

A Stiff-Necked People Numbers 11-12

Today we are going to talk about how we respond when we go through discomfort, difficulty, and disappointments in life – from the smallest aggravations to the life-altering ones. I had some aggravations in my life this past week. I was putting a new tailpipe on my side-by-side and when I took the old one off I snapped all three bolts off inside the muffler that held it in place. After that third one I noticed something welling up inside me and I wanted to complain.

I also had to replace a little motor under the dash in my pickup that controls the temperature blend. Not a big deal, but to do that I had to lay on the floor in front of the passenger seat and contort my head and arms in order to work on it. It didn't go well and took longer than I thought, and my shoulders, arms and neck were burning. I got dizzy and lightheaded. Eventually, that same thing welled up in me and I wanted to complain.

Then, last weekend I was using an ATV disc on a food plot and ended up having to back up in one spot and the extra strain ended up breaking the metal frame. That same thing welled up again and I wanted to curse and complain.

These are just minor things but they stirred up aggravation and made me want to complain. You probably ran into some problems as well, and for some of you it wasn't just frustrating, it was really painful or life-altering. Problems, pain, disappointment and loss are part of life and it's easy to complain and curse and even get to where we shake our fists and scream. And for those of us who believe in God and believe that he's active in our lives and able to do all things, it's easy to get frustrated with him – to doubt and get angry and resist or even to want to curse him and rebel.

This morning we're going to read a couple stories about complaining and how God responded. We're going to see why this is an area of our lives we need to take very seriously and seek to understand God's will so that we live in a way that glorifies God rather than insulting him.

Last week we started a new sermon series on the book of Numbers which records the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness from Sinai to the Promised Land. It's a journey that should have taken about 11 days but took 40 years instead. The Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years as a punishment for the kind of complaining and rebellion we're going to see today.

In the first sermon I summarized the first 10 chapters of Numbers which were all about God's provision and plans to prepare them for traveling through the wilderness. He provided an army of over 600,000 men along with marching and camping assignments for every tribe so there would be order and military protection all around. He provided the manpower and equipment for transporting the tabernacle and all the holy things in it. He provided a communication system with loud trumpets and a directional guide with a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night.

They had everything they needed to make it through the wilderness, and it says in Numbers 10:11-12 that in the second year after leaving Egypt, on the 20th day of the second month, the cloud of the glory of the Lord lifted and the people set out into the wilderness, following the cloud, heading north toward the Promised Land. The journey to their new home had begun.

Based on the situation, I would have expected the general attitude to be pretty good. They were no longer slaves in Egypt, they had seen many signs and wonders, God was with them and his glory was visibly present in their midst. Now they were on their way to take possession of their new home. It would be a long journey and take several days, but they had everything they needed and Yahweh was leading them. So I would have expected an attitude of thankfulness, growing excitement and steady determination that would enable them to complete the journey before them. But as you read about what happened, you see a much different response. The first thing recorded about their journey took place on the third day...

Read Numbers 11:1-3.

And the people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes, and when the Lord heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the

camp. ² Then the people cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire died down. ³ So the name of that place was called Taberah, because the fire of the Lord burned among them.

So this is a real downer to start the journey. I looked up some things to get a better idea of what was going on. In verse 1 it says they were complaining about their “misfortunes,” and I looked up that Hebrew word to see what it meant. It’s clear by the definition that the people were feeling like God was neglecting or even afflicting them – even after everything he had done! He wasn’t doing enough and they weren’t happy. It doesn’t say what their misfortunes were but likely had to do with the discomforts of the journey. I’m sure it was hot and tiring and burdensome to march through the desert with all your possessions, but couldn’t they keep in mind that they had just been released from a lifetime of slavery? Couldn’t they remember God’s goodness and provision and that they were heading to the Promised Land and would be there in a few days?

Apparently they didn’t and they complained and acted with contempt toward God and it kindled his anger. He caused fire to break out in the outlying parts of the camp. The people cried out, Moses interceded, God relented and the fire died down. You would think that would have been enough of a warning for them to repent and stop complaining. But it didn’t, because soon after that we read about the same kind of behavior, and even worse.

Read Numbers 11:4-6.

Now the rabble that was among them (people from other nations that left Egypt with them) had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, “Oh that we had meat to eat! ⁵ We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. ⁶ But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.”

Don’t miss the profound faithlessness and offensiveness of this complaint. There’s no food in the wilderness. It is a rocky wasteland. And yet 2 million people had food every day, provided for them, right outside their tents. It was called “manna” and it’s described in verses 7-9. It tasted pleasant, it was easy to prepare, and it was the perfect food for marching across the

wilderness. God gave them that food every day and in just a few more days they'd be arriving at a land that was known to be "flowing with milk and honey."

But that just wasn't good enough. All the people could do was think about their favorite foods back in Egypt... when they were slaves. So they complained about the manna, and not only did they complain, but they wept and wailed and had the audacity to say that they wished things were like they were back in Egypt. This is so offensive I can hardly believe it. How could they act like that?

After hearing their weeping, Moses became deeply frustrated and did some complaining of his own...

Read Numbers 11:10-15.

Moses heard the people weeping throughout their clans, everyone at the door of his tent. And the anger of the Lord blazed hotly, and Moses was displeased. ¹¹ Moses said to the Lord, "Why have you dealt ill with your servant? And why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? ¹² Did I conceive all this people? Did I give them birth, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a nursing child,' to the land that you swore to give their fathers? ¹³ Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me and say, 'Give us meat, that we may eat.' ¹⁴ I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me. ¹⁵ If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favor in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness."

