

# Numbers 11 Part 2: The Grave of Craving

By  
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*“Now a wind went out from the LORD, and it brought quail from the sea and left them fluttering near the camp, about a day’s journey on this side and about a day’s journey on the other side, all around the camp, and about two cubits above the surface of the ground. And the people stayed up all that day, all night, and all the next day, and gathered the quail (he who gathered least gathered ten homers); and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp. But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the wrath of the LORD was aroused against the people, and the LORD struck the people with a very great plague. So he called the name of that place Kibroth Hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had yielded to craving.”*  
-Numbers 11:31-34

Last week we looked at the beginning of Numbers 11. In these first few verses we see the Israelites complaining against God about the difficulties that they were facing in the wilderness. And then we see complaints from Moses towards God about how he feels mistreated in his call towards the Israelite people. In both instances we talked about how the people and Moses had both failed to retain the lessons from their own stories. Instead of seeing their past clearly, they had severely distorted their own previous experiences with God and therefore they had learned toxic lessons from their past that began to pollute their current view of God and their circumstances.

In today’s study, we will look at the consequences of that failure. We will talk more about Moses’ consequences in next week’s study in Numbers 12, but in essence, Moses’ punishment is the same as the people. God disciplines His people by giving them over to exactly what they wanted, and allowing their own corrupt desires to punish them. That is why, at the end of this story, the people name the place where they complained “Kibroth Hattaavah”, which literally means, “the grave of craving”.

The message here is fairly simple to understand, but incredibly difficult to apply. When we are governed by corrupt desires, our end will be tragic. This is one of the most basic teachings throughout scripture:

*“Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves...”*

*-Romans 1:24*

The primary way that God judges sin is by simply allowing the natural consequences of sin to judge. This is why we are told in Scripture: “...*the wages of sin is death...*” (*Romans 6:23*). We aren’t told that “the judgement of sin is death” but the “wages”. Meaning that death is the natural “payment” that we accrue in any behavior that is “sinful”.

This is a helpful thing to understand. Many people engaging in sin are waiting for divine retribution to come in the form of a lightning bolt or some sort of external judgement from God. Those who are waiting for such a thing might be surprised when seemingly no judgement happens even when they engage in blatant sin, but this is the normal way that God deals with His children. To be sure, God does, on occasion, reign down judgement from on high, like with Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10, or Ananias and Saphira in Acts 5. But normally, God won’t do this, as He says to His people later in this same book:

*“But if you do not do so, then take note, you have sinned against the LORD; and be sure your sin will find you out.”*

*-Numbers 32:23*

This is a truth that is found throughout the world, in virtually every recorded culture. This is what we find in the story of Pandora in Greek mythology, it is the story of Rapunzel, Pirates of the Caribbean, and even Willy Wonka. Because our desires are wrong, when we get what we wish for that is the actual curse and punishment. Even though God in this story, it seems like their punishment may have been divine in its origin, the message is still blatant and clear:

*“But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the wrath of the LORD was aroused against the people, and the LORD struck the people with a very great plague.”*

*-Numbers 11:33*

God specifically waits until the people of Israel partake of the meat *before* He judges them. He does this to demonstrate to them this very truth, the curse was not the death they suffered, but the meat itself brought the curse. This is the exact same lesson that we learn in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve feared that death would result from eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and so they hid themselves from God after they

partook of the forbidden fruit fearing His retribution. They did this not understanding that by merely eating the fruit they had already suffered the consequences, their sin had found them out.

*“For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things.”*

*-Philippians 3:18-19*

## Complaint and Lust

*“Now the mixed multitude who were among them yielded to intense craving; so the children of Israel also wept again and said: “Who will give us meat to eat?”*

*-Numbers 11:4*

We also see that it was their lust that brings about the complaint that God ends up judging. I really like how the New King James puts this when it says that they “yielded to intense craving...” This phrase insinuates something that is deeply profound. It shows us that at all times, there are various desires in our hearts that are bad for us, and over time our resistance to these desires can wear thin and we can fall to our lustful desires.

