

Cravings will get you into trouble.

For Israel in the wilderness, it was their craving for meat.

What do you crave?

Maybe it's food.

Maybe it's sex.

Maybe it's alcohol.

Psalm 78:29-30 uses the word twice in singing about this episode in Numb 11.

God gave them what they craved,
but he used it to destroy them.

This is a reminder to us to discipline our desires.

Food is a good thing – when used rightly.

Sex is a good thing – when used rightly.

Alcohol is a good thing – when used rightly.

To put it simply, if you cannot control your bodily desires,
then you are not using them rightly.

Israel is called to march through the wilderness –

subsisting on manna and water –

until they reach the Promised Land,

when they will go into the Land and receive the Inheritance.

In other words, they need to discipline their bodily desires for a short time,
in order to receive a great abundance.

Before you mock them for their failure of self-control and self-discipline,

I would ask you,

How are you doing at self-control and self-discipline?

Moses wished that all God's people would be prophets –
that the LORD would put his Spirit on all of them!

That's what God has done in Jesus Christ.

You have received the Spirit of God.

The day that Moses longed for has come!

And so we should be *far better* than Israel

at disciplining our bodies,

and controlling our desires –

seeking *first* the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

There are lots of parallels between Numbers and Exodus.

There are two basic journeys involved:

from Egypt to Mt. Sinai (in the book of Exodus),
and from Mt. Sinai to the Promised Land (in the book of Numbers).

The crossing of the Red Sea and the crossing of the Jordan River provide book ends
for Israel's sojourn in the wilderness.

But in the middle, there are lots of connections between the two halves of the trip.

David Stubbs points out that there is a chiasmic structure to the rebellions:

- A The first complaint is "misfortunes – and the LORD sends fire (11:1-3)
- B The second complaint is food – and the LORD gives food (and a plague) (11:4-34)
- C The third complaint is leadership – and the LORD sends leprosy (ch 12)
- D The central complaint is their refusal to enter the promised land –
and the LORD makes them wander in the desert for 40 years! (ch 14)
- C' The fifth complaint parallels the third – leadership –
and the LORD sends earthquake and plague (ch 16-17)
- B' The sixth complaint parallels the second – water –
and the LORD gives water (and punishment) (ch 20)
- A' The final complaint parallels the first – misfortunes –
and the LORD sends fiery serpents (ch 21).

So the seven complaints are structured in a chiasmic fashion –
with the worst – and most important – complaint right in the middle!

And you may note that the temptations of Israel in the wilderness
are all about food, leadership, and the land.

Many have seen a connection with the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness.

"Turn these stones into bread" – will Jesus complain about hunger?

"Throw yourself off the pinnacle" – will Jesus put God to the test?

"All the nations I will give you" – will Jesus refuse God's way to enter the land?

But the first and the last rebellion are more general.

They are focused around unspecified "misfortunes."

And the word "misfortune" is the Hebrew "ra'a" – which means "evil" or "bad."

In other words, the first and the last rebellions

are oriented around the general problem of evil.

God has called us out of Egypt.

But it's not easy out here in the desert.

We have to discipline our desires – corral our cravings.

And bad things still happen to us.

If God is good and powerful,
if he can make manna appear – and water come from the rock –
then surely he could do better than this dry, weary wilderness.

The problem of evil takes many shapes:

Why did my child die?

Why do the innocent suffer?

How can a good God let all these bad things happen?

And particularly, how can a good God let all these bad things happen *to me!*

Introduction: Complaining Versus Complaining: What Are You Whining About? (v1-3)

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,^[a] because the fire of the LORD burned among them.

Verses 1-3 set up the paradigm for the next 16 chapters.

The people complain.

The LORD hears – and his fire burns against them, scorching part of the camp.

Then the people cry out to Moses, and Moses intercedes, and the fire dies down.

Many of you know that I am a big fan of complaining.

There is nothing that I like more than a good complaint!

But in the English language we use the same word

to refer to a good and proper “complaint”

and to a whiny and selfish “complaint.”

Notice what happens here:

“the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes.”

That’s a perfectly good translation – but it’s important to make a couple notes.

In Hebrew one word used for the legal complaint

(which, incidentally, may be ill-founded!

You can have a “proper” complaint that is *in fact* wrong!

My child may come to me with a proper complaint –

it’s in good order – but the problem is that their facts are wrong,

and so they lose their case!),

but another word is used for the whiny complaint.

And that’s the word used here!

There are only two instances of this particular word in the OT –

here and in Lamentation 3:39,

“Why should a living man complain, a man, about the punishment of his sin?”

It is not at all related to the word translated “complain” in the book of Job.

Job’s complaint is a proper appeal being brought to a proper authority –

someone who can *do something* about the situation –

and, what is more, Job’s complaint is brought with a recognition that God is God,
and I am not!

