

Grumpy People

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Date: 07 May 2017

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[0 : 00] So, as I said at the beginning, Numbers is in many ways not an easy book to deal with. and the first section we have the problem of the numbers themselves.

! which was where we kind of finished last time, where they move off from Sinai, heading eventually towards Kadesh Baniya, although they stop several places on the way.

And so basically, as I've shown on the map there, they're moving through the wilderness of Paran, heading north into the occupied territories. And as we move from chapter 10 to chapter 11 in Numbers, there is a quite remarkable sudden change of mood.

If you, as you read through the first 10 chapters, it's all about the organisation of the camp and the laws. There were a few problems, but they were dealt with very efficiently and easily.

It's all order, discipline and calm efficiency. That's while they're camping. The Lord is within the camp, and Moses blesses the march in chapter 10, 35 and 36.

[1 : 35] I didn't actually read that out, but let me just read it out now. Whenever the ark set out, Moses said, Rise up, O Lord. May your enemies be scattered.

May your foes flee before you. Wherever it comes to rest, he said, Return, O Lord, to the countless thousands of Israel. So it all seems very organised, disciplined.

They know exactly how to march, who sets off when, what they're supposed to carry, what order they're supposed to march in, who's marching, who's in charge of everything. And all that's great until they actually move.

It's all highly organised. What can possibly go wrong? Once on the move, the whole project sounds rapidly sour.

And the first hint of trouble occurs in chapter 11, verse 1, where there is a fire in the camp. And in fact, over the next four chapters, we see the situation, far from getting better, in many ways, is getting steadily worse.

[2 : 51] And the chapters culminate in a military disaster in chapter 14, verse 45. And that's what I want to look at, these four chapters, over the next three weeks.

It's not actually just these four chapters, which is all rather bad news. In fact, the whole central section of the book strikes really a very gloomy tone. There is the odd hint of blessing in the budding of air and staff, for instance, in chapter 17.

But it's not until chapter 21 that the project really begins to get back on track. For these whole ten central chapters, from 10 through to 20, there is problem after problem.

Why does the writer want to tell us this? What's the point of all this gloom? What are we supposed to learn from it? We ask what can possibly go wrong, and these chapters answer it, well, pretty much everything you can think of can go wrong.

But the writer puts his finger on the heart of the problem right at the start of the discussion in chapter 11, verse 1. This army doesn't consist of robots. It doesn't consist of angels, but it's made up of people.

[4 : 09] That's the basic problem with the people of Israel, is that they are people. They're grumpy people, inconstant people. They're hot one moment and cold the next.

That's true of even Moses, to some extent, as we can see from these chapters. They're impatient. They're depressive people. They're dissatisfied. They're mistrustful.

They're disobedient. In chapters 11 to 14, we have all the effects of all this laid out. In fact, in chapter 11, we're showing the dissatisfaction and greed of the general population.

In chapter 12, we find there is rivalry, not just among the people, but even among the leadership.

Then in chapters 13 and 14, focus on military issues, and we see there's both cowardice and rashness among the spies and in the army.

There's a kind of recurring motif in the way that the Lord consistently provides blessing and the people consistently take that blessing and mess it up. And that's what we read in these central chapters.

[5 : 21] It's worth, just before we dive into this particular chapter, just thinking of the topics the writer actually addresses. We're reading the story of a journey and a war that took place over 3,000 years ago.

And you might think, well, what can that possibly have to tell us today? What possible relevance can that have for us today? And yet, when you read it, it all reads remarkably topical.

What are the problems that the people faced? Fire, hunger, disease. How many marches, military marches, how many invading forces have fallen prey to those before they even make contact with the enemy?

Dissension and mistrust among the commanders. How many campaigns have been wrecked by that? And then, well, we all know about the unreliability of military intelligence, don't we?

We hear about that every day in our newspapers. When they get it right, it's a time of celebration, isn't it, when they actually manage to prevent something happening.

[6 : 38] But so often, they don't. And then, of course, there's the unpredictability of the enemy itself. Somebody once said, no battle plan survives contact with the enemy. I might also say that no travel plan survives leaving the house.

And certainly, when you're in such an inhospitable territory, then it's not surprising in a sense that things are going to go wrong. So today, we're going to look just into chapter 11, where the writer presents to us the unruliness of the general population.

The people have been promised a good land, haven't they? A land flowing with milk and honey. But are they prepared for the rigors of the campaign, for the rigors of the journey? It appears not.

Chapter 11, verse 1, sets the agenda for this whole next, really, this whole next 10 chapters.

