

**CRITICISM:
A LEADER'S MOST DIFFICULT CHALLENGE**
Numbers 11 - 21

I. Introduction.

A. To whine or not to whine, that is the question.

- 1) Whine (definition): *To complain or protest in a childish, annoying fashion. (The American Heritage Dictionary. Definition #2.).*
- 2) Synonyms: grumble, complain, belly-ache, murmur, mutter, wail, gripe, quarrel, etc.

B. Whiners Anonymous.

1) Whining is an old problem.

Though the problem was present before Moses, it is during the exodus that whining achieved its classic expression.

a. The book of Exodus.

- *Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, "Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians"? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert! (Exodus 14:11-12)*
- *So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What are we to drink?" (Exodus 15:24)*
- *If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat & ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death. (Exodus 16:2-3)*
- Etc.

b. The book of Numbers (our study today).



II. Chart of Numbers 11 - 21.

Numbers 10:11 – 21:35 tells the story of Israel's march from Mount Sinai to the plains of Moab (border of Canaan). It took **38 years** to make the journey! The book of Numbers helps us to understand why they wandered aimlessly for so long. One of the primary reasons was this: they grumbled and complained. The following chart outlines the primary stages of this part of their journey and focuses on the complaints that Moses (and God!) had to confront.

Scripture & Setting	The Complaint	Moses' Reaction	God's Reaction
<p>Numbers 11:1-3 Taberah (=burning)</p> <p>The people complain about hardships of the journey (1).</p>	<p>The people complained (1)</p>	<p>He prays to the Lord and the fire died down (2).</p>	<p>His anger is aroused and he consumes some of the people with fire (1-3).</p>
<p>Numbers 11:4-35 Kibroth Hattaavah (=graves of craving)</p> <p>The people (especially the "rabble") are weary of manna and crave the foods they knew in Egypt (4-6).</p> <p>They wail (4,10,13,18,20).</p>	<p>"If only we had meat to eat! 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!" (vv. 4-6).</p> <p>"Why did we ever leave Egypt?" (20).</p>	<p>Moses is troubled and prays: "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them as a nurse carries an infant...? Where can I get meat for all these people?... I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, put me to death right now – if I have found favor in your eyes (10-15).</p>	<p>He becomes exceedingly angry (10,33).</p> <p>After Moses' prayer (11-15) God takes the Spirit that is on Moses and puts Him on 70 elders (16-30). "They will help you carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone" (17).</p> <p>Then God sends meat – quail, lots of quail! With the quail comes a severe plague (18-23, 31-34).</p>



<p>Numbers 12:1-16</p> <p>Hazereth</p> <p>Miriam and Aaron (older siblings!) are upset with Moses ostensibly because of his marriage to a Cushite woman (1).</p>	<p>"Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Hasn't he also spoken through us?" (2)</p>	<p>Moses cries out to the Lord: "O God, please heal her!" (13)</p>	<p>"Come out to the Tent of Meeting, all three of you!" (4)</p> <p>"Why were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" (8).</p> <p>God's anger burned against them (9)</p> <p>Miriam is smitten with leprosy (10).</p>
<p>Numbers 13 - 14</p> <p>Kadesh</p> <p>Twelve spies report on the land. It is all that God said it would be... except "the people who live there are very powerful and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there..." (13:26-29).</p> <p>Caleb and Joshua say, "We can do it" (13:30).</p> <p>The ten others give a "bad report" saying "We can't... We seem like grasshoppers" (13:31-33).</p>	<p>All the people raised their voices and wept and grumbled against Moses and Aaron: "If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt? We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt." (14:1-4).</p> <p>The whole assembly talked about stoning them. (14:10).</p>	<p>Moses and Aaron fall face down... Joshua and Caleb tear their clothes... and they say to the people: "Do not rebel against the Lord. Do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up... the Lord is with us..." (14:5-9).</p> <p>Confronted with God's anger and decision to destroy the people, he prays: "Then the Egyptians will hear about it!... and the nations will say, "The Lord was not able to bring these people into the land he promised..." Lord, you have declared that you are slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion... In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now." (14:13-19).</p>	<p>The Lord said to Moses, "How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them? I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they." (14:10-12).</p> <p>After Moses prays: "I have forgiven them, as you asked. Nevertheless... not one of the men who disobeyed me and tested me ten times – not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers.... Turn back tomorrow and set out toward the desert... In this desert your bodies will fall...except Caleb and Joshua... (14:20-35).</p>



