

“All the Voices in My Head”

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“They soon forgot what he had done, and did not wait for his plan to unfold.”

Numbers 11:4-23

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Not my strong suit

In reading and listening about Numbers 11, the most common response is, “Can you believe this unbelief?” One commentary has captions like this: “The disappointing people,” “Grumbling about life’s adversities” or “...deficiencies,” About Moses: “The vulnerable leader” – including subtitles like “Moses exaggerated the problems of leadership” and “Moses forgot the privilege of leadership.”

How could these people in the desert complain and disbelieve after all God had done? He sent plagues on the Egyptians, then provided them with more plunder than they could carry. He parted the Red Sea and gave them his presence and law at Mount Sinai. He provided food in the desert. He set them free after four centuries in slavery.

And Moses? He grew up in a palace, ran away and still got a wife and two sons. God appeared to him in a burning bush. He saw God face-to-face, an almost unheard-of privilege for humans in the Old Testament, and regularly had conversations with God. We would all believe and be faithful if we had Moses’ privileges, right?

Instead, the more I have pondered this chapter this week, the more I feel for Moses as the leader. I also feel for the followers, the Israelites, as well. I don’t feel for God. He is not threatened by any of this. He knows what he’s doing and why.

I have to work at empathy, I will admit. I’m not hardwired for it, nor is it necessarily a strong trait among Thompsons. Contrast that with my wife Linda, who can convey empathy easily with words or a hug or even a look. She’s so empathetic she

even feels for me in my lack of empathy and says I'm too hard on myself. I guess if my wife thinks I have more empathy than I think I have, that's good.

It's probably by osmosis from Linda, combined with 40 years in ministry or the grace of God at work through 64 years of life, that my capacity for empathy has grown.

Voices in the camp

I feel for the Israelites. There are so many voices in their heads.

Whining is contagious (4). Verse 4 begins, "The rabble with them began to crave other food." Apparently, "rabble" refers to non-Israelites who tagged along with the Exodus just because they wanted to get out of Egypt. They were confined to the edges of the camp, which was for "unclean" things and people. These people had started the complaining, and God answered by torching some of the outskirts of the camp. Moses' intercession had stopped God's judgment (1-3), but now, in verse 4, this same "rabble" starts the complaints about food specifically.

Soon "the Israelites started wailing." When the voices in your ears (not just your head) are all whining, it's hard not to join them. Whining is contagious.

Slavery was stuck in their heads (5-6). "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost," they say, "also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna."

Generational slavery is not that easy to eradicate from your patterns of thinking and behavior. Think of the parallels with generational abuse or crime or poverty. You may say, because it's not part of your story, that people should just accept the chance to start fresh if they have it. It's not that easy.

True, but they lived on the best land Egypt had to offer – Goshen, because that's what Pharaoh had given Joseph out of gratitude for saving Egypt from ruin during the famine generations earlier. For all their harshness they had endured, they at least had good food to eat and plentiful fresh water to drink, irrigate their crops, and graze their flocks. They say all this was "free" but it came at the cost of forced labor.

The desert can be terrifying (7-9). The description of manna in verses 7-9 is there in part to tell us it wasn't all bad. But it was still manna, and it was all they had eaten for a year except a brief provision of quail in Exodus 18. It's not that you couldn't survive and even be happy on manna for a day or a week. But for a year? Now they've moved on from Sinai to an even more remote part of the Sinai Peninsula. It's only been three days, but it's the terrifying prospect of things going downhill that evokes empathy in me.

That and this, at risk of trivializing what they're dealing with. The manna tasted like "coriander seed," so Bruce Carlton brought me a bag of coriander seed at my birthday breakfast with some guys Friday morning. It's not like eating dirt or anything

rotten. Later Friday, I had pancakes and syrup for breakfast, a chocolate ice cream cone in the afternoon, and Linda's homemade chocolate meringue pie for dessert in the evening. There's not a person here who wouldn't complain if you had none of your favorites for a year and no prospect of anything different.

I also feel for Moses.

He didn't want this job (10-11). It seems like he's just another whiner in verses 10-11, because when the whining spreads in the camp Moses says to God in so many words, "Why did you give me this job? Is it because I made you mad?"

