

From Complaints to Apostasy



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?

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

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

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?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Numbers 11:1*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Describe the rebellious contentions of Israel en route to the Promised Land and how God and Moses responded.

Feel: Sense the anger, frustration, humility, forgiveness, and mercy demonstrated by Moses and/or God in their various responses to Israel's acts of rebellion.

Do: React to frustrations and barriers with humility and trust in God's leading.

► **Lesson Outline:**

I. Know: Rebellion in the Ranks

A Not only did God demonstrate His guiding presence in tangible, physical means, but He demonstrated His displeasure immediately and concretely. By what various means did He respond to the spirit of rebellion?

B In what different ways did Moses respond to the complaining, murmuring, and rebellion?

C How did God and Moses communicate and interact in these situations? How did Moses honor God, and how did God, in turn, honor Moses?

II. Feel: Responding to Rebellion

A How have you felt when your children or employees responded to you rebelliously? How can you identify with God and Moses as they dealt with these attitudes and actions?

B Have there been times in which you have responded rebelliously? How have you been disciplined and loved through these situations? How have you learned to trust God's guidance rather than doubt Him?

III. Do: Acting on Faith

What situations are you facing in which God is calling you to act in faith on His promises, rather than give in to fear and doubt? What can you do this week as an act of humble obedience to this call to faith?

► **Summary:** When we are faced with problems and tempted to doubt, God asks us to look to Him for guidance and act on His promises.

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*)?

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

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?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1**—Motivate

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Nothing more clearly demonstrates a lack of confidence for the future than murmuring and complaining.

Just for Teachers: Complaining is rooted in unresolved fear of the future. Absence of hope often reflects a lack of appreciation for past blessings or a self-centered drive to control the future for personal benefit. In contrast, the following excerpt shows that a person can overcome even while facing bleak prospects. The author is Joni Eareckson Tada, a quadriplegic injured in a diving accident. Invite the class to discuss how she could face such devastation with a positive spirit.

Excerpt: “Depressed and despondent, I knew in a vague, hazy kind of way that the Bible probably contained answers to my situation somewhere between its covers. . . . Shortly, God brought into my life a tall, lanky 16-year-old boy named Steve Estes. . . . Even though Steve bumbled and stumbled his way around my disability, I was deeply impressed by his desire to help. And God used the long hours he and I shared over an open Bible to lift my spirits and turn my thinking around. I realized I no longer needed to make apologies for being paralyzed. God had reasons behind my affliction, and learning some of them made all the difference in the world. . . . As I look back on my friendship with this young man, I am more convinced than ever of the desperate need of many who spend, as I did, aimless days wishing for a better life and hoping for a chance to shake the ‘handicaps’ that encumber them in their disabilities. These people need comfort and hope from God’s Word and his people. And the Bible makes it clear that we, the church, are the ones who can provide what is needed.”—Joni Eareckson Tada, *All God’s Children* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), pp. 9, 10.

► **STEP 2**—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. The Sin of Ingratitude (Review Numbers 11; Phil. 2:14, 15; Luke 17:11–17 with the class.)

CONTINUED ►

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?

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?


Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Murmuring originated at the outskirts of the encampment, and fire, a divine punishment, was directed against the complainers. God honored Moses' intercession. Had He not, the results might have been worse. Given that tribal placement was precise, it is likely that the first complaints came from the "mixed multitudes," such as the non-Hebrews who had joined the 12 tribes during their Egyptian exodus. These would have camped at the outskirts of the encampment, as there was no assigned place for them among the tribes. The irony is that these people had come along "for the ride" once they had seen the miracles God had performed in Egypt. They probably saw attachment to the Hebrews as a shortcut to prosperity or at least a wall against adversity. However, it took but a few uncomfortable days to expose their shallow motives and true character. Compare this with the story of ten lepers whom Jesus healed. Why did only one of them return to thank Him?

Consider This: How do faulty expectations set us up for disappointment and lead to complaining? How can our mixed motives set us up for murmuring? In Acts 8 Simon tried to buy God's power because he thought having it would give him status. Do we seek God's power and blessing for the wrong reasons? Are we building our future hopes on our stock's performance, our new houses, or our social standing? How easy is it to trust in favorable circumstances rather than in an invisible God?

