



Provision

GOD HEARS HIS LEADERS AND SUSTAINS THEM
FOR HIS PURPOSES.

NUMBERS 11:4-17

Many of us know what it's like to have a job and find out we don't have the tools we need. We start to wash clothes and discover the washing machine isn't working. Maybe we are supposed to drive for the carpool, and the car won't start. We need to turn in an assignment in the morning and realize at midnight that the printer is out of ink. We discover that the bolt we're trying to remove requires a metric socket wrench that we don't have.



When has some difficulty kept you from doing what you needed to do? How did you feel when someone came through with a solution?

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

NUMBERS 10:11–12:16

The Israelites had been camped at the base of Mount Sinai for ten months and nineteen days (Num. 10:11-13). This was not a time of idle inactivity. Moses received the Ten Commandments and the law, built and consecrated the tabernacle, established the priestly orders, organized the Israelites by tribes for travel and conquest, conducted a military census, and celebrated Passover for the second time. The Israelites remained at Mount Sinai for about a month after celebrating the Passover.

The first ten chapters of Numbers have been free of complaints and conflicts. This changes in chapter 11, which begins a cycle of rebellions. The first complaint or rebellion was due to the general hardship of the travel (11:1-3).

This first rebellion established a pattern. The cycle of behavior had four stages. First, the people rebelled or sinned against God. Second, God punished His people. Third, the people cried out to God. Fourth, God forgave and restored His people. We see this progression of behavior not only in the book of Numbers but also in the Israelites' ongoing relationship with God.

Before reaching Sinai, the Israelites complained because they needed food and water (Ex. 16; 17:1-7). God responded by providing what the people needed. The complaint in Numbers 11 is a lack of food. The Israelites would later rebel because they needed water (Num. 20:2-13). In both instances, God responded with judgment.

Why did God bring judgment rather than simply supply the need? Mount Sinai had changed everything. There, God had revealed Himself and His power to the Israelites. He had established a covenantal relationship with them. He wanted them to trust Him. God's people had some lessons to learn. In today's story, class was about to begin.



As you read through Numbers 11:4-17, underscore each time Moses used the pronouns “I” or “me.” When Moses made these statements, what was he revealing about his concern—and himself?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

DISSATISFIED FOLLOWERS (NUM. 11:4-9)

⁴ **The riffraff among them had a strong craving for other food.**

The Israelites wept again and said, “Who will feed us meat?

⁵ We remember the free fish we ate in Egypt, along with the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic. ⁶ But now our appetite is gone; there’s nothing to look at but this manna!”

⁷ The manna resembled coriander seed, and its appearance was like that of bdellium. ⁸ The people walked around and gathered it. They ground it on a pair of grinding stones or crushed it in a mortar, then boiled it in a cooking pot and shaped it into cakes. It tasted like a pastry cooked with the finest oil. ⁹ When the dew fell on the camp at night, the manna would fall with it.

VERSES 4-6

Verse 4 refers to *the riffraff among them*. Seldom does such a colorful word appear only once in Scripture. Some translations render the noun as “rabble” and others as “mixed multitude.” It refers to a mixed crowd. These were non-Jews who had left Egypt with Moses and the Israelites (Ex. 12:37-38; Josh. 8:35). They *had a strong craving*. The Hebrew underscores the intensity of their yearning; it reads, “they were craving a craving.”

The riffraff’s complaints stirred the Israelites. They *again* began to weep, or as some translations have it, began to wail or complain. The earlier complaining likely refers to Exodus 16:1-3. There, the Israelites grumbled to Moses and Aaron: “you brought us into this wilderness to make this whole assembly die of hunger” (v. 3). Now, they wanted *meat*. This complaint ignores that they had brought flocks and herds with them (Ex. 12:32,38).

The Hebrews stayed in Egypt for over 400 years—until the exodus. There, crops were bountiful and *fish* were abundant. Calling them *free*, though, indicates the people were minimizing or forgetting the strain of their slave labor back in Egypt.

The vegetables listed were common in the Egyptians’ daily diet, even among the poor. Growing them, though, required a lot of water. Arid conditions meant the Israelites were now doing without these dietary staples. The phrase *but now* showed they were romanticizing their lives back in Egypt as if it had been blissful; *but now*, this was unbearable.



