

A Complaining People

Numbers 10:11-12:16

Introduction

Road Trip: I heard a comedian once joke that when they're going on a trip with their kids, the time between when a parent buckles their kid into their car seat and shuts the door to walk around the car to get into their seat *is* their vacation.¹

- You spend weeks planning the trip. You pack the car. My wife brings a corner store's worth of snacks. If you need anything, she has it. Our tiny passengers are reclining in an air-conditioned vehicle, watching a movie on an iPad, being chauffeured to a week of fun activities, and before long...
 - "I'm hungry." "I *don't* want any more Goldfish." "I *want* more goldfish." "Why does she get to sit there?" "I'm bored." He's touching me." "How much longer?" (*It's been eleven minutes btw*).
- There's something about a journey that has a way of bringing what's inside of us out of us.

Israel's Journey: That's where we are in Numbers, for the first ten chapters, God has been preparing Israel for the journey to the Promised Land: counting, organizing, purifying (e.g., packing the car). Now it's time to go.²

- ¹¹ In the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth day of the month, the cloud lifted from over the tabernacle of the testimony, ¹² and the people of Israel set out by stages from the wilderness of Sinai. And the cloud settled down in the wilderness of Paran (Num 10:11-12).
- ³³ So they set out from the mount of the LORD three days' journey. And the ark of the covenant of the LORD went before them three days' journey, to seek out a resting place for them. ³⁴ And the cloud of the LORD was over them by day, whenever they set out from the camp. ³⁵ And whenever the ark set out, Moses said, "Arise, O LORD, and let your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate you flee before you." ³⁶ And when it rested, he said, "Return, O LORD, to the ten thousand thousands of Israel" (Num 10:33-36).

The Danger Within: The next recorded words tell us all we need to know: And the people complained (Num 11:1).

- After all the preparation, what could go wrong? They have everything they need: God's presence, provision, and promises. They have his Word through his appointed leader, Moses.
- It turns out, they're still their own greatest problem.

¹ HT Jerry Seinfeld recounting Louis C. K. Joke

² Before the story moves forward, Numbers 7–10 takes us back and fills in Israel's final preparations at Sinai. The leaders bring their offerings. The Levites are consecrated. Israel celebrates the Passover. God gives them the cloud to guide them and trumpets to gather them. The camp is organized. The camp is cleansed. The Tabernacle is dedicated. The Levites are ready. They've remembered God's rescue. They know how God will lead them. Everything is ready.

The greatest danger in the wilderness isn't around God's people, but within God's people. The same is true for us.

- Our greatest problem isn't what's happening around us, but what's happening within us.
- Your greatest danger isn't the wilderness around you, but the sin within you.
 - (1) The Danger of Discontentment
 - (2) The Destruction of Discontentment
 - (3) The Reach of Discontentment

1. The Danger of Discontentment (11:1-17)

¹ 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. ² Then the people cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the LORD, and the fire died down. ³ So the name of that place was called Taberah, because the fire of the LORD burned among them. ⁴ 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! ⁵ We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost 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 appearance like that of bdellium. ⁸ The people went about and gathered it and ground it in handmills or beat it in mortars and 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 upon the camp in the night, the manna fell with it. (Num 11:1-9).³

Same Same But Different: There's a bit of a Groundhog Day situation, with a déjà vu replay of Exodus 15 and 16 (e.g., three days' travel, complaining multitude, manna, and quail, etc.), which only highlights the rebellious stupidity of this moment.

- In Exodus 15, they *were* newly freed slaves on their way to Sinai. But now, it's nearly a year later. They've received God's law from the mountain. They've had enough time, revelation, and firsthand experience to know better. They should have learned their lesson by now.
 - I can certainly relate. How many times have I found myself in the same situation, doing something I should have learned not to do by now?
- Sinai gave Israel God's law, but has not changed Israel's heart. It only takes a moment to get the Israelites out of slavery, but it takes a lifetime to get slavery out of the Israelites.

³ ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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? ¹² 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? ¹³ 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.' ¹⁴ I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me. ¹⁵ 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" (Num 11:10-15).

Complaining: ¹ And the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes... Beware of being discontent with God's provision.

- **Complaining is a sin!** We tend to treat complaining like a personality quirk. The Bible treats it as a spiritual problem. Do all things without grumbling or disputing (Phil 2:14).⁴
- Now, that doesn't mean Christians can't lament. The Bible gives us an entire vocabulary for bringing our pain, confusion, disappointment, and even frustration to God (HT Lamentations series).
 - The difference is between bringing your complaint to God in faith and grumbling against God in unbelief.
- **The sin of complaining is the accusation underneath it: God is not being good to me.**
 - You have rejected the LORD who is among you (Num 11:20).
 - "Your grumbling is not against us but against the LORD" (Ex 16:8).
- This accusation against God **rightly riles his anger.**
 - God gets angry when his people complain. God's anger is kindled both figuratively and literally.
 - Anger is often a cause for sin, but not when it is godly and righteous.
 - "Be angry and do not sin" (Eph 4:26).
 - "For the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (Jas 1:20).
 - But God's anger is righteous because it is against the unfaithful accusations of the people he has rescued and provided for.
 - If being angry at complaining is being like God, then I have a lot of godly moments with my kids. You want to complain about this food you didn't buy, didn't prepare, and didn't lift a finger to put on the table? You can always say "thank you," instead of complaining.
- But even after the fire comes, the people cry out, Moses intercedes, and the fire stops, they keep complaining.
 - Complaining is not the disease; it's the symptom. Until the heart changes, the symptoms will return.
 - When the check-engine light comes on, you can put a piece of electrical tape over it. Congratulations—the light is gone. The problem isn't. Their complaining is the warning light.
 - Underneath it is something deeper: a heart that doesn't trust the goodness and provision of God.⁵ A heart that doesn't trust God *will always find something to complain about.*⁶

The Riff Raff: ⁴ 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!"

⁴ Cf. 1 Cor 10:9-11

⁵ Could also use the smoke/fire illustration.

⁶ "And the people were as those complaining of evil/bad in the hearing of the LORD." There may be a literary contrast with טוב ("good"): Israel perceives its circumstances as רע despite God's good provision: discontentment causes Israel to perceive God's good provision as bad.

- The rabble! The Hebrew Word only shows up this one time and has the sound and meaning of our term “riff-raff.”⁷
- Remember the geography of Israel’s camp? God at the center (then Levites, tribes, others). God’s judgment just fell on some outlying parts of the camp.
- These voices from the margin of the camp are tempting God’s people away from his presence in the center.
- That is the direction of temptation; it calls us away from God’s presence. It tells us that we can find satisfaction out there rather than in the God who is already among us.

Lustful Amnesia: They had a strong craving.⁸ They had a deep desire, a lust for a fancy Egyptian meal.

- (1) Discontentment edits our memories.
- (2) Discontent exaggerates our misery.
- (3) Discontentment distorts our blessings.
- (1) Discontentment edits our memories. Discontentment has a selective memory. It exaggerates what you don’t have, minimizes what you do have, and romanticizes bondage as freedom.
 - They remember the fish they ate in Egypt (along with the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic).
 - Describing their time in Egypt only based on the cuisine is like giving the Titanic five stars because the dinner was excellent.
 - “Sure, we ate in chains, but the onions were exquisite” (Grear).
 - They also describe the food as free (that cost nothing)! That is a crazy read on the story. They might not have gotten a bill, but they paid for it with their freedom.
 - College students will sometimes describe the amenities of college with that language. Free Wi-Fi, free admission to sporting events, a free gym membership, etc. It’s not free, you’re paying for it (at least someone is).
 - Discontentment remembers what sin gave you and forgets what sin cost you.
- (2) Discontent exaggerates our misery. Discontentment takes real hardship and narrates it as catastrophe. Now our strength is dried up. “We’re wasting away!”
 - “We’re starving.” Except they’re not. They are tired of the menu, but they are not wasting away or starving.
 - The Israelites would make great Baptists with their skill of inventing non-problems. How quickly can we go from singing “Great is Thy Faithfulness” to complaining that the sanctuary is too cold (*too much A/C*).
 - Now, I like to give the Israelites a hard time. But, to be fair, **wilderness life was hard**. Imagine moving an entire nation—children, elderly, livestock—with only what you could carry through an actual desert.

