

Provision

GOD HEARS HIS LEADERS AND SUSTAINS THEM
FOR HIS PURPOSES.

If there is one thing that characterizes our society today, it is the fact that griping and complaining seems to be our number one activity. Whether it is complaining about the weather, or the economy, or the woes of our favorite sports team, we complain a lot. Complaining is simply our response when we feel that our perceived needs are not being met. I expect my meals to be at a certain temperature. When the restaurant serves them at a temperature different from my expectations, I complain. When my body doesn't perform perfectly as I think it should, I complain. When my drive to work doesn't go as planned, I complain. In reality, much of our complaining is caused by unrealistic expectations and inconvenience.

A culture of complaint pretty much sums up our society today. It also sums up much of the account of the children of Israel as they journeyed from Mount Sinai toward the promised land. Because of the continual complaining and opposition of the people, Moses found himself constantly in prayer to God. In prayer, he was either lamenting over the waywardness of the people or interceding for them before God. The testimony of Scripture is that God heard Moses's prayers and provided what was needed at the time so that His plans and purposes could be accomplished through Moses. This truth continues to be so in our day and time as well. God hears our prayers and provides not only for our needs; He provides what is necessary to carry out His plans and purposes.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

Numbers 10:11–12:16

For almost a year, the children of Israel had been camped at the foot of Mount Sinai. God had given them the Ten Commandments, the laws related to day-to-day conduct, the laws concerning proper worship, and

more during this period of time. In addition, the tabernacle had been constructed and worship at the tabernacle had begun. Now the time had arrived to begin the journey from Sinai to the land of promise.

Number 10:11–12:16 form a complete literary unit and provide a picture of the events of the journey from Mount Sinai to Kadesh in the Wilderness of Paran. The narrative begins with the Israelites marching in triumph from Sinai. Each tribe had an assigned location in the line of march. Within this line of march, two groups of Levites also marched transporting the parts to the tabernacle and the sacred items of the tabernacle (10:17,21). The journey had begun! However, within short order, the joy and excitement of the journey turned into complaint and bitterness.

Numbers 11 begins with the first of a string of complaints against God and the leadership of Moses. Each narrative of the complaint and rebellion follows a similar pattern. The complaints began over one of three things—hardship, food, and leadership. In the cycle of complaint, the next element was some type of judgment from God against the rebellion. Finally, in two of the three instances, Moses interceded to God on behalf of the people and the Lord relented in His judgment.

The first rebellion in 11:1-3 illustrates this pattern. The people of Israel complained about the hardship of the journey (11:1). God sent fire on the outskirts of the camp to punish the complainers (v. 1). As a result, the people cried out to Moses, and he interceded with God on their behalf (v. 2). The place was named *Taberah* (v. 3), which means “blaze.”

The second rebellion chronicled in the focal passage for today began with a complaint over God's provision of manna and a craving for something different (vv. 4-6). After providing additional leadership to help Moses with the people (vv. 11-17), God provided quail as an addition to the manna for the people. Along with the quail, though, came God's judgment through a plague (vv. 31-33). In this instance, there was no intercession on the people's behalf. The place where this happened was called *Kibroth-hattaavah* (v. 34), which means “graves of craving.”

This literary section of Numbers concludes with one more instance of complaint, this time a complaint over leadership. The root cause was clearly Aaron and Miriam's jealousy over the special relationship that Moses had with God (12:1-3). Once again, this rebellion was met with God's judgment as Miriam became a leper (vv. 4-10). Only after Moses interceded on her behalf was Miriam cured of the disease (vv. 13-15).

One of the most prominent features of Numbers 10:11–12:16 is the leadership and intercession of Moses. Moses's life serves as a great illustration of the fact that God hears His leaders and sustains them to accomplish His plans and purposes.

Dissatisfied Followers (Num. 11:4-9)

On the journey, the Israelites began to complain to Moses about food. They had grown dissatisfied with the manna God was providing that fell to the ground each morning with the dew. The people wanted the meat, fish, and vegetables they'd enjoyed in Egypt.

VERSE 4

The riffraff among them had a strong craving for other food. The Israelites wept again and said, “Who will feed us meat?”

Numbers 11:4 introduces a second rebellion of the people, this time over food (rebellion one, 11:1-3). This account parallels a similar incident in Exodus 16 where the people also complained about the lack of food. In response to that complaint, God gave them the miracle of manna each day. Now some were complaining about the manna. They felt they'd had enough of the manna.

