

ISRAELITES: COMPLAINING AND REBELLING

Numbers 10 - 33

STRUCTURE

Key-person: Moses

Key-location: The wilderness

Key-repetitions:

- People complained, then God usually disciplined: Israelites complained about hardship and manna. Fire and a plague came from God (11:1-9, 18-30); Miriam and Aaron complained against Moses because of his wife. Miriam had leprosy for 7 days (11:10-17); Ten spies complained about giants in the promised land. They died in a plague (13:28-33; 14:37); the Israelites believed the 10 spies and complained. They wandered in the wilderness for 40 years (14:1-34); Israelites complained because there was no water (20:2-6); Israelites grew impatient and complained against God and Moses. Snakes killed many (21:5-9).

- Revolted against God: God declared the Israelites would wander in the wilderness for 40 years. A group went up toward the hill to conquer the promised land (14:39-45); Moses struck the rock twice when God's command was to speak to it (20:2-13); Balaam disobeyed God when he went to Balak (22:21-35) and told the king how he could get the Israelites to sin (Nu 31:16); Israelites practiced sexual sins and idolatry (25:1-9).

- Moses and Aaron fell face-down before the Lord (14:5; 16:4, 22, 45; 20:6).

Key-attitudes:

- The constant complaining on the part of the Israelites.
- The frustration Moses felt when criticized.
- The 10 spies' unbelief and their fear of the giants.

- Caleb and Joshua's belief in God and their courage to confront an angry multitude.

- God's anger because of the constant complaining and attacks on Moses and Aaron.

- The Israelites' impatience with the long journey filled with constant hardships.

- Balaam's ambition and greed for financial gain.

- The Israelite men desired to have sex with the Moabite women.

- Moses feared the tribes of Reuben and Gad would discourage the Israelites when they desired to remain on the east side of the Jordan River.

Initial-situation:

The Lord liberated the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

At Mount Sinai, the Lord gave Moses the Ten Commandments and other laws.

Moses went up the mountain to be with God and stayed a long time. The Israelites asked Aaron to make them gods.

The Israelites constructed the Tabernacle as God's dwelling place among the people. Aaron and his sons were consecrated priests.

Initial-problem:

The Israelites complained about their hardships.

Final-situation:

Moses gave his last instructions to the Israelites, preparing them to enter the land the Lord promised them.

BIBLE STORY

Complaining and Revolting Against God

The Israelites complained about their food, "If only we had meat to eat! Remember the fish we ate for free in Egypt; we also had cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. Now nothing tastes good here. All we have is manna, manna, manna and more manna!" (11:1-9).

God set in motion a wind that drove quail in from the sea. The people gathered and prepared the quail. As soon as they put the meat in their mouth, before they swallowed it, God's anger blazed out. He struck them with a plague. There they buried the people who craved food other than manna (11:31-34).

Miriam and Aaron criticized Moses because of his Cushite black wife.

The Lord's anger blazed out against them and Miriam turned leprous, her skin was like snow. Aaron pleaded with Moses, "Please, my master, do not let her be like a stillborn infant coming from its mother's womb without half its flesh!"

Moses cried to the Lord, "O God, please heal her!"

The Lord replied, "Quarantine her outside the camp for seven days." Miriam was quarantined outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not march until she was readmitted (12:1-16).

The Spies Report; The People Revolt

The Lord told Moses, "Send men to explore the land of Canaan.

Moses sent twelve spies out to go through the land and check it out.

While the spies were exploring the land, they cut off a branch bearing a single cluster of grapes. It took two men to carry it on a pole between them. After forty days of scouting out the land, they returned to the camp (13:1-3, 17-21, 25).

They reported, "We went into the land to which you sent us. It does flow with milk and honey! Just look at this fruit. But the people who live there are strong. Their cities are fortified and huge (13:16-29).

Caleb interrupted, "Let's go up and take possession of the land."

But ten of the spies argued, "We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are. All the people we saw there are giants. Beside them, we felt like grasshoppers, and we looked like grasshoppers to them" (13:30-31).

That night all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron, "Why didn't we die in Egypt? Why did the Lord bring us to this land only to be killed by the sword? We would be better off returning to Egypt!"

Moses and Aaron fell face-down in front of the whole Israelite assembly. Joshua and Caleb, two members of the spy group, argued, "If the Lord is pleased with us, he will give us the land! Don't rebel against the Lord. Don't be afraid of those people. We will swallow them up. The Lord is on our side. Do not be afraid of them!"

But the assembly talked about stoning those two (14:1-10).

The glory of the Lord appeared at the Tabernacle. The Lord commanded Moses and Aaron to tell the grumbling Israelites, "The Lord is going to treat you the way you said he would. Every one of you whiners and grumblers who are twenty years old or more, your corpses are going to litter the wilderness and rot in the desert. Not one of you will enter the land except Caleb and Joshua. I will bring your children in to enjoy the land you rejected. Your children will live in the wilderness for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness. I, the Lord, have spoken".

The spies who had given a bad report were struck down and died of a plague. Of the twelve men who scouted the land, only Joshua and Caleb survived (14:20-38).

More Complaining and More Revolting

Early the next morning the people started out toward the high hill country. They said, "We have sinned; we will go up to the place the Lord promised."

But Moses told them, "You are disobeying the Lord's command. The Lord is not with you."

Nevertheless, in their presumption they went up toward the high hill country. The Amalekites and Canaanites who lived in the hill country came out of the hills, attacked them and beat them (14:39-45).

When the Israelites were camped in the Desert of Zin, Miriam died and was buried (20:1).