We see this with the nation itself, but we also see this even more clearly with Moses himself. Moses has been fairly good about resisting his anger towards the people of Israel, but over time, his “lust”, his desire to be rid of his responsibility for these people, overcomes him, or to put it differently, he yielded to his lust and complained against God in a similar way to how the people of Israel yielded to theirs. I like how Joseph Exell put this in his commentary on this passage:

*“An evil heart is the source of all sins, and the evil heart almost always shows itself in a state of inward discontent which finds vent in outward complaints. Hence the “unthankful” are next door to the “unholy” (2Ti. 3:2), and all one with the “evil” (Luk. 6:35). A discontented heart is a hot-bed of every kind of sin.”*

*-Joseph Exell - The Pulpit Commentary*

When we yield to our craving, we forget to be content with the things that God has given to us and we find in ourselves an instant, insatiable desire to pursue something that is forbidden to us. A simple example can be seen in eating. Let’s say that we are trying to follow through with a diet. So daily we deal with a type of craving for the forbidden sweets that we enjoy so much. Over time our resolve weakens, and then when we finally fall to our temptation, we tend to indulge ourselves in all the things that we were

denying. It's as though all the contentment we were feeling prior was a lie and we find our current situation, suddenly, unbearable.

But once they yielded to their craving, since they had no way of obtaining their lustful desire, they turned to complaining. We can think of complaining, in this context, as a form of "cultivating" their lust. What was being resisted only moments earlier is now given full vent. This fact helps us understand the symbol of fire that we find at the beginning of the chapter.

*"Now when the people complained, it displeased the LORD; for the LORD heard it, and His anger was aroused. So the fire of the LORD burned among them, and consumed some in the outskirts of the camp."*

*-Numbers 11:1*

Even though this is a separate instance than what we find in the rest of this chapter, it symbolically captures the overall narrative of Numbers 11, as well as various other failures that we find throughout this book. Biblically, fire can symbolize purity, holiness, judgement, divine power, spirit, and many other things. However, even though this punishment does demonstrate God's holiness and purity, it is also a sign of what we talked about earlier, that our sin finds us out. Because fire in the Bible can also be a symbol of lust:

*"The leech has two daughters— Give and Give! There are three things that are never satisfied, Four never say, "Enough!": The grave, The barren womb, The earth that is not satisfied with water—And the fire never says, "Enough!"*

*-Proverbs 30:15-16*

Fitting in with our theme of complaint that is in this chapter, the word translated "leech" is a word that does refer to a parasitic creature, but it seems to derive from an Aramaic word that describes a mythical vampire-like creature. In other words this Proverb warns us that when we yield to our cravings we become parasitic in our outlook. Looking to take from others and we cease to be those who support others in a loving, self-sacrificing way. But also notice how insatiable lust is compared to the barren womb, the dry earth, and the fire.

This is for two reasons. The first is that a fire's "hunger" must be tended to. If a fire is denied food, it will eventually die out. But once the fire begins to grow, we must tend to it to keep it burning. Lust works in a similar fashion. The more we tend to our lust with fantasy and complaint, the bigger it gets. Which leads to the second point, fire is definitionally insatiable. No matter how much we feed it a fire, it merely grows and

demands more to keep burning. In the same way, the passion of lust burns bright, but the more it receives the more it craves. For this reason it is related to addiction and drunkenness:

*“And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit...”*  
*-Ephesians 5:18*

Another way to translate the word “dissipation” is “excess”. In other words we shouldn't be drunk with wine because it grows our “thirst” instead of satisfying it. The more we drink, the more we want to drink. And we see this in the nation.

*“Now a wind went out from the LORD, and it brought quail from the sea and left them fluttering near the camp, about a day's journey on this side and about a day's journey on the other side, all around the camp, and about two cubits above the surface of the ground. And the people stayed up all that day, all night, and all the next day, and gathered the quail (he who gathered least gathered ten homers); and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp.”*  
*-Numbers 11:31-32*

First we are told that they ventured out of the camp about a day's journey and spent all day and all night collecting the quail until “he who gathered least gathered ten homers...” We don't know how much a “homer” was, but it is estimated to be a little over fifty gallons. In this brief description we get a pretty good picture of the events. The people who were lusting rushed a day's journey outside the camp to gorge themselves on quail for over a day and began to gather up as many as they could, more than they could possibly carry, in order to bring it back to camp. Whether this is a literal description or not, the intent is clear. These were people driven, not by need, but by ravenous, excessive lustful desire.

