

A Wind Went Out from the LORD

Numbers 11:31–35

One of the first things I do every morning is check the weather report. I want to know how I should dress for the day, and if any storms are forecast. People intuitively understand that the weather, for better or for worse, is going to affect their day. In ancient times one couldn't get a weather forecast over the radio or on a smart phone. Farmers scanned the sky for clues. Jesus made reference to this: "When it is evening you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red'; and in the morning, 'It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.'"¹

Our text this morning begins with the words, "Now a *wind* went out from the LORD." Wind—the movement of air molecules—is certainly an important component of weather. Note that weather is not random. It is sent by the LORD of heaven in order to accomplish his sovereign purpose. It does not happen on its own. It is not simply the product of natural forces. Rather, it is sent from the hand of our wise heavenly Father, who upholds all things—including weather—by the word of his power.²

The word for *wind* is רוּחַ (*rūach*). Its basic meaning is *wind* or *spirit*. The first time that it is used is all the way back in the second verse of the Bible, where the "Spirit" of God (רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים *rūach elohīm*)—that is, the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Holy Trinity—moves on the surface of the waters as a *wind*, accomplishing God's purpose in creation. When God purposed to send the great flood of Noah, he caused two of each kind of animal to go into the ark—all in whose nostrils was the *breath* (רוּחַ) of life. After the floodwaters prevailed on the earth for a hundred and fifty days, God made a *wind* (רוּחַ) to pass over the earth, and the waters subsided. When Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, had an especially troubling dream, his *spirit* (רוּחַ)—his *human* spirit) was troubled.³ So רוּחַ can mean *wind*, or *breath*, or *spirit* (with a small *s*) or *Spirit* (with a capital *S*). *Context* determines the meaning.

We've already had the word רוּחַ a number of times in the book of Numbers. Chapter 5 speaks three times about a spirit (רוּחַ) of jealousy. In chapter 11 there have been four references to the Spirit (רוּחַ) that was upon Moses that was sovereignly placed upon the seventy elders of Israel. Last week we heard Moses exclaim, "Oh, that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put His *Spirit* (רוּחַ) upon them!" Now, just two verses later, our paragraph begins with the words, "Now a *wind* (רוּחַ) went out from the LORD." The word for "wind" is the same as the word for *Spirit*. This is not merely a coincidence. It is intentional—part of the stunning literary and poetic beauty of the inspired Word.

¹ Matt. 16:2–3

² Heb. 1:3

³ Gen. 6:17, 8:1, 41:8

It is God who gives man the *breath* of life. It is God who puts his *Holy Spirit* into his elect when he saves them, and it is God now who sends a great *wind* to bring in a huge cloud of quail from the sea. God did not create the quail before Israel's eyes; rather, he gathered them from afar and brought them in by a powerful wind. Clearly, what we are reading shows the sovereignty of God. This is *God's* world, and the most important thing of all is to be in a right relationship with God. To be *reconciled* to God is eternal life. To be *alienated* from him is death—ultimately, the second death, eternal fire.

To come to Christ and have our sins forgiven is where it starts. We must understand that we are sinners, that we have failed to measure up to God's standard of absolute perfection, that the only One who has ever achieved this is the perfect Son of God who possesses the Spirit without measure.⁴ He is the only man in history who perfectly kept God's holy law in all its detail. He is the righteous One with whom the Roman governor could find no fault. He is the One onto whom the Spirit descended like a dove, and the voice of the Father testified, "Thou art my beloved Son; in *thee* I am well pleased."⁵ As sinners, God is *not* "well pleased" with men in their sins, but he *is* well pleased with Christ! The only way to be in a right relationship with God is to have your sins washed away by the precious blood of Christ, and to have his perfect righteousness credited to your account by faith.

Just before the sermon we sang the hymn "For Your Gift of God the Spirit." We sang the words, "He who in creation's dawning brooded on the lifeless deep, still across our nature's darkness moves to wake our souls from sleep, moves to stir, to draw, to quicken, thrusts us through with sense of sin; brings to birth and seals and fills us—saving Advocate within. He, himself the living Author, wakes to life the sacred Word, reads with us its holy pages and reveals our risen Lord. He it is who works within us, teaching rebel hearts to pray, he whose holy intercessions rise for us both night and day." Here is an excellent summary of the Holy Spirit's power to bring a sinner to God and make him a saint. Oh, that every one of us would experience that!