<p>Numbers 16:1- 17:13</p> <p>Korah, Dathan and Abiram lead a populist revolt.</p>	<p>Korah, Dathan and Abiram became insolent and rose up against Moses. With them were 250 men, well-known community leaders... they came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron saying: "You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord's assembly?" (1-3).</p> <p>When summoned, they refuse. "We will not come! Isn't it enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the desert? And now you also want to lord it over us? Moreover, you haven't brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey or given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards... No, we will not come!" (12-15).</p>	<p>Moses fell facedown and said to them: "In the morning the Lord will show who belongs to him and who is holy... Take censers and come before the Lord... You Levites have gone too far! Isn't it enough for you that God has separated you from the rest of the community and brought you near himself to work at the tabernacle but now you are trying to get the priesthood too. It is against the Lord that you have banded together. Who is Aaron that you should grumble against him?" (4-11).</p> <p>He prays: "Lord, do not accept their offering" (15).</p> <p>He prays: "O God, will you be angry with the entire assembly when only one man sins?" (22).</p> <p>Moses' speech before judgment falls: "This is how you will know that the Lord has sent me to do all these things and that it was not my idea... if the earth opens up its mouth and swallows them then you will know... (28-30).</p>	<p>The glory of the Lord appears (19).</p> <p>God warns the assembly to move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram (23-30).</p> <p>The ground split apart and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed Korah, Dathan, Abiram and their families... they went down alive into the grave, with everything they owned... and fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense (31-35).</p>
<p>Numbers 16:41-50</p>	<p>After Korah and his cohorts are destroyed, the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron: "You have killed the Lord's people. (41).</p>	<p>Moses and Aaron fall facedown (45).</p> <p>Aaron intercedes and makes atonement... he stands with his censer between the living and the dead and stops the plague (46-50).</p>	<p>"Get away from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once" (45).</p> <p>God sends a plague and 14,700 people die (46-50).</p>



<p>Numbers 17:1-13</p>			<p>Finally, God shows definitively who He has chosen: "The staff belonging to the man I choose will sprout, and I will rid myself of this constant grumbling against you by the Israelites." (17:1-13).</p>
<p>Numbers 20:1-13 Meribah (=quarreling)</p> <p>Traveling in desert of Zin to Kadesh. No water!</p>	<p>The people gather in opposition to Moses and Aaron and quarrel with them: "If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the Lord! Why did you bring the Lord's community into this desert, that we and our livestock should die here? Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!" (2-5)</p>	<p>Moses and Aaron fall facedown (6).</p> <p>Moses takes the staff and gathers the assembly in front of the rock: "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out and the community drank (9-11).</p>	<p>The glory of the Lord appears (6).</p> <p>God's instructions to Moses are clear: "Take the staff, and you and Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to the rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water" (7-8).</p> <p>The Lord says to Moses and Aaron: "Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them" (12).</p>
<p>Numbers 21:4-9</p> <p>Traveling around Edom.</p>	<p>The people grew impatient on the way. They spoke against God and against Moses: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!" (4-5).</p>	<p>Moses prayed for the people when they repented and sought God's favor (7).</p>	<p>The Lord sent venomous snakes among them. They bit the people and many died. (6)</p> <p>In response to his prayer, God instructs Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. "Anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." (8-9).</p>



III. Summary of Numbers 11 – 21.

A. The causes of grumbling.

1) Surface causes (symptoms).

