

# From Complaints *to* Apostasy



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Numbers 11–14.*

**Memory Text:** “Do all things without murmurings and disputings: that ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world” (*Philippians 2:14, 15*).

When the pillar of cloud lifted from the tabernacle in Sinai and the priests set forward with the ark, Moses proclaimed: “Rise up, Lord, and let thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate thee flee before thee” (*Num. 10:35*). It was like a victory cry, and the vast hosts of Israel took to their journey with good cheer. At last they were on their way to the Promised Land!

Imagine what it would be like having such a visible presence of God in your midst! One would think that with something so clear and obvious before them, they so readily and willingly would have obeyed His every command as they journeyed toward the fulfillment of the promise made to their fathers long ago.

Of course, that's not quite how things tend to work, even with God's people. This week we'll look at one mess after another, one expression of doubt, disbelief, and ingratitude after another. As we study, let's keep in mind whatever relevant parallels there might be to us, today, as we await the fulfillment of an even greater promise (*Heb. 11:40*).

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 31.*

## The Sin of Ingratitude

**Read** Numbers 11 and ask yourself the following questions:

- What does this incident tell us about the importance of not forgetting how the Lord has led us in the past?

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- How do we understand the Lord’s reaction to the Israelites?

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- What can we learn from this account about the importance of controlling our appetites?

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Literally, the Hebrew describes these discontented persons as “murmurers of evil.” We only can imagine what “evils” they complained about. Perhaps they felt that God had led the nation into a death trap in the wilderness—and not to the Promised Land of “milk and honey.” After all the miracles they had witnessed in Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea, their murmuring was rebellious. Their influence could have been contagious and destructive to the young nation. And fire from the Lord destroyed them in “the uttermost parts of the camp” (*vs. 1*). Only the intercession of Moses quenched the fire.

The people really had no true basis to complain about their diet. The manna could be prepared in various ways—ground in a mill, or beaten in a mortar; it could be baked or boiled (*Exod. 16:23, Num. 11:8*). Certainly the God who created so many tasty wonders for all humans wasn’t going to make His covenant people eat something unpalatable. Furthermore, they had milk from the goats, sheep, and cattle. From this they also made curds (“butter,” *Deut. 32:14*). As for flesh foods, the various “peace sacrifices”—vows, thank offerings, and freewill offerings—all ended with a communal meal in which the priest, the offerer, his family and servants, and invited Levites partook of the sacrifice. No question, they weren’t going to go hungry.

**There’s a saying, “Be careful what you ask for or pray for; you might get it.” What does that mean, and what can we learn from it for ourselves?**

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## Pressures on Leadership

When Israel so quickly reverted to idolatry and worshiped the golden calf, Moses pleaded with God to forgive them, but “if not,” he prayed, “blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written” (*Exod. 32:32*).

Later, when Moses heard and saw the people “weeping” at the door of their tents and crying out, “Who shall give us flesh to eat?” (*Num. 11:4*), how did he react? Why was his attitude unjustified? Where do we see the flawed humanity of this great man of God coming through? *Vss. 10–15.*

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**Read** Numbers 11:21–23. How again does the humanity of Moses come through?

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Despite the mistakes of Moses, and his lack of trust, the Lord did help ease the burden that Moses felt himself under, and that was by appointing 70 elders to assist Moses in his work (*vss. 16, 17*). The experience of the 70 was similar to the Spirit’s descent upon Christ’s disciples at Pentecost, except that they “prophesied.” Thus, they were honored by God before all the people.

“They would never have been chosen had Moses manifested faith corresponding to the evidences he had witnessed of God’s power and goodness. But he had magnified his own burdens and services, almost losing sight of the fact that he was only the instrument by which God had wrought. He was not excusable in indulging, in the slightest degree, the spirit of murmuring that was the curse of Israel.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 380.

**Read carefully Numbers 11:20.** They had “rejected the Lord, who is among you” (*NIV*). Rejecting the Lord, then, doesn’t mean outright apostasy, denial of God’s existence, or taking one’s name off the church books. What can we learn from this incident about how easy it is to deceive ourselves regarding our relationship to God?