Now, in English, we use the word “complain” to refer to both the proper complaint
and the whiny complaint.

I’m not going to try to change the English language!

So, we need to distinguish clearly between a proper complaint and a whiny complaint.

The proper complaint is brought to the right person with the right attitude.

The whiny complaint is indiscriminate and selfish.

So the first thing to see is that the people are not bringing a proper *complaint* –
they are whining.

Parents, there is no greater kindness that you can do for your children (or grandchildren),
than to teach them how to bring a proper complaint!

And children,

if you work hard at learning how to bring a proper complaint – a proper objection –
to the proper authorities,

then you will be able to bring healthy productive change to all sorts of areas of life!

Presbyterians have been known throughout history at being really good at “church order” –
partly because we insist that wise laymen (ruling elders)

are equal with ministers in the *government* of the church.

One effect of this is that Presbyterian ruling elders

have been disproportionately influential in business, law, and politics.

No one has been able to prove a direct connection,

but it is at least curious that Presbyterian church order *preceded*

the development of republican government in the Anglo-American world.

The second thing is that they are whining in the hearing of the LORD *about their misfortunes*.

This is the word normally translated “evil” or “disaster.”

They are objecting to the “bad things” that have happened.

It’s not clear what these “bad things” are –

but it is clear that they are whining without a proper sense of humility before God.

Israel is faced with the problem of evil in a very concrete way.

God has led me out into the wilderness.

Bad things are happening to me here.

Should I still follow this God?
The problem of evil takes various forms,
but invariably it says that if God is both good and powerful,
then he shouldn't let all these bad things happen to me (or others).

As we go through the book of Numbers we will frequently see *both* proper complaints
and whiny complaints.

In fact, we see both in our passage tonight.

The rest of the chapter is structured around the whining of the people,
and the proper complaint of Moses.

And it's worth noting that in both cases, God gives people what they want!

The people want meat – and God gives them meat.

Moses wants help – and God gives him help.

Be careful what you wish for –
God may just give it to you!

But the same fourfold pattern of verses 1-3 will be repeated many times:
sin, punishment, prayer, salvation.

In fact, that is the pattern that we saw in Psalm 78!

And we see a more detailed example in the second rebellion in the wilderness, found in v4-34.

1. Discontentment with God's Provision: What Do You Crave? (v4-9)

⁴Now 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! ⁵We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. ⁶But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."

In verses 4-15 we see two different ways of complaining.

First, we see the complaint of the "rabble" (verses 4-9).

The "rabble" are contrasted with "the people of Israel" – who "also wept."

This is the "mixed multitude" that came up out of Egypt with Israel.

We know from Ex 12:38 that many non-Israelites came with Israel.

Some of those (like Caleb, son of Jephunneh) will be faithful.

But others – like those referred to today – are rebellious.

It's easy to understand why many would have joined Israel.

The plagues of Egypt would have convinced many to follow the God of Israel!

But while Numbers suggests that the rabble *started* the grumbling,

verse 4 is very clear that the people of Israel joined in fully!

It is true, as Paul says, that "bad company ruins good morals,"

but that does not mean that you can blame your sins on others!

If you follow the rabble, and do what they do, then you are just as guilty!

The issue here is a strong craving for meat.

They have manna (described fully in verses 7-9).

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.

You hear that description and you think,

“Hey, that sounds pretty good – why are they grumbling?”

Well, if you had to eat the same thing every day – you might grumble too!

It’s hot.

The ground is hard, rocky, and barren.

There’s not much water.

And you have to eat the same stuff every day.

We remember the fish – the cucumbers – the melons – the onions and garlic...
but all we have to eat is this *manna*...

This is why Psalm 78 says that they lacked faith!

God says in verse 20, “You have rejected the LORD”

If they had believed that God would lead them into the land,
then they would have been able to restrain their bodily cravings.

How can you restrain your bodily cravings?

How can you discipline your flesh?

By faith.

Whenever we sin – whenever we give in to our cravings –
it is because we don’t *really* believe God’s promises!

We hear the voice of the serpent –

we hear the voice of Dame Folly,

“Food eaten in secret is delicious...”

and we believe the lie – and we walk willingly into the trap!

So verses 4-9 warn us against surrendering to our cravings.

Verses 10-15 point us in the way of the proper complaint:

2. “Kill Me at Once”: How to Complain to the LORD (v10-15)

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."

While Israel grumbles and murmurs in verses 1-9,
Moses complains –
in the proper sense!!

Now, the word “complain” is not used here –
but what Moses says to the LORD fits perfectly the idea of the proper complaint.
The people had “complained” about their “misfortunes” (their evils).
Now Moses asks “for what have you done evil to your servant?”

