is a difference between groaning and grumbling, both of which are responses to suffering. The type of complaining here is grumbling.

Grumbling occurs, when under the heaviness of suffering, you respond to God with resentment and anger. Groaning, on the other hand, also occurs under the heaviness of suffering, but the response to God is a sincere outcry of pain, grief, sorrow, weariness, or hurt.

Groaning still trusts and hopes in God’s faithfulness. Grumbling blames God, and anticipates the worst possible outcome. God gives mercy to groaning. God shows his anger to grumbling. Do you see the difference?

Groaning is what the Israelites did while suffering in slavery in Egypt. Grumbling is what they did in freedom that is so offensive to the Lord. And his wrath against it was clear. Church family, let us not get trapped in the same pattern. May we be challenged, even

under the weight of suffering to handle it in the same way as the Apostle Paul did in 2 Corinthians 1:8-10

**2 Cor. 1:8 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself.**

**2 Cor. 1:9 Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.**

**2 Cor. 1:10 He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us.**

So, we see first that complaining, grumbling is a virus that is destructive to our spiritual freedom. And the second main thought about complaining is that it distorts the reality.

## **2. Complaining Distorts Reality (11:4-9)**

We continue in Numbers 11:4-9

**Num. 11:4 The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, “If only we had meat to eat!**

**Num. 11:5 We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic.**

**Num. 11:6 But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!”**

**Num. 11:7 The manna was like coriander seed and looked like resin.**

**Num. 11:8 The people went around gathering it, and then ground it in a hand mill or crushed it in a mortar. They cooked it in a pot or made it into loaves. And it tasted like something made with olive oil.**

**Num. 11:9 When the dew settled on the camp at night, the manna also came down.**

The first of their complaints regarded their hardships. This second complaint is all about dietary preferences. They craved meat instead of manna. This complaining is started by the “rabble” that was among them. The word “rabble” means the non-Israelite Egyptians who came out of Egypt with God’s people. The term implies that they are a recurring source of complaints and trouble in the camp.

These are people who do not know the Lord, who do not know the goodness of God and they incite others who do know God to rebel against him. Now, an important side note for all of us today...let this serve as one of many scriptural examples, when we are admonished in 1 Cor. 15 to not be misled.

**1 Cor. 15:33 Do not be misled: “Bad company corrupts good character.”**

**1 Cor. 15:34 Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God—I say this to your shame.**

That is why it is critical to not allow the bad example of other people to affect your walk with God, especially your gratitude of his salvation and provision that they don’t know anything about. It can happen so quickly. So be on guard against that.

But, they went ahead and chimed in with the rabble. And what we see in Numbers 11 is that their complaining had distorted the reality of their past experience.

#### **a. Past Experience (4-6)**

Once again, they are just over a year removed from 400 years of slavery, and they are complaining because they used to eat better things in slavery. They have selective memories.

Their minds focus more on the tasty meals and they seemingly forget the ruthless masters that caused intense hardships, sorrow, beatings, and the murder of their children. This shows us how easy it is for the reality of our past experience to be distorted by complaining.

#### **b. Present Provision (7-9)**

But Complaining also distorts the reality of our present provision. God’s provision of manna was good. Combined with the descriptions of it in Exodus, it was like a coriander

seed that was ground up into a flour. Then it was baked into something resembling cakes or bread. And it tasted sweet like honey, and of olive oil.

So, the Israelites are 3 days into a journey in a desert, and God is providing sweet food from his heavenly storehouses for hundreds of thousands of people every day. The complaints were distorting the reality of their present and they were overlooking the miraculous provision of God.

If complaining distorts the reality of our past experience and our present provision, then it certainly distorts the reality of our future vision.

### **c. Future Vision (31-35)**

We need to skip ahead a few verses to verses 31-35 to see what happens as a result of their complaining

**Num. 11:31 Now a wind went out from the Lord and drove quail in from the sea. It scattered them up to two cubits deep all around the camp, as far as a day's walk in any direction.**

**Num. 11:32 All that day and night and all the next day the people went out and gathered quail. No one gathered less than ten homers. Then they spread them out all around the camp.**

**Num. 11:33 But while the meat was still between their teeth and before it could be consumed, the anger of the Lord burned against the people, and he struck them with a severe plague.**

**Num. 11:34 Therefore the place was named Kibroth Hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had craved other food.**

**Num. 11:35 From Kibroth Hattaavah the people traveled to Hazeroth and stayed there.**

Remember, they are on the journey to God's promised land. They have been preparing for months for the journey. Three days in, they take their eyes off of God's vision. And their desire to satisfy the cravings of their flesh have terrible consequences.



Unbelieving and ungrateful, they craved meat, and they ended up getting more than they bargained for. God sent a miraculous wind that pushed a huge number of quail into the camp. The birds flew waist high and the flight lasted so long that the Israelites stood for two days and a night knocking down quail.

Here's a thing to think about...If you complain about God's provision of your basic needs, you won't be able to handle more with a grateful heart either. And instead of pushing forward to receive the prize of what God has called you to, you may just end up chasing after quail in the desert instead of living in a fertile land flowing with milk and honey.

Twelve years ago my wife and I moved away from Northshore to help plant a church. And after two years there, I confessed some struggles with sin that I had been dealing with for a long time. And in the midst of repenting of sin, some of our friends, admittedly so, didn't handle my situation very well.

I caused the situation, but we felt like the response to it made it impossible for us to stay. For the longest time we didn't say anything about that part of it to anyone because we didn't want to damage what God was doing there, and because I was the one that initially caused the problem.

