

Learning to Trust the Lord: *Moses and His “Complaint” to God (Numbers 11:4-23)*

“Nothing cures ingratitude as quickly as a good memory.” ~ Woodrow Kroll

I. Investigation: An Examination of Numbers 11:4-17

A. Introduction

After the golden calf incident in Exodus 32, the Lord worked with Moses to hone his skills as a mediator. The Lord expected Moses to contend with Him for the sake of the people. And thus, at a first glance, this scene seems to suggest Moses had not learned his lesson as a leader. In fact, many scholars see Moses responding in anger and that he is not coming to the aid of the people. However, one could argue that Moses is actually, once again, interceding on behalf of the Israelites. In the end, the Lord provided for both complaints—one ended in assistance, the other in disaster.

B. Israel’s Complaint (vv. 4-9)

v. 4 - The “rabble” or “mixed company” refers to non-Israelites who joined Israel when they left Egypt (cf. Exod 12:38; Jer 25:20; Neh 13:3).

“craving” - The term is use of Eve’s desire in the Garden and of the warning against coveting in the Decalogue (Deut 5:21).

vv. 5-6 - The word for “freely” means “to be gracious” or “free.” Their ingratitude to the Lord for His gracious provision of manna is stressed through the insults of their Deliverer and how He is choosing to provide for them.

Psalm 78:18-19 - “They willfully challenged God by asking for food to satisfy their appetite. They insulted God, saying, ‘Is God really able to give us food in the wilderness?’” (also, cf. Psalm 106:15).

vv. 7-9 - This repeated description of manna (first seen in Exodus 16) highlights God’s provision and the ungrateful hearts of the Israelites. Also, one scholar aptly notes, “The children of Israel may be bored, stressed, tired, frightened, or seduced away from right worship, but they are not hungry” (P. T. Reis, “Numbers XI,” *VT* [2005], 210). Besides the manna, the Israelites also had milk, butter, cheese, and yogurt from their livestock (cf. Exod 12:38; 27:3).

C. Moses’ Complaint (vv. 10-15)

v. 10 - “Moses regarded the situation as dangerous” because of the Lord’s extreme anger rather than the people’s misconduct (cf. Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, 25). Already in this chapter, Moses was faced with serving as intercessor between the sinful Israelites and the wrath of God.

vv. 11-12 - Moses complains that despite leading the entire Israelite nation, the Lord appears to have not shown him favor. And yet, it was the Lord who is responsible for their existence, not Moses.

Note that Moses makes no excuse for the sin of the people. Nor does Moses attempt to blame only the “riffraff.” Rather, Moses distances himself from the people and joins the Lord in His anger towards the Israelites.

There are two ways to interpret Moses’ response:

- He speaks with hostility towards the Lord. “Moses was by implication charging Yahweh with avoiding his *own* responsibility towards Israel” (Whybray, “The Immorality of God,” *JSOT* [1990], 114).
- He indirectly reminds the Lord in terms most likely to arouse God’s compassion (e.g., the root for womb and root for mercy are the same. The mother was seen as the more gentle, caring parent.). It was the Lord who bore them on eagles’ wings (Exod 19.4) and revealed Himself as One who is “merciful” and “gracious” (Exod 34).

vv. 13 - 14 - The task is too great for Moses to handle. Moses downplays the rhetoric from the complaining Israelites. One scholar writes, “To keep God from scrutinizing their greed, their amnesia, and their traitorous ingratitude, Moses fabricates a less objectionable version of the children of Israel’s question” (Reis, 216).

v. 15 - In Moses’ opinion, he would rather die than continue the impossible task of overseeing the Israelites and their judgment.

Contrast Israel’s complaint with Moses’ objection to the Lord:

Israel’s Complaint (vv. 4-9)	Moses’ Complaint (vv. 10-15)

D. God’s Response (vv. 16-23)

vv. 16-17 - Similar to the allowance of Aaron to assist Moses, the Lord permits 70 men to come and share in Moses’ leadership responsibilities. Observe that not once in these two verses does the Lord mention the sin of the people, nor does He rebuke Moses.

vv. 18-20 - The Lord emphasizes their lack of trust in Him, their unwillingness to turn to Him for help, their ungratefulness for His many provisions, and their overall disdain for Him. In their discontent, they have failed to recall their former way of life in Egypt (e.g., slavery, the killing of their sons), the blessings of God's provisions in the present, and the hope that awaits them in the Promised Land.

vv. 21-22 - Logistically, Moses is concerned that there is not enough food to feed the Israelites for an entire month. He certainly would not want to have to deal with the Israelites if there was a shortage of meat promised by the Lord!

v. 23 - "Is the Lord's hand shortened?" - This phrase could be rendered "Is the Lord too weak and powerless to provide?"

II. Intersect

A. Uncertainties of life can easily draw our eyes away from the Lord. We find ourselves attempting to resolve or answer life's unknowns with our own resources rather than resting in the Lord's character. We eventually find ourselves shackled by the chains of doubt, bitterness, and anger.

Psalm 111 -

B. Life is often full of questions and confusion. In the midst of these uncertainties, we need to be reminded that God is not disengaged, or even upset, but rather, He is a loving and sovereign God who is intimately involved in the lives of His people.

Romans 8:35-39 -

C. We need to be careful to trust the Lord to provide and not presume upon what the Lord *should* provide. We not only will miss out on the Lord's blessings, we may also wind up with the very thing we desired!

Proverbs 3:5-6 -

"The discontented person thinks everything he does for God is too much, and everything God does for him is too little." ~Thomas Watson, *The Art of Divine Contentment*, 84