So Moses goes off the deep end and starts complaining. The pressure of leading the huge crowd combined with their weeping was more than he could handle and he cried out to God. It's not an example of what we should do, but it is what happened. And God showed mercy to Moses. Later on we see that God listened and gave him 70 elders from among the Israelites to serve as officers to share the burden of leadership.

But God's response to the Israelites was much more severe. He had shown them patience and mercy many times in the past, but after their complaints and insults that day, it was time for judgment.

Read Numbers 11:18-20.

And say to the people, ‘Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat, for you have wept in the hearing of the Lord, saying, “Who will give us meat to eat? For it was better for us in Egypt.” Therefore the Lord will give you meat, and you shall eat. ¹⁹ You shall not eat just one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, ²⁰ but a whole month, until it comes out at your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, because you have rejected the Lord who is among you and have wept before him, saying, “Why did we come out of Egypt?”’”

So he’s going to give them so much meat they would get sick of it, and when the next day came, we read this...

Read Numbers 11:31-34.

Then a wind from the Lord sprang up, and it brought quail from the sea and let them fall beside the camp, about a day's journey on this side and a day's journey on the other side, around the camp, and about two cubits above the ground. ³² And the people rose all that day and all night and all the next day, and gathered the quail. Those who gathered least gathered ten homers (60 bushels!!!). And they spread them out for themselves all around the camp. ³³ While the meat was yet between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people, and the Lord struck down the people with a very great plague. ³⁴ Therefore the name of that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had the craving.

A whole bunch of people died for complaining the way they did. And before we start to think God’s response is too harsh, I think it’s important for us to see that these weren’t isolated occurrences. They weren’t just having a bad day like Moses was. That kind of complaining was a regular pattern from the time Moses showed up to lead them out of Egypt to the time they finally started to enter Canaan. There are 15 times the Bible records stories where the Israelites complained against God, grumbled, resisted, and even rebelled. And keep in mind, those were just the times when their complaining was recorded because it reached the point of serious corporate disruption. There

must have been countless other times when they complained on a smaller scale.

Paul actually writes about this in 1 Corinthians 10:6-11: *“Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.”* He writes about their sins of idolatry and sexual immorality, and then he gets to their complaining in verse 9: *“We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents,¹⁰ nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer.¹¹ Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.”*

We need to learn from the Israelites so that we don't do what they did. When I look at their complaining, especially at how often it was and how they never truly repented, I see a number of different things. I see a complete disregard for the goodness and faithfulness of God, and the amazing miracles he was doing among them, and for the fact that he took them out of a life of slavery, suffering, and death, and set them apart for a life of peace, prosperity, and blessing. They completely disregarded his goodness and all the promises he gave them and fulfilled on numerous occasions.

They stubbornly refused to believe who he really was and that he would do what he said he would do. They refused to trust him to fulfill his promises. They treated him like a liar and like a God who was far less desirable than the gods of Egypt. They disregarded his warnings, refused to repent, and refused to learn or grow. They hardened their hearts and persisted in foolishness and defiance. The phrase that is often used to describe them in the Old Testament is “They are a stiff-necked people.” So they whined and complained and cast blame on God.

I want you to see that their feelings of disappointment and frustration, and even their complaints weren't the problem. There are many chapters in the Bible and even whole books devoted to a complaint or lament (Job, Lamentations). It's not wrong to be grieved or disappointed when bad things happen in your life and when you struggle. When you find out you have cancer or you lose your job or someone you love has been in an accident, it is fitting

and expected to grieve or lament. We live in a fallen and broken world and things are not the way they should be.

The problem with the Israelites was their complete lack of gratitude and faith, and complaining in a way that made God out to be a liar. They weren't just struggling and confused about what they were going through. They were acting like God had wronged them, wanted to kill them, and was a horrible God – worse than the gods of Egypt.

When we go through circumstances that are disappointing, frustrating, painful, or that make us afraid, we're likely going to start feeling and thinking the same things they did and we'll be tempted to respond the same way. We'll focus our attention on whatever our problem is and forget all about God and the big picture. We'll forget what God is actually like and what he's already done in our lives and what he's promised to do. We'll doubt or question his goodness to us and we'll be tempted to whine and resist and rebel. We'll forget that even though he does allow bad things to happen, he makes all things work together for good – to cleanse us from sin and make us more like Christ.

Those thoughts and feelings can be like an avalanche that gains momentum and blinds us to the truth. And we need to look out for that. By God's grace and the Holy Spirit working in our lives, we need to recognize what's happening, stop the avalanche, and start reminding ourselves of what's true. When that third bolt snaps off in the muffler or you get the layoff notice at work or you get the results back from the doctor, rather than giving in to the flesh and crying out against God, we need to learn to cry to him instead. We need to humble ourselves and trust him and depend on his wisdom and goodness, even when we don't have the answers. Believe that God is who he said he is and will never fail to carry out his promises in your life.

God has not promised to take away all our disappointments, pains, and fears, but he has promised that he will be with us and do good to us and keep us secure to the end. And he has promised that when this life is over he will bring us to the Promised Land of Heaven where there will be no more crying or pain, no sickness or evil, no disappointments or fear. As people who have been set free from the curse of sin and condemnation we must learn patient

endurance, faith, trust, humility... these are the responses that honor the one who has done everything for us. Let us learn to be like Christ, who, for the joy set before him endured the cross. (see Hebrews 12)

So when those feelings start welling up inside you, start to remind yourself of what's really true. Remember all the ways God has blessed you. Start thanking him for all the blessings in your life, and turn to him for mercy and help.