Chapter 11, verse 1, says, The people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the Lord. And when he heard them, his anger was aroused. The chapter's bracketed by fire and disease. But actually, the main theme is hunger, or perhaps we should more accurately say craving.

[7 : 56] It seems that some hangers-on in the camp started the trouble, but it soon spread to the Israelites themselves, verse 4. There are some issues of translation, but it's possible that the rabble with them, as it talks about in verse 6, is not the Israelites themselves, but other people who have travelled out into the desert with them.

But it soon spread to the Israelites themselves. And Moses himself has a complaint in verse 14.

The burden of leadership, he says, is too much for him. The structure of this chapter is actually rather complex and layered, as you probably would have noticed when we read through it.

But it's this question of the meat craving that kind of recurs all the way through and drives the narrative. I've set out more or less what the structure is there on the slide.

It starts with fire, then we first have the craving for meat in verses 3 to 6. Verses 7 to 9 reminds us that the Lord had made a provision for feeding them in the desert.

[9 : 05] And then we get Moses' complaint, and he complains about a few things, but he does complain about the meat issue as well in verse 15. And then we read about the Lord's provision from Moses, particularly of the elders.

And then the theme returns to this craving for meat, and the Lord warns Moses what it would mean in verses 18 to 23. And then we go back to the Lord's provision for Moses when the elders actually receive the spirit.

And then finally the craving for meat is indulged, and then as we started with fire, we finish with plague.

And the last verse tells us that they moved on. There are some repetitions in the text, as you can see, the repetition of saying we wanted to go back to Egypt, we were better off in Egypt, and so on. One or two of them are hidden by the translation. It's worth remembering that the spirit of the Lord in Moses comes upon the elders in verses 25 and 26.

[10 : 19] But of course the Hebrew word for wind that we get in verse 31 is of course actually the same Hebrew word, ruach. The word for a wind and the word for a spirit are the same in Hebrew.

So there is a sense in which the spirit of the Lord answers both parts of Moses' prayer, although obviously the literal meaning in the second case is of course the wind, because it says it blows the quails.

It is the same word of course, the word in Hebrew, the word ruach, the wind or spirit of the Lord. So I thought we wouldn't plough through the chapter verse by verse.

I thought perhaps to get a grip on it, the way we'll deal with it is to compare the complaints of the people with the complaint that Moses made. Because they both did complain, it's clear, it's clear, the people complain first of all, and then Moses is upset by this, and he makes a complaint to the Lord as well.

But they receive very different answers of course. So what I'd like to do is look first of all at how the complaints that are made are similar, what they had in common, but then perhaps more usefully, how were the complaints of the people and Moses different?

[11:50] What was different about what the people were asking for and what Moses was asking for? And then that will lead us on to how the Lord answered those two complaints or those two prayers, if you want to call them that.

How did the Lord answer? And again, of course, in a very different way. And then just at the end, I'll just summarise perhaps some of the lessons that we could take from this passage.

So first of all, how are the complaints of the people and Moses similar? And in a sense, the topic is the same. The provision the Lord has made for a large travelling population.

It says here 600,000 men on foot, whether that means again 600 clans or something else, or it just refers to the army, but of course it's not just the army that wanted meat, it would have been their families as well.

But certainly a large travelling population. Verses 13 and 21, just in case the Lord hasn't noticed this, Moses is careful to point it out in verses 13 and 21.

[13:02] has the Lord made adequate provision for the journey?

This is the issue. Is there adequate food? And as far as Moses has complained, is there adequate leadership as well? Is he expected to do it all himself?

He didn't birth all 600,000 or however many it was. That's what he says, isn't it? He said, do you think I'm their mother? That I can carry all of them? That's how his complaint goes.

Moses himself appears he's not up to the task. He needs some help. And he points out that, you know, Moses points out, how is he supposed to feed all these people?

They've had a few flocks they'd brought with them, but if you kill them all, it wouldn't feed them for a month. You could fish all the fish out of the Red Sea and it wouldn't feed them.

[14:06] Actually, it probably would have done, there's probably a bit of hyperbole there, but still, it probably felt like that. But there wasn't enough.

It's rather reminiscent, isn't it, of the complaint of the disciples in Jesus' day, when there were 5,000 people and Jesus says, can you just go and feed this lot, please? I can't do it.

There just aren't the resources available. Moses, we notice, takes the request personally. We notice in the fire, in verse 2, the people actually didn't go direct to the Lord, they cried out to Moses.

And it was Moses who prayed to the Lord and the fire died down. man. And although it says it's in the hearing of the Lord, the complaint basically about the food seems to be addressed to Moses.

