

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Lessons Learned in the Wilderness
(Studies in Exodus and Numbers)

From Complaint to Contentment

(Numbers 11)

Study #2

Introduction: Contentment robbers...

This morning, three days after the feast of Thanksgiving and exactly four weeks before the hoped-for gifts of Christmas is a great moment to be considering the theme of contentment.

Contentment must be fought for, and the battle for contentment is a battle well-worth waging.

The Apostle Paul didn't have an easy life, but he had consistent joy because he was content.

After he catalogued a list of trials that I fear would undo me, he wrote, ***[2 Corinthians 12:10] Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.***

When he was writing from house arrest in Rome, he told the Christians in the city of Philippi, ***[Philippians 4:11] Not that I speak from want; for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am.***

And near the end of his life he wrote this from a Roman dungeon to his friend and younger brother in Christ, Timothy.

[1 Timothy 6:6] But godliness actually is a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment. [7] For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. [8] If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content.

When we're content, we're satisfied. We're at ease with our life situation. We're not plagued by worry about tomorrow and we're not frustrated with today.

And it is possible to lead a contented life. But, to say it again, contentment must be fought for. There are thieves out there that would rob you of your contentment.

Speaking personally, pulling up next to a perfectly restored 1960's or 70's muscle car at a stop light fuels discontentment with my current ride.

If you spend much time on social media sites where people talk about their lives in always glowing terms, you can feel contentment slipping away. Watching movies, TV shows, or Netflix originals where the men and women are uniformly attractive, successful, and lead charmed lives are contentment thieves.

Shopping - at La Cantera or on Amazon - where what we would really enjoy is two rungs above what we can really afford doesn't really help in the battle for contentment. and we can be tempted to discontentment when our friends have iwatches and ipads and fitbits a generation newer than ours.

Every ad you will ever watch, hear, or read is designed to rob you of contentment.

So, there are lots and lots of contentment thieves out there today. But there's nothing 21st century-ish about discontent. It's plagued people since the beginning of time, even before the Internet!

This morning, as we turn to the Bible, we're going to see a lot of complaint and a lack of contentment in the ranks of God's people while they slogged their way through a desert wilderness.

And on this strategically placed Sunday, we're also going to seek God's mind on how to arrive at contentment.

Review...

Last week, as we began looking for lessons we can learn in our own 2016 wildernesses, we watched the Jews march away from the Red Sea into the Sinai desert.

We saw God give His people sweet water where it had been bitter (at Mara), provide food day by day (manna) and bring forth water out of a rock (at Rephidim).

He did all of this because of His great love for them and to convince them that they had nothing to grumble about. He was good and He was for them.

Then, God led Israel to the foot of Mt. Sinai where He gave them the Ten Commandments along with the rest of the Mosaic Law. The remainder of the book of Exodus and all of the book of Leviticus details that set of laws.

After Leviticus, we come to a book we call "Numbers." Its title alone might scare you off. You're thinking "boring" - but not so fast.

The first ten chapters of Numbers are mostly administrative, telling us the duties of the tribes of Israel. It's all by the numbers. But the book is not at all, all about the numbers.

The Jews call this book, "*In the Wilderness*"¹. That's because after chapter ten, the book turns to narrative and recounts the experiences of the Jews "in the wilderness."

It is to these stories we will turn to see the lessons God taught them and that He wants to teach us.

At the end of a solid year of being camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai, they left the mountain, bound for the Promised Land.

The pillar of cloud - by day - and fire - by night - led them north toward the Wilderness of Paran (an area just to the north of the eastern finger of the Red Sea).

We pick up the story at the beginning of Numbers, chapter 11. The first three verses of the chapter set the stage for what follows.

Setting the scene: The people complain about adversity (vv. 1-3)

Moses tells us that ***[1b]...[God's] anger was 'kindled' and the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp.***

One evening last week, Kathy and I enjoyed the cooler season's first evening of sitting outside by the warmth of our backyard chimenea. First, of course, we had to start a fire.