But, after a few years, we would have some friends ask about it and I would fall into the same trap. I looked at the past and I would share more of the things that were hurtful, unfair, and damaging. It was so easy to suppress all of the ways that God had grown me and our faith during that time.

That was a time where we completely relied on God for our needs. He called us to leave in the middle of the collapse of the housing market without a home to go to and without any assurance of financial support. I had to make pastoral and leadership decisions that I never had to make before. I learned who he wanted me to be as a minister.

But, when I would share my experience I wouldn't focus on those. My complaining was distorting the reality of what God had done in my past, and in a way I was being ungrateful for where he has brought me today. And if I had stayed in that pattern it certainly would affect the way I would think about the future.

Am I the only one? Is there something that you complain about that happened in your past that makes the blessings and movement of God in your life distorted? Are you complaining about something presently that overlooks God's provision?

Let us all learn from the mistakes of those who have walked before us, complaining will only make your plight more unbearable. So, complaining is a virus, it distorts reality, both past, present, and future, and third, complaining weakens others.

### **3. Complaining Weakens Others (10-26)**

We had skipped in our verses to the judgement of the people for complaining, but going back we see the truth of its weakening effect on others. Let's go back to verse 10

**Num. 11:10 Moses heard the people of every family wailing at the entrance to their tents. The Lord became exceedingly angry, and Moses was troubled.**

#### **a. The whole body (10a)**

So, the one way that complaining affects others is that it affects and weakness the whole body. Their second complaint had gone viral to the point that people of every family were wrapped up in it.

That should be a caution for us as a church. Unfortunately, complaining is alive and well in churches today. Some may not get their way. Some may think a poor leadership decision has been made. Sometimes others just complain about anything. It may not even be focused on something.

And not everyone may take part in it, but it sure has a negative impact on the body. It can quickly deflate and depress others. Eventually it can spread like a cancer to the whole camp. But it can especially have a troubling effect on spiritual leaders.

#### **b. Spiritual Leaders (10b-15)**

It has a weakening impact on leaders. In verses 11-15, we see:

**Num. 11:10b The Lord became exceedingly angry, and Moses was troubled.**

**Num. 11:11 He asked the Lord, "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me?"**

**Num. 11:12 Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors?**

**Num. 11:13 Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, 'Give us meat to eat!'**

**Num. 11:14 I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me.**

**Num. 11:15 If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me—if I have found favor in your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin.”**

The few whispers of discontentment about hardships had grown to a loud chorus of wailing about minor problems. The people wept. We see that God was angry. And Moses was troubled. The complaining was having a terrible impact on him. This is the beauty of the Bible, it doesn't overlook the vulnerability of its leaders.

In his commentary, a guy named Raymond Brown provides a list of leadership troubles that Moses was facing in his heart because of his complaint.

First, complaining caused Moses to disregard the cost of leadership, meaning that there is often a price to pay with difficult assignments. Second, complaining caused him to exaggerate the problems of his leadership. He thought all of this was happening to him because God was unhappy with him.

Third, complaining led him to anticipate leadership failure. He could only imagine the worst of what was to come to the point that he was wishing that God would just take him out. Fourth, he forgot the privilege of leadership. Perhaps God could have chosen someone else, but he gave Moses this great purpose.

You see, complaining affected the whole body and their spiritual leader in a serious way. But God's reaction to Moses was different than his anger toward the people. Why? Here is the critical difference. Moses took his complaints straight to God. Moses took his troubles to the one who could help him.

#### **4. God's Mercy & Cure for Troubles (16-26)**

And this is the final point about complaining that we will look at today. God has mercy and a cure for troubles. We can go straight to the source of help. Now, I want to clarify that if you have legitimate grievances toward someone that has caused harm to you, or if there is someone that can help you in a time of need or with a problem, then you can go to them.

The Bible gives us clear instructions about that. But we see here that God is merciful to Moses because he doesn't grumble behind the backs of others. And, he isn't just complaining without cause. He goes straight to God, and what he finds is mercy. He finds that God helps those who come to him in need. Look at verses 16-17:

**Num. 11:16 The Lord said to Moses: "Bring me seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the tent of meeting, that they may stand there with you.**

**Num. 11:17 I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take some of the power of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them. They will share the burden of the people with you so that you will not have to carry it alone.**

Now, we are not going to read the rest of that part because those verses show how God is merciful to Moses. He helps him. He gives him a team that can help him. But he also gives them a cure for complaining that is the same cure that he gives us today, His Holy Spirit. Look at what the Spirit does in Romans 8:26-27:

**Rom. 8:26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.**

**Rom. 8:27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.**

**Rom. 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.**

So, if you are suffering with something today: a hardship, a trial, a hurt, a wrong that you feel like you can't get over, you can groan. Groan to God, and even when you don't know what to pray, the Spirit will groan for you.

But, don't grumble, don't complain in unbelief and ingratitude. Remember that God works for the good of those who love him. Church family, the journey to our future inheritance will have deserts, mountains, valleys, and other difficulties. But let us not forget what Jesus did for us to pull out of slavery to sin, to save us, to give us life anew, and hope for our future destination.

So, may our challenge for the journey be this, in Philippians 2:14-18:

**Phil. 2:14 Do everything without grumbling or arguing,**

**Phil 2:15 so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation." Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky**

**Phil. 2:14 16 as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain.**

May we always remember and know how good we've got it.