You may recall that when God called Moses at the burning bush, Moses had pushed back with five excuses: Who am I? They won't listen to me. I have a speech impediment. And so on. In other words, Moses is now telling God, "I told you so. I knew I was the wrong man for the job and look how it's turned out."

He's not equipped (12-13). The next part of Moses' complaint seems kind of odd because he uses an analogy more appropriate to a female. "Did I birth these people? Can I suckle them?" That's actually the point of his complaint, apparently. These people need a wet nurse, and I'm a guy. It's an analogy, of course, but it's rather vivid and poignant. You have heard of spiritual gifts, and Moses is essentially saying, "These people need gifts like leadership, administration, and wisdom. I don't have those gifts."

I get it. There are times I think my staff or others need the gift of encouragement. That's Linda's strongest gift. As I said, I'm not hardwired for it. I try, but it's not my strong suit. I can organize myself or a group for anything that needs organizing. But that's not always what is needed. I feel for Moses.

Leadership is a burden (14). Moses adds, "I cannot carry all these people by myself. The burden is too heavy for me." Again, I get it. And you might too – whether you're a teacher or a healthcare worker or any other kind of leader in this current environment. "I didn't sign up for this."

Most of the time, leadership feels like a privilege to leaders. People look to you for direction and perspective. You find the "sweet spot" in your role, figure out how to balance your time and what needs your greatest attention, and you sail along – usually toward the outer limits of your expendable energy. Then, just about when you think everything's leveled out – a crisis hits. In my world, it might be a funeral or a criticism or...oh, hey, a pandemic! The rules suddenly change and the burden of leadership becomes more than you bargained for. Moses gets sympathy from me at this point.

Depression is illogical (15). Even with all of that, however, what Moses says in verse 15 is not reasonable. "This is so hard, God, that you'd do me a favor by letting me die, right now." It's not logical. That's the point. Depression never is. Nobody knows that more than those who battle depression.

It's not 2+2=4 to say, "Hard times + Crisis = Death wish." Something triggers in the brain that those of us who don't battle depression have a hard time understanding. Through the years, even as a person for whom empathy is not natural, by the grace of God I've learned how important it is to try to put myself in the shoes of those who don't have my genes or my opportunities or my family. I've learned to empathize with those who experience same sex attraction or those who can't seem to work their way out of poverty or need, even those who can't relate to God or grow spiritually.

On this subject, I know that great men and women have struggled with depression and suicidal thoughts, including Martin Luther and Charles Spurgeon, and in the Bible, Elijah, Job, and Moses. Some of the kindest, most gracious Christians I personally know in this church family battle with various forms of mental illness, including depression. They would be the first to flip a switch in their head and stop thinking or feeling that way if they could. It's not that easy.

The voice of God

So I feel for the Israelites and I feel for Moses in this passage. But I don't "feel" for God. He doesn't need pity, empathy, sympathy, or correction. He's not like Bruce Almighty. Yes, he gets mad too and he expresses strong words and takes strong actions. But I don't say, "Poor God. He must be having a tough day." God doesn't have tough days. He's the same yesterday, today, and forever. He's got this.

God tells Moses first, "Help is on the way!" Moses had said, "I can't do this alone." He's been listening to all these voices, but hasn't been listening for God's voice. God says to him, "I never planned for you to bear this alone. I'm in it with you and for you. And I've also called and equipped others to share the burden of leadership."

God tells Moses to call seventy of the existing leaders to the tent of meeting. There God says, "I will take some of the power of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them. They will share the burden of the people with you so that you will not have to carry it alone" (17). That's really the root of the problem – that Moses assumed he was the only one who could listen to God and speak for God.

It's not that God is taking away any of his Spirit or power from Moses, like there was a limited supply that had to be shared. Instead, it's that God is going to take those same qualities and spread them out further. Moses had a Superman complex – and I can empathize with that too. A lot of us with leadership burdens are prone to assume nobody can do it like we can do it – nobody can represent God like we can.

Second, God tells Moses, "Meat is on the way!" This is the part where I'm saying God gets the benefit of the doubt in any Scripture passage. If we don't understand his ways, it's because he's God and we're not. We may think his response is overreach – he starts a fire in verse 2, he's "exceedingly angry" in verse 10, and in verses 18-20 he says to Moses, "You tell those people if they want meat they're going to have so much of it

they'll vomit out their mouths and noses." Sure enough, when the quail arrive, they cover thousands of square miles and as greed prompts the greedy people to hoard more than they need, it turns to a plague and many of them die (31-34).