## Family Nastiness

Zipporah, Moses' wife, and their two sons had stayed with her father, "the priest of Midian," during the plagues on Egypt. After Israel had become settled in Sinai, Jethro brought Zipporah and the children to Moses. Zipporah noticed how wearied her husband appeared and informed Jethro, who took a closer look at Moses' method of administration and suggested a reorganization by appointing rulers of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. He suggested that they could judge the small matters. Moses would bring the larger cases to God. Moses agreed, and these chosen men "judged the people at all seasons" (*Exod. 18:13–26*). This move on the part of Moses was eventually to excite the jealousy and envy of Miriam and Aaron.

**Read Numbers 12.** What wretched human traits are being revealed here by Miriam and Aaron? How is their sin contrasted with the attitude and character of Moses? What should this sordid story tell us about how God views the bad attitudes revealed by these people?

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The verb *spake* (*vs. 1, KJV*), or "began to talk" (*NIV*), is feminine singular, indicating that it was Miriam who initiated the charge following verse 1. She was jealous of Zipporah and blamed her for influencing Moses to appoint the judges Jethro had suggested. She called Zipporah a Cushite, probably because she may have been dark-complexioned. Actually, Zipporah was a Midianite, a descendant of Abraham through his son Midian by Keturah, and a worshiper of the same true God. Also, the sneer may have been picked up from the fact that some of the Cushite tribes lived among the Midianites in the territory east of Sinai and east of the Gulf of Aqabah in Arabia. She could have been designated by either term. For example, a person of German descent born in the United States could be called a German or an American. But most likely the term was used in a slanderous manner.

**Despite the powerful manifestations of God's power among them, these two faithful people displayed some very bad attitudes. Examine your own heart: What bad attitudes need to be purged from you before they lead to your own spiritual ruin?**

## At the Borders

The time was probably about September; the vineyards were ripening and the second crop of figs had matured. It took the Israelite migration only about 11 days to reach Kadesh-Barnea, near the southern border of Canaan. We only can imagine the tremendous waves of joy and happiness that rippled through the immense throng as it approached the cherished object of their dreams.

**Read** Deuteronomy 1:19–23. What mistake was made here?

**Read** Numbers 13 and answer the following questions:

- Though the Lord agreed to let them send spies, why was that a compromise? What were the fruits of that compromise?
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- What did the reaction of most of the people reveal about them, even after all the manifestations of divine power?
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The people no doubt rejoiced to hear about the productivity of their new home-to-be. They marveled at the huge cluster of grapes carried between two men. This truly was going to be as good as, or even better than, they had imagined.

As usual, with anything in this sinful world, there always are problems, even when God leads us. Of course, the Lord knew those pagan people were there. Did not the Hebrews think that the Lord could have taken care of the situation for them? After all, look what He had done to the Egyptians!

Nevertheless, forgetting about the power and promises of God, they saw the obstacles set before them and, despite the pleadings of Caleb and Joshua, the other spies filled the ears of the Israelites with gloom and doom.

**How can you learn to trust God despite the seemingly impossible obstacles in your path? What choices are you making today that will determine how you will respond to what you face tomorrow?**

## Back to Egypt

**Read** Numbers 14. What’s the most powerful and important spiritual lesson you can take away from this story? In what ways have you ever done the same thing?

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Of all the horrible things they said, perhaps the worst was saying that they wanted a captain to take them back to Egypt (*vss. 3, 4*). When we consider that Egypt symbolized the bondage and slavery of sin, of death, of alienation from God, for these people to act as they did, after having had such an incredible deliverance, was inexcusable.

“The unfaithful spies were loud in denunciation of Caleb and Joshua, and the cry was raised to stone them. The insane mob seized missiles with which to slay those faithful men. They rushed forward with yells of madness, when suddenly the stones dropped from their hands, a hush fell upon them, and they shook with fear. God had interposed to check their murderous design. The glory of His presence, like a flaming light, illuminated the tabernacle . . . and none dared continue their resistance.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 390.