This makes sense of the end of the story:

*“So the name of that place was called Kibroth-hattavah, because there they buried the people who had been greedy.”*  
*-Numbers 11:34*

Other translations say that they buried the people who “yielded to craving”, but regardless the point is interesting. It seems as though the people who died were specifically greedy. It is even possible that the “curse” of God was more of a natural consequence, like the people eating themselves into a stupor and succumbing to

dehydration or something like that. Regardless the point is clear, the people, in some sense, indulged themselves to death.

## The Evil of Complaint

*“Now when the people complained, it displeased the LORD; for the LORD heard it, and His anger was aroused. So the fire of the LORD burned among them, and consumed some in the outskirts of the camp.”*

*-Numbers 11:1*

Which leads us to the next point, the evil of their complaint. If we go through the various translations of this passage, we can see that the translators had a little trouble with this phrase. The New King James that I quoted from simply says that the people complained, other translations tell us that they complained “bitterly” and others tell us that the people complained about their adversity. The reason for this diversity of translation is because what the passage literally says is that the people complained “evilly”, which sounds strange.

The reason why this sounds strange is because the phrase intimates that the complaint itself was a form of evil. In order to understand this phrase, we have to take a look at the nature of complaint and how it manifests itself throughout Scripture.

The first thing that we notice is that the first complaint that begins the chapter is general with no specificity. It is only after God judges this complaint that it manifests itself into the lust for meat. What this tells us is that the *heart* of the people was bent towards complaint, they merely needed something to complain about.

A simple way to understand this is by looking at a modern phrase that is more commonly understood, generalized anxiety disorder. Though our modern culture suffers from overdiagnosis and over-medication, what this disorder was supposed to establish is someone who was overly anxious for no reason in particular. To put that point another way, if someone was suffering from acute anxiety, but they had something substantial to worry about, like a bad medical diagnosis, a failing relationship, or a sudden massive shift in their career, this wouldn't be considered a disorder, but an appropriate, albeit painful, emotional response.

However, if someone was experiencing relatively peaceful times and they had as much anxiety as someone going through a cataclysmic shift in circumstances, whether this was due to a weak disposition or something more serious, the likelihood is that they had this disorder. However, since feeling anxious for no reason in particular is pretty

miserable, what our minds tend to do is latch onto circumstances and exaggerate them until they match our internal experience.

For instance, let's say this person was going through a minor relational conflict, or a small setback at work, or symptoms of a minor illness, instead of dealing with these issues rationally, they might blow them up into something far more severe to justify their internal distress. This is a way to understand the reaction of the Israelites in this passage.

By not telling us the cause of the complaint in the first verse of the chapter, the author is telling us that the real issue with the Israelites is not that they had something to complain about, but instead that they had a spirit of complaint that was *looking* for something to complain about.

Like the person who has general anxiety latches onto reasons to be anxious, the person who wants to complain will exaggerate issues to justify their complaint instead of questioning their outlook. When we read this story, or listen to the sincere and passionate complaint of someone that we care for, we want to believe that there is something rational behind the complaint. Almost like listening to someone who has incredible levels of anxiety talking to us about their issues. We don't want to question their complaint, but empathize with it.

But, like with the Israelites, sometimes there isn't a good reason to complain. A rationality is given after the fact, but this doesn't mean that it is actually the cause. The people of God are complaining *before* they recognize the lack of meat. And what we will see throughout the book, there is no limitation to what a spirit of complaint can find fault with. So it isn't that the complaint itself is sinful, but that the Israelites complaint specifically was evil because of the spirit that motivated the complaint.

## Mourning Without Hope

*"And Moses said, "The people whom I am among are six hundred thousand men on foot; yet You have said, 'I will give them meat, that they may eat for a whole month.' "Shall flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, to provide enough for them? Or shall all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, to provide enough for them?" And the LORD said to Moses, "Has the LORD's arm been shortened? Now you shall see whether what I say will happen to you or not."*

*-Numbers 11:21-23*

Another reason why the complaint of the Israelites is considered evil is because it is without hope. The word that is translated "complain" in Hebrew can also mean to

mourn. It is obvious that mourning, biblically, is not considered a sin, and yet to complain can be.

