

Sermon on Numbers 11 prepared by Jonathan Shradar

Numbers 11:1-35

The Mercy of Christ must be enough for us to trust Him.

“Stop It!” Skit with Bob Newhart from MadTV back in the day. Newhart plays a therapist and a new client comes in for the \$5 session - After the client explains her situation - dreadful fear of being buried alive that incites crippling anxiety, can’t work or leave her house.

Once he hears the problem, he prepares her for the counsel. She gets out her notebook, and he says “Stop It!”

They go back and forth about the ability to actually stop it, he walks her through the reality that no one is trying to bury her, it is unlikely and her fear is unfounded, and the like. She is not convinced... Eventually this therapist says “Stop it or I will bury you alive!”

When we come to some of these stories of Israel - or anyone acting opposite of what we think is right in behavior or belief we can think or respond like this, “stop it!”

And I have to be honest, for a long time that is how I have used Numbers 11.

It has been a life-changing text for me. Our former pastor was preaching a sermon on provision that came down to asking God hard enough and he will deliver. “His arm isn’t too short!” The people’s complaint was equated with prayerfully asking God and he sends all-you-can-eat quail.

The pesky thing was, I had my Bible open, and I kept reading. It wasn’t a blessing, it’s a curse!

The spark that made me want to go to seminary and study the Bible.

Out of that experience, I, at least in my head, and occasionally with my mouth, equated those not gospel-centered enough, or focused enough on the finished work of Christ - manna - were quail-eaters! Rejecting Jesus.

I still think that is an appropriate application of this story as a warning, but there is more.

As I studied it afresh, with the help of the Spirit, and Tim Keller, I am finding myself in this story more and more. Where I am called to trust God - to rely on Jesus - far too often it is my performance, my strategies, that I look to for security and hope. Distrusting God.

Here is Israel 3 days into their journey... for a year God has proven himself. He has fed them, given them sustaining water, been present with them, and guided them. He can be trusted.

I think that's a fair reading actually of the Old Testament - "God can be trusted!" Is his word true, do covenant promises hold? Things might take time, but he delivers. Yes he can be trusted.

All the more for those of us that live in light of the New Testament!

What do we need to trust him?

As we look at three mercies in Numbers 11, perhaps the Spirit will mine our souls a bit and uncover places we have refused to trust Jesus, that we would give them over to him and receive life.

Mercy of a Mediator

The first three verses set the framework for the rest of 11 and chapter 12. Complaint/accusation, hearing, response.

"In the Book of Numbers this action constitutes a shift in the structural and theological movement of the book from one of unity, faithfulness, holiness, and celebration to one of discord, rebellion, and dissatisfaction with who they were as the people of the covenant." R. Dennis Cole

Verse 1 is a doozy. **Numbers 11:1** "And the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes, and when the LORD heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp." (ESV)

The people complain in the hearing of the Lord... misfortunes.. That they have been brought out of slavery, given identity, the promise of a land, and they are on the march there.

“Are we there yet?!” Disparaging God, it’s his fault. And this sparks his anger - fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed outlying parts of the camp.

I want to make a clear distinction here. This complaint is different from a lament. Holy complaining, calling things as they are, but laments are resolved. Where we see them in the Psalms primarily, there is the gut-wrenching reality, but followed by “Still I will trust you.”

That’s absent here.

It is not calling things as they are. This is just base complaining. No resolve in it whatsoever. “I won’t trust you!”

“The people’s complaint against God’s leadership alienated them from God. They refused to remember in gratitude what he had done or trust him in present hardship. Sin always produces alienation between a person and God.”

“What’s the root of it? Well, the root of it is the particular poison, but here’s what the particular poison is ... You don’t trust God farther than you can throw him. And you can’t throw God even an inch.” Timothy J. Keller

Complaining is not a personality trait. It is the fruit of sinful distrust of God.

It jacks you up.

“Grumbling distorts your vision. It reimagines the past as a golden land, it despises the good gifts that God has surrounded you with in the present, and it completely ignores God’s promises for the future. That’s why I say that the root of grumbling is unbelief (distrust). Grumbling is an unbelief that robs you of your joy. It is the exact opposite of faith, which sees the past and present with clear eyes but has its gaze joyfully fixed on God’s promises for the future. Faith believes God’s promises to be certain, no matter what difficulties the present may hold.”

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I was with a dear friend this week, and immediately to start the conversation they began grumbling, over something pretty slight. My response was “stop it!” Well, kind of, ‘the day has just begun and you choose to complain about that?’

Complaints like this are an indicator of distrust. That’s the problem in all three movements of this chapter.

Convicting maybe for some of us. Challenging what has become a habit to us.

“Nobody likes a complainer.” And nobody hates when people complain more than a complainer! Like we don’t want anyone in on our action...