The instigators in the wave of complaint were identified as **the riffraff**. The term *riffraff* speaks of “a gathering” or a mob of people “gathered together.” This is the only place in the Old Testament where this term is used. These people were the “mixed multitude” (see KJV; “rabble,” ESV) that accompanied the children of Israel as they departed out of Egypt (Ex. 12:38). There is nothing in the biblical record to identify who this “mixed multitude” was or why they left Egypt with the Israelites. This indicates that not all who left Egypt when God delivered the Israelites were descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.¹

A strong craving for other food is literally translated, “craving a craving.” This doubling of the word speaks of intensity, a literary technique common in the Hebrew language. They had a strong desire for something besides manna. Such a complaint was a huge misrepresentation of the situation. The Israelites had flocks and herds with them (Ex. 12:32). More than likely, this cry, “**Who will feed us meat?**” was a general complaint and exaggeration about the hardship of the journey.

The Israelites wept again refers most likely to the original complaining in Numbers 11:1-3. Or it could go all the way back to the original complaint in Exodus 16:2-3. This time the complaint began with the riffraff but was taken up by the entire group—family by family. Discontent and griping have a way of spreading throughout a group of people.

VERSE 5

“We remember the free fish we ate in Egypt, along with the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic.”

The foods they craved were what they had eaten while **in Egypt**. What they called **free fish** is a misnomer. The fish had come at the terrible price of miserable slavery and harsh treatment. They wanted to return to the foods grown in the land of Egypt; more specifically, foods commonly grown in the fertile region of the eastern Nile Delta in the area called Goshen where the Israelites had settled (Gen. 46:28-34). They had forgotten the toil of slavery, glossing over the hardships in Egypt because of their cravings. In their cravings, they demonstrated ingratitude. They did not acknowledge that God had delivered them from slavery, taken them as His people, and provided for their needs during their journey.

VERSE 6

“But now our appetite is gone; there’s nothing to look at but this manna!”

But now our appetite is gone is better translated “our bodies are dehydrated,” “our strength is dried up” (ESV), or “our lives are vanquished.” Perhaps the change in the Israelites’ diet from the moisture rich foods of Goshen to the dryer climate of the desert and the daily **manna** had created some dehydration.

VERSES 7-8

The manna resembled coriander seed, and its appearance was like that of bdellium. 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.

The miraculous, daily provision of **manna** began during the second month of the exodus (Ex. 16:1). *Manna* took its name from the exclamation of the Israelites when it first appeared: “What is it?” (v. 15; Hebrew, *man hu*). The people’s part was to gather it and then prepare it to be eaten. **Coriander seed** was used for flavoring, similar to poppy or sesame seeds. **Bdellium** is a pale yellow or white aromatic resin. Note how this description of manna and its taste like that of **a pastry cooked with the finest oil** stands in stark contrast to the people’s complaints of how much they disliked manna.

VERSE 9

When the dew fell on the camp at night, the manna would fall with it.

God was faithful to provide **manna** every night along with the dew. It was a daily gift. Manna that was kept longer than a day bred worms and stank (Ex. 16:19-20). But on the day before the Sabbath, the Israelites were to gather enough for two days, for on the Sabbath day no work was to be done (20:8-11). In that case, God preserved the manna for two days (16:22-24). Besides providing food, manna was an important lesson that God often provides for His people one day at a time (Matt. 6:11,25-34).

Explore Further

Read the article “Manna” on page 1051 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Like the Israelites, we can easily take for granted the gifts God provides for us. Spend some time making a list of the gifts God has provided for you throughout your life. As you pray this week, choose a different gift from your list every day and thank

- God for His love and mercy in giving you this gift.

Frustrated Leaders (Num. 11:10-15)

God also took note of the complaints and was angry. Moses approached God and asked a series of questions. Moses questioned why he had been burdened with the people and where he might obtain meat for them. Overwhelmed, he declared his frustration and misery with his predicament.

VERSE 10

Moses heard the people, family after family, weeping at the entrance of their tents. The LORD was very angry; Moses was also provoked.