To get any fire kindled, you begin with paper or small twigs. Then, once those are burning, you add larger branches to get a nice blaze going. That's how fire works.

Well, something the Israelites had done had been like putting twigs and small branches in contact with a spark of burning heat. Somehow, they had kindled the wrath of God.

We want to know what they did. Whatever it was, we want to avoid doing that.

Well, here's what they did: ***[1a] Now the people became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the Lord.***

Woah. Can you imagine that? Somebody complaining when they are in the midst of adversity?

I'd never complain of adversity. And I know that You wouldn't, either. Right?

Well, God reckoned His people guilty of sin for complaining when times got tough. He considered that they were wrong to

¹ The Hebrew title for the book is, "*In the Wilderness*" (b'midbar)

complain of adversity. Regardless of the adversity they faced, they should not have complained.

Rotten weather, tough trail conditions, failing health, adversarial relationships. According to God, no adversity justifies complaining. And the Jews' complaint prompted God's anger.²

Now if fire from heaven for having complained seems to us to be a bit of an over-reaction, we need to understand complaining from God's perspective.

On Thursday, we gave thanks. To give thanks requires a "someone" to whom we express our gratitude. We don't give thanks in a vacuum. Giving thanks is not just being thankful "for" something. It is being thankful "to" someone.

By the same token, to complain is to complain against someone.

As my heavenly Father, God has assumed responsibility for my welfare. So, when I complain of my situation, it is as if I am saying, "God, You're not much of a Provider."

And when I or when you complain about adversity, the Lord takes it very personally.

Our complaints/grumbles are not just gripes about our circumstances. They are like snide comments to God, "It sure would be nice if someone would care for me."

Complaining shows a lack of faith that God is lovingly at work in our lives. That's what kindled the fire of God's anger.

These first few verses of Numbers 11 let us know what God thinks about people who complain when they encounter adversity. The rest of the chapter tells us what God thinks about people who complain about His gracious provision.

² See [Lamentations 3:39] *Why should any living mortal, Or any man, offer complaint in view of his sin?*

Lamentations 3:39 and Numbers 11:1 are the only occurrences of this word for "complaint" in the Hebrew Old Testament.

After setting the stage, Moses referred to a backward-looking group of people. They looked back to the past. They longed for the good ol' days, when life was sweet in the land of plenty. They longed for (wait for it)... Egypt.

The Discontent of the People of God (vv. 4-9)

"Oh, For the Good Ol' Days" (vv. 4-5)

The Bible calls this group, "rabble." They are the "grass is greener on the other side of the hill" gang. This rabble daydreams about the luxurious life they enjoyed just a couple of years earlier when they lived in Egypt.

[4] The rabble³ who were among them had greedy⁴ desires; and also the sons of Israel wept again and said, "Who will give us meat to eat? [5] "We remember the fish which we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic..."

This rabble suffered from a form of dementia, but it wasn't Alzheimers. It was a functional and a chosen forgetfulness. They had allowed themselves to forget how bad things used to be in Egypt.

They claimed that they used to eat FREE fish, forgetting that they paid for that fish with slave labor.

In their hazy memories, Egypt looked like the Ritz Carlton, where everything was sweetness and light, peaches and cream. (Or, at least, good and spicy. They liked the onions and garlic and leeks and cucumbers they ate there.)

³ This is the only time that this word "rabble" is used in the Old Testament. It is believed to refer to the part of the mixed multitude of the wanderers which was comprised of Egyptians who decided to throw their lots in with the Israelites in the wilderness, rather than stay in Egypt with a stubborn Pharaoh.

⁴ The rabble was sinning by their grumblings. The sin in view is that of greediness, a violation of the tenth commandment, the command to not covet. Coveting, essentially is an illegitimate longing for whatever God has not provided.

And they looked back with special fondness to one aspect of their diets in Egypt: meat. Ever since having crossed the Red Sea, they hadn't had any meat. They longed for meat.

Sick and Tired of Nothing but Manna, Manna, Manna (vv. 6-9)

No appetite for God's provision

[6] "...but now our appetite is gone. There is nothing at all to look at except this manna."

