

Warning: Hazardous Grumbling!

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning.

Again, if you are just passing through, we are currently in a series on the book of Numbers and we actually begin a new section in that book today in Numbers chapter 11. So do make sure that your Bibles are open to Numbers chapter 11.

There's also an outline that will help you along if you need it. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we just ask again for your help.

We ask for your spirit to be working in our hearts. Please challenge us where we need to be challenged. Please help us to change where we need to change. But above all, please help us to keep remembering who you are, to keep fixing our eyes on you, even as we look through this passage this morning.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen. Now this week I decided to count how many times I had grumbled over the past few days. And once I started counting, I wanted to stop.

[1 : 1 7] To my shame, it's quite a lot. There's a time where I grumbled over the quality of a particular news article. To the journalists in our congregation, don't worry, it wasn't you. There's a time where I grumbled over the unreliable internet connection.

There's a time where I grumbled over Manchester United's inability to get quality players. And to my shame, there's even the time where I grumbled over something in church, even as I prepared this sermon.

It's so easy to overlook our own grumbling and complaining, as I discovered. After all, for Malaysians, complaining can be something of a national pastime.

When it's hot, we complain about how the rain never comes and how we need to put the aircon on full blast and how the electricity bills are too high. When it rains, we complain about how it interferes with our astro signal and how we can't drive out because the roads get flooded too easily.

When there's lots of school co-curricular activities, we complain about how the education system is overburdening our students and how it used to be when we could just play freely. But when there's a break from those easy A's, we complain about how our schools are not preparing our children to be well-rounded individuals but to focus on getting straight A's.

[2 : 3 3] It's easy to complain. And it's easy to overlook. What's the big deal, we say? Everyone does it. Well, in today's passage, grumbling and complaining is a big deal.

I read an article this week that suggested complaining might be hazardous for your health. The latest research shows that complaining apparently does something to the neurons in your brain and floods your bloodstream with cortisol, the stress hormone.

So the admittedly sensationalist claim is that if you complain for half an hour every day, you could potentially be damaging your brain. Now, the research is still speculative, but God's word today is not.

For today, Numbers 11 to 12 tells us that whatever the effects it has on our physical health, complaining is hazardous to our spiritual health.

It's a big deal to God. It's not something we can overlook. But how and why is it hazardous? Well, that's what we're going to explore in today's sermon.

[3 : 48] But let's remember the story so far. All throughout Numbers 1 to 10, God has been preparing his people. He's organizing them into an army.

Why? Because he wants to keep his promise. He wants to take his people to this beautiful land, a place where they can truly call home.

Numbers 10 verse 32 tells us that the land is going to overflow with good things. Exodus 33 verse 14 tells us that they will find sweet rest there.

God wants to take us to the best place imaginable. And last week, we saw that God was going to be with them every step of the way.

He comes in a cloud of fire to light up the path to be a lamb unto their feet. And he's going to lead them to certain victory. Rise up, Lord, Moses declares in 10 verse 33.

[4 : 52] May your enemies be scattered. May your foes flee before you. And as Israel steps out, they look to be in good shape.

Do you remember last week where we kept hearing this phrase, at the Lord's command they encamped, and at the Lord's command they set out? They trusted and obeyed.

And actually, all throughout Numbers 1 to 10, obedience has been a hallmark of God's people. Look at the last verse of chapter 1, and the last verse of chapter 2, and the last verse of chapter 3, and the last verse of chapter 4, and you'll see that again and again, it keeps saying the same thing.

Either the Israelites did as was commanded, or Moses did as was commanded. And so as they now finally set out for Mount Sinai, there's a great note of confidence and expectation.

They are following the Lord. But sadly, it doesn't last. Let me just warn you that for the next 15 chapters, as we journey along with Israel, we're going to find that they go wildly off track.

[6 : 15] I might be wrong, but I think we won't find even a single time when it says that Israel obeyed God. For out of nowhere, after the people set out following the cloud, after Moses has confidently declared their faith in God in 10 verse 33 to 36, we get a hard slap in the face.

11 verse 1, Now the people complain. There hasn't been any great tragedy. There hasn't been any great catastrophe, or calamity, or heartbreak, nothing at all that could have been a trigger.

It seems as if simply leaving the relatively fertile area of Mount Sinai and venturing into the hot, dry terrain of the wilderness was enough to set their lips loose in grumbling.