Still, though, it's not because God has "lost it." God never loses it. But at moments in biblical history (and beyond), God makes dramatic gestures designed to leave an indelible imprint on his people – then and now. In addition to his rage at sin and unbelief in this passage, God also gives Moses a very practical response.

Third, God tells Moses, "Power is on the way!" Moses still tells God in verse 21, in so many words, "I don't even think YOU can provide enough meat for all these people." Imagine telling the Creator of earth and stars, "This is too big for you."

God answers "Is my arm too short? Do I look like a tyrannosaurus rex to you with a giant body and itty bitty arms? I'll show you something." God empowers other leaders with the same Spirit Moses has, and then he fills the desert for miles around with sea quail. The play on words is in the word "Spirit" and "wind" which are the same Hebrew word. God's power may be invisible (like wind), but it's not limited.

Lessons

So what are the lessons of Numbers 11 for us? They're for leaders and followers.

First, expect a cacophony of voices. I'm always amazed in a time of conflict or uncertainty when we're amazed that others don't get it. When has there ever been a time when everyone "got it"? When has everyone agreed on what God is doing or the way forward? When in any nation or church or even family is everyone on the same page, and would that even be a good thing? Sometimes there are just differences of opinion or background – but often there are differences of spiritual maturity and attention to God's word and his Spirit.

1 John 4:1 says, "Do not believe every spirit." That would include "spirits" who claim to be prophesying from God. Test every spirit, including me.

I try to remind myself that I might not be the mature one. But even if I am, if I'm the one most representing God's heart and his perspective, why would I expect that everyone else would be at the same place or give me the benefit of the doubt? One of the lessons here is to expect a variety of voices and not be taken aback by them.

Second, take seriously the warnings. That's Paul's primary point in 1 Corinthians 10. It's not that God judges in the same way – with fire or quail until you're nauseated. But God takes sin seriously, and he will deal with it. Sometimes God will give you exactly what you asked for, what you thought you wanted, and let you see that your sinful desires will destroy you. Sometimes he'll give you the freedom you thought you wanted to run away from a hard situation and you'll find you miss something you never

realized you had in abundance. Sometimes he'll answer your prayers and you'll find out you shouldn't have prayed for that in the first place.

These stories are given to us as warnings. Be careful what you long for. Conversely, be content with where you are. God has put you there because right there he is working on your peace and your joy and your trust and your contentment.

Paul goes on to say in verse 13 that your temptations may be common but your God is anything but. He is faithful and he will provide a way out.

Third, trust his heart and his plan. Psalm 106 is one of the places where later biblical writers reflect on the story of Numbers 11 – and, in fact, on the entire wilderness experience. Here is what the psalmist says –

*But they soon forgot what he had done
and did not wait for his plan to unfold.
In the desert they gave in to their craving;
in the wilderness they put God to the test.*

They “did not wait for his plan to unfold.” He was taking them to the Promised Land, but the wilderness was a necessary pit stop. It could have been a much shorter trip, as we'll see next week and beyond, but they were impatient and unbelieving. Sometimes it requires a lot of waiting and always it requires a lot of trusting.

Finally, take your complaints to the top. God responds to Moses with so much more kindness than he does the people. It's not that he loves Moses more. It's that Moses takes grumbles to God while the people spread discontent among each other.

God and I have this in common as leaders: I'd rather you talk to me than about me. It's human nature to get other whiners on board and then complain to the leadership, but part of the “example” of Numbers 11 is that God hates that.

On the other hand, the entire Bible, especially the Psalms, shows us that God is so patient and kind when we take our complaints directly to him. With few but notable exceptions in the Bible, those who complain to God are met with empathy and patience.

Jesus himself makes one of the Psalms of Lament among the most famous quotes in the Bible: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus never spread discontent or doubt about God's ways horizontally. He went directly to God.

Then he died, but his death was not in vain. His death was “a way out” as every death is for the believer. His death was our life. Take your longings and your doubts directly to him. He'll show you the way forward. Amen.