⁷ The Hebrew in Numbers 11:4 is רֶבֶב (hā’asapsûp), a rare word—it occurs only here in the OT. It appears related to the root רָכַץ (‘-s-p), “gather/collect,” with an unusual reduplicated formation (Morales). A collection/gathering of people, hence something like “rabble,” “riffraff,” or “miscellaneous crowd.” The idea may be roughly “the gathered crowd” / “the motley collection.” The ancient versions already understood it as some sort of mixed or miscellaneous group.

⁸ The Hebrew is הִתְאַוּהוּ (hit’awwû ta’ăwâ), from the root אָוָה (‘-w-h), meaning to desire, crave, long for.

- That's precisely what makes discontentment so dangerous. It takes something genuinely difficult and convinces us that everything is terrible.
- **(3) Discontentment distorts our blessings.** There is nothing at all but this manna to look at."
 - It's amazing how quickly God's miraculous gifts can become ordinary burdens when we become discontent with them (e.g., children. You pray for a child. You celebrate the pregnancy. You cry when they're born. You stare at them sleeping and can't believe God entrusted this little life to you. And then a few years later: "Why are your shoes in the middle of the floor?" Now, the shoes really are in the middle of the floor. And they should move them! But what happened? Yesterday's miracle can start feeling like today's inconvenience. The child didn't stop being a blessing. Discontentment distorted the blessing.
 - We do this with jobs we once prayed for, spouses we once couldn't wait to marry, homes we once couldn't believe we could afford, churches we once thanked God for, opportunities we once begged God to give us. What transformed yesterday's blessing into today's burden? Discontentment. Sometimes the blessing didn't change. We did.
 - Nothing at all but this manna. Bread is literally falling from heaven every morning to feed you in the wilderness and that's "nothing."
 - It's not even bad! And the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. The manna isn't bad. They're eating cake and mad about it.
 - You can have bread from heaven falling outside your tent every morning and still convince yourself God is withholding something good from you.
 - That's where discontentment eventually takes us. When God's provision isn't enough for us, what we're ultimately saying is that God isn't enough for us.

And sometimes the most frightening thing God can do with that kind of craving is give us exactly what we're demanding.

2. The Destruction of Discontentment (11:18-35)⁹

¹⁸ And say to the people, 'Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat, for you have wept in the hearing of the LORD, saying, "Who will give us meat to eat? For it was better for us in Egypt." Therefore the LORD will give you meat, and you shall eat. ¹⁹ You shall not eat just one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, ²⁰ but a whole month, until it comes out at your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, because you have rejected the LORD who is among you and have wept before him, saying, "Why did we come out of Egypt?"' ²¹ But Moses said, "The people among whom I am number six hundred thousand on foot, and you have said, 'I will give them meat, that they may eat a whole month!' ²² Shall flocks and herds

⁹ ¹⁶ Then the LORD said to Moses, "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. ¹⁷ 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 (Num 11:16-17).

be slaughtered for them, and be enough for them? Or shall all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, and be enough for them?" ²³ 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" ²⁴ So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD. And he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent (Num 11:18-24).¹⁰

Get What You Want: Be careful what you demand from God. Sometimes judgment looks like God giving you what you want.