And Moses takes it rather personally, as you can see. He says, how am I supposed to do this? They're all complaining at me. And Moses felt he wasn't up to the task.

[15:16] And in that sense, of course, he is right. So in the sense, as I say, the complaints in one sense are the same as the Lord provided adequate resources for the task.

But then perhaps we could think about how these complaints are rather different. Sorry, I missed a slide out there. That slide says how the complaints were about inadequate resources and food and leadership.

But now we could go on to ask how the complaints perhaps are different and why they receive a very different answer. And I think it's worth reminding us of those words of James, well-known words, James chapter 4 verses 3 and 4.

When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred towards God?

Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God? That's the principle that can guide us as we can identify three differences between the complaint of the people and the prayer of Moses.

[16:37] Firstly, we notice that Moses' need was rather more genuine than that of the people. The people were not starving, as the writer is very keen to remind us.

They had manna. It wasn't even unpleasant stuff to eat. They weren't expected to live on a diet of marmite or whatever. The stuff was nice to eat.

It reminds us it was as if it was cooked with olive oil. They wanted luxury. They wanted meat. By contrast, Moses really was struggling with the stresses of leadership.

So the first difference is that Moses' need really was more genuine than that of the crowd. The second point is that Moses' concern was firstly for the people.

He is concerned for himself and that he's inadequate to the task, but he's concerned because he thinks he can't do the task that the Lord has given him to bring the people to the promised land.

[17:47] his concern was for the people, whereas the people were blaming Moses for their situation. It is true that Moses was displeased and wondered whether he had really found the Lord's favour in verses 10 and 11, but even this displeasure was not for himself, but for the burden of the people.

In contrast to that, the people were just griping, weren't they? They weren't really in trouble. They had enough to eat. They were just complaining.

They were having a grumble at Moses. But I think the most important difference, and this is the one I think that the writer particularly brings out, is that Moses, you notice is mission focused, isn't he?

The people, by contrast, have forgotten that they had been slaves in Egypt. They have been, of course. They'd had to spend their time being whipped and building stuff, making bricks.

But they'd forgotten that. If you read verse 5, you'd think that all they'd done in Egypt was spend their time lazing by the river and watching the occasional fish jump out into their lap.

[19:11] They were looking back to Egypt. They were thinking that Egypt hadn't been so bad after all. And when you start to think that way, of course you'll decide that the rigors of travel and that the warfare is not worth the effort.

In the way that James puts it, the craving of the mob was based on friendship with the world. They wished they'd never left Egypt so that in verse 5, but it says it and it's repeated.

For instance, it's repeated twice I think. It's in verse 26. Oh yes, and in verse 18. They wished they'd never left Egypt.

They expected the comforts of the promised land while they were still in the wilderness. this. If you're crossing a desert, if you've got a good reason to cross a desert, then you eat what you can find and you're glad of it, don't you?

You don't expect champagne and caviar. What you're interested in is water and bread that will sustain you. And they had both those things and yet they were complaining about it.

[20:25] But the rabble wasn't up for that and the reason was of course that they had lost sight of where they were actually going. Instead they were looking back. The prize didn't seem worth the journey.

As Jesus himself put it, no one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the service in the kingdom of God. You can just imagine it, can't you?

The man driving his plough with the horse or ox in front of him and he keeps looking over his shoulder and thinks why did I start this? No, if you're ploughing a field you need to keep your eyes firmly on where you're going otherwise you'll wander all over the place and it just won't work.

And you can notice the contrast with Moses' concern. Moses' concern in verse 12 was how they were actually going to make it to the promised land, to the land you promised on oath.

to their forefathers. Who's going to carry them? Moses saw that it was a struggle, yes, but he hadn't forgotten where he was going, whereas the people had.

[21:43] Only if we're convinced that the destination is worth achieving, are we going to put up with the inconveniences of travel, aren't we? I mean, that's true on any journey. There's always some inconvenience to travel.

You decide whether the place you're going to is worth the effort to get there. And if you, you know, as if the moment you're half a mile down the road you think, oh dear, I wish I'd never left home, then the travel is going to be a burden, trouble.

You've got to keep your focus on where you're going, where you're hoping to arrive, and then you think it's worth the effort. Or if we want to think in military terms, the rabble wanted the victory without the battle.

Moses was praying for the strength to win the battle. And again, it's interesting to compare some of the words of Jesus on this.

Luke chapter 9, 23 says, if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

[22 : 54] If you're going to follow Jesus, you have to take up the cross, you have to be prepared for the rigors of the journey. And yet, that wasn't the only thing Jesus said.