As far as we know, no Israelite ever starved during all the time they spent in the wilderness. They never had to send out patrols to look for food. They never had to hunt or tend a garden. They had sufficient to eat every single day.

Granted, there wasn't a lot of variety, but they had food. They had manna. The Bible indicates that that they sought variety.

I picture Jewish homemakers serving their families baked manna, fried manna, sautéed manna, and sweet and sour manna. They had boiled manna and broiled manna, manna pancakes and manna crepes.

It wasn't that the manna tasted bad. Not at all. It actually sounds pretty good when you hear the Bible's description.

Manna described (vv. 7-9)

[7] Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its appearance like that of bdellium.⁵ [8] The people would go about and gather it and grind it between two millstones or beat it in the mortar, and boil it in the pot and make cakes with it; and its taste was as the taste of cakes baked with oil.

Manna was eye-pleasing and good-tasting. Yes, it was abundant. Yes, it was nutritious. Yes, it was tasty. And, yes, it was God's provision. But, the Jews were tired of it. They wanted meat.

⁵ Bdellium is related to myrrh. It is the name given to several resins, which exude a fragrant gum.

The people were acting as if God owed them variety, as if they had a right to demand meat, when actually He was being super-gracious to provide ANYTHING for them.

Remember. We just saw how God responded to His people's complaint when they encountered adversity. To my mind, a complaint when facing adversity seems natural, even if it is not all that spiritual.

But, God doesn't appreciate a complaint in the midst of adversity because He considers it an assault on His goodness.

How, then, do you think He is going to respond to this complaint about His provision of manna?

How will YOU respond when your friend tells you on the day after Christmas, "*Thanks, but that is not exactly what I wanted. Could you return it and get me a green one?*"

Parents, what is your reaction when you buy your child a gift, or take them on an outing, and they look at you and yawn, or outright reject your token of love?

Hold on to that feeling, because in a minute we're going to watch God's response to His people's complaint about manna.

Before we do that, though, we're going to notice another plot line that runs through this chapter, making Numbers 11 a fascinating study in HOW TO and HOW NOT TO approach God.

While the rabble were making their ugly complaint against God for manna, Moses also expressed himself to God. But he did so in a completely different way.

Parenthetically... - How to Approach God (vv. 10-15, 24-30)

Moses told the Lord that he couldn't handle leading God's people all by himself - especially given that they were such grumblers. He certainly couldn't supply all that they needed and he needed help. He desperately begged God for help. (vv. 11-15)

God works with desperate pleas for help and He gave Moses the help he needed.

He told Moses to gather seventy men from among the elders of Israel. He told Moses that He would place His Spirit on each of those men, just as His Spirit rested on Moses Himself. These men would help Moses provide shepherding leadership. (vv. 16-17; 26-30)

Notice.

Moses expressed his inadequacy. Expressions of inadequacy flow from a life of dependence. And God's ear is always open to hear us when we tell Him that we aren't up to the task before us.

Moses was at a point of personal desperation. He knew that if the Lord didn't come through for him, he was sunk. He didn't complain and he didn't grumble. But he did lay his request on the line and he didn't hold back.

And THAT is the spirit in which God wants you and me, today, to come to Him. He wants us to desperately express our need, asking Him to do what only He can do.

When we do that, God will respond. He won't always give us exactly what we ask for. But He will always give us what we need.⁶

Now, let's move back to the complaint of the rabble about meat.

God Deals with Discontent (vv. 16-23; 31-35)

God's Promise of Meat for His People (v. 18)

[18] "Say to the people, 'Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wept in the ears of the Lord, saying, "Oh that someone would give us meat to eat! For we were

⁶ Please note that Moses' request was not for seventy additional leaders to help him out. If I read Moses' request rightly, he was asking to be relieved of duty. God gave Moses what he needed, not what he asked for.

well-off in Egypt." Therefore the Lord will give you meat and you shall eat."

Well. God is going to give His people meat.