The people complain about their hardships in the hearing of the Lord. And mind you, this is not just them being a little cranky because they didn't get enough sleep.

Our English translation softened it somewhat. The NIV says they complain about their hardships. The ESV says they complain about their misfortunes. But really, that Hebrew word, the NIV and ESV translates hardship, or misfortune, can also be translated as evil.

[7 : 45] They were whispering evil in the hearing of Yahweh. One day in the wilderness, and they were already attributing evil to him.

This isn't just Israel complaining about lousy service from their travel agency. This was Israel slandering and committing treason against God.

Just imagine, God is moving them towards the land of good things and sweet rest, and they label that as evil.

And so no wonder, verse 1 again, God's anger is aroused. And actually, depressingly, what we get in verses 1 to 3 is the standard pattern we will see in future weeks.

It's very simple. The people complain, God hears it, and his anger is aroused. So the Lord disciplines them, and they cry out to Moses, and then he prays for them, God responds, and the punishment ends.

[8 : 56] That's what happens here. And that's what we're going to see over and over again. So really, verses 1 to 3 is a sign that says, warning, hazardous grumbling.

But it wasn't enough to stop them. You would think that fire falling down from heaven and starting a little bushfire on the outskirts of the camp would be warning enough.

But sadly, it isn't, as we'll shortly see. But even if they didn't heed the warning, we need to. Because in 1 Corinthians 10, the Apostle Paul actually references some events in the book of Numbers.

And one of the things he singles out is Israel's complaining and grumbling. And in 1 Corinthians 10, verse 11, he says this on the screen, these things happen to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us on whom the culmination of the ages has come.

Now, in the Old Testament, we shouldn't necessarily always take every single thing as examples, whether positive or negative.

[10 : 16] But in this case, we should. And so that's why we'll keep reading. Firstly, we'll look in more detail at the complaining itself.

And then we'll think about what lies at the heart of their complaining and then study God's response to it. And then, as we should do with every Old Testament passage, we'll consider what's going on in light of Christ and in light of 1 Corinthians 10.

So let's look at the complaining. Come down with me to verse 4 and we find the Israelites wailing again. Verse 4.

If only we had meat to it. We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost. Also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic.

But now we have lost our appetite. We never see anything but this manna. Notice what they are complaining about. They are not talking about starving.

[11 : 20] The problem isn't that they had no food. Rather, they are displeased with the menu. They are like little children. Dad, this food sucks.

Where's the variety? All we ever see is this manna, manna, manna. Boring. But what they are really saying is this. Dad, Egypt was way better.

Why did you take us to this rubbish wilderness in the first place? We want to turn back. We want to go home. And by home, we mean Egypt.

That's what they were really indicating. Their memories had become faulty. Think about it. Was it really the case that they would serve all those nice, nutritious vegetables when they were in Egypt?

There's no way of knowing for sure. But it's highly doubtful that slaves got such nice food. In their minds, they saw rocket and pumpkin salad with feta cheese and roasted walnuts.

[12 : 28] But in reality, it was probably just some stale, moldy lettuce. But even if they really did eat such nice food, have they forgotten everything else?

What about the sting of the whip from their Egyptian slave masters? What about the cruel bullying as they are driven to make an impossible number of bricks in the heat of the sun?

What about the constant fear they felt when Pharaoh hunted down their boys and sent his huge army to chase them down? Their faulty memories drive their complaining.

They're forgotten. Or more accurately, they don't want to remember rightly. I mean, look at verse 5. They say, We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost.

At no cost? Are you sure about that? There was a very huge cost. But because they only wanted to indulge in selective memories, they chose not to remember their past slavery.

[13 : 40] They only wanted to complain about the groceries. Well, no wonder. Verse 10. The Lord gets angry. And so does Moses.

The NIV says that he was troubled, but the ESV translation captures his emotion better. He was displeased. So what we're expecting now is for Moses to take the high ground.

We expect him perhaps to correct the people. But instead, what happens is that he turns around and he does what the people do. He complains.

Verse 11. He asks the Lord, I wonder if you notice the tone.

Did you notice the many I, I, I in his list of questions to God? What have I done? Did I give them birth? Why tell me to carry them?

