

“If You Want to Get Picky”

[Numbers 11:1-17](#)

Rev. Allen M. Thompson

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Kelsey and I don't yet have children, so I can only imagine how this typically goes. You pack everything into your suitcases the night before...well, everything except the one outfit you're going to wear in the morning. You make sure that all the electronics are in order, that all the electronic chargers are packed, and everyone has their toiletries. Everyone is allowed to pack one toy. You put the big stuff into the car the night before, and then everyone goes in and sets the alarms...an hour earlier than you need.

Morning comes, and sure enough, it took that extra hour to get everyone up, to pull all the bags out of the car because they changed their minds about the toys, and to find the missing sock from the outfit that had two socks the night before. Finally, you all get in the car. You say your little prayer asking God for a safe journey, and then you pull out of the driveway.

Then, before you're even out of sight of the house, what happens? “My tummy hurts!” “This seat belt is too tight!” “I'm hungry.” “He's touching me!”

Does that sound familiar? Well, if it's ever happened to you, don't feel bad, because it happened to God, too! Here in the book of Numbers, we have the story of what happened in the desert between the time that God led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and gave them the law, and the time that they made it to the cusp of the land where God was taking them. Last week we covered chapters 1-9, when God is preparing them to get going, and in chapter 10, they finally get going.

Here is the end of chapter 10:

³³ Thus they set out from the mount of the Lord three days' journey, with the ark of the covenant of the Lord journeying in front of them for the three days, to seek out a resting place for them. ³⁴ The cloud of the Lord was over them by day when they set out from the camp.

So, what happened immediately after they got going? Well, as Marissa just read for you, and just as any family experiences on a long road trip, the people started complaining. They started complaining early, and they started complaining often.

And, just like most parents when the complaining starts, God was not happy. His anger burned, and God singed the edge of their camp with fire. But the fun thing about that phrase—if you can call God's anger “fun”—is that the Hebrew word for anger is also the Hebrew word for “nostrils.” So when God's anger burned, we can also read it as “God's

nostrils flared.”

I actually like that translation more, because if God just sent fire to the edge of their camp, then the image we have of God was that he got angry and sent out bolts of lightning or something to burn up the edges of their camp. But as I said last week, the message we get from the start of Numbers is that God is not distant; He is right there with the people. God leads them from among them, in the tabernacle—the tent in the middle of their camp—and He leads them from ahead when they carry the ark of the covenant in front of them as they march.

So, God is not just throwing down bolts of lightning from above them; God is fuming from among them. Another big theme of these early books of the Bible is that God’s power is so great, that the people have to be very careful in God’s presence. So, if God simply gets upset and flares His nostrils from among them, then it makes sense that the edges of the camp would catch fire. That’s the power of God among them.

Plus, let’s be honest: when you were a little kid and you were sitting in the back seat of the car, and your mom or dad got mad at something you did, didn’t you kind of feel like the whole car was on fire? I know I did. So we shouldn’t just think of God raining down fire on the people; rather, we should think of God’s anger coming from among the people.

Moreover, we really shouldn’t think of the fire of God’s anger as punishment, but rather as a fire that refines, and that purifies. After all, the whole point of all of these things that happen while the Israelites are in the desert is not so that they can be punished, but so that God can form them into the people that He wants them to be. So, when God sings the edge of their camp, He’s just forcing them to get tighter, and get closer. It’s almost as if the message of God’s anger is, “You’re a family, and you’re gonna sit together, and you’re gonna like it.”

So, after God singed their camp, what did the people do next? Well, they complained again; but this time, the complaint was very specific. In fact, we are told that “the rabble” among the people started to complain about the food.

“The rabble.”

There was apparently this group called “the rabble,” and the rabble was just looking for things to complain about on the journey. The easiest target was the food, since they were eating the same thing day after day after day. God was supplying them with manna, and they would gather it and make little cakes out of it. Basically, they were making do with what God was providing for them, and they were moving forward to where He was leading them.

But once the rabble started complaining about the food, it's like things suddenly switched. The rabble found the right button to push, and what little momentum they had just ground to a halt. All of a sudden, instead of leading their families and marching, following God, the leaders of every household were wailing and crying at the doors to their tents about how much better the food was in Egypt.

At this point, Moses was at a loss for what to do, so he went and complained to God about the people. Moses said, "Lord, why did you stick me with this group of ingrates, who just whine and complain about everything you give them?" Moses even asks for God to just kill him then and there so he wouldn't have to put up with it any more.

Now, if you've ever been in a leadership position, you probably have some empathy for Moses here. It might be easy to side with Moses and think that the people are just a bunch of ingrates, but in reality, isn't Moses doing the exact same thing that the people are doing? Sure, Moses never *asked* to be appointed their leader, but the people also never *asked* to go on a slow march across the Sinai peninsula. In both cases, Moses and the Israelites are complaining about their God-given situations. They're getting picky with God.

But instead of getting mad again, God gives them some grace. In the last part that Marissa read, we find that God decided to allow Moses to pick 70 leaders whom he trusted, and God would spread his power among those 70 so that Moses did not have to bear the burden of leadership alone (he was leading 600,000 people, after all).

But that's not all that God did. God had a two-pronged response to the people's complaints. The first was that He would give power to 70 more leaders, and the second was that He would send meat for the Israelites to eat. Here is the second half of the chapter:

God said to Moses:

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. ¹⁹ You will not eat it for just one day, or two days, or five, ten or twenty days, ²⁰ 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, and have wailed before him, saying, "Why did we ever leave Egypt?"'"