But, in His response, He planned to expose the ugliness of their attitude. They had turned up their noses at His gracious gift of manna. So, God says, in effect, *"You want meat. I'll give you meat."*

God's Promise to Over-Serve His People with Meat (vv. 19-20)

[19] "You shall eat, not one day, nor two days, nor five days, nor ten days, nor twenty days, [20] but a whole month, until it comes out of 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 ever leave Egypt?'"

This provision of meat for the people was a two-edged sword. He would satisfy their craving for meat, but His provision would be an expression of His discipline.

This gift of meat is actually a judgment. God was going to teach His people that when they reject His provision, the alternative is nauseating.⁷

God's Condemning Provision (vv. 31-35)

The provision of the quail (vv. 31-32)

[31] Now there went forth a wind from the Lord, and it brought quail from the sea, and let them fall beside the camp⁸,

⁷ When Moses realized the logistical problems involved in providing meat for such a large number of people as were represented by the Israelites, he told God. He saw a problem with feeding the 600,000 people with him *"on foot"* - referring to either the adults or to the men prepared for battle. That represented a lot of mouths to feed. ***[23] The Lord said to Moses, "Is the Lord's power limited? Now you shall see whether My word will come true for you or not."***

about a day's journey on this side and a day's journey on the other side, all around the camp, and about two cubits deep on the surface of the ground. [32] The people spent all day and all night and all the next day, and gathered the quail (he who gathered least gathered ten homers) and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp."

As you know, quail are small, tasty birds, related to the partridge. And quail-hunting is very popular here in South Texas. We're deep into quail season, now.

As you may NOT know, every spring, quail migrate across the Sinai Peninsula from Africa to Arabia.⁹

It appears that what God did for the Jews was to take a portion of that regular quail migration and divert it to the camp of Israel in the wilderness - depositing it on the Jews' doorstep.

This would have been an amazing spectacle. The birds fell all around the camp. There were three-foot deep piles of quail on the ground.¹⁰ All the Israelites picked up as much quail as they wanted - and even more than they wanted.

The Bible says that they collected a minimum of ten homers apiece. My study of ancient weights and measures tells me that this was equal to as much as sixty bushels, certainly more than enough to feed a family of four for a month.

⁸ Perhaps significantly, the meat (in the form of quail), fell outside the camp, in the unclean area, while God had answered Moses' request in the clean area of the camp, at the Tabernacle.

⁹ The gift of the quails here in Numbers is also (like that of Exodus 16) in the second month of the Jewish year, which would have placed it in conjunction with the yearly northern migration pattern of the quails across the Sinai Peninsula. In this case, God used natural means (wind and migratory patterns) to accomplish supernatural ends.

¹⁰ Some understand the text to be saying that the birds were captured as they flew two cubits above ground level. That does not seem to me to be the point.

That is a disgusting amount of quail. And I'll wager that most of the Jews were thinking, "You know, that manna is looking better and better..."

But God's judgment struck a few. We read at the beginning of the chapter that God's anger had been kindled like a fire. Here again, the fire explodes.

The judgment of God. (vv. 33-35)

[33] While the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people, and the Lord struck the people with a very severe plague. [34] So the name of that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had been greedy. [35] From Kibroth-hattaavah the people set out for Hazeroth, and they remained at Hazeroth."

So, some of the Israelites (probably that initial group referred to as the "rabble") were dealt with immediately for their greed, and were killed for their complaint.

But, true to His word, God consigned the people of Israel to a month's worth of eating nothing but quail. For the next thirty days, the people munched their way through meal after meal of the meat they had craved.

That was life in the Sinai wilderness around 1500 BC. What does this episode in the life of the wandering Jews say to us this morning, who seek to follow the Lord in 2016?

Well, this incident provides an invitation and a warning.

Conclusion:

First, from the life of Moses, listen to God's gracious invitation. When we sense that we need something from God:

- we are to state our request clearly.
- we are to express our inadequacy.

- we are to express our desperation.

God is pleased when we come to Him in that spirit. He does good things with such requests. Even if He doesn't do exactly what we ask, He will respond lovingly and in good ways when we come to Him in desperate need.