But there is more than complaint here.

Fire, and the people cry out to Moses, he prays, and the fire dies down.

We don’t know what he prayed, but given highlights in other places we imagine it was something along the lines of “have mercy on your people!”

A mediator steps in - pleading for the people and in mercy, God responds.

When God says “live this way; prioritize these things; set aside these other things,” it rubs against the way of the world. It rubs against us, what we think we need, what our itching ears, and hearts, demand. Leads to complaint, even a rescripting who God is and what he should do for us.

It’s a human response. We have hope, even when we distrust because we have a mediator.

Jesus - as our high priest, mediating a covenant of mercy and grace. Interceding on our behalf before the Father. His blood covering us, keeping us. Jesus proves that God can be trusted.

“We never have sufficient reason to lose trust in God. He has shown in Jesus that he cares supremely for us.”

From that mercy we learn to trust... to cry out with resolve. To lean in and follow him.

Mercy enough to trust him.

There is more...

Mercy of Multiplication

Numbers 11:4–6 “Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, “Oh that we had meat to eat! [5] We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. [6] But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” (ESV)

“Now do you see what they’re saying? This is what they’re saying. “Because we have nothing but what God has given us, we’re drying up. If we take only what God has given us, we’re going to dry up. If we rely only on what God has done, if we rely wholly on him, if we center wholly on him, we’re going to die. It won’t be enough.”

Now, by the way, this is an absolute lie.” Timothy J. Keller

Moses hears it all and has a leadership crisis. Talks back to God.

Numbers 11:14–15 “I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me. [15] If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favor in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness.” (ESV)

‘I can’t do it, just kill me!’ He supposes that would be mercy, but it's not.

Silly Moses. This is how pastors feel when you come complaining by the way!

For Moses it has happened before. Jethro mentored him to appoint others to help judge the people.

But in this situation, it is really beyond him.

Rabble-instigated, people wept and complained. How would Moses provide meat for so many people?

So God promises meat. But in a moment of distrust, Moses doubts God's ability to provide.

Numbers 11:23 "And the LORD said to Moses, "Is the LORD's hand shortened? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not." (ESV)

Hasn't God already proven himself?

Here he extends mercy to Moses. God tells him to find 70 men that "shall bear the burden of the people with you. So that you may not bear it yourself alone."

Multiplies leaders so Moses isn't alone. (a perfect eldership text).

Costs some, some of the spirit on Moses will be given to the other men and the will prophesy (speak for the Lord). Makes Joshua nervous... Moses is diminished for distrusting but still granted mercy.

Jesus grants mercy to us by giving us one another.

Romans 12:4–5 "For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, [5] so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another." (ESV)

We are to bear each other's burdens, so that there is more than one shoulder under the weight of life. We are strengthened by one another and able to bear up under the weight of the suffering of this world. We are to do this, because we are members of one another as the body of Christ. This is what He calls and commands His followers to be marked by.

Galatians 6:2 "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." (ESV)

Because we were once not a people he makes us a people.

When our performance can't keep pace with our circumstances... when I can't hold my arms up alone... we need one another to remind each other to trust him, to get through.

Isolation incites distrust. "I have to bear this alone" is a lie!

In Christ we have each other. When we have eyes to see it, it is like multiplying the leadership of the camp. It is a mercy to lighten the load, to share the burden.

Mercy enough to trust.

Leads to a final mercy in the text we don't want to miss.

Mercy of the Manna

Distrust in God's provision.

"Oh that we had meat to eat!" Like the good old days in Egypt.

"they had become nostalgic over their former food supply while forgetting the bondage and oppression from which the Lord had so dramatically delivered them. The failure to remember God's grace and faithfulness was the second aspect of their rebellion." R. Dennis Cole

Because they had to walk three days, and had manna to eat, they entirely lose sight of the great deliverance from bondage and God guidance, his presence even now. The meals in Egypt were likely meager but they swell in their imaginations into some lavish feasts.

"Better a warm meal as a slave than a warm meal as a free person!" Absurd.

Their complaint isn't even true.

Numbers 11:7–9 "Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its appearance like that of bdellium. [8] The people went about and gathered it and ground it in handmills or beat it in mortars and boiled it in pots and made cakes of it. And the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. [9] When the dew fell upon the camp in the night, the manna fell with it." (ESV)

It was good. And it was exactly what they needed.

Deuteronomy 8:2–4 “And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. [3] And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. [4] Your clothing did not wear out on you and your foot did not swell these forty years.” (ESV)

It was nutritious. They didn’t get scurvy. They thrived for health under the influence of his provision.

God guided them, provided what they needed; daily mercy in the form of a meal.

And they miss it. They could have seen it as a miracle, as mercy, instead they talk themselves into the misery of despising God.

