

Israel Showed Themselves Complainers

By Tom Hill

Bible Text: Numbers 11:1-3

Master Ministries International, Inc.

2700 Marfitt Road, #315

East Lansing, MI 48823-6338

Website: <http://www.masterministries.org/>

Online Sermons: <http://masterministries.sermonaudio.com>

The Bible makes numerous references to the journey of the Children of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament include accounts of it. In his defense before the Synagogue, Stephen recounted how the Israelites' experiences showed how they resisted the Holy Spirit (Acts 7.51).

From his reminder, then, we can conclude that they give Christians an example to avoid. Their actions can admonish believers in all eras. One such example comes from Numbers 11:1-3:

"And when the people complained, it displeased the LORD: and the LORD heard it; and his anger was kindled; and the fire of the LORD burnt among them, and consumed them that were in the uttermost parts of the camp. {2} And the people cried unto Moses; and when Moses prayed unto the LORD, the fire was quenched. {3} And he called the name of the place Taberah: because the fire of the LORD burnt among them."

This outbreak came after God gave the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Further, it followed the construction of the Tabernacle and the arrival of God's presence in the Holy of Holies. Then, the cloudy pillar rose from the Tabernacle and began to move, which was Israel's signal to follow. They traveled 3 days' journey and came to rest. At this point, the Israelites complained, as recorded in our text from Numbers 11.1.

From this passage, I want to examine with you some particular absolute truths about Israel's complaining against God. I pray that the Holy Spirit will use them to clarify for you the truth, convict you of their presence in your life, and correct you to bring about a spiritual reformation and revival that will revolutionize your life.

Pattern of life

The Israelites' complaining against God showed a pattern of their lives. This instance of objection went beyond merely registering an individual complaint. The strict rendering of the word means that they showed themselves as complainers. They complained frequently.

In fact, the Bible records their pattern of complaints. In Exodus 14, they complained at the Red Sea in fear of their lives. In Exodus 15, they murmured about the bitter water at

Marah. In Exodus 16, they cried to God for food, and He gave them manna and quail. In Exodus 17, they again murmured for water, which God gave them out of the rock. In Exodus 32, they complained about the absence of Moses for 40 days.

The record clearly shows the Children of Israel as complainers. Nothing was ever good enough. They continuously asked, "What have you done for me lately?" Throughout their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness they complained and murmured to God about their conditions. Indeed, the pattern of their lives showed them as complainers.

Perversion of the truth

Granted, some instances of life may qualify for a legitimate protest. These can occur when another wrongs you or cheats you, for example. These circumstances might call for an objection.

However, these qualifying factors do not fit the Israelites. When they complained so incessantly before God, they perverted the truth of God in their lives. In reality, they had no reason to murmur against God. They did so wrongfully.

Again, the Scriptures provide abundant evidence of God's mercies on their behalf. He showed His mercies in at least 7 ways.

He revealed His abundant power sufficient to meet their every need. In Egypt, He performed 10 miracles on their behalf that led to their exodus.

God gave them provisions for their physical needs. At Marah, He turned the bitter water to sweet water. God gave them manna, quail, and water out of the rock, too.

They saw the providence of God every day. He gave them the pillar of clouds by day to lead them and the pillar of fire by night to give them light.

They knew the mighty presence of God. The cloudy pillars gave them evidence. More clearly, they saw the lightning and heard the thunder of God on Mt. Sinai. In addition, they observed the cloudy presence of God over the Tabernacle.

God honored His promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to deliver them out of Egypt. Through Moses and Aaron, God reminded the Israelites of His promise and His intent to fulfill it in their lives.

God gave them protection from their enemies. At the Red Sea, He destroyed the Egyptians. Furthermore, when God led them south into the wilderness, He sent them that direction to protect them from entrenched foes along the Mediterranean Sea. God knew that the Children of Israel were no match for them yet.

Finally, God showed abundant patience with their constant complaining, when they had no cause.

Indeed, the Israelites had no excuse to complain. God met their every need, with abundance. But despite the goodness of God, they murmured. They perverted the truth of God and did not believe nor trust Him.

Proof of their hearts

In the end, their murmuring revealed the true condition of their hearts. This is always true in life. The true condition of the heart invariably reveals itself in outward actions. In reference to the Children of Israel, we read the indictment of their hearts in Hebrews 3:10:

"Wherefore I was grieved with that generation, and said, They do always err in their heart; and they have not known my ways."

Note the emphasis of the passage upon the condition of the heart. The constant complaining of the Israelites showed that they erred in their hearts. Their actions revealed these 3 areas of error.