II. At the Borders and Back to Egypt *(Review Numbers 13 and 14 and Deut. 1:19–46 with the class.)*

The Israelites advanced to the borders of the Promised Land and paused for an assessment of the task ahead. Twelve explorers, representing each tribe, were sent to spy out the land. From the Negev in the south to perhaps as far north as the Lebanon mountains, the spies went gathering data. Their data supported the Lord's claim of a fruitful region, but the majority report was subjectively tainted with fear of the potential obstacles. Only two spies recalled that God recently had delivered them from the most powerful army on the face of the earth. Two appreciated the daily provision of food. Two spoke in faith. The majority, however, carried the day, and their negativity doomed a generation. They were enamored by the land but were unwilling to invest themselves and assume any risk. Such fear was a slap in the face of their Divine Partner, whose ability was being questioned.

CONTINUED 

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?

• What did the reaction of most of the people reveal about them, even after all the manifestations of divine power?

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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Consider This: How do Christians today set themselves up for failure and disappointment? We want God’s gifts but shrink back from sharing in Christ’s suffering. This attitude reveals the same cowardly spirit displayed by the ten spies. How might history have been altered if they had expected suffering but trusted that God would bring them through?

► **STEP 3—Apply**

Just for Teachers: When Christians expect faith to automatically bring a life of fame, prosperity, health, and ease devoid of any problems, they set themselves up for failure and disappointment. Have two class members present the following comic parable, and then discuss its underlying message for our lives.

Discover the Real Undercover

RECRUIT: Are you . . . *really* . . . an agent?

AGENT: The real thing. I understand you’ve applied to the agency. Are you sure this is what you want?

RECRUIT: Oh, absolutely. I mean, ever since I can remember, James Bond and Maxwell Smart have been my idols. I’ve never wanted anything more.

AGENT: Well, it may not be exactly what you’re expecting.

RECRUIT: Maybe you can tell me what’s involved. What’s your mission?

AGENT: Our basic mission is to support the cause of freedom. The information we transmit is instrumental in thwarting the enemy of freedom.

RECRUIT: That’s me inside and out. I’m right there with you. I’d just die to get one of those shoe phones you guys use.

AGENT: Well, actually we quit using those things generations ago. Now we have surgically implanted chips in our auditory and oratory systems to transmit information.

RECRUIT: Awesome! This deal is even better than I thought. I mean, in a few weeks I should be able to out-MacGyver MacGyver. That guy is so cool. I think I’ve seen every episode twice, and I can already do about half his stunts. Look no further. Believe me, I’m the man for this job!

AGENT: Well, this “deal,” as you call it, involves a lot more than that.

RECRUIT: [*concerned*] Like what?

CONTINUED ►

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?

Of all the horrible things the Israelites 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?

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.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

AGENT: For example, loneliness. Sometimes we operate for years in foreign territory where no one speaks our language. We are aliens in strange lands where the culture of freedom is unknown and often despised.

RECRUIT: And?

AGENT: And our lives are on the line 24 hours a day. We bleed real blood. Agents have been threatened, beaten, even killed. I'm not sure this is the picnic you're looking for.

RECRUIT: Why don't they show any of this in the movies?

AGENT: Not only that, sometimes you're not even sure which ones you can trust in the agency. There are double agents who are really working for the enemy. They're the most dangerous. You see, we've had guys like you before. They see the glitz, glamour, and excitement, and they even feel some sympathy for our mission; but they join for the wrong reasons. Then they find out that we have to file reports, be away from family, eat cold food. They feel the discomforts of being a real agent, and they complain about the Director and murmur about other agents who seem to have better assignments. Next thing you know, they've dropped out or, worse, become double agents.

RECRUIT: Maybe I need to give this some thought.

AGENT: Do that. This is the most rewarding position I've ever had, and there *is* excitement and all that; but you have to join because you're committed to the mission. You have to be ready to suffer what we go through. The fight for freedom is just that—a fight; if this is what you decide to do, you will never regret it.

RECRUIT: Thanks for showing me the real picture.

AGENT: Sure. It's the only way the Director will allow it to be shown.

► **STEP 4**—Create

Activity: Make a list of 14 things that you can thank God for. Think carefully about how you may be able to thank God for your suffering (remember Joni Eareckson Tada), as well as the more enjoyable aspects of your life. Each morning and evening this coming week thank God for one thing on your list until you have thanked Him for each one.

Conclusion: Depending on the composition of your class, sing the doxology or a newer praise song, such as “Give Thanks With a Grateful Heart.”

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 are 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.