

Complaining Is Catching

Numbers 11:1–15

When our kids were little, there were parents who got their kids together for what was called a “pox party,” purposely exposing them to chickenpox to “get it over with” while they were children, because infection during childhood might be less severe. It is possible to “catch” an infectious disease. This is why, when we must be with someone that is sick, we take special precautions.

Our text this morning shows that the disease of *sin* is infectious as well. In our text this morning the people begin to complain. It starts here and there, but complaining, like chickenpox, is catching, and soon, there are *lots* of complainers, demoralizing the whole camp and bringing a swift response from God. I have two points this morning: (1) Complaining and (2) Craving; first,

1. Complaining

Israel is on the first of many treks that will ultimately take them to the Promised Land. This first trek is only a three-day march—kind of a warm-up. As we noted last week, Israel got off to a good start. God had instructed them to break camp and move out when the glory-cloud moved, and all 2½ million people obeyed—a significant feat! Furthermore, the people set out in an orderly fashion, the tribes marching according to the order that God had expressly specified back in chapter 2. Things got off to a good start. But now, well into that first leg of their journey, there is trouble. We read: “Now when the people *complained*, it displeased the LORD; for the LORD heard it, and His anger was aroused.”

Here were people who had been miraculously delivered from 400 years of enslavement in Egypt. The Egyptian armies pursued after them, but the LORD fought for them. He has gathered them in his very presence at Sinai. He has spoken to them his law and informed them how they, of all the peoples on the earth, are his special people. He has taught them how to worship him. He has promised them his unique presence and blessing. He has fed them with manna, the bread of heaven, every morning and evening without fail. He has supplied them with the freshest water. Their clothes and shoes have not worn out. Their cup has literally run over with blessings, but they don’t realize it. Now they have begun their march to the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey. They are going there to take possession of their inheritance. *And they begin to complain!* What to make of that?

One commentator makes the very perceptive observation that “The people have marched only three days when discontent surfaces, *revealing hearts still tied to Egypt*.”¹ Did you catch that? *Hearts still tied to Egypt!* Do you see the irony? Here were people on their way to claim their God-given inheritance in the Promised Land—a picture of the saints’ eternal inheritance in heaven. They didn’t realize the

¹ <https://biblehub.com/bsb/numbers/11.htm#summary>, accessed 9-5-26

sheer magnitude of this blessing; rather, they begin to complain that they didn't have more! Isn't this just like human nature? People with a temporal value system (concerned only about the here-and-now) tend to *complain*, rather than give thanks. The Bible says, "In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you." Thankfulness is God's perfect plan. *Complaining* is the very opposite of thankfulness. Thankfulness is God-centered; complaining is man-centered. It is idolatry, a worshiping and serving of the creature rather than the Creator. If you are a complainer, then your idol is *self*.

The Israelites' complaining in the wilderness is a recapitulation of Adam and Eve in the Garden. The LORD had given our first parents a perfect environment. Their every need was met. The LORD had given them the go-ahead to eat the delicious fruit of every tree in the Garden. There was only one tree that was off-limits. But rather than give thanks for the tremendous blessings that were theirs, Adam and Eve began to resent that there was *one* tree—a single tree out of thousands—that they couldn't have. Satan came up to Eve and said, "Hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?" Adam and Eve began to fixate on that one forbidden tree to the exclusion of thousands that had been given to them, that were lawfully theirs.

The Israelites were acting like spoiled children. Maybe you've been around spoiled children. They don't realize how good they have it: they have loving parents that sacrifice to provide for them, but they do not want the food that is set before them on the table. It is not to their liking, so they throw a tantrum. They are *idolaters*, saying in effect, "*I* am god; everything must be to my liking; that is my right." Wise parents will nip this kind of behavior in the bud. To fail to do that is to send the message: *You* are the most important thing in the universe—even more important than God. Unless a child learns otherwise, he is going to have an unhappy life and be made a two-fold child of hell.²

The Bible says: "Now when the people *complained*, it displeased the LORD; for the LORD heard it." Notice the words "The LORD heard it." Man cannot hide from God. He hears every idle word. He knows the thoughts and intents of the heart. He knows everything that we do.

There has been a lot of controversy recently about Flock cameras that record the license plate numbers of vehicles that go past them. There are currently over 120,000 license plate-reading cameras nationwide, but the actual number is likely higher. The system can document the movements of vehicles, keeping a record of where we go. And as more and more cars have microphones connected to the Internet, listening to our voices, and with the ubiquity of cell phones, our words and movements are no longer private. But the God of heaven is omniscient and

² Matt. 23:15

knows everything! The Israelites' complaining was known to God. He heard it! The literal Hebrew is something like: "And the people, as they were complaining, were evil in the *ears* of the LORD." The Hebrew speaks of the LORD's "ears." Obviously, this is a figure of speech, for the LORD is a spirit and does not have a body. God is omnipresent (everywhere at once). He is not limited by a physical body. Scripture tells us that "the *eyes* of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth"³—the LORD *sees* everything. In similar fashion, the *ears* of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth: the LORD *hears* everything. Our complaining, as well as that of the ancient Israelites, is known to the LORD. It cannot be avoided. And just as the LORD's anger was aroused by Israel's complaining, so the LORD's anger is aroused by our complaining.