In terms of vocabulary, Moses has precisely same complaint as the Israelites!
In v10 – the people were weeping, the anger of the LORD was blazing,
and “Moses was displeased” – literally, “it was evil in the eyes of Moses”
that the people are weeping and the anger of the LORD is burning.
Likewise, in v11 – “why have you dealt ill” – why have you “done evil” to your servant?
And in v15, “kill me...that I may not see my *evils*” – my “misfortunes” –
since it is the same word the people used in verse 1,
when the people grumbled about their “evils.”

So Israel complains about their misfortunes – the bad things that happen to them –
and God burns them to a crisp (verses 1-3).
Now Moses complains about his “misfortunes” – the bad things that happen to him –
and God takes pity on him!

The difference is not found in the words that Moses uses.
Moses sounds just as whiny to me as the Israelites.
He sounds like a drama queen!
Quite frankly, he sounds like my wife –
with the difference that she really *has* conceived and birthed
all the people that she complains about!!

I take comfort in this.
Because it means that you can be a drama queen before God!
You can go over the top rhetorically.
You can say to God, “who do you think I am?”
Moses?
He wasn't able to carry your people!

Why do you seem to think that I can do better than Moses!?”
Moses says, *I am not your mother!*
I cannot carry you.
I cannot bring these people into the Land!

What makes you think that I can do this by myself?!!

In fact, why don't you just kill me!
If this is the way that you treat your servants, then just put me out of my misery!

Have you ever been there?

Herodotus commented in the 5th century B.C.
that *everyone* at some point or other thinks that they'd be better off dead.

So, Israel is craving meat and grumbling about the manna.
And Moses just wants to die.

How does God answer?

3. God's Answer (v16-23)

a. So You Say You Want Help? God's Answer to Moses: (v16-17)

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.*

First, in verses 16-17, God says to Moses,
Yup, you're right.
You can't do this by yourself.
So let me help you.

As we said earlier,
there are lots of parallels between the journey in Exodus, from Egypt to Sinai,
and the journey in Numbers, from Sinai to the Promised Land.

In Exodus 18, Jethro had advised Moses to appoint elders who could judge the people.
And so Moses selected rulers to judge ordinary cases –
so that only the difficult cases were brought to Moses.
What is the difference between the judges of Exodus 18 and the elders of Numbers 11?
The difference is the Spirit.
The rulers of Exodus 18 are tribal elders – they are judges of civil matters.
The elders of Numbers 11 receive the Spirit of God – they are spiritual rulers.

God says that he will put some of Moses' Spirit upon these elders,
so that Moses will no longer be alone.

b. So You Say You Want Meat? God's Answer to the People (18-23)

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?"'"*

But then in verse 18, God tells Moses to say to the people,

"Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat."

When Israel came to Sinai, God had told them to consecrate themselves
before he gave them the 10 Commandments.

This will be the same command in Joshua 3,

when the ark crosses the Jordan River into the Promised Land;
and in Joshua 7, when Israel prepares for judgment after Achan's sin;
and in 1 Samuel 16, when Samuel prepares to anoint David;

You consecrate yourself in preparation to meet with God and behold God's mighty deeds.

And so the LORD says that he will give Israel a *month* of meat,

"until it comes out of your nostrils!"

Israel has rejected the LORD,

and so the LORD will teach Israel a lesson.

But he will do this by giving them what they want!

Brothers and sisters, listen carefully!

Sometimes, when God gives you what you want,

he is doing it to show you that your desires are totally out of whack!

[Mom]

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 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?"*

At first, Moses doesn't get it.

He looks around and sees flocks and herds –

but you can't slaughter your flocks and herds –

otherwise you have no future!

Moses can't figure out where all this meat will come from.

Commentators struggle with this.

Most commentators want to say that Moses lacks faith.

But consider the difference between Zechariah and Mary in the Gospel of Luke.

When told that his wife will bear a son, Zechariah asks,

“How shall I know this?

For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” (Luke 1:18)

And the angel says you will be mute “because you did not believe my words.”

Of course, when the angel comes to Mary, Mary asks,

“How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:35)

And the angel explains how.

Zechariah asks how he will know.

Mary asks how will this be.

So we cannot say that asking God questions is a necessary sign of unbelief –
even asking God questions about *how* he will pull this off!

Indeed, the key difference between Zechariah and Mary

is that Zechariah wants *a sign* (how will I know?),

while Mary wants to understand *how* God is going to do this.

Look again at Moses’ question in verses 21-22.

He’s not asking for a sign.

He’s asking “how are you going to do this?”

Unbelief says, “I won’t believe it unless I see a sign.”

Faith says, “How are you going to pull this one off?”

(notice that the question *assumes* that God will do it !

He just can’t see how.)