²¹ But Moses said, "Here I am among six hundred thousand men on foot, and you say, 'I will give them meat to eat for a whole month!' ²² Would they have enough if flocks and herds were slaughtered for them? Would they have enough if all the fish in the sea were caught for them?"

²³ The Lord answered Moses, “Is the Lord’s arm too short? Now you will see whether or not what I say will come true for you.”

²⁴ So Moses went out and told the people what the Lord had said. He brought together seventy of their elders and had them stand around the tent. ²⁵ Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took some of the power of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied—but did not do so again.

²⁶ However, two men, whose names were Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp. They were listed among the elders, but did not go out to the tent. Yet the Spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷ A young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.”

²⁸ Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses’ aide since youth, spoke up and said, “Moses, my lord, stop them!”

²⁹ But Moses replied, “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!” ³⁰ Then Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

³¹ Now a wind went out from the Lord and drove quail in from the sea. It scattered them up to two cubits^[b] deep all around the camp, as far as a day’s walk in any direction. ³² All that day and night and all the next day the people went out and gathered quail. No one gathered less than ten homers.^[c] Then they spread them out all around the camp.

Moses was wondering how in the world God was going to give 600,000 people enough meat to eat, but not only did God give them meat, He gave it to them in the form of quail.

Now, if you’ve never eaten quail, you might not have an idea of just how small a quail is. I remember the first time I ate quail. I ordered the quail appetizer at a Vietnamese restaurant in DC. I was sitting with a friend of mine from Oklahoma who did a lot of bird hunting, and he asked me if that was all I was getting. Well, the menu said there were three quail, so I figured I was fine. I had had pheasant, and I had had cornish game hen, and I figured a quail couldn’t be much smaller than those hens.

I was wrong. Actually, a quail is probably about one-sixth the size of a pheasant, and just to show you, *this* is a quail egg. How many of these guys do you suppose it takes to make an omelet? How many quail do you suppose it takes to make a meal— let alone 600,000 meals!

But even more than that, how much effort to you think it takes to clean, cook, and pick the meat off of a few million quail? It's got to be the pickiest, most tedious job imaginable. Basically, God said, "If you wanna be picky, then I'll let you *really* be picky."

Meanwhile, God is also sending his power among the 70 other leaders, and those leaders begin to prophesy. Two of the leaders are out in the midst of the camp, and sure enough, someone came to Moses and complained that these two guys were prophesying in camp. Moses just said, "Good! I wish everybody was prophesying in camp!"

At one of the churches where I worked before, there was a coffee house, and there was a church member, Jerry, who was the kind of person who was always being vigilant, making sure that everything was in its place and nobody was doing anything suspicious. Usually it was quite a blessing to have his extra set of eyes, but every now and then he would miscalculate.

There was a group of kids with purple and green hair and goth clothing who would come and hang out in the coffee shop every day after school, and they weren't church members or in the youth group or anything like that, and Jerry had been suspicious of them for a while.

Well, one day Jerry came to me and said, "you know that group of kids who comes in at 3:30 every day," and I said, "yeah." He said, "Well, yesterday I saw them reading one of our Bibles..."

...and as soon as he said it, I could tell that he realized, "wait...that's a good thing!" And that was Moses's opinion, too!

People are prophesying in camp? Great! If there were seventy other leaders and a bunch of people in camp prophesying, maybe they could get some momentum back and get on with their journey. After all, there are always going to be complaints, and there are always going to be people—the rabble—who only want to complain.

There are often going to be legitimate complaints, as well, but there will always be petty complaints...and the best way to drown out petty complaints is with the spinning wheels of momentum—the sound of sandals on the ground and people moving forward where God is leading them.

But before the people could go forward, God had to take care of one more thing. Here's what happened to the people who ran out and picked up the quail:

³³ But while the meat was still between their teeth and before it could be consumed, the anger of the Lord burned against the people, and he struck them with a severe

plague. ³⁴ Therefore the place was named Kibroth Hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had craved other food.

³⁵ From Kibroth Hattaavah the people traveled to Hazeroth and stayed there.

Whoa...so God gave them quail, and then punished them for eating quail? Doesn't that seem like a trick?

Well, think about it this way: when Moses went and complained to God, God had a two-part response, right? He was going to give power to 70 elders, and he was going to send meat. The elders gathered at the tent of meeting in the center of the camp, and the quail fell outside the camp.

So...which do you think was the bigger deal for the Israelites: the quail, or the 70 elders?

The quail! They had been complaining about their food, and when God answered their complaint, they ran right out of the camp and started picking up the quail.

But what should have been the bigger story? The 70! The big news should have been, "God is going to give power to 70 more of our leaders! Let's go to the tabernacle and see!"

Instead of following God's will, many of the Israelites followed their complaints. They followed them right out of the camp, and as they were sitting outside the camp eating, God flared his nostrils again. They buried the people and named the place "Kibroth Hattaavah," which means, "graves of lust."

After this, the people moved on to the next camp.

At some point in life, each one of us is going to have complaints about what God is giving us, where He has put us, or how we feel like He has let us be treated.

But the good news we know is that God has revealed Himself not as a God who fumes in anger and takes the lives of those outside His camp. Instead, God is one who has laid down His own life so that anyone who wishes can enter the camp. These are the words that he gives us, the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:

25 "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? 27 Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' 32 For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. 33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Yes, each day has enough trouble of its own, and many reasons to complain. God hears our complaints, but he longs for us to find rest and comfort in Him. Eventually, our complaints can spoil us and tempt us away from what God has given us; but if we remain focused on the good and the wondrous things that God is doing, we will see that in Christ, He has provided for us in more ways than we can even imagine.