Are you a complainer? Remember, that is sin. It is not a minor sin. It is a failure to be thankful and put the LORD first, ahead of your own desires. If you are a worshiper of Christ, then ask him to help you cultivate a spirit of thankfulness. Transform yourself into a thankful person. How do you do this? By prayerfully meditating on the Word. Consider, for example, Ephesians 1:3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with *all* spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ." All spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ—election; effectual calling; the gift of faith; justification; the forgiveness of sins; the perfect righteousness of Christ credited to you as a free gift; the indwelling of his Holy Spirit, enabling you to say No to sin and Yes to God; an eternal inheritance among the saints in light; the comfort of his Holy Word; and many, many more. Though we sorrow in this vale of tears, we do not sorrow as those without Christ, who have no hope. Christ himself is our *life*.⁴ He is "the way, the truth and the life," to be sure, but it is more personal than that. He is "our life"! No matter what happens to you in this vale of tears, Christ can never be taken away from you. Nothing can separate you from the love of Christ. He is with you in life, and in death.

But as for those in the camp of Israel who complained, "the fire of the LORD burned among them, and consumed some in the outskirts of the camp." This was obviously a severe punishment, kind of like smiting Ananias and Sapphira with instant death for lying to the Holy Spirit. God did not give a warning. He did not speak to Israel as an indulgent parent: "You better come right now! 1, 2, 3! Didn't you hear me? Now you come right this minute!" Many children—sadly, even Christian children—are conditioned to regard their parents' lawful demands as idle threats. A plain instruction is regarded as something to be bargained, as give and take. A parent threatens, then the threat is forgotten. Children quickly learn that they can avoid consequences for their disobedience. Some people reading this

³ 2 Chron. 16:9

⁴ Col. 3:4

biblical account through the lens of modern psychology might consider God's swift punishment as unduly harsh. They might even accuse God of being unjust! It would be better if God were an indulgent parent. After all, one can attract more flies with honey than with vinegar. Can't God lighten up a little and win more people to himself? But that is humanistic thinking. It is unbiblical, and people who think that way are taking the side of fallen man against the God of absolute holiness and perfect justice. Romans reminds us that this kind of thinking is vain: "*Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?*"⁵

The bottom line: this is God's world, and he gets to make the rules! Moreover, do not miss that this is an anticipation of the eternal state. Notice the Spirit's carefully chosen words: "*So the fire of the LORD burned among them, and consumed some in the outskirts of the camp. Then the people cried out to Moses, and when Moses prayed to the LORD, the fire was quenched. So he called the name of the place Taberah [Burning], because the fire of the LORD had burned among them.*"

These are absolutely frightful words. Those who make fun of the Gospel should pay close attention. They call to mind Isaiah 33:14, "Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?" Indeed, who? But God's judgment was tempered with mercy. Moses was his mediator. "The people cried out to Moses, and when Moses prayed to the LORD, the fire was quenched."

In like manner, we who hear the Gospel and flee to Christ are saved from everlasting punishment by the Savior's perfect mediation. "There is one God, and one *mediator* between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."⁶

2. Craving

Our text continues: "Now the mixed multitude who were among them yielded to *intense craving*; so the children of Israel also wept again and said: 'Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our whole being is dried up; there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes!'"

The bread of heaven—perfect, fresh, delicious food—and they dismissed it as "nothing"!

Notice the words "intense craving." We'll consider this more in a few moments, but first, look at the phrase "mixed multitude"—"the mixed multitude who were among them." Who were these people?

⁵ Rom. 9:20

⁶ 1 Tim. 2:5

The Hebrew word for “mixed multitude” occurs only here,⁷ but the concept has been alluded to earlier. In Exodus 12, when the Israelites, after the devastating tenth plague—death of the firstborn in every household—walked out of Egypt as a free people, we are told that “a *mixed multitude* went up with them.”⁸ When Jacob and his eleven sons and their families had first gone down to Egypt to be delivered from certain starvation, they brought no servants with them. After all, servants would have been more mouths to feed, and they themselves were starving. So the “mixed multitude” that came out of Egypt with the Israelites were not slaves that had been with the Israelites all along. The “mixed multitude” no doubt included migrants from other countries who had moved to Egypt because there were good opportunities there. But with the utter devastation caused by the ten plagues, in which most of the cattle perished, and the crops were destroyed, making food scarce, many sojourners and even native Egyptians concluded that they were better off to throw in their lot with the Israelites. The mixed multitude would have included people who saw that the LORD was with Israel, and they wanted to get in on the blessing. Some of them became circumcised and adopted the true religion. Others were welcomed as “God-fearers.”