I think that the difference can be seen in the way that Moses complains above, as well as the wording of the complaints of Israel. While mourning in the Bible is not bad, there is a correction for mourning “without hope”:

*“But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.”*

*-1 Thessalonians 4:13*

To mourn over something is to go through a process of grieving the loss of something. However, the aim of the mourning process is to eventually accept the loss. When Paul tells us that we shouldn’t sorrow as “others who have no hope.” He isn’t saying that we shouldn’t be sad at the death of others, but that the Christian can appropriately grieve the loss of another, knowing that the person who died is not actually “lost” but waiting for us in the presence of God.

While this knowledge doesn’t take away the grief, it provides comfort in our grief and strength necessary to go *through* our grief. Without this hope, we would have no way to accept our loss. If death really was the end, then grief would never cease, and comfort would be vain in the midst of our loss. While the people of God are going through a temporary season of slight deprivation, they had hope in the future. God was leading them to a land of “milk and honey”. A land where they would be able to raise all the cattle that they wanted, where they could live in:

*“...large and beautiful cities which you did not build, “houses full of all good things, which you did not fill, hewn-out wells which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant—when you have eaten and are full—”*

*-Deuteronomy 6:10-11*

While God wouldn’t have minded a period of “mourning” where Israel lamented the loss of the meat and food of their past, as long as it had a level of thankfulness for what they did have, or hope for how things could get better in the future. Same with Moses. When he complains to God, he isn’t mourning about the complaints of the people, which is totally justified, he is mourning without hope.

He offers no logical solutions to the problem, he doesn’t even ask God to provide for the desires of the people, even though he has literally seen God do exactly what the people

are asking for before. When mourning crosses the line into complaint, it is when it is devoid of hope. Its aim is not for a solution, but merely to vent negative emotions.

*“A fool has no delight in understanding, But in expressing his own heart.”*

*-Proverbs 18:2*

There is another aspect of this that is tied into hopes and expectations. Another source of complaint has something to do with what our expectations are, and tying up our expectations with our desires. Let's think about this in a relational context to help us understand this point.

In any relationship we will naturally have things that we desire of the other person, and things that we expect of another person. It isn't wrong to have expectations, but an expectation is something that we are innately entitled to and something that we don't have to communicate to the other person. For instance, it is right for someone to expect that their spouse won't ever cheat on them or abuse them. These are right expectation and reasonable expectations, they don't ever have to be communicated, and if they are violated, something truly tragic and severe has occurred which does entitle someone to immediate recourse. Because of this, our expectations should be minimal and understood.

Desires on the other hand don't work this way. A desire is something that I personally want from my partner. Since it is personal, I am, definitionally, not entitled to it. Therefore I have to communicate it clearly to my partner, I have to negotiate it with them, and if it is violated I have to talk gently to them about it as opposed to demanding immediate change.

While desires are not wrong to have, it is always destructive to confuse expectations and desires. If I begin to treat my desires as expectations, I can become tyrannical in my relationships. Constantly expecting behavior from others that I am unwilling to communicate. So instead of talking to the person who isn't meeting my desires, I complain to them and about them to others. When we do this, we make those around us walk on eggshells, constantly worried that they will do something, or fail to do something, that will offend us and make us bitter.

This is exactly what the people of Israel are doing. It isn't wrong for them to desire meat and other luxuries that they miss from Egypt. But they aren't expressing these things as desires, but as expectations. They feel as though their very rights are being violated by God, as if He has let them down in a massive way and they are entitled to then

complain and whine about how difficult their lives are. But God never promised the Israelites a constant flow of meat and other delicacies.

He is providing for their needs, but He isn't giving them all they desire, and that is ok. But since they have made this deadly mistake, they are openly criticizing the God who loves them and is actively delivering them in the most ungrateful and disrespectful manner imaginable.