- Sometimes God's judgment isn't simply saying, "no," but saying, "Okay. Have it your way."
 - One of the most frightening forms of God's judgment is when he stops restraining us and gives us over to what we have chosen.
 - Your sin will destroy you, God doesn't have to.
 - Sometimes God's judgment is not withholding the thing we worship. Sometimes it's handing us over to it.
 - You know that old-school parenting technique? A kid gets caught sneaking a cigarette, so the parent says, "You want to smoke? Fine. Smoke the whole pack." The point is to make them sick of the very thing they thought they wanted. That's not gonna make it into modern parenting books. But the underlying principle is important: **sometimes "no" is an act of love**. A good parent doesn't give a child everything the child wants, because the parent knows that some of the things the child wants will hurt them.
- The people want meat. God says, Okay. I'll give you meat. Not for one day. Not two days. Not five. Not ten. Not twenty. A whole month. Until "it comes out at your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you."
- **You think you're tired of manna?** Wait until you're sick of quail.

It's Not About the Meat: It's about the meat, but it's not about the meat. God tells us what is actually happening underneath the craving. It's because you have rejected the LORD who is among you and have wept before him, saying, "Why did we come out of Egypt?"

- He doesn't say, "because you rejected the manna." He says: "because you have rejected the LORD who is among you."
- The craving is a window to their hearts. This is not a culinary problem, but a spiritual one. They think if they can just have what they want, they will be satisfied.
 - We do the same when we think if I could just make more money, or get married, or get the promotion, or get out of this season.
- But satisfaction in anything other than God is a moving target.
 - Today's "if only" becomes tomorrow's "what's next?"

¹⁰ 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. But they did not continue doing it.

²⁶ Now 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 the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth, 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, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" ³⁰ And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp (Num 11:25-30).

- You cannot satisfy the spiritual need we all have with anything other than God.
 - “Your satisfaction in Christ alone should run so deep that no pain can shake it and no pleasure can compete with it” (Piper).
- Jesus will eventually describe himself as “the bread of life” and say, “whoever comes to me shall not hunger” (John 6:35). Our deepest hunger isn’t finally for better circumstances or more stuff. It’s for God himself.
 - Am I saying human beings can never genuinely be satisfied? No. Only God can satisfy us. Created things cannot bear the weight of being our ultimate satisfaction.

Short Hand: Moses has his own problem. Moses hears God’s promise and does the math.

- With hundreds of thousands of people, where is all this meat going to come from in the desert? If you slaughtered every animal, you might not have enough. Is every fish in the sea going to show up?
- Is the LORD’s hand shortened? Do you think God can’t do this? Is he too short to reach the top shelf of the cupboard (like me)?
- Does he need Moses to come up with a catering plan to feed these people? No more than he needed the disciples to plan to feed the 5,000. It’s God miraculous provision that is enough.
 - “You are enough’ in the same way that a loaf of bread and a fish were enough” (Miller).
- If God has not provided something, it isn’t because he is unable to provide it. Just because God *hasn’t* given you something doesn’t mean God *can’t* give it to you.
 - Sometimes God withholds something precisely because he knows better than you do what is good for you.¹¹ It is not a sign of his weakness but evidence of his wisdom.
 - Israel’s lack of meat was never evidence of God’s lack of power.
 - And Israel is about to learn that the problem was never that God couldn’t give them meat. The problem was that they thought they knew better than God what they needed.

³¹ 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. ³² And the people rose all that day and all night and all the next day, and gathered the quail. Those who gathered least gathered

¹¹ The Seventy Elders and Eldad and Medad (11:16–30): The narrative of Israel’s craving is interrupted by God’s response to Moses’ own crisis. Moses complains that the burden of carrying the people is too heavy for him (11:11–15), so God appoints seventy elders to share the burden and places upon them some of the Spirit who is upon Moses (11:16–17, 24–25; cf. the seventy elders of Exod 24:9). The solution is therefore more than pragmatic delegation: God equips those he appoints by his Spirit. When the Spirit rests upon the elders, they prophesy. Eldad and Medad unexpectedly prophesy within the camp rather than at the tent, prompting Joshua to ask Moses to stop them (The Pseudepigraphal book, *Eldad and Medad*, is even quoted in *The Shepherd of Hermes*). Moses responds without jealousy: “Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!” (11:29). This desire becomes especially significant within the larger biblical story as the prophets anticipate the widespread gift of God’s Spirit (cf. Ezek 36:26–27; Joel 2:28–29), fulfilled climactically at Pentecost (Acts 2:16–18). Thus, even amid a chapter exposing what is wrong within God’s people, Moses voices a desire for what they desperately need: God’s Spirit within them.

