

From Complaints to Apostasy (Backsliding)



SABBATH—OCTOBER 24

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Numbers 11–14.

MEMORY VERSE: “Do everything without finding fault or arguing. Then you will be pure and without blame. You will be children of God without fault in a sinful and evil world. Among the people of the world you shine like stars in the heavens” (Philippians 2:14, 15, NIV).

THE PILLAR OF CLOUD LIFTED FROM THE TABERNACLE¹ IN SINAI. The priests set forward with the ark. Then Moses said, “ ‘Lord, rise up! Let your enemies be scattered. Let them run away from you’ ” (Numbers 10:35, NIV). It was like a victory cry. The large group of Israel started their journey with good cheer. At last they were on their way to the Promised Land!

Imagine what it must have been like to know that God was in the cloud above you! A person might think that God's presence would have caused His people to obey His every command.

Sadly, that is not what always happened. This week we will study one mess after another. We will find doubt, unbelief, and unfaithfulness among His people. As we study, let us keep these examples in mind as we wait for the promise of Christ's second coming to be fulfilled (Hebrews 11:40).

1. tabernacle—the place of worship or house of God in the wilderness; tent.

SUNDAY—OCTOBER 25**THE SIN OF UNTHANKFULNESS
(Numbers 11)**

Read Numbers 11 and ask yourself the following questions:

- What does this event tell us about how important it is for us to remember that the Lord has led us in the past?
- How do we understand the Lord's action toward His people?
- What can we learn from this story about how important it is for us to control our desire for food and other things?

These unhappy persons are described in Hebrew as “complainers of evil.” We can only guess what “evils” they complained about. Perhaps they felt that God had led the nation into a death trap in the wilderness. Maybe they complained about not reaching the Promised Land of “milk and honey.” The people had seen many miracles in Egypt. They had crossed the Red Sea. But their complaints were rebellious (against God). Their influence² could have destroyed the young nation. So fire from the Lord destroyed them in “the outer edges of the camp” (Numbers 11:1, NIV). Only the prayer of Moses stopped the fire.

The people really had no real reason for complaining about their diet. The manna could be prepared in different ways. It could be ground in a mill or



The people rebelled against God and cried for meat.

beaten on a flat-iron pan. Or it could be baked or boiled (Exodus 16:23; Numbers 11:8). Certainly God was not going to provide (give) untasty food for His people! And the people had milk from the goats, sheep, and cattle. From this milk they also made curds (“butter,” Deuteronomy 32:14, KJV). As for flesh foods, the different “peace sacrifices” (vows, thank offerings, and freewill offerings) all ended with a group meal. At this meal, the priest, the person who made the offering, his family and servants, and the Levites who were invited ate the sacrifice. No question, they were not going to go hungry.

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

MONDAY—OCTOBER 26**TOUGH TIMES FOR ISRAEL'S
LEADER (Numbers 11:10–15)**

Israel quickly went back to idol³ wor-

2. influence—the power to affect or change persons or things.

3. idol—having to do with false gods.

ship and worshiped the golden calf. So Moses begged God to forgive them. But “if you won’t [will not],” he prayed, “‘erase [remove] my name from the scroll [book] you have written’ ” (Exodus 32:32, NIV).

Later, Moses heard and saw the people weeping at the door of their tents. They were crying out, “Who shall give us flesh [meat] to eat?” (Numbers 11:4, KJV). How did Moses act? Why was his attitude (feeling) not right? What human⁴ weakness does Moses give into in Numbers 11:10–15? How again does the human weakness of Moses come up in Numbers 11:21–23?

Moses made mistakes. And at this moment, he lacked trust in God. But the Lord helped to lessen Moses’ load. God did this by choosing 70 elders to help Moses with his work (Numbers 11:16, 17). The experience of the 70 was almost the same as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon Christ’s disciples (followers) at Pentecost.⁵ The elders “prophesied.”⁶ So the elders were honored by God before all the people.

“The elders never would have been chosen if Moses had shown more faith in what he experienced of God’s power and goodness. But Moses had made his own burdens and services so great that he almost forgot he was only a ser-

vant used by God. Moses’ complaints were not right. Neither were Israel’s.” —Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*,⁷ page 380.