- a. Hardships (11:1).
- b. Bad food (manna!) (11:4-6; 21:4-5).
- c. No food or water (20:2-5; 21:4-5).
- d. The leader's wife! (12:1).
- e. Dangers, risks and an uncertain future (14:1-4).
- f. "Incompetent" leadership (16:12-15).
- g. "Dictatorial" leadership (12:2; 16:1-3, 12-15, 41).

2) Root Causes.

- a. **Double-mindedness.** Mid-way between Egypt and Canaan, the people often found themselves wanting to go both forward and backward at the same time! (Numbers 11:4-6; 14:2-4; etc.). This is not only a picture of human sinfulness. It is also a recipe for insanity! The Bible tells us that a double-minded man is **unstable in all he does** (James 1:8).
- b. **Jealousy.** It is clear in the complaints that come from both Myrian and Aaron (12:1-16) and those that come from Korah, Dathan and Abiram (16:1-50) that the underlying issue was jealousy... competition... jockeying for position. Because of their own **selfish ambition**, they fabricated supposed wrongs that Moses had committed (bad marriage, abuse of power, etc.). The cause of conflict was not in Moses, but in the hearts of those who were jealous of his position.
- c. **Fear (= unbelief = rebellion).** The people again criticize Moses at Kadesh Barnea. Ostensibly, the reason for their complaint was his poor leadership and incompetence. However, the real reason was the people's disobedient unbelief in the **power** and **promises** of God. They were paralyzed by their fears!

Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief. (Hebrews 3:16-19).



B. The response (of Moses) to grumbling.

1) In the book of Numbers, every time the people complain Moses responds in the same way: **he prays!**

a. Sometimes his prayer is itself a **complaint (!)** to God (11:10-15).

b. Sometimes his prayer is an **intercession** for the whiners:

- i. Healing for Miriam's leprosy (12:13).
- ii. Forgiveness for the offenders (14:13-19).
- iii. Atonement for sinners (16:46-50).
- iv. Judgment to be spared (16:22).

c. Sometimes his prayer seeks **vindication** from God (16:15).

2) However, there was one occasion (20:9-11) when Moses apparently failed to pray! And the consequences were tragic. Perhaps it was the lack of prayer that explains the volcanic eruption of **anger and rage** which led to his exclusion from Canaan. (Next month we'll look at this incident in more detail.)

IV. The Perils of Leading Whiners.

To be a leader is to wear a target on your chest... all the time. Especially for those who seek to lead others in a godly manner, the risks are great. Many will assume that you are the person divinely ordained to listen and respond to their grievances! Here are some of the perils of spiritual leadership.

A. **Discouragement / Depression / Despair.** Few things have a greater potential for making a leader want to quit and throw in the towel than when those he leads are constantly whining. Moses was so disheartened he wanted **to die** (11:15).

B. **Being misunderstood.** Although Moses was the humblest man in all the earth (12:3), his **motives** were maligned. His own siblings accused him of arrogance (12:2) and a group of Levites accused him of overstepping his authority and thinking he was "above" other people (16:1-3).

C. **Anger / Cynicism / Contempt.** Over time, the whining got to Moses. In the early years, he was able to respond to the criticism and complaints by praying for the people's welfare and overcoming evil with good. But eventually, the whining wore him down and his ugly outburst of anger at Meribah (20:1-13) was his undoing.



TABLE TALK

1. Talk about a time when you were seeking to lead others (as a father, parent, foreman, boss, ministry leader, etc.) and were criticized. How did you feel?

2. In the light of our study this morning, how would you handle the situation differently if you could go back and do it again?

3. Talk about a time when you grumbled and criticized someone else's leadership (boss, parent, pastor, government figure, etc.).

4. In the light of our study this morning, how would you handle the situation differently if you could go back and do it again?