ten homers. And they spread them out for themselves all around the camp. ³³ 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. ³⁴ Therefore the name of 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, and they remained at Hazeroth (Num 11:31-35).

The Quail: This isn't one thanksgiving turkey, but enough quail to overwhelm them. Quail everywhere for a day's journey in all directions. More wilderness chicken nuggets than you can possibly eat.

- They spend all day and night gathering quail. The craving has taken over. They have more than they need, yet they can't stop getting more.
- **Uncontrolled desire is never satisfied.**
- Their frantic gathering vividly displays the craving, but the judgment is for their rebellious rejection of God.
- They get everything they want, and it's not enough.
- They choose quail and reject God.

Burial Place: With their mouths still full, a visibly picture of their rebellion, God judges them. The name of the place, Kibroth-hattaavah, means the Graves of Craving. They are buried in their lust.

- They had a strong craving and their craving buried them.
- That's where unchecked desire takes us. Sin always advertises what it will give you. It never shows you where it will bury you.¹²
 - Lust entices, "One more time."
 - Greed promises, "One more dollar."
 - Ambition whispers, "One more achievement."
- **But how much is enough?**
- If your heart is looking to something other than God to satisfy it, the answer will always be: more.
- That's the destruction of discontentment. The thing you thought you couldn't live without can become the thing that destroys you.¹³

But discontentment isn't just a problem for the rabble on the edges of the camp, it infects familiar people in the inner circle.

3. The Reach of Discontentment (12:1-16)

¹² Consider addiction as illustration.

¹³ Psalm 78:17–31 later retells this episode as an example of Israel's rebellion and testing of God in the wilderness. Particularly striking is vv.29–31: "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." The psalm highlights the irony of Numbers 11: God gave them what they craved, but getting what they craved could not satisfy their craving. Their problem was not ultimately the absence of meat, but a heart that refused to trust and be satisfied with God's provision.

¹ Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. ² And they said, “Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” And the LORD heard it. ³ Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth. ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house. ⁸ 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?” ⁹ And the anger of the LORD was kindled against them, and he departed. ¹⁰ When the cloud removed from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous, like snow. And Aaron turned toward Miriam, and behold, she was leprous. ¹¹ And Aaron said to Moses, “Oh, my lord, do not punish us because we have done foolishly and have sinned. ¹² Let her not be as one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes out of his mother’s womb.” ¹³ And Moses cried to the LORD, “O God, please heal her—please.” ¹⁴ But the LORD said to Moses, “If her father had but spit in her face, should she not be shamed seven days? Let her be shut outside the camp seven days, and after that she may be brought in again.” ¹⁵ So Miriam was shut outside the camp seven days, and the people did not set out on the march till Miriam was brought in again. ¹⁶ After that the people set out from Hazeroth, and camped in the wilderness of Paran.

Sibling Rivalry: Chapter 12 begins with two names we know very well: Miriam and Aaron (Moses’ sister and brother).

- If anybody knows exactly which buttons to push, it’s your siblings (“He’s touching me; I’m not touching her”).
- Moses has just survived hundreds of thousands of Israelites complaining about his leadership, but now he has to deal with his brother and sister.
 - Discontentment doesn’t just infect the rabble on the outside of the camp, but also the leaders in the inner circle.

The Non-Issue: The purported issue is his wife (they spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married). There are many things this passage doesn’t make clear.