According to Numbers 11:20, the people of Israel had turned against the Lord. What can we learn from this event about how easy it is to deceive (fool) ourselves about our relationship with God?

TUESDAY—OCTOBER 27

UNPLEASANT FAMILY PROBLEMS (Numbers 12)

Zipporah, Moses’ wife, and their two sons stayed with her father, Jethro, “the priest of Midian,” during the plagues on Egypt. After Israel settled in Sinai, Jethro brought Zipporah and the children to Moses. Zipporah noticed how tired her husband seemed. She told Jethro about it. He suggested a new plan for ruling Israel. By choosing leaders to rule over groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, Jethro hoped to make Moses’ job easier. Jethro suggested that these leaders could judge small cases. Moses would bring the larger cases to God. Moses agreed. These chosen men “judged the people at all seasons” (Exodus 18:13–26, KJV). This decision (choice) by Moses to follow Jethro’s advice made Miriam and Aaron jealous.

4. human—having to do with men, women, or children.

5. Pentecost—the time when Jesus’ followers received the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit after Jesus rose from the dead and went back to heaven (Acts 2:1–4).

6. prophesied—said what would happen in the future; foretold.

7. *Patriarchs and Prophets*—patriarchs were leaders of God’s people in early Bible times; men such as Abraham and Isaac, or other leaders of Israel such as Moses; prophets are men or women sent by God to warn us about what will happen in the future.



Jethro told Moses to pick men to help him lead the people.

According to Numbers 12, what human weaknesses do Miriam and Aaron show? How is their attitude (feeling) different from the attitude and character⁸ of Moses? What should this story tell us about how God feels about the bad attitudes shown by Miriam and Aaron?

The Bible shows that the verb “spake” (Numbers 12:1, KJV) or “began to talk” (NIV) is spoken by a female person. Clearly this tells us it was Miriam who started the blame in verse 1. Miriam was jealous of Zipporah. Jealousy causes us to say, do, and think things that go against God’s love and His law.

Sadly, this is just what happened to Miriam. Jealousy twisted her mind. She blamed Zipporah for influencing (causing) Moses to choose the judges Jethro suggested. Miriam

called Zipporah a Cushite. Miriam meant this word as an insult against Zipporah. It is clear that Miriam had a low opinion of Cushites. What is not clear is exactly why. Perhaps she looked down on Zipporah because of her background. Perhaps Miriam thought Cushites were not as good as Israelites because they worshiped idols (false gods). Or perhaps she looked down on Zipporah because of her lovely dark skin. All of these reasons for not treating someone with kindness are terrible and hateful to God.

Whatever reasons for the insult against Zipporah, Miriam’s thinking was dead wrong. First of all, Zipporah was a worshiper of the true God. Second, Zipporah was a Midianite. The Midianites came from Abraham through his son Midian by his second wife Keturah. Also, some of the Cushite tribes lived among the Midianites in the land east of Sinai and east of the Gulf of Aqabah in Arabia. She could have been called either a Cushite or a Midianite.

But no matter what Zipporah could have been called, God called her His daughter. We are all sons and daughters of the heavenly King. Let us pray that we do not forget this truth as Miriam did.

Wonderful miracles⁹ of God’s power were shown to Miriam and Aaron. But these two faithful people showed some very bad attitudes (feelings). Examine your

8. character—who someone is; all that a person does, feels, and thinks are what he or she is made of.

9. miracles—extraordinary (amazing; great) events believed to be signs of the power of God. Examples of miracles are Peter’s walking on water and Jesus’ raising Lazarus from the dead.

own heart: what bad attitudes need to be removed from you before they cause you to turn away from God?

WEDNESDAY—OCTOBER 28

AT THE BORDERS (Numbers 13)

The time probably was September. The vineyards ripened, and the second crop of figs was ready to pick. The people of Israel took only about 11 days to reach Kadesh-Barnea. It was near the southern border of Canaan. We only can imagine joy and happiness spreading among the people as they neared the goal of their dreams.

According to Deuteronomy 1:19–23, what mistake was made here?