[14 : 58] Moses isn't so much angry on behalf of God. He's angry on behalf of himself. He's not so much mad because the people have rejected God's provision, but at God for making his life so difficult as a leader.

Did you notice also the you, you, yous? Verse 12. Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms?

Or verse 15. If this is how you, God, are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me. And so Moses' self-pity drives his complaining.

He says, Woe is me and passive-aggressively accuses the Lord. Let me just point out one more instance of complaining, and that's in chapter 12.

This time, it's Moses' own brother and sister who brings the complaint. In 12 verse 1, they speak out against Moses because he has a Cushite wife.

[16 : 01] That's the surface issue. Now, at this point in time, there is no law stating that he couldn't do so. Whether that was wise is another question, but it isn't against the law.

And yet, Miriam and Aaron begin to complain. Notice that they don't complain to God or to Moses. Rather, they complain about him to others.

And actually, given that Moses has been married for decades now, why only raise the complaint now? Well, we discover the real reason in verse 2.

Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? They ask. Hasn't he also spoken through us? And the Lord heard this. It appears they were envious.

Aaron's a priest, and Miriam's a prophetess. Important positions. But they wanted the glory and reputation of Moses. Maybe they felt excluded when, back in chapter 11, they saw the Holy Spirit fall on 70 elders.

[17 : 08] We'll come back to that. But not on them. And so sheer envy drives their complaining. They compared themselves to Moses and felt marginalized.

They didn't have what Moses had, so they complained. Well, let's hit the pause button for a moment and think. What exactly is going on with all this complaining?

You see, what is going on here is not just some harmless chit-chat about our government or our education system or the state of our Malaysian badminton team. It's more serious than that.

What lies at the heart of all this complaining and grumbling is the sin of unbelief. For what the people were really saying when they said they wanted to go back to Egypt, what the people were really saying when they said they wanted to go and enjoy its food is this.

They were actually saying, I don't really care that I'm redeemed. So what if God rescued me? In fact, sometimes I wish it didn't happen. Look where it's gotten me.

[18 : 25] And so in effect, they were doubting the goodness of the Lord. And that's what Numbers 11 is warning us against. It's warning us against looking at our own lives and thinking that God isn't good and life outside of Jesus is actually better.

Wasn't it great, we might say, when I didn't commit my life to Jesus and didn't have to think about giving money or hanging out with all these people who are much older or younger than me or using my weekends for Bible study?

Our minds begin to imagine what we are missing out on. And we might begin to think, oh, actually, it's easier if I just go back and do all the stuff I used to do when I wasn't a Christian.

After all this, being saved by grace stuff isn't so great. It's not like my money problems or my relationship problems are all fixed. And so we begin to employ selective memory.

And so complaining actually reveals our unbelief. Our unbelief that life apart from God is the worst possible fate.

[19 : 38] Our unbelief that God's gracious rescue of us from sin is what we most need. Our unbelief that our God is a good God.

Instead, our loud complaints reveal the whispers of our hearts. They show we are thinking, Egypt is better.

It's horrible to be a Christian. Well, that's what Numbers 11 is warning us against. It's interesting, isn't it, that as the Israelites look at the wilderness and the manna, they saw it as God's judgment.

They thought that God had brought them into the desert to starve them of good things. When in reality, the wilderness was God's mercy.

He's saving them, leading them away from slavery. And yet they confuse the two. And we could so easily do the same.

[20 : 46] Especially when it seems like God is denying our cravings. Perhaps we crave social inclusion. We don't like that awkward feeling when we are left out of the juicy gossip or not invited to that party because people think we're too holy.

Perhaps we crave more relationship choices. We find it so limiting that the scriptures say that Christians should marry other Christians. And because it seems like we're being denied these cravings, whatever they are, we think that God is out to starve us rather than save us.

We're quick to conclude that God isn't being good to us. We become self-pitying like Moses. So we complain. But complaining always distorts our vision.

It always imagines the past to be better than it really was and the present to be worse than it really is. Now whenever we complain, we're seeing God as a heartless dictator who robbed you of all these good things rather than as a lover who sacrificed his only son to give you the best things.

The root of complaining is actually the opposite of faith. It's unbelief. It's what happens when envy of the things of the world gets into our hearts.

[22 : 13] It causes us to doubt that what God has given to us in the present is enough. In 11 verse 7 to 9, we get a little description of the manna to make the simple point.