V. Resolving Conflict God's Way.

A. The world (as opposed to the Kingdom) says that conflict can be "resolved" by:

- 1) **Warfare.** The way to settle a dispute is to meet on a field of battle (legal, military, financial, etc.) and slug it out. The conflict will be settled when one of us "wins."

- 2) **Pulling rank.** Conflicts are settled when the leader asserts his/her rank (boss, husband, pastor, parent, etc.) and demands submission. The basic idea here is: "Submit to my authority or leave!"

- 3) **Passivity, Denial, Giving-in.** Some try to resolve conflicts by "giving in" and letting the other person have his/her way! (But what if the other person is Saddam Hussein?)



B. Resolving conflict God's way¹.

- 1) Make a decision to **glorify God** in how this conflict is handled!

So...whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

The key question is not: *How can I **get my way** in this matter?*

But rather: *How can I please and **honor the Lord** in this situation?*

In conflict, we have a golden opportunity to:

- a. Trust God.
 - b. Obey his commandments.
 - c. Serve and love one another.
 - d. Grow in Christ-likeness.
- 2) Get **the log** out of your own eye first.

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?... You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Matthew 7:3-5).

The key question is not: *How was I **wronged**?*

But rather: *How have I **contributed** to this conflict and what do I need to do?*

When it is appropriate, take responsibility for your actions and attitudes which helped to fuel the conflict. Practice the seven A's of confession:

1. **Address** everyone involved.

The circle of confession should be only as large as the circle of those who were hurt or offended.

2. **Avoid "if", "but", and "maybe"**.

You are not ready to reconcile if all you can say is, "If I offended you, then I'm sorry."

¹ The basic concepts of this outline come from Ken Sande's book *The Peacemaker* (Baker Book House, 1991).



3. Admit specifically.

Confession is meaningful only when it is specific. Name your sin. "Well, none of us is perfect," will not do.

4. Apologize.

"I was wrong for _____ and I'm so sorry," is a good place to begin.

5. Accept the consequences.

When restitution can be made, do it. When it can't, forgive and move on.

6. Alter your behavior.

Words without actions to back them up will only increase interpersonal distance and psychological pain. You are not ready to reconcile until you are ready to give up your sins.

7. Ask for forgiveness.

When you have said all the above, then humbly ask, "Will you, can you, forgive me?"

Only when I have taken care of the "plank" in my own eye am I then ready to help my brother with the "speck of sawdust" in his eye...

3) Go and show your brother his fault.

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. (Matt.18:15).

The key question here is: *How can I help others to understand how they have contributed to this conflict?*

- a. When to confront?
 - When someone has something against you (Matthew 5:23-24).
 - When someone's sins are too serious to overlook (Luke 17:3; Gal. 6:1).
- b. Speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15).
- c. Be quick to listen (James 1:19).



- d. When peace is not restored through private conversations....
- Take one or two other along (Matthew 18:16).
 - Tell it to the church (Matthew 18:17).
 - Treat him as a non-believer (Matthew 18:17).

4) Go and **be reconciled**.

First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift (Matthew 5:24).

The key question here is: *How can I demonstrate forgiveness and encourage a reasonable solution to this conflict?*

- a. Extend forgiveness. Forgive others just as God forgave you (Col. 3:12-14).

Remember: Forgiveness is not:

- **A Feeling**
- **Forgetting**
- **Excusing**

Rather, Forgiveness is:

- Accepting the consequences.
- Refusing to bring up the incident again and use it as a weapon against the offender.
- Not allowing the incident separate us.

- b. Practice **love!** This is our ultimate weapon for dealing with conflict. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:21).

TABLE TALK

1. Look again at "Resolving Conflict God's Way" (pages 6-9). What struck you the most as we went through this material?
2. Is there a conflict now in your life that needs resolution? (Share about it if you can.)
3. If yes, what do you believe God wants *you to* do in the light of this study today?

