

People Complain About Food Again; Moses Struggles with the Burden of Leadership

Numbers 11

Group ¹	C	V	Description
The People Complain	11	1-3	The people begin complaining and the fire of the Lord consumed some on the edges of the camp
		4-6	Longing for the delicacies of Egypt
		7-9	Manna in daily life
The Complaint of Moses		10-15	Moses complains about the burden of leadership in hardship
Seventy Elders to Assist		16-23	God instructs Moses to select 70 elders to assist him and He will bestow His Spirit on them; God will show His power by giving them meat
		24-25	Moses told the people and God sent His Spirit and the 70 prophesied, but only once
		26-30	Two who remained in the camp prophesied too (v29 is important)
The Quail and the Plague		31-35	An abundance of quail sent from the Lord, followed by a plague

Reflections

How often do you complain about something or anything? That is a question we need to ask ourselves and probably on a regular basis. Why? This is only my opinion, but how often or how much we complain could be an indication of our attitude, whether we have an overall positive or negative attitude about life. In this text, we see that the people begin to complain about their situation, which in turn causes Moses to complain to God as well.

Before I dig into the text, I want to emphasize one passage. I also want to include passages from 1 Corinthians and Matthew.

Numbers 11:26-29 NASB But two men had remained in the camp; the name of one was Eldad and the name of the other Medad. And the Spirit rested upon them (now they were among those who had been registered, but had not gone out to the tent), and they prophesied in the camp. **27** So a young man ran and told Moses and said, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." **28** Then Joshua the son of Nun, the attendant of Moses from his youth, said, "Moses, my lord, restrain 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 upon them!"

1 Corinthians 14:1 NASB Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual *gifts*, but especially that you may prophesy.

Matthew 7:7-11 NASB "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. **8** "For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. **9** "Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? **10** "Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? **11** "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is

¹ (NASB) "Group" column from the headings in the NASB text.

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good to those who ask Him!

Let's start with a few definitions.

*murmur*²: (n) a mumbled or private expression of discontent; (v) to complain in a low tone or in private.

*complain*³: (v) to express dissatisfaction, pain, uneasiness, censure, resentment, or grief; find fault.

*grumble*⁴: (v) to murmur or mutter in discontent; complain sullenly; (n) an expression of discontent; complaint; unhappy murmur; growl

Different Bible versions translated the Hebrew word in a few different ways.

Term	Bible version or translation ⁵
Grumbling	ABP; MSG;
Murmurers or murmured wickedly	ASV; Brenton; Darby; DRB; Geneva; JPS; RV
Saying evil	BBE;
Complaining	CEV; CJB; ERV; ESV; GNB; GW; HCSB; ISV; JUB; KJV; LEB; LITV; NASB; NET; NIV; NKJV; NLT; Webster
weren't happy about the hard times	NirV;
Sighing habitually	YLT

It wasn't just that the people were complaining, it was the evil intent behind it which was directed at the Lord. They weren't complaining about being mistreated or abused (as in the complaints that God heard and then He sent Moses to lead the people out of Egypt), they were simply having to travel for three days from where they had been camped for about a year (Numbers 10:33). God's response was to send the fire of the Lord which began consuming some on the outskirts of the camp.

The "fire of the Lord" is one of those expressions which isn't really explained in the text and we will simply have to learn from the example to not complain against the Lord or we might suffer similar consequences.

Other references⁶ to fire in relation to God: Num 16:35; Lev 10:2; Deu 32:22; 2Ki 1:12; Job 1:16; Psa 78:21, 106:18; Isa 30:33, 33:14; Nah 1:5; Mar 9:43-49; Heb 12:29.

We find in verse 4 that a group referred to as "rabble", literally "a mixed group" probably made up of some Egyptians who left with the Israelites and Israelites, who were also complaining. They were probably the ones on the outskirts of the camp since they weren't members of any of the Israelite tribes who were given specific directions where they were to camp. Once again their complaints were about food, in particular not having meat to eat and that they didn't have the delicacies they had in Egypt. All they had was manna.

2 ("Dictionary.com" "murmur")

3 ("Dictionary.com" "complain")

4 ("Dictionary.com" "grumble")

5 English Bible translations: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_English_Bible_translations

6 (Torrey Numbers 11:1)

People Complain About Food Again; Moses Struggles with the Burden of Leadership

Note: Keith Green has a song⁷, “So You Wanna Go Back to Egypt,” that describes this attitude and this particular passage.