Envy after imagination. “Envy is a condition that deeply poisons us that makes us unable to enjoy what’s in front of us ever, unable to ever sit down and live in the moment and rejoice in what we have, but to find fault with it and to say, “This isn’t enough. This isn’t good enough.”

Numbers 11:19–20 “You shall not eat just one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, [20] but a whole month, until it comes out at 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 come out of Egypt?”” (ESV)

They are visited by a flood of quail.

Numbers 11:32–33 “And the people rose all that day and all night and all the next day, and gathered the quail. Those who gathered least gathered ten homers. And they spread them out for themselves all around the camp. [33] While the meat was yet between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the LORD

was kindled against the people, and the LORD struck down the people with a very great plague.” (ESV)

Judgment.

Ways we distrust God’s provision:

- Me, financially - careful not sacrificial
- Reputation
- Relationships
- Children

Ultimately translates into a distrust of Jesus. Despising him as our provision.

A story that repeats itself.

Jesus feeding thousands, they just want more...doing the works of God is believing in who he sent. **John 6:35–44** “ Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. [36] But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. [37] All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. [38] For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. [39] And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. [40] For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

[41] So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” [42] They said, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?” [43] Jesus answered them, “Do not grumble among yourselves. [44] No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.” (ESV)

I am the grumbler. Missing the provision. Envyng something else. Refusing to recognize it. To see Jesus as the provision I need and all he gives as enough. Maybe you are like that too, and if so, we ought to be the easiest people in the world to be a failure in front of.

When that is the case... for all of us who desire to follow him, the wasting disease has been swallowed by another. Our mediator grants mercy and leads us to recognize the manna, his mercy, again. It's where we grow up in him.

As in the story of the rich young ruler. One thing we lack. Jesus is inviting us to give away all we have and follow him.

"Just as he did with the rich young man, Jesus looks at us and loves us. He sees with his searching eyes the things that keep us frail, fragile, and distant from his presence. And he asks us, "If your life continues on in the way it's going, is this the life you want?"

And with a tender voice, he continues: "These things must die in order that you might live." This is a word of love for us. But it's also one that demands a sober reckoning, because death feels like death.

We read the story of the rich young man in the Gospels and often consider it a story of a potential conversion. Are you going to begin a new life with Christ today, or will you reject him forever? Forever saved or an eternal sinner? And, yes, it can be understood that way. But this encounter with Jesus—who looks and loves, who asks us to willingly die to the Babylonian promises of this world and follow him—is a daily labor. When we wake up and spend a few moments in the morning preparing to follow Jesus for the next sixteen hours or so, he looks at our hearts with love and says, "you lack one thing."

That one thing is the death and burial of what we are trusting in and hoping for that keeps us from experiencing and following Jesus. That death and burial isn't a one time event as the beginning of our faith or the dramatic moment of repentance from some deep, dark sin in our Christian life. It is the Christian life."
The Secret Place of Thunder John Starke

Mercy enough for this kind of trust. It's maturity. It's abundant life.

The Mercy of Christ must be enough for us to trust Him.

Jesus, the final and only mediator has taken all of your distrust, rebellion, rejection of God, and fully satisfied the wrath that was kindled against sin.

He has made a way of trusting - risking - relying on him. A way to grow up in him.

May we see mercy enough to trust and truly live.

Repent of your distrust.

See his provision, the beauty of Christ as your sustenance.

Surround yourself with others that will point you to him, to trust in the Lord.

The Mercy of Christ must be enough for us to trust Him.

In the 5th century there was a Scottish monk known for his own form of “stop it!” When distrust arose among the faithful.

Cuthbert. “He encouraged his fellow monks to look to God for all of their needs. While on a long walk in the wilderness, one of Cuthbert's young disciples expressed anxiety about the source of their next meal. Pointing overhead to an eagle, Cuthbert said, "God can send us food by means of that eagle." The eagle swept down and delivered a fish. Cuthbert cut the fish in two and gave half back to the eagle. On another occasion, one of Cuthbert's disciples observed the monk up to his neck in the North Sea, singing psalms to God amidst the crashing of the waves.

After finishing his prayers, the monk returned to shore, where his feet were dried and warmed by two sea otters. Cuthbert blessed the two otters before they scampered away.”

"Rise, brother, and do not weep, but rejoice greatly because [of] the mercy of heaven." - Cuthbert (c. 634-687), Bishop-Abbot of Lindisfarne & Missionary

“O God, your blessed Son became poor for our sake, and chose the Cross over the kingdoms of this world: Deliver us from an inordinate love of worldly things, that we may seek you with singleness of heart, behold your glory by faith, and attain to the riches of your everlasting kingdom, where we shall be united with our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.”