*"When I was younger I couldn't discern between my desires and my longings; I can now. Desire is satisfied every time a parcel of books drops through my door, often within a day of ordering. Desire is satisfied every time I wander through a mall and slip into any number of fast-food restaurants. Desire is satisfied when I settle for porn over intimacy. The gap between desire and delivery gets less and less and less. In the West, most of us live in a time of feasting and very little fasting. And then I realise. I'm not satisfied. And I'm more and more impatient with any kind of wait at all. Then I immediately want something else. I'm hooked on the whole wave of desire and delivery, but actually any deeper satisfaction grows less and less. I wave my spoon like a high-chair tyrant. Longing isn't the above. Longing is something many religious traditions understand. In myth what you long for is rarely what you receive. However, you'll receive something, and it may be even deeper than the yearning. Longing has a quality that isn't locked into what Christianity calls the passions, that habitual field of lusts, wants, and envy. It sees through it, whilst establishing a disciplined falling into the mind of God."*

*-Martin Shaw - "Liturgies of the Wild"*

## Mourning Without Responsibility

*"And the children of Israel said to them, "Oh, that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and when we ate bread to the full! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not."*

*-Exodus 16:3-4*

However, the first time that God gave His people bread from heaven it was in response to a complaint, a time of mourning without hope. So why did God respond favorably to their complaint in Exodus 16 and yet He judged them in Numbers 11? This is tied up in our personal responsibility. God seems to judge people, not primarily in that they do, but in what they are responsible for.

As a parent, when my children were infants, they “mourned without hope”, and complained without taking any personal responsibility for how to fix it, or thanksgiving, or hope for the future. Even so, I knew I shouldn’t be angry with them. Sure I got annoyed and exhausted, but I knew I shouldn’t get angry because I shouldn’t expect them to be able to do any of those things yet. However, now that they are getting older, I do expect them to do these things as a part of their maturity.

Another example would be someone in the first stage of grief. When Job grieves to his friends about the devastating nature of his circumstances they correct him, and he responds by saying:

*“How forceful are right words! But what does your arguing prove? Do you intend to rebuke my words, And the speeches of a desperate one, which are as wind?”*

*-Job 6:25-26*

Job doesn’t defend his words, but instead calls himself a “desperate one”, whose words “are as wind”. Meaning that he knows that his words are wrong, to be “as wind” means his words carry no weight. But they are also the cries of someone who is desperate, and God later vindicates him in this. When someone is “desperate”, we should be gentle if we will correct them, because they have not yet made it to the point where they can take responsibility for their circumstances in any meaningful way.

When the people of Israel first left Egypt they were essentially infants. They had never taken personal responsibility, and they had no clue how God would provide for their needs. They were immature and desperate in their situation. We can say the same for one of Moses’ early complaints to God:

*“So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me!”*

*-Exodus 17:4*

Moses was in a desperate situation, the people were literally threatening to stone him. Because of this, they didn’t receive corrections, but were provided for. But in the book of Numbers, this isn’t the case. They are no longer infants in a desperate situation. All of their needs are met, they have been learning the commands of God for a year under the cloud of God’s protection, and their path to the promised land is set and imminent. Same with Moses. There is no threat to his life, and he has seen the provision of God for over a year.

Beyond that, Moses had already made a change to the leadership of the nation a year prior under the counsel of his father in law Jethro. He had established other people throughout the nation who could take responsibility for smaller sections of the group. This also means that the nation has *learned* responsibility through this state of affairs. However, the nation complains as though they haven't learned anything about responsibility in the wilderness.

They still cry out and whine like helpless babes, when they should have learned that they could approach God in prayer, they had established priests who could help carry their petitions of God, and they had intermediate rulers who they could talk with to negotiate with Moses and Aaron if necessary. But instead of doing that, they cry out like impotent, lost little children, and Moses is unfortunately not any better.

*"We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; "but now our whole being is dried up; there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes!"*

*-Numbers 11:5-6*

*"I am not able to bear all these people alone, because the burden is too heavy for me. "If You treat me like this, please kill me here and now—if I have found favor in Your sight—and do not let me see my wretchedness!"*

*-Numbers 11:14-15*

There is, unfortunately, a secret pleasure in playing the victim. It can feel good to complain about our problems as if we are impotent to fix them and to receive compassion and empathy from others. The problem is that rejecting our personal responsibility and blaming other people will only increase our lust, our complaints, our own misery, and the misery of those we complain to. It reminds me of a section of C.S. Lewis' book "The Great Divorce".

