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Session 1 - Grumbling against God

Bible Passages

Numbers 11:1-35

Brief Notes

The book of Numbers tells the story of Israel's journey from Sinai to the Promised Land. It's been called the book that should never have been written, because it should have been just an 11 day journey but would take 40 years, and the book explains why. The first 10 chapters all take place at Sinai, and the last 15 chapters are all situated in the plains of Moab, from where Moses would deliver his final words to the Israelites before they entered the land (ie Deuteronomy). Our studies, in chs.11-21, therefore deal with how they got from one to the other.

In Ch.10 they strike camp and set off full of confidence and faith, but that didn't last long. Chapters 11 and 12 describe the journey to the border of the Promised Land, and the picture painted is one of continual grumbling, first by the people, then by Moses, then by Aaron and Miriam.

Taberah (vv.1-3)

The opening story is a brief and succinct cameo, pared down to the barest details, giving the

pattern we might look for: complaint – judgment – intercession – mercy. The striking divergence we'll notice in what follows will be Moses' failure to intercede.

Kibroth Hattaavah (vv.4-35)

The grumbling starts with the “rabble”, probably the hangers on who had decided to flee Egypt with the Israelites, but it soon spread as grumbling so often does so that the Israelites themselves are wailing like spoilt children (v.10a) - not over lack of food, but over the lack of variety. Grumbling distorts their perception of the past (v.5, no mention of being slaves), and their perception of the present (vv.5-6, contemptuous of God's faithful and miraculous provision). It is not simply that they were fussy eaters: God becomes “exceedingly angry” because it is much more serious than that. In verse 20 we see that it showed their rejection of God and disdain for his redemption.

Before we hear about God's response, though, we learn first about Moses' response (vv.11-15). The pattern set at Taberah leads us to expect Moses to intercede for the people, but instead he too brings his own complaint about his circumstances and the inadequacy of God's provision to God. He does complain *to* God, rather than simply complain *about* God, which is commendable and indicates faith rather than unbelief, but it is a raw heart cry from someone feeling totally overwhelmed by an impossible burden.

The bulk of the chapter, though, is taken up with God's response to all this moaning as he first says what he is going to do (vv.16-23) and then does it (vv.24-35). We might suppose God's anger in v.10 is like a parent with whinging kids, about to blow a fuse, but God's anger is not like ours. It is delayed until v.33, and what we see before then in the heart of the chapter, particularly in the interchange with Moses, makes us see his judgment in a different light. To Moses God shows himself to be not a grumpy old dad, but kind and gracious and sympathetic. 70 elders are anointed to help carry the burden of pastoring the people in a way that doesn't diminish Moses' authority but shows that their authority is an extension of his. This sharing of the Spirit is not judgment on Moses, and Moses feels no shame in it (v.29). It seems rather to show God's concern for Moses and for his people – for this is the people he had conceived and given birth to (cf v.12); Moses might be acting as the nursemaid, but God is their mother, they are his people. A key and pivotal verse is verse 23 where God asks “Is the arm of the LORD too short?”. It was his arm that had redeemed them from Egypt. Moses might feel like throwing in the towel, but God says “Do you think I can't pull this off? That I can't get this rabble to Canaan? Watch and see.”

The provision of the quail, therefore, and the judgment that follows is in the context of God's faithful (and fierce) love for his people. The word for “a wind” (v.31) which brings the quail is actually the same word as “Spirit”, through whom God answered Moses' complaint, tying his response to the two moans together so that the first colours the second. Judgement is severe, because we are to learn that grumbling and the unbelief that lies behind it is serious, but this is the anger of a parent, who disciplines his children not out of irritation but out of love. This God is the one who saved them and is determined to faithfully lead them to their inheritance.

You might check out 1 Cor.10:10-13 where Paul draws some lessons from this story for us

today. There are certainly lessons about grumbling (what are we saying about God when we grumble?), and lessons too about what he is like.

Discussion Questions

- You could set the scene very briefly, explaining that the first ten chapters are set at Sinai, and that in ch.10 they set off. What sense do you get from 10:29-36 of the mood of the people as they set out?
- What is the people's mood in this chapter?
- Why do you think we have the introductory story in vv.1-3?
- Look at vv.4-10. What things do you notice about their grumbling in these verses?
- From vv.1-3, what might we have expected Moses' response to be? How does he respond?
 - Is his complaining any different from the Israelites' in general?
- God first says what he will do in response to Moses' complaint and the people's complaint, and then does it. How does he respond to Moses?
 - Why do you think he responds this way?
- How does that colour how we understand God's response to the people? (What is his response?)
- What might you say to someone who on reading this story says that God seems like a marked off parent blowing a fuse because of the constant whinging of his children?
- Read 1 Cor.10:10-13. What lessons does Paul draw from this story?
 - How are we prone to grumble?
 - What are saying about God when we grumble?
- What does this chapter teach us about what God is like?
 - How does that challenge you and encourage you?

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