The discontent expressed by the rabble-rousers spread quickly throughout the entire camp of the Israelites. Weeping was heard everywhere, from **family after family**. It is the nature of discontent to spread easily

to others. Sadly, the people were complaining about the blessings given to them by God!

Because of the discontent of the people, **the LORD was very angry**. The Hebrew phrase translated *angry* literally means “the burning of the nose.” The image is that of the flaring of the nostrils as an expression of anger. This echoes verses 1 and 33 which both state that the Lord’s anger “burned”; that is, His anger was kindled against the Israelites.

Moses was also **provoked** by the Israelites actions and complaints. As the account develops, we see that the Moses’s anger was two-directional. First, he was angry at the people and the burden they were in his life. Second, Moses was frustrated with God for having given him such an overwhelming task of leading these rebellious people.

VERSE 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?”

The complaint of the people elicited a complaint from Moses to God. A hallmark of this prayer of complaint is Moses’s total honesty before God. Moses expressed despair, discontent, and even a hint of rebellion against God. Moses was no superman; he was a human being just like us. His level of frustration had reached the breaking point, and he poured out those frustrations to God.

This is not the first time Moses expressed frustration before God. At one point during Moses’s confrontations with Pharaoh, the Egyptian king instead of releasing the Israelites increased their workload. The Israelite foremen confronted Moses and Aaron over the increased suffering of the Israelites because of them. This led Moses to cry out to the Lord because He had not delivered the Israelites (Ex. 5:22-23); in that instance Moses’s obedience to God only seemed to be making matters worse for the Hebrew slaves. The difference between these two expressions of frustration is this: In Exodus 5, Moses was concerned about the welfare of the people. In Numbers 11, the frustration of Moses had turned inward to his own suffering and needs.

VERSE 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?”

Because of his frustration with the Israelites, Moses began distancing himself from the people. His attitude was this: he didn't conceive all these people; therefore, he was not responsible for them. Moses refused to be the nursemaid to the children of Israel. Overwhelmed by the weight of leadership, Moses no doubt had a great sense of loneliness as the "only" leader of the people. One wonders why Moses didn't find leadership assistance from those who were appointed to help mediate disputes among the people (Ex. 18:25-26). Most likely Moses viewed this crisis as an issue far beyond a mere settling of arguments between neighbors and relatives.

VERSES 13-14

"Where can I get meat to give all these people? For they are weeping to me, 'Give us meat to eat!' I can't carry all these people by myself. They are too much for me."

The issue was where would Moses **get meat to give all these people**. As far as Moses was concerned the idea of providing meat for the nation was an impossible task. To emphasize the unthinkable nature of the challenge, Moses repeated the demand of the people: **"Give us meat to eat!"** Projections put the number of men, women, and children of the Israelites at this time to be in excess of two million people.² Providing meat for the Israelites would have been a miracle that only God could do. At this precise moment, however, Moses lacked the faith to trust that God would take care of His people. The despair of Moses was very deep.

Moses's plea, **"I can't carry all these people by myself,"** concerned more than just providing meat. It was a declaration that the entire task of leading the nation was more than Moses thought he could handle. This wasn't just a complaint; rather it was a passionate appeal for deliverance. These words harken back to Moses's initial reaction to God's call to lead the people in Exodus 4:10-17 when he told God he wasn't equipped to carry out the task.

While we may be surprised at this despair of Moses, the great man of God, this plea is a great lesson in honesty before God. While we must approach God with respect, He understands our frustrations and offers grace when we pour our hearts out to Him.

VERSE 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."

In his despair, Moses told God he would rather be dead than continue to go through what he was experiencing with the Israelites. This incident was a major crisis in the leadership of Moses. He laid the responsibility for this crisis at God's feet—**"If you are going to treat me like this."** At this point, Moses considered God taking his life as a kindness—**"If I have found favor with you."** He despaired over what he viewed as an impossible task to lead a bunch of ungrateful and obstinate people.

Explore Further

Read the article "Wrath, Wrath of God" on pages 1672-1673 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How does the article define the wrath of God? How is the wrath of God in the New Testament both a present reality and a future judgment?

Gracious Provision (Num. 11:16-17)

God heard Moses's plea. He commanded Moses to gather seventy men from Israel to meet with Him at the tent of meeting. God would fill them with His Spirit. These men would help bear the load of leadership alongside Moses.

VERSE 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."