This complaining also affects Moses as well. This is one of two times when the attitude of the people caused Moses to sin (here and Numbers 20:1-13).⁸ This time Moses is complaining about the being unable to answer the people’s complaint about not having meat to eat.

God tells Moses to gather 70 elders from among the Israelites. God sends His Spirit on them and they begin prophesying, even two of them that remained in the camp (see the reference above). This is not the first time a group of 70 elders is referred to in connection with Moses.

Exodus 24:1 NASB Then He said to Moses, “Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu and seventy of the elders of Israel, and you shall worship at a distance.

Exodus 24:9 NASB Then Moses went up with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel,

The interesting thing is that it was seventy people from Jacob’s family that originally entered Egypt.

Genesis 46:26-27 NASB All the persons belonging to Jacob, who came to Egypt, his direct descendants, not including the wives of Jacob's sons, *were* sixty-six persons in all, **27** and the sons of Joseph, who were born to him in Egypt were two; all the persons of the house of Jacob, who came to Egypt, *were* seventy.

Ezekiel also refers to a group of seventy elders of Israel as well. However they are not worshiping God but all manner of idols.

Ezekiel 8:10-13 NASB So I entered and looked, and behold, every form of creeping things and beasts *and* detestable things, with all the idols of the house of Israel, were carved on the wall all around. **11** Standing in front of them were seventy elders of the house of Israel, with Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan standing among them, each man with his censer in his hand and the fragrance of the cloud of incense rising. **12** Then He said to me, “Son of man, do you see what the elders of the house of Israel are committing in the dark, each man in the room of his carved images? For they say, ‘The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land.’” **13** And He said to me, “Yet you will see still greater abominations which they are committing.”

Another group of seventy in the bible are the seventy disciples that Jesus sent out to preach and perform miracles.

Luke 10:1, 17 NASB Now after this the Lord appointed seventy others, and sent them in pairs ahead of Him to every city and place where He Himself was going to come. ... **17** The seventy returned with joy, saying, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name.”

Other references to the elders of Israel are listed below.

Genesis 50:7; Exodus 3:16,18; 4:29; 12:21; 17:5,6; 18:12; 19:7; 24:1,9,14; Leviticus 4:15; 9:1; Numbers 11:16,24,25,30; 16:25; Deuteronomy 5:23; 19:12; 21:2,3,4,6,19,20; 22:15,16,17,18; 25:7,8,9; 27:1; 29:10; 31:9,28; 32:7; Joshua 7:6; 8:10,33; 20:4; 23:2; 24:1,31; Judges 2:7; 11:5,7,8,9,10,11; 21:16; Ruth 4:2,4,9,11; 1 Samuel 4:3; 8:4; 11:3; 15:30; 16:4; 30:26; 2 Samuel 3:17; 5:3; 12:17; 17:4,15; 19:11; 1 Kings 8:1,3; 12:6,8,13;

⁷ You can listen to it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MD9W61KZYxk>

⁸ (Wiersbe 328)

People Complain About Food Again; Moses Struggles with the Burden of Leadership

20:7,8; 21:8,11; 2 Kings 6:32; 10:1,5; 19:2; 23:1; 1 Chronicles 11:3; 15:25; 21:16; 2 Chronicles 5:2,4; 10:6,8,13; 34:29; Ezra 5:5,9; 6:7,8,14; 10:8,14; Job 12:20; 32:9; Psalms 105:22; 107:32; Proverbs 31:23; Isaiah 3:14; 24:23; 37:2; Jeremiah 19:1; 26:17; 29:1; Lamentations 1:19; 2:10; 4:16; 5:12,14; Ezekiel 7:26; 8:1,11,12; 9:6; 14:1; 20:1,3; Joel 1:2,14; 2:16;

Alexander Strauch has an excellent book on biblical eldership.

Strauch, Alexander. *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*. Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1988. Print.

The contrast of the complainers and the seventy elders who prophesied shouldn't go unnoticed.

God's response to the people's complaint about not having meat to eat is basically this, "Meat! You want meat, I'll give you meat! So much that you'll wish you never complained in the first place." (That's my paraphrase of vs 18-20.) In fact He sends enough quails so that the people were three feet deep in them. Of course the people didn't follow God's directions and they began gorging themselves on the meat and God then sent a plague among the people, killing many of them. Moses again intercedes for the people and to plague is stopped.

Key Words: Old Testament, Torah/Pentateuch, Numbers, Moses, Manna, Quails, Elders, Holy Spirit, Complain, Prophecy



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