- Is this woman Zipporah (his Midianite wife) or someone else (maybe after she died)?
- Are they mad at Moses for marrying this woman? I’m sure no one here has ever disapproved of your sibling’s choice of a spouse (A man was asked who he’d save if his MIL and SIL were in the ocean with a shark, he said, “the shark”).
 - Some have suggested they are mad because she is not an Israelite. She is Cushite (i.e., from south of Egypt, Nubia, a black African).¹⁴ If there is implicit

¹⁴ Cush ordinarily refers to the region south of Egypt associated especially with Nubia (older English translations frequently use “Ethiopia”), and Jeremiah 13:23 associates Cushites with distinctive skin color. Whether the woman in Numbers 12:1 is Zipporah, Moses’ Midianite wife (Exod 2:16–22), or another woman is debated; the text does not resolve the question. Nor does Numbers explicitly tell us why Miriam and Aaron object to her. Ethnic prejudice is therefore possible, but describing the episode simply as modern “racism” claims more than the text tells us. Significantly, the stated challenge immediately shifts from Moses’ marriage to Moses’ unique prophetic authority: “Has

racism from Miriam and Aaron, it is not supported by Scripture or theology, as God has always welcomed non-Israelites into the covenant by faith (cf. Rahab, Jethro, or Hobab the Midianite earlier in this same passage).¹⁵

- Are they defending his wife? Maybe he is neglecting her in his busyness as a prophet.¹⁶
- Are they questioning his leadership ability? He is described as very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth.
 - In human terms, meekness is seen as weakness. In Biblical terms, it is godly and faithful, and the description of Jesus' character.¹⁷

The Real Issue: Just like it wasn't about the meat, it's not about the wife. ² And they said, "Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" And the LORD heard it.

- What makes Moses so special? I babysat him in the Nile. I changed his papyrus diapers. I knew him before the beard. Why does he get God's special attention?
- This is wrong on a few levels.
 - **Miriam is a prophetess** (Exod 15); God *has* spoken through her.
 - **Aaron is a high priest** (Exod 28); God *has* spoken and chosen him for a special assignment.
- They have extraordinary roles, yet they're discontent because of the role God has given Moses. They're not thankful for what they have, jealous of what they don't have.
- If you're discontent, it doesn't matter what God gives you; you'll find something else he hasn't.¹⁸
- They have the same disease as the people, but a different symptom.
 - The people want meat (ch. 11); they want God to speak to them as He did to Moses (ch. 12).
 - The people want something God hasn't given them (ch. 11); the siblings want what God has given someone else (ch. 12).¹⁹
- God speaks to Moses **differently** (face-to-face, mouth-to-mouth). Moses isn't merely Israel's CEO. He is God's uniquely appointed mediator and prophet. That's why their

the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses?" (Num 12:2). Whatever role the marriage played in provoking the dispute, vv.2–8 reveal that Moses' God-given status is at the heart of the confrontation.

¹⁵ The presence of a Cushite wife should not automatically be read as violating an Israelite principle of ethnic endogamy. Scripture repeatedly portrays non-Israelites being incorporated into or closely associated with God's covenant people. Israel itself left Egypt accompanied by a "mixed multitude" (Exod 12:38). Immediately before the events of Numbers 11–12, Moses urges Hobab the Midianite, his relative by marriage, to accompany Israel: "Come with us, and we will do good to you, for the LORD has promised good to Israel" (Num 10:29), and promises, "whatever good the LORD does to us, the same will we do to you" (10:32). Later, descendants of Moses' Midianite/Kenite relatives appear living among Israel (Judg 1:16; 4:11; cf. Jael in Judg 4). The larger biblical pattern therefore distinguishes ethnicity from covenant allegiance: prohibitions against intermarriage are particularly concerned with marriages that would turn Israel toward other gods (cf. Deut 7:3–4), while foreigners who attach themselves to Yahweh can be welcomed among his people (cf. Ruth 1:16; Isa 56:3–7).