Verse 23 says it really simply and clearly:

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.”*

4. God’s Actions (v24-35)

a. The Spirit Brings Comfort: the 70 Elders (v24-30)

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.* 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.*

Finally, in verses 24-35 we hear how God’s Spirit implements God’s verdict.

First, the LORD took some of the Spirit that was on Moses and put it on the 70 elders,
and they prophesied – but they did not continue doing it.

I want you to think about the effect of this.

These 70 elders receive a temporary gifting of the Spirit –
and particularly, the Spirit that was on Moses.

Now there are 70 elders who are not only tribal elders,
but also are spiritual elders –

they are equipped with the Holy Spirit
(although not as fully as Moses).

As such, they are now tasked with helping Moses carry Israel through the wilderness.

At Sinai – less than a year earlier – there had been 70 elders that went part way up the mountain,
with Moses and Aaron – and Nadab and Abihu (Ex 24).

The 70 elders had seen God – and they ate and drank with God on the mountain.

That was in Exodus 24.

Just a few days later, when Moses was back on the mountain receiving the Law,
Aaron and the leaders of Israel wound up making the golden calf,
and Israel turned to idolatry.

Now, the LORD places his Spirit upon 70 elders – and they prophesy.

A few days later, Israel will be faced with a question:
will we trust the LORD and enter the land – or not.

Where were the 70 elders?

Aren't there now 70 Spirit-filled elders who would help Moses carry Israel into the land?
“They prophesied. But they did not continue doing it.” (v25)

What does that mean?

They prophesied on this day.

But they did not continue.

The book of Numbers is warning us not to expect too much from these men.

You might wonder,

“But if they received the same Spirit as Moses,
why didn't they continue?”

Verses 26-30 point us to the answer:

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.

Eldad and Medad were among those registered –
they were among the 70 –
but they did not go out to the tent of meeting.

So when the young man runs up and says that they are prophesying in the camp,
Joshua is upset.
My lord Moses, stop them!

Some people have said that this is an example of God working “outside standard channels.”
(Stubbs, 120)

But verse 26 is clear that Eldad and Medad were registered.
So it's not as though God gave the Spirit to some random people in the camp.
Rather, God gave the Spirit to those who were appointed –
even when those appointed failed to show up for duty!
We are not told why they failed to show up.
(Maybe they were sick? Maybe they slept in! Who knows?)

But God puts his Spirit on *all* of the 70 – even those who don't show up!
Cyril of Jerusalem rightly explains that this was “to make it clear
that it was not Moses who bestowed the gift but the Spirit.” (218)

And while Joshua is concerned about this,
Moses is not!
“Would that all the LORD's people were prophets,
that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!”

Moses is not concerned about Eldad and Medad!
Moses thinks that it is *wonderful* that the 70 have the Spirit –
even the slackers who failed to show up!
Because it's not about Moses!
This is why I cannot see anything wrong with Moses' complaint!
He doesn't care about glory and honor for himself!
He wants to see Israel enter the Land!
He wants to see *all of God's people* prophesying!

And indeed, that is what finally happened on the day of Pentecost.
At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon all God's people –
and now, in Christ, all of God's people are prophets.

b. The Spirit Brings Judgment: the Quail (v31-35)

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^[b] 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 ten homers.^[c] 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,^[d] because there they buried the people who had the craving. ³⁵ From Kibroth-hattaavah the people journeyed to Hazeroth, and they remained at Hazeroth.

But then comes the Wind of Judgment.

The word translated “wind” in v31 is the same word translated Spirit in the rest of the chapter.

Now, it needs to be translated *wind* here

because it occurs without the definite article.

Throughout the earlier part of the chapter when it speaks of the Spirit, it says “ha-ruach.”

Here it just says “ruach” – without the definite article –

so it seems clear that it refers to a wind instead of the Spirit.

But there is another Hebrew word for wind that could have been used –

and so it is important to note the parallel between the Spirit and the wind.

And further this wind is “from the LORD.”

The LORD had sent his Spirit upon the 70 elders.

Now his wind blows the quail to the people of Israel –

and they spread them out in the sun (the Egyptian method of eating quail was to dry the meat in the sun, and then eat it uncooked).

I'm not always a big fan of naturalistic explanations of God's judgments –

but this one almost seems too easy!

The Israelites have been grumbling about not having meat.

They are driven by their cravings.

So when the quail is provided,

they don't take the time to prepare the meat properly,
and they wind up with major food poisoning.

Our Lord was tempted in all ways like we are.

In the wilderness, Jesus was tempted with his bodily desires –

“if you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread.”

But Jesus trusted his Father.

What are your bodily desires?

Do you need food? clothing? shelter? friends?

God knows what you need – and he *will* provide –
but you need to trust him!

Do you trust him to lead you to the Promised Land?

And Jesus said, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
and all these things [food, drink, clothing] will be added to you.”