There was no water, and the people gathered in opposition against Moses and Aaron. They criticized Moses, "Why did you bring the Lord's community into this desert to die? Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain, no figs, no grapevines, no pomegranates, and there is no water to drink!"

Moses and Aaron went to the entrance to the Tabernacle and threw themselves face-down. The Lord told Moses, "Take the staff, and gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock that is in front of them, and it will pour out water."

Moses and Aaron rounded up the assembly in front of the rock. Moses spoke, "Listen, you rebels! Must we bring you water out of this rock?" Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock two times with his staff. Water gushed out.

The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, "You did not trust me, you did not honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites; therefore, you will not bring this community into the land I will give them" (20:2-13).

Aaron died when the Israelites came to Mount Hor (20:22-28).

They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea. The people grew impatient; they became irritable and spoke out against God and Moses. They said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! We detest this miserable food!"

Then the Lord sent them poisonous snakes. They bit the people, and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and you. Pray to the Lord; ask him to take the snakes away from us."

Moses prayed for the people.

The Lord told Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole. If anyone who is bitten looks at it, he will live." Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Anyone who was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake lived (21:4-9).

Balaam the Mercenary

King Balak of Moab offered the prophet Balaam great wealth if he would put a curse on the Israelites. Balaam refused to curse the Israelites, because God was with them (22-24); however, Balaam taught King Balak how to cause the Israelites to sin by eating food offered to idols and by taking part in sexual sin as a part of idol worship (31:16).

The Israelite men had sex with the Moabite women and with them, worshiped the god Baal of Peor.

The Lord told Moses to hang those guilty of idolatry (25:1-15).

The Lord told Moses to pay back the Midianites for tempting the Israelites with idolatry and immorality. Moses sent twelve thousand men into battle. They killed every Midianite man. The prophet Balaam was killed in the slaughter (31:1-12).

The Tribes Who Chose to Stay on the East of Jordan

The tribes of Reuben and Gad had herds and desired the land conquered from the Midianites, east of the Jordan River. Moses accused them of discouraging the Israelites. The families of Reuben and Gad agreed that the men would cross the Jordan with the other Israelites and would not return to their homes until every Israelite had received his inheritance (32:1-16).

Moses' Last Instructions to the Israelites

The Israelites were by the Jordan River across from Jericho. Moses gave them the Lord's message, "When you cross the Jordan into Canaan, drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you. Destroy all their carved images and their cast idols, and demolish all their high places. Take possession of the land and settle in it. Distribute the land by lot, according to your family groups.

"If you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides. They will bring you trouble in the land where you will live. And then I will punish you as I planned to punish them" (33:50-56).

By the side of the Jordan River, Moses made the speeches that are found in the book of Deuteronomy.

Moses climbed up Mount Nebo, which is across from Jericho. The Lord showed him all the land of Canaan. Then Moses, the Lord's servant, died there. Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet he had perfect vision and he was still strong (Dt 34:1-8).

GENERIC DIALOGUE QUESTIONS

1. What catches your attention in the story?
2. Is there anything in the story that is hard to understand?
3. Who are the main characters in the story?
4. What problems did the characters face?
5. How did the characters face their problems?
6. How have you faced similar problems?
7. Is there someone in the story who is similar to you or who is different from you?
8. What does the story tell about God?

SPECIFIC DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When the people complained, how did God discipline them?
2. How did Moses deal with the people's complaining?
3. What was the result of the people accepting the majority report of the 10 spies who lacked faith instead of the minority report of the two spies who had faith in God?
4. Why was Moses prevented from entering the Promised Land?
5. What tempts you to complain?

LIFE-LESSONS

1. When a person faces problems, his character is revealed. As a result, two people can face the same problem in different ways. The ten spies saw the giants and forgot about God's power, while Caleb and Joshua saw God's power and didn't fear the giants (Nu 13:25-33; 14:5-9).
2. Murmuring is a sign of distrust of God. It leads one to sin and can test the patience of the Lord. The Israelites' murmuring was proof that they didn't believe that God could give them the Promised Land (Nu 14:1-4). The Israelites were camped in a location that lacked water. They complained and accused Moses and Aaron because they had no water (Nu 20:3-5). Paul referred to this episode and gave the counsel, "Do not complain as some of them did" (1 Cor 10:10). The Israelites' complaining tested God's patience (Nu 21:4-6; 1 Cor 10:9) and he sent poisonous snakes that bit and killed many of the Israelites.
3. Those who forget God's actions of the past, rebel against him because they lack faith to trust God for victory over present situations. Each time the Israelites forgot God's past actions in their favor, they failed to trust him to give them victory over current situations and problems, and they erred. When Moses was on the mountain for forty days, they felt insecure without his presence and made the golden calf (Ex 32:1-35). When they heard the

ten spies' report, they lacked faith to conquer Canaan, rebelled and rioted against God (Nu 13-14).

4. The consequence of disobeying God may be that a person will experience his greatest fears. The greatest fear of the Israelites was that they would die in the wilderness (Nu 14:2-3). The result of not believing in God was that they wandered in the desert until they died (Nu 14:34).
5. God's punishment for sin should lead to repentance. The Israelites' complaining tested the
6. Lord's patience (1 Cor 10:9). God punished them with poisonous snakes (Nu 21:6). Then the Israelites recognized their sin (Nu 21:7).
6. Salvation is available only to those who accept the plan established by God. When the poisonous snakes invaded the Israelites' camp, the Lord instructed Moses to make a snake and put it up on a pole. Anyone who was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake lived. There was only one way to be saved from the snake bite: trust God's promise and look at the bronze snake (21:4-9).