What blessings from God might we tend to overlook?

VERSES 7-9

The people complained that their only food was *manna*. God began providing manna for His people as they traveled between the Red Sea and Mount Sinai—about a month after they left Egypt. They already were coming to loathe this food, though it came without cost or labor. They were turning up their noses at what God was supplying.

Verses 8-9 state how the people gathered and prepared the manna. It came with the evening dew. “When the layer of dew evaporated, there were fine flakes on the desert surface, as fine as frost on the ground” (Ex. 16:14). Unlike the fish in Egypt, which the people had to work to catch, this manna was free and abundant.

After picking up the flakes in the morning, people would grind them. They might use a pair of disk-shaped stones, each with a hole in the middle. The person would lay the bottom disk flat, cover it with seeds, and then put the other disk on top. A dowel in the center holes would keep the stones aligned as the person rotated the upper disk. Another option was to use a mortar and pestle, which was more common than stones. The manna softened as it boiled in water. While still moist, the cook would roll it into a ball, flatten it, and cook it in an oven.

Moses described the manna as “the bread the LORD has given you to eat” (16:15). Jesus compared Himself to manna. He is the living bread that came down from heaven, and whoever eats of His bread will never be hungry but will live forever (John 6:35,51).



What does God’s providing manna to His people reveal about Him?

FRUSTRATED LEADER (NUM. 11:10-15)

¹⁰ **Moses heard the people, family after family, weeping at the entrance of their tents. The LORD was very angry; Moses was also provoked.** ¹¹ **So Moses asked the LORD, “Why have you**

brought such trouble on your servant? Why are you angry with me, and why do you burden me with all these people? ¹² Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth so you should tell me, ‘Carry them at your breast, as a nursing mother carries a baby,’ to the land that you swore to give their ancestors? ¹³ Where can I get meat to give all these people? For they are weeping to me, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ ¹⁴ I can’t carry all these people by myself. They are too much for me. ¹⁵ If you are going to treat me like this, please kill me right now if I have found favor with you, and don’t let me see my misery anymore.”

VERSE 10

The people were *weeping* in their tents. This verse gives the impression that complaints rang from everyone—*family after family*. Moses could not escape it.

The people’s complaints made God *very angry*. The Hebrew word describes someone burning or being ablaze with fury. The same word occurs in verse 1 of this chapter, describing the Lord’s reaction to the people’s complaints: “his anger burned.” Our word “incensed” conveys the same idea.

The word *also* is significant; it connects Moses’s reaction to God’s. The Lord burned with righteous indignation. Moses, though, was exasperated and had reached his boiling point. As one commentary writer said, “Just as the people are sick and tired of manna, Moses is sick and tired of them!”¹



Why do you think God was angry at His people?

VERSES 11-13

Moses previously interceded for the Israelites and served as their advocate when God became angry (Num. 11:1-3). Not this time; Moses was angry with the people.

Three times Moses asked *why*. This wasn’t a request for information but an accusation—*why have you . . . why are you . . . why do you?* The questions reveal Moses’s frustration and despair.

Moses reminded God that he had not brought this on himself. In the Hebrew of verse 12, the “I” comes first, which places it in the emphatic position. In English, we might say, “I, did I conceive

all these people?” It was a sarcastic yet rhetorical question, and the implied answer was a resounding NO! God previously told Moses “Israel is *my* firstborn son” (Ex. 4:22, emphasis added).

In verse 13, Moses moved to the pragmatic question. Where would he get meat to feed the people? He later questioned whether slaughtering flocks and herds or catching all the fish in the sea would be enough food (Num. 11:22).

Even those with the strongest faith can still become frustrated and feel defeated.

VERSES 14-15

Moses declared in effect, “I can’t do it; it’s too much!” For a fourth time, he referred to the Israelites as ***all these people***. The phrase drips with irritation and resentment. Moses’s words reveal he was emotionally and physically worn out. The responsibility and burden were too great for him to bear by himself.