While Moses desired death, God dealt with him in grace. Rather than responding in anger toward the complaint of Moses, God graciously took the steps necessary to provide for the needs of the situation. God always deals in grace when we are honest before Him. In mercy God didn't give Moses and the people what they deserved. Instead, in grace God gave Moses and the people what they didn't deserve. God's answer to Moses's complaint was to provide other leaders who could give assistance to Moses in leading the people (vv. 16-30). In addition, God also would provide quail as another food source beyond the daily provision of manna (vv. 31-33).

God instructed Moses to choose men **known to you as elders and officers**. The term *elders* spoke of those with the experience and wisdom of age. These would have been seasoned leaders from among the people. The word *officers* or “leaders” refers to those who arrange or organize. The word indicated leaders who probably had some responsibility to record official information. This same Hebrew word for *officers* is used in Exodus 5:14-19 for the Israelite foremen who oversaw the daily brick production of the children of Israel when they were Egyptian slaves. Perhaps a part of their function was keeping track of daily production in writing. The *elders* and *officers* would have already been recognized as leaders on the tribal and clan levels. God’s direction was to give these seventy men greater leadership, influence, and responsibility.

This new body of elders would give immediate assistance to Moses with the burden of leadership. The number **seventy** speaks of an adequate representative group who could support and administer Moses’s leadership. Seventy elders had the privilege of ascending Mount Sinai with Moses to share a sacred meal in the presence of the Lord God (Ex. 24:1,9-11).

During the time of the exodus event, the place where God met with Moses shifted. First, Moses met with God on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:3). Next came a tent that Moses set up outside the Israelite encampment after the incident with the golden calf (chap. 32–33). God spoke to Moses at this tent. Finally, the site of communication between God and Moses (and the people) shifted to the newly erected tabernacle (chap. 40) that had been designed and built according to the specific instructions from God (chap. 25–31). Once the tabernacle was in place, it was also known as **the tent of meeting** (Num. 9:15; 11:16).

An interesting side note to the initial tent of meeting, Exodus 33:7-11 seems to indicate that the cloud of God’s presence would settle at the entrance of the tent outside the camp whenever Moses entered the tent. When Moses departed from the tent, the cloud would lift from the tent. When the tabernacle was set up on the first day of the second year of the exodus (Ex. 40:1-2), the movement of the cloud shifted. The cloud covered the tabernacle and “the glory of the LORD” filled the tabernacle (vv. 34-38), and the Lord dwelt there among His people (25:8).

VERSE 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.”

God’s remedy for this situation was shared leadership. His solution to relieve some of Moses’s frustration was to add another layer to the leadership for the Israelites. The seventy appointed leaders were to help **bear the burden** of the people that had been carried up to this point by Moses alone.

God would endorse the seventy men selected to help Moses before the tent of meeting. God would **take some of the Spirit** that was on Moses and put it on these seventy men who had been chosen. There is some conjecture that the term for *Spirit* could simply be referring to the spirit of Moses in the sense of giftedness and personality. This, however, is not the spirit of man. Instead, this is a reference to the Spirit of God—God the Holy Spirit. The gifts and influence of the Holy Spirit would be put on these men to assist Moses in the leadership of the people.

There are numerous instances in the Old Testament of God’s Spirit coming upon leaders to enable them to carry out the tasks assigned to them by God. See for example Gideon (Judg. 6:34) and Samson (14:19). Realize that God bestowing His Spirit on others did not diminish the leadership abilities of Moses in any way. These leaders were given the same gifts of leadership, wisdom, and discernment as Moses possessed. Furthermore, these men appear to have had a different function from the mediators selected earlier by Moses (Ex. 18:25-26). Those men were to help in administrative and judicial matters. The seventy chosen and endowed with the Spirit of God were to assist Moses in bearing the burden of spiritual leadership.³

Explore Further

Read the article “Holy Spirit” on pages 759–761 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. While the Spirit was given to individuals for specific purposes in the Old Testament, after Christ’s ascension God poured out the Holy Spirit upon believers to indwell them permanently and apply the benefits of salvation in the believer’s life. What are some of the works of the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual believer? How does the Holy Spirit work in the body of Christ as a whole?

1. Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2006), 303.
2. Ralph L. Smith and Eric Mitchell, “Exodus,” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, rev. (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015), 528.
3. R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers*, vol. 3B, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2000), 188–89.