Our chapter began with the words, "Now when the people *complained*, it displeased the LORD." Here are the people of God, who had heard his voice thunder over Sinai, and had been supernaturally sustained by him in the desert, now complaining about the way God was treating them! Their memory of the past was very selective. What they remembered were the fish dinners and fresh salads. But they had blocked out the memories of the taskmasters and whippings! They were also putting the present in an unattractive light. The truth was, the manna wasn't boring or tasteless. Verse 8 lists some of the ways that it could be cooked—ground, or boiled or baked. It was the perfect food, the bread of heaven, and it was

⁴ John 3:34

⁵ Luke 3:22

very appetizing: “its taste was like the taste of pastry prepared with oil.” Psalm 78, written many years later, puts it in perspective: “He rained down on them manna to eat and gave them the grain of heaven. Man ate of the bread of the *angels*; he sent them food in abundance.”⁶ The people had it so good, but they complained! As the complainers started coming out of the closet, they convinced themselves that God was shortchanging them—and they deserved better!

Isn’t this so typical of human nature? Sinners are basically selfish and self-centered. From the time we’re little children we naturally think it’s all about *me*. A nursing baby wails when he doesn’t get the breast in time. He doesn’t think about his mother—her lack of sleep, how hungry or tired *she* is, the fact that she has been working long hours changing diapers, doing laundry, feeding the family, and picking up the living room, and hasn’t had a spare minute to attend to her *own* needs. All baby thinks about is *his* needs; he knows he’s hungry and wants attention *now*, and is not about to be quiet and wait his turn. Sadly, a lot of adults haven’t progressed much past this.

God’s Word teaches that part of maturing and loving our neighbor is learning to think about *other people’s* needs. “Let each of you look out not only for his *own* interests, but also for the interests of *others*” (Phil. 2:4). Our fifth-commandment duty to honor father and mother actually applies to *all* people—“Love thy *neighbor* as thyself: I am the LORD.” “Honor *all* people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.”⁷ We honor people by listening to them *attentively*, even if we think we know what they’re going to say next. We honor them by showing a genuine interest in what they say, and how they express it. We honor them by considering *another person’s* needs—even if we have needs of our own. We make it our aim to treat them as Christ would, with care and dignity. We treat God the same way.

Well, the Israelites hadn’t gotten the message. Remember how our chapter began: “Now when the people *complained*, it displeased the LORD; for the LORD heard it.” And God did not consider it a little thing: “His *anger* was aroused.” We might have thought: *Hey, what’s the big deal? We were just complaining. We weren’t actually hurting each other—it hadn’t come to fists.* But God was offended. His honor was at stake. He had heard their prayers when they were in slavery. “The children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage” (Ex. 2:23).

To complain against the LORD is to minimize and overlook the many ways that he has blessed us. “He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has

⁶ Ps. 78:24–25 ESV

⁷ Lev. 19:18; 1 Pet. 2:17

He removed our transgressions from us. As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him.”⁸ To be unthankful in the face of such mercies is the height of self-centeredness. It is idolatry. It is to worship *self* instead of God. It is to say, “I want to have God on *my* terms!” Warning: if you must have God on *your* terms, then you are going to be “*without God* in the world”⁹—an utterly terrifying proposition! To be in the holy presence of God Almighty at the last day without a mediator is to be in the most terrifying situation imaginable. Can you think of anything more frightful than to hear his sentence: “Depart from me, ye *cursed*, into *everlasting fire* prepared for the devil and his angels.”¹⁰

Are you a complainer? Do you think God owes you more than what he has given you? On what basis can you conclude that? Or has the Spirit of grace taken away your complaining spirit and replaced it with a heart of thankfulness? Can you say with Paul, “I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content”?¹¹ Too often we think, *If only I had such-and-such* [fill in the blank], *then I would be truly happy!* But is not that “such-and-such” an idol?

The people of Israel were behaving like spoiled, self-centered children, but God was gracious to them and performed a great miracle on their behalf. “Now *a wind* [רוּחַ] *went out from the LORD*, and it brought quail from the sea and left them fluttering near the camp, about a day’s journey on this side and about a day’s journey on the other side, all around the camp, and about two cubits above the surface of the ground. And the people stayed up all that day, all night, and all the next day, and gathered the quail.”

There were a *lot* of quail. A “day’s journey” would have been several miles at least, radiating out from the camp. “Two cubits” would have been about three feet high—that is, within easy reach. But not only were the quail *around* the camp; they were also *inside* the camp. Psalm 78, from which we will sing after the sermon, says, “He also rained meat on them like the dust, feathered fowl like the sand of the seas; and He let them fall *in the midst of their camp, all around their dwellings*.”¹² God provided bountifully, and they didn’t even need to walk very far. Here again is the God of heaven graciously supplying his people’s needs. He continued to supply the manna, morning and evening, but now he gives them fresh meat as well. Moses had doubted that God could do this. Moses had said, “Shall the flocks and the herds be slain for them, to suffice them? or shall all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, to suffice them?” Even though he was a

⁸ Ps. 103:10–11

⁹ Eph. 2:12

¹⁰ Matt. 25:41

¹¹ Phil. 4:11

¹² Ps. 78:27–28

prophet of the LORD and had personally witnessed the power of God, he doubted that God could supply enough fresh meat for so great a multitude.