**How** do we see the mercy and grace of God revealed even here with these people who openly rebelled against Him?

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**Look at their reaction to the punishment that they had received. In a sense, having rejected what God would have done for them, they decided to try to do it themselves, which, of course, resulted in disaster. If only they had trusted in God, who already had done so much for them, their disaster could have been averted. Sad, too, as is always the case with sin, many innocents—who had nothing to do with the rebellion—suffered for the sins of others.**

**Further Study:** Read Ellen G. White, “From Sinai to Kadesh,” pp. 376–386; “The Twelve Spies,” pp. 387–394, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“These men, having entered upon a wrong course, stubbornly set themselves against Caleb and Joshua, against Moses, and against God. Every advance step rendered them the more determined. They were resolved to discourage all effort to gain possession of Canaan. They distorted the truth in order to sustain their baleful influence. It ‘is a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof,’ they said. This was not only an evil report, but it was also a lying one. It was inconsistent with itself. The spies had declared the country to be fruitful and prosperous, and the people of giant stature, all of which would be impossible if the climate were so unhealthful that the land could be said to ‘eat up the inhabitants.’ But when men yield their hearts to unbelief they place themselves under the control of Satan, and none can tell to what lengths he will lead them.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 389.

### Discussion Questions:

**1** Why is it so important to cultivate, in whatever situation we face, an attitude of praise and gratitude toward the Lord? No matter our circumstances, don’t we all have things to be thankful for? Why is it so important to dwell on them, as opposed to the troubles that come upon us all? Why is gratitude and praise so important for keeping our faith strong?

**2** Have you ever noticed how contagious criticism and murmuring can be, and how easily those attitudes in others can spread to you? What should this tell us, then, about how careful we need to be regarding the words that come out of our mouths?

**3** In what ways, even subtly, as we await the Second Coming (which seems to be taking so long), could we be in danger of displaying the same attitudes we find so repugnant as manifested by the Hebrews here?

**Summary:** The 11 days between Sinai and Kadesh-Barnea on the borders of Canaan were some of Israel’s worst wilderness times. There was an outcry against the manna that was so overwhelming that Moses begged God to let him die right then. Miriam and Aaron’s sharp challenge of Moses’ leadership was another low blow. Finally, after the evil report of the spies, the nation crossed a line, which resulted in 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.

# Before I Knew Him

by ANTHONY BARTHOLOMEW

God had His hand on my life long before I knew Him. I live on the island of Grenada in the Caribbean. I dropped out of school when I was 15 and sold drugs to earn big money. I didn't use the drugs; I just wanted the money. But life was hard, and I had lots of problems. Sometimes I just wanted to die.

Then I got sick and was admitted to the hospital. While there, my roommate gave me a Bible to read. I started reading it and realized that I was living far from God's will. The Bible gave me hope, and I wanted to pray, but I didn't know how. I just talked to God as I thought I should.

I recovered and returned home. I attended my mother's church, but I also kept reading the Bible on my own. I saw things in the church that didn't match what I was reading, and I asked some church leaders about it. They didn't have answers, so I searched for another church.

I talked to my sister about God. She was not a Christian, but she told me about some evangelistic meetings she had heard about. I went, and there I learned the real truths of the Bible and accepted Jesus as my Savior.

I had stopped selling drugs, and God took away my cravings for tobacco, alcohol, and gambling. I started telling my former friends about my faith. "You're liming!" they said, meaning I was faking my religion. But I assured them I was serious. With time they became convinced that my faith was real.

I told them how God took me from the gutter and cleaned me up. I urged them to try Jesus, and a few visited the church, but no one became a Christian.

I moved to another area of Grenada, where I preach in open air meetings and have seen dozens give their lives to God, but my former friends would not surrender to Jesus. That's pretty amazing to me.

A few church members, including a drug dealer who was recently baptized, have formed a group that goes out and intervenes with gang members who fight each other. We urge them to consider accepting Jesus into their lives to break the bonds of anger and violence. We hope to teach them how to lead productive, healthful lives.

My sister who told me about the evangelistic meetings has since been baptized, and an adopted sister also has given her life to Christ. I praise God for leading me into a life of peace-making, of building people up instead of tearing them down.

When we share our mission offerings, we support ministries that reach out to people in all walks of life.



ANTHONY BARTHOLOMEW shares his faith in Grenada, West Indies.