It showed a heart of conceit. Conceit says, "I deserve..." And the Israelites regularly said it in this fashion: "Back in Egypt, we had..." In reality, they had forgotten their true condition in Egypt, one of abject servitude and misery under their cruel Egyptian taskmasters. In addition, their actions betrayed a heart of covetousness. Covetousness says, "I want..." Their selfishness, discontent, and dissatisfaction drove them to demand from God more than what He had provided.

In the end, their actions showed a heart in contention with God. They showed themselves ungrateful to God for His abundant grace and mercies on their behalf. Instead, they desired things denied by God. They did not properly value God's gifts to them. Further, they mistook His grace and mercy for approval.

Ultimately, the behavior of the Children of Israel showed them as slanderers. They mutinied against Moses, Aaron, and God. At every turn, they quarreled and grumbled.

Punishment of God

At last, God punished them for their sin. He heard their complaining, and it displeased Him. It provoked Him to wrath. God sent a fire among them and consumed many of their number. At Moses' prayer, God quenched His judgment.

Purpose of their example

The Bible reminds us in 1 Corinthians 10:11:

"Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come."

The actions of the Children of Israel provide an example and a warning to believers today. Note the caution of the Holy Spirit given in response to this very sin of the Israelites. The caution comes in 1 Corinthians 10:10:

"Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer."

The caution carries a clear warning. The grace and mercy of God that has withheld the judgment of God does not mean He has changed His mind. No, God always punishes sin. Although He may withhold destruction, He will punish in other ways. He uses the natural consequences of sin as well as the withdrawal of His presence to judge sin, too. Christians today frequently fail to take into account these severe penalties. In addition, the Bible issues 2 commands for Christians to follow that specifically apply to the conceit and covetousness exhibited by the Children of Israel. The Lord Jesus reminded us of that which should consume our desires in Matthew 6:33-34:

"But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. {34} Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

Again, the Scriptures declare in Hebrews 13:5:

"Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee."

What does the Holy Spirit want these truths to accomplish in your life today? He wants to clarify for you the truth of God's word as it relates to the sin of Israel. God hates a complaining attitude, and it grieves Him. Further, He judges it, as He judges all sin. The example of the Children of Israel gives you direction to follow: correction from error and conformity to truth.

Where has the Holy Spirit identified the presence of these same attitudes and sins in your life today?

Does their example have an all too familiar ring to it?

Does it show that you have followed the same pattern in your life?

Does your life show you to be a complainer?

Does it reveal inward conceit, covetousness, and contention with God?

Do your actions reveal inner discontent and ungratefulness toward God?

Do you center your Christianity around yourself and your own personal gratification?

What conclusions about your spiritual condition has the Holy Spirit revealed to you today?

Has He approved or reproved you?

Has He found you innocent or guilty?

Has the heat of His conviction humbled you before God?

The consequences of sin produce dire results. Sin grieves the Holy Spirit and quenches His work in your life. As a result, you lack spiritual power. Murmuring and complaining degrade God's character and nature. It comes between you and God's presence, and He withdraws.

The example of the Children of Israel ultimately provides correction from sin. It details sinful practices to shun and an example to avoid. From it, the children of God can learn to conform their thoughts, opinions, beliefs, and actions to God's word.

What changes does the Holy Spirit need to bring into your life today because of these truths? You need to realize the refuge of lies that keep you from faith and obedience. Human nature quickly defends itself with arguments like, "I did not sin..." or "I did nothing wrong..." In like manner, it finds excuses for conduct, like "Everybody does it..." or "I am not alone..." However, such unprofitable responses ultimately wreck ruin upon those who believe them.

If you choose to follow excuses such as these, you need to recognize what will result if you refuse to believe and obey the truths of God's word. You will suffer the consequences of your sin (Galatians 6.7). You will endure the withdrawal of God's presence (Isaiah 59.1-2). In the end, you will experience God's judgment. You are accountable to God for your sin, and He always punishes sin.

Or, you can repent of the sin that the Holy Spirit has identified in our life today. He has brought to you a sense of your true condition before God. Agree with His assessment and confess it now. Confess it with humbleness and in detail.

Concurrent with His conviction, the Holy Spirit will reveal to you God's provision for you in Jesus Christ. He is not only the Savior for sinners but the Advocate for believers (1 John 1.9; 2.1). Turn from your sin unto Jesus Christ and find relief through the blood of Jesus. Rely upon Him, and He will give repentance from sin, forgiveness, and power for obedience.

I pray that you will experience this work of the Holy Spirit in your life that will bring a spiritual transformation to you today.