Jesus said in Matthew 11, 29 to 30, take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light. I don't know whether when Jesus said that he was thinking of Moses who was described as the meekest of men, but of course he's referring really to himself. He is the one who really takes the people to the promised land.

And he says that if you learn from him, there is a burden, yes, but it's an easy and light burden if we have our focus in the right direction.

We do need to take up the cross but Jesus gives us the provision to do it. Now let's look at the answer that the Lord provides.

[24 : 09] Moses and he gives the answer first to Moses. So let's look particularly at the answer that he gives to Moses and then how that works out when it comes to the people.

So first of all, the Lord points out to Moses that actually the people are not complaining to him, to Moses, and the Lord hadn't actually said that Moses had to carry the people across the desert. But in fact they were complaining to the Lord, to God. Their complaint was in the hearing of the Lord and he became angry and that of course it is the Lord who would carry the people and lead the people across the desert, not Moses, it wasn't all up to Moses.

So it's the Lord who is angry but also the Lord who answers, it's God who answers. And then we can notice the Lord answers both parts of Moses' prayer but he does it in a different way.

Moses did have something he needed to learn but it was to cast his burden on the Lord. Insofar as his need was genuine the spirit made a suitable provision.

[25 : 43] There already was a list of elders, verse 26 says this and the earlier list but perhaps they weren't doing what they should have been doing.

Perhaps they weren't supporting Moses when they should have been and so the solution the Lord provides is to give them a portion of Moses' spirit in verse 17.

And of course Moses' spirit here really means of course the spirit of the Lord. It's the spirit of the Lord that came upon them and they prophesied perhaps to show that the spirit of the Lord had come.

They only prophesied once it appears but hopefully the spiritual wisdom that they'd gained through that remained. And notice the different reactions of this from Moses and Joshua.

Joshua was jealous for his master, for Moses. But Moses, the man who had been a prince in Egypt, the one who had been chosen by God to lead the people out of Israel and across the desert, he was not at all jealous of his power and authority.

[27 : 06] The more prophets the better as far as he was concerned. That's what he says in verse 29. I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets. So the Lord does indeed provide resources to cross the desert, but they are spiritual resources and they're appropriate resources that are suitable for the task.

And we notice that the spirit given to the elders and the number of elders themselves was not an excess. For all those tribes and clans, 70 people was not a large number and the spirit came in prophecy to them only once.

But the Lord provided what was really needed, not an excess in this case, but what Moses really needed. And why does he do that? It's so we remember that it's his own power that provides success and not all the resources that we might bring to the problem.

And yet in answering the second part of Moses' prayer, the request of the rabble themselves, the Lord also has something to teach, but it's something quite different.

It's that greed and a desire for too much is self-destructive. This quail business, worth noting, is actually not really a miracle at all.

[28 : 36] At this time of year, there is indeed a migration of quail in the Middle East at that time of the, across that part of the Middle East there.

And yet the language given here emphasizes the over-provision, doesn't it? It's all far too much. The people do dispute the translation of exactly what this means.

If you took the Hebrew very literally, you might take it to mean that they were three foot deep, a meter deep in dead quail.

I don't think it can mean that for various reasons because, well, for one thing, you wouldn't have needed to collect them because you wouldn't be able to move. Secondly, well, it's unlikely that there were that many quail about anyway, probably what it means, and I've heard people translate it differently.

Probably what it means is that the wind caused these birds who normally perhaps would have been migrating at a higher, safer altitude, to fly low within a meter of the ground, perhaps blew them down somehow from the sky, and perhaps the headwind was causing them to drop onto the ground with exhaustion.

[30 : 02] Something like that is probably what it's meant. But certainly the point is that they were there in abundance, more than they could possibly want. Moses had said, would all the fish in the sea be enough?

Well, the Lord's answer is, well, here's all the quails in the air, here's all the birds in the air that you could eat. And it said that everybody collected ten homers.

Well, again, ten homers is about 1,600 kilos or a tonne and a half. So, again, it can hardly mean that everybody collected a tonne and a half of quail. Either it is hyperbole, as we might say, oh, I caught tons of fish, meaning I caught more than we could possibly need, or possibly what it might mean is that just a few people were sent out to do the collecting, and those people collected a tonne and a half each.

But certainly, either way, the whole point is that there was far more than they could possibly need, far more than they could possibly eat in a sensible time. So, what did they do with them all, all these birds that they've collected?

Well, it tells us in verse 32, they spread them out around the camp. They did what? Didn't the health and safety officer have anything to say about that?