Read Numbers 13 and answer the following questions:

- **The Lord agreed to let His people send spies, but what were the results of that decision (choice)?**
- **What did the attitude (feeling) of most of the people show about them, even after all the wonderful examples of God's power?**

The people were happy to hear about how fertile the land of their new home-to-be was. They were impressed by the size of the grapes carried back between two men. This land truly was going to be as good as, or even better than, they had expected!



The people of Israel were amazed by the size of the grapes brought back from the Promised Land.

As usual, in this sinful world there always are problems, even when God leads us. Of course, the Lord knew those pagan¹⁰ people were in the land. So why did the Hebrews not think that the Lord could have taken care of the situation for them? After all, remember what He did to the Egyptians!

But the people forgot about the power and promises of God. They just saw the problems set before them. Caleb and Joshua pleaded with them, but the other spies filled their minds with negative thoughts, and they lost faith in God.

How can you learn to trust God, even though there are impossible problems in your path? What choices are you making today that will decide how you will act tomorrow?

¹⁰ pagan—having to do with the worship of idols (false gods) or nature instead of God.

THURSDAY—OCTOBER 29**BACK TO EGYPT (Numbers 14)**

What is the most powerful and important lesson about God you can learn from the story in Numbers 14? In what ways have you done the same thing Israel did?

Of all the horrible things the people did, perhaps the worst one was saying they wanted a captain to take them back to Egypt (Numbers 14:3, 4). Egypt was a symbol¹¹ of the slavery of sin, death, and separation from God. But these people experienced God's great act of saving them from Egypt. So there was no excuse for their lack of faith in God.

"The unfaithful spies were loud in criticizing Caleb and Joshua. So the cry was raised to stone them. The crazy mob picked up rocks to kill those faithful men. They rushed forward with yells of madness. Then suddenly the stones dropped from their hands. Silence fell upon them, and they shook with fear. God acted to stop them from murdering the two men. The glory¹² of God's presence, like a flaming light, brightened the tabernacle. . . . None dared to go forward with their rebellion [war against God]."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, page 390.



**Suddenly the stones
dropped from their hands.**

How are the mercy and grace¹³ of God shown to these people who openly rebelled (warred) against Him?

Think about the people's feelings about the punishment¹⁴ they had received. They turned against what God would have done for them. They decided to try to do it themselves, but this led to a very sad and foolish ending. If only the people had trusted in God, who already had done so much for them. Then this sad ending would not have happened. What a sad thought, too, because many innocent people, who had nothing to do with the rebellion, suffered because of the sins of others.

11. symbol—an object, mark, sign, or person that stands for, or means the same thing as, another object, idea, or thing.

12. glory—great beauty, power, and royal perfection.

13. grace—God's gift of forgiveness and mercy that He freely gives us to take away our sins.

14. punishment—a penalty (price to be paid) for, or the result of, doing something wrong; when someone must suffer loss or pain for doing something bad, wrong, or against the law.

FRIDAY—OCTOBER 30

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

“These men took the wrong course of action and stubbornly set themselves against Caleb and Joshua, against Moses, and against God. Every step they took made them more stubborn. They wished to discourage all effort to take over Canaan. They lied to gain their negative influence. They said, ‘The land we checked out destroys those who live in it’ [Numbers 13:32, NlrV]. This report was not only evil. But it was also a lie. It was not true at all. The spies had announced the country to be fruitful and fertile and the people to be giants. All of this would be impossible if the weather were so unhealthy that the land could ‘destroy those who live in it.’ But when men surrender¹⁵ their hearts to unbelief, they place themselves under the power of Satan. And no one can say how much Satan will lead them.”—Adapted

from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, page 389.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① Why is it so important for us in all kinds of situations to have a positive attitude of praise and a thankful heart toward the Lord? No matter what our situations are, do we not have things to be thankful for? Why is it so important to think about them, instead of being depressed by the troubles that come upon us all? Why are gratitude (thankfulness) and praise so important for keeping our faith strong?
- ② Have you ever noticed how quickly finding fault or wrong in others and making complaints can spread? What should this tell us about how careful we need to be to use the right words?
- ③ In what ways, while waiting for the Second Coming, could we be in danger of showing the same disgusting attitudes shown by the people of Israel?

15. surrender—the act of giving oneself completely.