I'm not guaranteeing healing for your body, money in your bank account, a promotion at work, or a fix for your marriage.

But my understanding of Scripture and my growing experience is that if we come to God acknowledging that if He doesn't come through for us, we're sunk, He will meet us at our point of need.

Second, from the "rabble's" discontented grumbling, listen to a very serious warning. Complaints and grumbles are infectious diseases of the soul.

Our complaints about God's provision (the life He has given us, as opposed to the life we might have chosen), weaken our own faith.

If I constantly give voice to my bitterest disappointments and to my most severe setbacks, if I regularly complain, I become my own worst enemy. I end up dwelling in bitterness and fueling discontent.

Complaining damages me, the one who complains. But complaints also weaken the faith of those around us.

Complaining about our lot in life is one of a number of leavens that will permeate an entire lump of dough.¹¹

Your desperate plea for God to do what only He can do leavens this church with faith. Your tears of sorrow over some tragedy in your life leavens the church with genuineness and vulnerability. Your love and service leavens the church with compassion and community.

But, your bitter railings against God, your grumbling about your life, and your complaints against someone you know leavens the church with discontent.

¹¹ See 1 Corinthians 5:6; Galatians 5:9.

One of the things I want us to note is that the complaints in Numbers 11 began with the rabble and then spread to consume much of the nation. In the same way, my complaints and your complaints produce a sour harvest in this or in any church.¹²

It is easy to complain and to be sucked in to a complaining mindset. For the welfare of your brothers and sisters, don't complain.

What do we do, then, when we face adversity, or when what we have received from the Lord is not what we would have most enjoyed?

I would never want to gloss over how hard life can be at times.

I know that at this time - and in fact at ANY given time - there are people here who are wading through deep waters.

But just because life is sometimes unspeakably hard, it doesn't follow that we are free to complain of adversity. And Numbers 11 teaches us that we are certainly never to complain of God's provision when it isn't exactly what we wish it was.

There is something better, something stronger, something more productive, something more godly to do in the face of adversity or disappointment that brings a smile to God's face.

That something we are to do when life doesn't measure up to our expectations is to **cultivate contentment**.

¹² People in business know this. That is why at restaurants you will see signs that read "If you didn't like our food or our service, tell us. If you did like us, tell your friends." Sadly, things don't usually work out that way. According to a study undertaken by the White House Office of Consumer Affairs, 96 percent of dissatisfied business customers never told the offending company. So, for every complaint a restaurant or a store or a website actually hears, twenty-four complaints never make their way to the company. That's discouraging! But the study's most frustrating finding was that each of those twenty four dissatisfied customers told an average of ten friends about the bad service they received, poisoning their friends against the store. The rabble of Numbers 11 have shared their grumbings with their fellow Israelites, and now many more have joined them in their complaint about food.

Cultivating contentment doesn't mean that we sit around and do nothing about our lack or our problems. There is freedom in Christ to be pro-active to seek changes and to even improve our standard of living, if we wish (1 Corinthians 7:21).

Rather, cultivating contentment means that we consciously flex our faith muscles in the goodness of God. We remind ourselves that we are in the hands of a good God who loves us perfectly. We remind ourselves that as good as this life can be, this is not heaven and as hard as this life may be, we have heaven to look forward to.

The cultivation of contentment is a major theme of the Bible and it is to be a major life goal for the believer.

The cultivation of a life of contentment is to fight tooth and nail to live by Matthew 4:4, "**Man does not live by bread alone** (that is, for the satisfaction of his appetites), **but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God** (that is, by whatever God provides)."

We can so easily fall into the trap of the "rabble" who believed that life was "**anything but this manna.**"

They thought - and we sometimes think, too - that we will find life if we get what we want. And that is a lie straight from the pit.

The "rabble" of Numbers 11 believed that "meat" would solve their problems and bring them fulfillment. Multitudes today believe that if we can just get what we want, we'll be OK.

The truth of the matter is that getting what we want is not the key to life. Instead, life is found in finding satisfaction in what God has provided.