Moses had expressed feelings of inadequacy when he first encountered God at the burning bush (Ex. 3:11; 4:1,10). There, he pleaded, “Please, Lord, send someone else” (Ex. 4:13). Now, having reached his breaking point, Moses uttered a more desperate plea: ***please kill me right now***. His current frustration and feelings of helplessness eclipsed all the blessings God had previously supplied. His words reveal he blamed God for his plight.

Moses was not alone in bemoaning his life. Job cursed the day of his birth (Job 3:1-13). Likewise, the prophet Jeremiah said, “May the day I was born be cursed” (Jer. 20:14). After a great victory over the prophets of Baal, Elijah fled the threats of Jezebel and prayed for God to take his life (1 Kings 19:1-4). Even those with the strongest faith can still become frustrated and feel defeated. God, though, was not finished with any of these men.



We often applaud Moses for his great faith and obedience. What does verse 15 reveal about Moses? How do you handle frustration and the feeling of defeat?



KEY DOCTRINE: *God the Holy Spirit*

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God, fully divine. (See Genesis 1:3; Exodus 31:2-3.)

GRACIOUS PROVISION (NUM. 11:16-17)

¹⁶ **The LORD answered Moses, “Bring me seventy men from Israel known to you as elders and officers of the people. Take them to the tent of meeting and have them stand there with you. ¹⁷ Then I will come down and speak with you there. I will take some of the Spirit who is on you and put the Spirit on them. They will help you bear the burden of the people, so that you do not have to bear it by yourself.”**

VERSES 16-17

The Lord responded to Moses’s anger with grace. He understood what was at the core of Moses’s diatribe—Moses felt inadequate for the task. God declared He would meet Moses at his point of need.

Earlier, seventy elders had joined Moses plus Aaron and two of his sons for a covenant ratification ceremony at Mount Sinai (Ex. 24:1-11). These **seventy** were not necessarily the same men as those at Mount Sinai. In the New Testament era, the Sanhedrin was comprised of seventy men. The number was likely based on the seventy elders and officers Moses chose here.

The seventy were to approach ***the tent of meeting***. God would speak with Moses there and reveal His will to him. The seventy would hear God speak to Moses.

The Spirit on Moses was the Spirit of God. Moses later said, “If only all the LORD’s people were prophets and the LORD would place *his* Spirit on them!” (Num. 11:29, emphasis added). Lighting a candle from the flame of an oil lamp’s wick does not lessen the oil lamp’s glow. In the same way, God’s putting some of the same Spirit that Moses had onto the seventy did not lessen Moses’s portion of the Spirit. This was the Holy Spirit, who would enable them to carry out their God-given tasks.

God’s response in this verse echoes Moses’s earlier complaints. In verse 11, Moses had asked “why do you *burden* me with all these people?” (emphasis added). Here, God promised him that the seventy would help bear the ***burden***. In verse 14, Moses complained, “I can’t *carry* all these people” (emphasis added). Verse 17 uses the same Hebrew verb when God said, ***you do not have to bear it***

by yourself. God never rebuked Moses for his tirade. Instead, He graciously provided what Moses needed.

 What did God reveal about His character by supplying Moses's specific and stated needs?

BIBLE SKILL: Look for the prayer prompts in a passage of Scripture.

Numbers 11 describes how God sustained Moses by bringing alongside him seventy of Israel's elders (vv. 16-30). He also provided quail for the people (vv. 31-34). What does this reveal about God? How should you respond to what it reveals? How does it prompt you to pray? Consider the following suggestions: Give thanks for the ways God has provided for you in the past. Express your willingness to allow Him to meet your needs in the way He chooses, rather than merely asking Him to work in the ways you desire.

APPLY THE TEXT

- + Believers should be careful not to take God's provisions for granted.
- + We can always take our concerns to God, telling Him what we need.
- + We can trust God to provide what we need to carry out the tasks He gives us.



What actions can your Bible study group take to help each other feel free to share their burdens and concerns openly—with God and with one another? What can you do to help foster honest dialogue?



Even when we can see how God met our needs in the past, what causes us to panic when we face a new crisis? What can you do to help you remember God's past blessings?



Memorize Numbers 11:23.

Prayer Needs

1. Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 581.