The Israelites got rich and tasty food. But they took that for granted. And did you notice how envy gets into our hearts?

Back in verse 4, we have a group called the rebel who are with the Israelites. It seems like these were the non-Israelites who had travelled with the Israelites on the night they left Egypt.

But they have never fully taken on the new identity as part of God's people or adopted his values. And so in verse 4, they're the ones who begin looking back longingly at Egypt.

And before you know it, the Israelites join in. Idolatrous cravings led to complaining and it became contagious. Even Moses in verse 10 is infected by it.

[23 : 19] He hears the people's wailing and then he ends up wailing himself to the Lord. When we choose to open our ears only to those in the grip of unbelief, we begin to see the world through their eyes rather than faith's eyes.

And so we begin to crave what the world craves and our reality becomes distorted. We have a wrong image of God. When we complain, that means our vision has gone all wrong.

We've lost our faith in the God of the Bible. Well, having examined the complaining that's going on, let's now examine the Lord's response to it.

That's mainly in 9 verse 16 to 35. Firstly, there's a response of grace. In verse 16, the Lord tells Moses to gather the 70 elders of Israel at the 10th of meeting.

And there, he will pour out his spirit upon them. Why? Well, God is being gracious. He tells Moses, since you feel so burdened, let me lighten it for you.

[24 : 35] As these men receive the spirit, they will be able to share leadership with you. God's answering Moses' prayer. Despite the self-pity, despite the complaints, Moses did at least get one thing right.

He brought it to God. And the Lord answered him, not by killing him, but by unburdening him. And so in verse 24, Moses does as the Lord says, and these 70 elders gathered and prophesied as a sign to the people that they had received the spirit.

This included even the two elders, Eldad and Medad, who for whatever reason didn't make it to the 10th, but who still prophesied. That's in verses 26 and 27.

Now this alarms Joshua, Moses' right-hand man, who then brings a complaint of sorts on his own. Stop them, Moses, he says.

It seems like he was concerned for Moses' reputation. If there are others besides Moses, who has the Holy Spirit resting on them, he reasons, doesn't that also threaten Moses' unique status?

[25 : 49] But perhaps he's also a little bit concerned for himself. After all, he's the right-hand man. So he could be next in line for succession. But now, we have all these elders who could be potential candidates.

So there's competition. And thus, Joshua complains. But notice verse 29, how Moses replies, Are you jealous for my sake?

I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit on them. He sees this as grace. and he wishes for more of it.

But there's a second response and that's a response of judgment. Just look at verse 18. Tell the people, Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow when you will eat meat.

The Lord heard you when you wailed. If only we had meat to eat, we were better off in Egypt. Now the Lord will give you meat and you will eat it. You will not eat it for just one day or two days or five, ten or twenty days but for a whole month until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it because you have rejected the Lord who is among you.

[27 : 09] Essentially, God says, Be careful what you wish for. You might just get it. God hands them over to their cravings.

That's how judgment works sometimes as Romans 1 also points out. We get given over to our cravings and it destroys us. Just think about how many people have pursued their ambitions, got what they wanted, but destroyed their families, their health and ultimately their walk with God in the process.

For as God points out in verse 20, they crave meat but not him. They have rejected him. The sin of unbelief is at work and there's going to be consequences.

Now Moses is still gripped by self-pity. In verses 21 to 22, he basically says, How can I find one month's supply of meat for them? He still thinks he's in charge.

But God replies verse 23, Is the Lord's arm too short? Now you will see whether or not what I say will come true for you.

[28 : 26] And it does come true. Down in verse 32, we discover that there is so much meat that there is at least 1.75 tons of quail per person.

And so there's a double response. God's outpouring of his spirit in grace and God's outpouring of meat in judgment. Now this becomes even more obvious in the original Hebrew where the writer engages in wordplay.

You see, the Hebrew word for spirit, ruach, is also the same Hebrew word for wind. It just depends on the context how it's translated. So in verse 25, the spirit, ruach, comes on the 70 elders.

But then in verse 31, the wind, that's the word ruach again, comes and brings quail to the Israelites. And verse 33 tells us that as the people stand outside the camp with the meat still in between their teeth, they die.