But a wind from the LORD blew and brought them quail! Israel did nothing to deserve it. How very much like our salvation! “When we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.”¹³ We were “without strength!”—we had nothing to contribute, but God saved us anyway!

What if God would have said, “Look, I know that you cannot merit eternal life, but I’m willing to meet you halfway. All I require is for you to be absolutely perfect for 24 hours! Just 24 hours: no sinful thoughts, no outbursts of sinful anger, no lust, no discontent, no vain imaginations, no manipulating the truth for your own benefit. Just love me perfectly for 24 hours, and be loving to your neighbor. Just do that for 24 hours, and I’ll let you earn your own salvation.”

Would any of us be able to earn it? No, for “there is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one.”¹⁴

This was not the first time the people complained. Why did God punish the people’s murmuring and complaining here, when he spared them when they complained in Exodus 16? Well, for one thing, in the former instance they had no food. Now, they were blessed with daily manna. Moreover, this sin was committed after God had committed his law to them. There was greater light, thus greater guilt. So it is with us. We have the completed Word of God.

Because of the people’s complaining and ingratitude, the LORD struck the people with a plague. But nonetheless it was tempered with mercy. God did not annihilate everyone. His plague seems to have been confined to the complainers. While the meat was still between their teeth, the LORD’s wrath was aroused and the people were stricken with “a very great plague.”

Now I’m sure that all of us have heard complaining. If we’re honest, we have to admit that we’ve complained ourselves. Why have we not been struck by a plague?

Well, it can’t be that God has changed. It can’t be that complaining is no longer a sin. God is still holy. His standards have not changed. Consider Philippians 2:14, “Do all things without *complaining* and disputing.” The Christian life is not to be characterized by a complaining spirit! Rather, God wants us to be thankful. “In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” (1 Thess. 5:18). These verses are not unclear.

Do you have a complaining spirit? Do you have a reputation as a complainer? If so, you need to understand that it is sin, and that it reflects badly on the One you confess as your Savior. You might be tempted to feel sorry for yourself. You might

¹³ Rom. 5:6

¹⁴ Rom. 3:10–12

think, I have confessed Christ as my Savior and Lord. I try to live for the Lord. Yet I have a hard life, I face difficult circumstances. I pray for things to change, but nothing has changed. I wonder how I can go on.

Remembering a basic point of theology can help here. Remember the truth expressed in our Catechism: “The fall brought mankind into an estate of sin and misery.”¹⁵ All the miseries that we experience in this world are ultimately a result of Adam’s fall. God told the woman, “I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children; your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” He told the man: “Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you. . . . In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return.”¹⁶ All of us daily suffer the effects of the fall. God has a wonderful future for us, but in the meantime we suffer. But there is a *purpose* in suffering, for we will learn by experience that God will sustain us and strengthen us to persevere and to overcome. We learn in 1 John that “everyone who has been born of God *overcomes* the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.”¹⁷

Here is the secret: God wants us to learn to live by faith. It is by faith in the promises of God that we can overcome the problems and difficulties that confront us, living in a fallen world. God will never abandon us but will give us grace daily as we look to him in faith.

The Lord Jesus experienced what it was like to live in a fallen world. He experienced tears, but he never experienced defeat. He didn’t deserve to suffer at the hands of wicked men or to die a criminal’s death. But through it all he persevered and was victorious. And by his grace we too can be victors, not victims!

Are you a complainer or a victor? Do you trust in his promise? Do you have a thankful heart? Do you want your life to reflect Jesus?

Our Numbers text records that the LORD himself “called the name of that place Kibroth Hattaavah [קִבְרוֹת הַתַּאֲוָה], because there they buried the people who had yielded to craving.” Kibroth Hattaavah means *graves of craving* or *graves of desire*. Here lay people whose lives were *defined* by discontent. They did *not* live by faith. Their lives were defined by what they *didn’t* have—and what they would *never* have—without Christ. They would never be able to say with Paul: “I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.”¹⁸ They desired the

¹⁵ Westminster Shorter Catechism, <https://opc.org/documents/SCLayout.pdf#page=10>

¹⁶ Gen. 3:16–19

¹⁷ 1 John 5:4 ESV

¹⁸ Phil. 4:11

things of this world, and they would go out into eternity with their desires perpetually unfulfilled.

And so it is eternally: hell is the place of frustrated desires; heaven is the place of perfect contentment in the presence of Christ eternally. Amen.