In it, he depicts people in states of salvation and damnation interacting with one another. Those who are in a state of grace are trying desperately to help those trapped in their own sin and misery. One of these interactions is actually between a married couple. The wife is enjoying the blessedness of God, but the husband insists on dwelling on his own misery. This is, comically, depicted by the husband carrying around with him an old fashioned "tragedian", an old word for an actor who acts in tragic roles and gives long speeches of woe. At one point in their interaction the wife stops empathizing with her husband acting like a victim and says this to him:

*"Quick," she said. "There is still time. Stop it. Stop it at once." "Stop what?" "Using pity, other people's pity, in the wrong way. We have all done it a bit on earth, you know. Pity was meant to be a spur that drives joy to help misery. But it can be used the wrong way round. It can be used for a kind of blackmailing. Those who choose misery can hold joy up to ransom, by pity. You see, I know now. Even as a child you did it. Instead of saying you were sorry, you went and sulked in the attic . . . because you knew that sooner or later one of your sisters would say, 'I can't bear to think of him sitting up there alone, crying.' You used your pity to blackmail them, and they gave in in the end. And afterwards, when we were married . . . oh, it doesn't matter, if only you will stop it."*

*-C.S. Lewis - "The Great Divorce"*

I love how Lewis puts this. What the husband is doing here, which is common to all of us, is to use the pity of others to make himself feel better. But he has learned that the best way to gain the pity of others is to complain incessantly and loudly about every wrong, both perceived and actual. He does this with no real personal accountability and no hope. This gains him a sympathetic audience with others, but it also alienates him from others because no one really wants to be around a person embroiled in constant victimhood.

## Praisemakers

*"Bless the LORD, O my soul; And all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, And forget not all His benefits..."*

*-Psalm 103:1-2*

Which leads to the next, more controversial point. Scripturally, we are told that we have responsibility for our emotions, which is why we are actually commanded to praise God and to rejoice in Him in all circumstances.

*"Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!"*

*-Philippians 4:4*

Paul doesn't word this as a suggestion, but as a commandment. Our ancient ancestors wouldn't have been bothered by such a phrase, but the modern world sees emotions in a very different way than our ancestors. For the modern person emotions are things that happen *to* us, not something that we have any control over. We are even taught that to ignore our emotions is to repress our truth and this will result in psychic pain or difficulty.

While this idea does have some merit to it, it is ultimately wrong. For sure, Biblically we are not told to repress our emotions. In fact, we are taught that we should be:

*"...casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you."*

*-1 Peter 5:7*

We are also told that even in the midst of our rejoicing in God, we will also need to experience and express sorrow. Even Paul, when describing his joy in God, says that he is: *"...sorrowful, yet always rejoicing..."* (2 Corinthians 6:10) For this reason, it is right that the modern world criticizes the hypocritical, stoic culture of the near past. But this does not justify the modern glorification of our inner truth.

While the Bible acknowledges our need for expressing our emotions, it also warns that doing so in the wrong way can actually "vent" the emotion like a fire and make it far worse:

*"A fool vents all his feelings, But a wise man holds them back."*

*-Proverbs 29:11*

This balance helps us understand the mistake of the Israelites in this passage. They are "giving vent" to their emotions, which is why the symbol is again a fire that burns the edge of their camp. By giving constant vent to their complaints, they have engorged their lustful desires and their thankless spirit. This takes us back to Job. While Job does express his emotions to his friends in fairly colorful terms like:

*"May the day perish on which I was born, And the night in which it was said, 'A male child is conceived.' May that day be darkness; May God above not seek it, Nor the light shine upon it."*

*-Job 3:3-4*

While this sounds like a complaint, when Job later calls these words "wind" he is explaining to his friends what he is actually doing. He is giving *expression* to his internal turmoil, but not vent. He is not justifying his emotions, nor does he believe that they accurately reflect reality, but that doesn't change the fact that he is *feeling* these things in the moment. Job isn't embracing his emotions, he is *wrestling* with them, which is exactly why he is so easily corrected by God at the end of the book.