It's a picture of their distance from the Lord. And so it's the same God, the same spirit who is bringing grace and judgment. And that's why, verse 34, the place is called Kibrof Hatavah, which literally means graves of craving.

[29 : 47] They rejected God and followed their cravings all the way to their graves. And so we also see grace and judgment in God's response to Miriam and Aaron in 12, verse 4 to 16.

The Lord vindicates Moses affirming his unique calling and then strikes Miriam with leprosy. But Moses prays for her and she is eventually healed.

Both judgment and grace come from the hand of the same Lord. We shouldn't forget that. But how should we approach this story today, especially in light of Christ?

Well, when we turn to the New Testament, we discover that Christ, too, was once in the wilderness. The story is found in Matthew chapter 4. And notice, just like Israel was led by God into the wilderness, so we are told that Christ was led by the Spirit into the wilderness.

But notice, he didn't let his appetite take over. That was Israel's problem, wasn't it? Their appetites drove them. But not Jesus.

[30 : 59] When Satan came and said, if you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread, he could have said, good idea. After all, he was hungry. But he didn't.

Instead, he said, man shall not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. Think about it. Israel, don't forget, had food every day in the wilderness.

Jesus didn't. But Israel reacted in ingratitude and disobedience to God, whereas Jesus responded in total obedience to God.

But the point is not to say, look at Jesus and try hard to be more like him. The point is to say, we are like Israel, not Jesus.

And that's why we need him. In John 6, we find another story where people are controlled by their appetites. They saw Jesus feeding thousands of people miraculously, and so they chase after him because they hope that he can give them a feast.

[32 : 11] But Jesus uses that as a teaching opportunity to say, you know what you guys need in the end? Not physical manner, but the true bread of life.

John 6, 32, Jesus said to them, very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.

For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. Sir, they said, always give us this bread. And then Jesus declared, I am the bread of life.

Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. We need Jesus, the only person who was never infected by the sin of grumbling.

We need his righteousness to be given as a gift to us. We need him to live just like we need bread and food to live. We can never ever say, Jesus again, you're so boring, the way the Israelites said, manna again, so boring.

[33 : 24] For when we trust in him, well, that's when we can journey in the wilderness. For not only does God give us Jesus, he gives us the Holy Spirit.

It's a double blessing. Just as God distributed the Holy Spirit amongst the elders that day, God distributes the Holy Spirit amongst those in Christ.

But it's even better because whereas as the Spirit only fell on the elders that day, every Christian receives him today. In Christ, the longing of Moses in Numbers 11, verse 29, has been fulfilled.

And with that Spirit in us, well, we can now begin to apply 1 Corinthians 10 to take those Israelites as negative examples and not to follow in their footsteps.

ourselves. And so that's where we'll finish today, by reflecting. Are we like Israel? Do we find ourselves complaining about how God is working in our lives?

[34 : 31] Do we think God is unkind to us? I know I'm more like Israel than I care to admit. I need to hear 1 Corinthians 10.

Perhaps you do too. And the antidote to grumbling is to cultivate contentment. It's not to want more, not to complain about our burdens.

is to freely and gladly accept what God chooses to give us at all times and at all places. Because we know we can trust him to give what's best for us because he's already given us the double blessing of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

We're no longer looking at circumstances. We're looking at him. And the only way to cultivate contentment is by growing our longings for Jesus.

We could try to find gratification in other things like Israel did with Egyptian cuisine. But ultimately they don't fill you up. But Jesus is living water, a fountain that never runs dry.

[35 : 43] Are you longing for true forgiveness? The cross has won it. Do you long for true rest? It's found in Christ. True friendship? What a friend we have in Jesus.

Through hope, Jesus is risen. Through riches, Jesus makes us co-heirs with him. When we see how valuable Jesus is, it's easier to see what is not valuable and for our longings to be recalibrated.

And sometimes God puts us in a place where we especially feel that we're in the wilderness so that we remember his grace and his provision. So that when Christ is all we have, we discover that Christ is all we need.

To have Christ and nothing else is truly gain, not a loss. For there we find contentment. And when we have that, we will no longer indulge in the kind of complaining Israel does.

So look to Jesus. Don't be influenced by the rebel. Don't be conformed to the pattern of their thinking. Their path leads to graves of craving.

[36 : 59] These things happen to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us on whom the culmination of the ages has come. Let's pray.