¹⁶ "A popular rabbinic reading... understands Miriam's speaking against Moses as a defence of his Cushite wife whom he, in a perpetually sanctified state as YHWH's prophet, had been neglecting by abstaining from marital relations (cf. Exod 19:14–15) (see MQ 17b; *Sif. Deut.* 99; *Yalk. Shim. Deut.* 738)" (Morales).

¹⁷ Matt 11:29 uses the same term of Jesus as Moses (LXX). See also Matt 5:5, 21:5.

¹⁸ If you're trusting, faithful, content, you'll be thankful for what he has given you.

¹⁹ Even Eldad and Medad got prophetic opportunities.

challenge is so serious. They aren't merely criticizing Moses' management style. They're challenging the order God has established for revealing himself to his people.²⁰

Hears, Speaks, Punishes: Be careful, the Lord hears your complaints (11:1; 12:2).

- Miriam and Aaron want God to speak to them. He does, and *it does not go well*.
 - God clarifies that Moses is his chosen and faithful mouthpiece. When they speak against him, they dishonor and distrust God.
- Because of their unfaithfulness, they are punished. Particularly Miriam, the apparent ringleader in the complaining.²¹
 - So now she must bear the mark of uncleanness, at least for a week, as a reminder of her sin.
 - She *wanted* to be closer to God, but because of her complaining, she finds herself further away.
 - Her discontentment promised more but left her with less.
- They're supposed to be on a journey, but they've been delayed by quail and now by Miriam. They have to wait for her to be healed before they get moving.
 - The wilderness isn't stopping their journey. Their sin keeps stopping their journey.

Greater Moses: One thing we find throughout Scripture is that, as great as Moses is, he is pointing to someone greater: a greater prophet, a greater mediator.

- Just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house... Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself... Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son (Heb 3:2-3, 5).
- Miriam and Aaron needed Moses to mediate and intercede for them; we need a better Moses to intercede for us. And we have one in Jesus.

Conclusion

Out There or In Here: Israel keeps thinking the problem is somewhere else. If only we were back in Egypt, or had meat, or could experience God like Moses.

- We do the same thing: **If only God would change this one thing, then I'd be okay.**
- But Numbers shows us that the greatest danger isn't the wilderness around God's people. It's the sin within God's people.

²⁰ Morales notes that Numbers 12:6–8 reflects an order within biblical revelation. Moses/Torah occupies a unique place: unlike ordinary prophets, God speaks with Moses “mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles” (Num 12:8; cf. Deut 34:10). The Prophets receive divine revelation through visions and dreams (Num 12:6), while the Writings, though likewise divinely inspired, do not claim Moses' distinctive face-to-face revelatory status. Thus, Numbers 12 is not merely defending Moses as Israel's leader; it establishes the unique revelatory authority of Moses and the Torah. This distinction becomes significant in Hebrews 3:1–6: Moses was uniquely “faithful in all God's house” as a servant, but Jesus surpasses even Moses as the Son over God's house.

²¹ The verb “to speak” is in the feminine form hinting at Miriam's leadership.

What We Need: And there's one little scene in chapter 11 that we skipped over. In the middle of all this mess, Moses says something remarkable: Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them! (11:29)

- That's exactly what they need and what we need.
- Sinai has put God's Word *before* them, but they need God to do something *within* them.
- That's the promise of the new covenant: Jeremiah says God will write his law on our hearts. Ezekiel says, "I will put my Spirit within you." Joel says, "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh."
 - And through Jesus, God does it.
- Jesus, our greater Moses, doesn't merely intercede for sinners—he gives his life for sinners. He dies for our grumbling, our craving, our jealousy, our unbelief. He rises again, and he pours out his Spirit upon his people.
 - So the answer to discontentment isn't simply: Try harder to complain less.
 - It's to trust and learn to believe that the God who gave himself for you can be trusted with what he gives you—and with what he doesn't.
- You don't need everything around you to change. You need God to keep changing what's within you.
- What is one thing you keep complaining about, craving, or wishing God would change that you can surrender to God in trust today?