[31 : 32] didn't somebody have done a risk assessment? Heaps of birds, rotting birds around the camp.

Well, what was the result? Exactly what you'd expect, of course, disease. Actually, the Hebrew word can mean various kinds of defeat and disaster, but clearly, plague is the correct translation here.

It's presented as a warning from the Lord, and I'm sure it was, but actually, of course, it's probably just the natural result of heaping all these birds around. It's just that when you have too much, the treatment of that unexpected provision was absolute folly.

And the Lord was teaching them that greed, indulgence, was to invite disaster.

if they'd just taken a few birds, then that would have been a welcome treat, no doubt. It probably would have provided a bit of a change from the manner, but they don't.

[32 : 51] They're so greedy, so self-indulgent that they just grab all the ones they can possibly collect, whether it's sensible or not.

It's exactly what the Lord said they would do, of course, and the result, predictably, was disaster. And many of them were struck down with disease, so they had to bury them there and name the place after the burial site.

Once again, it reminds us of that lesson of James, doesn't it? It's almost a case of it's not so much a question of what you pray for, but why you're praying for it.

It's what James says, when you pray, you pray to spend what you get on your pleasures. Moses was praying that they would be equipped to reach the promised land.

The people were just grumbling and saying they wanted food now. Moses would have liked more than he actually got. He says that, doesn't he?

[33 : 57] He said, I wish all the people were prophets. But he was grateful for what he did receive, and what he received, of course, was what he really needed, not what he would have liked. But the rabble was profligate, and it just destroyed them, destroyed many of them in any way.

So there is, although Moses and the people both complain, there are differences between their complaints, and one gets a beneficial answer from the Lord, the other one gets an answer from the Lord, certainly, but it's an answer that causes them trouble and warning.

So what can we learn from these lessons? The first thing we might notice is that spiritual leadership is not a privilege to be grasped, but in a sense is a burden to bear, but also a burden to share. That's why we have multiple elders and deacons in the church, church. But actually the writer has more to say on this next week, well, in the next chapter, which we'll look at next week. So I won't say more about that now, but next week we find there was not just dissension among the people in chapter 12, but dissension among the leaders, even among the siblings, Aaron and Moses and Miriam.

We'll look at that next week. But more for all of us, the second lesson is clearly that we need to keep our eyes on the destination. Any travel involves inconvenience.

[35 : 38] You balance that inconvenience against the attractiveness or importance of the destination. When you're crossing a desert through hostile territory and when you're marching towards the promised land, you must expect a certain amount of hardship.

It's a necessary part of the journey. But if you keep your mind on the destination, then you won't find the hardship to be quite so hard.

And thirdly, I think it's worth pointing out, the Lord doesn't send these inconveniences just because he's niggily, just because he wants to make it difficult for us. he does provide us with what we need and we need to learn to rely on him.

Sometimes, in fact, because he knows we are easily discouraged, he does provide the odd luxury item for which we should be grateful. The journey isn't all struggle.

There is manna and sometimes there's quail as well, but too much of it will destroy us. You only have to look at the epidemic of obesity and diabetes we have in our own overindulgent society.

[37 : 06] That doesn't mean we shouldn't be thankful for the Lord when he sends us blessings. In fact, Psalm 104 tells us that the Lord gives wine to gladden the heart and bread to sustain the heart.

bread of sustenance, but also wine, if you like, a luxury item if you want to think of it in those terms, to gladden the heart.

And we give thanks to him for the things that he does give us. But we also know that cheap alcohol and too much sugar are deadly.

Overindulgence will destroy us, body, soul, and spirit. An athlete or a soldier must maintain a healthy diet. But our Western society has largely chosen the path of selfishness, of denying oneself nothing.

Only my personal satisfaction matters, and if the government or society or God will not provide that, then it's not my fault, it's the government or society or God who is to blame.

[38 : 16] We all want the fish from Egypt that costs us nothing, don't we? Verse 5. And certainly our self-indulgent Western society makes us want that.

We think, well, it wasn't so bad that where we came from. Perhaps we should go back. But we need to keep our eyes on the destination.

Otherwise we will indeed go back. But Jesus warns us about that, doesn't he? Let's finish with those well-known words of Jesus. Matthew 7, 13 and 14.

Enter through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate, and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it, but small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

The Lord tells us to make sure we find the way through the desert. It's not always an easy route to find, but Jesus tells us the fact that he himself is the way, and that if we enter by him as the gate, and if we follow him as the way, then we will make it through the desert, because he has provided what we need.

[39 : 40] Thank you.