A number of translations call this mixed multitude a “rabble.”⁹ *Rabble* (a disorderly crowd of people, mob) is not quite the right word.¹⁰ This was no disorderly mob. They had respect for Israel’s religion, but they were newbies—new converts. They had been with Israel for only one year. On the other hand, the native-born Israelites knew the oral traditions that had been carefully passed down from father to son. Tragically, some of the mixed multitude grew tired of the strict diet of manna and began to crave the fish which had been abundant in Egypt, as well as the variety of vegetables such as cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic. They began to whimper and sob, and said, “Who will give us meat to eat?” This betrayed a lack of faith in Jehovah God!

In a land of prosperity most of us prefer variety in our diet. We don’t want to eat the same thing over and over. But when times are hard, we ought to give thanks for what we have. God has promised to give us our daily bread if we ask him. Bread and water are surely better than starvation! Jesus gave thanks for his daily food, and so should we. When he fed the 5,000, he took the loaves and fish, “gave thanks, and distributed them to those who were seated.” Similarly, at the Last Supper, Jesus “took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them.”¹¹ If the

⁷ מִצְרַיִם from גָּזַץ *what is gathered* (Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon, Logos Bible Software)

⁸ Ex. 12:38

⁹ A couple have “riffraff.”

¹⁰ The word *rabble* comes from the Middle English *rabel*, pack of animals—not a flattering term to apply to orderly, law-abiding humans, made in God’s very image.

¹¹ https://biblehub.com/topical/naves/f/food--articles_of_thanks_given_before_receiving.htm, citing John 6:11, Luke 22:19 (accessed 9-5-26)

Lord Jesus, Creator of heaven and earth, gave thanks for his food, then how much more should we, mere creatures. Surely he set an example for us! I vividly remember the first time I ever had lunch at a playmate's house, back when I was in elementary school. My friend's mother served us each a bologna sandwich and a cookie, and everybody immediately started eating. I was uncomfortable. *Shouldn't we pray?* I thought. Let us not be like those who don't know Christ; rather, let us bow our heads and give thanks for our food, even when we are out in public. It is a testimony to our faith in God.

By way of further application, the presence of new believers among God's people, and the problems that they caused, illustrates a problem in congregational church government practiced in independent churches. Now as presbyterians we observe that there are *no* independent churches in the Bible—none! The church is the kingdom of Christ, and in Scripture the churches of Christ are in fellowship with one another. They receive with humility the preaching of the Word from ministers ordained by the presbytery—a higher court above the local churches (1 Tim. 4:14). They receive with meekness the “decrees for to keep” ordained by the higher courts of the church, if they are consonant with the Word of God (Acts 16:4).¹² No person has authority to start a rival church disattached from the true church of Jesus Christ. The Bible says that the man holding the office of overseer (“bishop”) should be “not a novice” (νεόφυτος *newly-planted*). An independent church ordains its own ministers—there's *no* example of this in the Bible. When I was ordained as a Baptist, I was examined for several hours by an “ordaining council” composed of twenty or so local Baptist ministers who determined that I had a credible profession of faith, was living a godly life, and held to sound doctrine. They brought their recommendation to the congregation, which by vote accepted their recommendation, after which the assembled ministers ordained me by the laying on of hands. Years before, when I applied to join the church, I was examined by a board of deacons, which then recommended to the congregation to be received as a member. The congregation in turn voted to receive me into membership. Ultimately, it was the *congregation* that judged me to have a creditable profession of faith. The final authority was with the congregation. But that congregation included neophytes (new converts), which, according to the Word of God, should not have exercised authority to rule in Christ's church.

Churches that are independent should seek to join the true church that holds to the apostles' doctrine and is organized according to the apostolic precedent. Ministers who are self-appointed or who were ordained by an independent congregation with no biblical authority to ordain should seek to be ordained by

¹² https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_31 (accessed 9-6-26)

faithful presbyteries. The government of Christ's kingdom should be organized in accordance with Holy Scripture.

But returning to our text, do not miss the point that it is possible to obey *outwardly* while rebelling *inwardly*. On the final day, when we stand before Christ's judgment bar, what he requires will be *heart* obedience. If we kept all God's commandments outwardly, every moment of our lives, but did so grudgingly, without a heart perfectly devoted to God, then our obedience is in vain. We will have missed the mark, and we will go to hell. Since none of us measures up to God's standard of absolute perfection, that is the fate that awaits us all, unless we cry out to him for mercy. "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Complaining is catching! Let us cultivate thankful hearts and not *complain* against God's good providence. Let us not *crave* this world over Christ, and be forever lost. Amen.