We see many Psalmists walking this line throughout the Bible, but my personal favorite is Psalm 42:

*"Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him For the help of His countenance."*

*-Psalm 42:5*

This is what it means to be a “praisemaker”. It isn’t about living in toxic positivity where we pretend as though everything is fine. It is instead seriously wrestling with our negative emotions, and our negative circumstances, but doing so that we might praise our God who is indeed worthy of praise no matter what. To exercise ourselves to praise is the polar opposite of exercising ourselves towards complaint, and it does take intentionality. I like how the Christian story teller Martin Shaw puts this point:

*“Praise is the natural expression of a life tuned to the mythic. This can be in the way you weave a Brixham fishing net, nurture a garden, attend to learning a poem by heart. These examples may seem slight, but they’re not. This capacity of leaning into beauty, of a sustained gaze to the good even in the face of a concentration camp, gulag, or prison, can be the difference between life and death. Praise is most effective in its specificity; it’s not to be dished out in great, sugary heaps. Praise is a response to a movement of the heart. These responses can’t be placed in a line and expected to behave. That’s more like a generic affirmation than praise, and real praise has at its heart a blessing. When delivered with integrity praise makes connections, warms the cockles, opens possibility.”*

*-Martin Shaw - “Liturgies of the Wild”*

To praise means wrestling through our negative emotions that we might better see all the things that we have to be thankful for. It is actually orienting ourselves towards thanksgiving that we might *find* reasons to be happy and reasons to praise.

*“Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.”*

*-Philippians 4:8*

Whenever we are tempted to believe that we have no reason to praise God, we should meditate on this verse and remember that the apostle Paul wrote this letter from a Roman prison, awaiting a trial that might result in his execution. There are *always* causes to praise if we are willing to look. The result of this search is the very joy that adversity threatens to steal. We will find that we are not only praising, but that we actually *feel* like praising.

While the Israelites fail to learn this lesson in the wilderness, years later, or perhaps generations later, they did learn this lesson and they enact it in their prayer life. In fact, every year during the Passover they recite a prayer called the Dayenu, which was

actually featured in the show “The Chosen”. This is a prayer that all faithful Jews have offered well before Christ’s birth and this is a section of it:

*“Had He delivered us from Egypt and not punished the Egyptians, it would have sufficed. Had He punished the Egyptians and not destroyed their idols, it would have sufficed... Had He helped us for forty years in the desert and not fed us manna, it would have sufficed. Had He fed us manna and not given us the Sabbath, it would have sufficed. Had He given us the Sabbath and not brought us to Mount Sinai, it would have sufficed... Had he brought us into the land of Israel and not built for us the Temple, the Holy Temple, it would still have sufficed.”*

*-Dayenu*

Commenting on this prayer, the Jewish writer and Holocaust survivor commented on this prayer and said this:

*“The name of this beautiful prayer is Dayenu, which means “it would have sufficed” or “we would have been satisfied.” Perhaps “grateful” would be a better translation. Dayenu is the song of our gratitude. A Jew defines himself by his capacity for gratitude... The first prayer a Jew is expected to recite upon waking expresses his gratitude for being alive. This holds for all generations, and surely for ours. For each of us, every day should be an act of grace, every hour a miraculous offering.”*

*-Elie Wiesel - The Passover Haggadah*

## Fire on the Margins

To complain on the other hand is to give vent to all our negative emotions until they are all we feel. This venting process literally cultivates our lustful desires, our hopeless complaints, and our irresponsible outlook until we become genuinely unpleasant people to be around. Complaint is like a virus, it has a contagious effect. It doesn’t take long being around a negative and complaining person until we feel our own joy slip away from us. To put it another way, complaining demoralizes those around us.

It is for this reason why the Jewish author and radio host Dennis Prager calls happiness a moral obligation:

*“Happiness — or at least acting happy, or at the very least not inflicting one's unhappiness on others — is no less important in making the world better than any other human trait... the pursuit of happiness is noble. It benefits everyone around the individual pursuing it, and it benefits humanity. And that is why happiness is a moral obligation.”*

*-Dennis Prager - “Happiness is a Moral Obligation”*

From this we can understand another way to interpret the punishment of fire in the first verse, namely the fire that consumes the margins of the camp.

*“The rabble who were among them had greedy desires; and also the sons of Israel wept again and said, who will give us meat to eat?”*

*-Numbers 11:4*

Notice that the complaint begins with the “rabble” and then extends to the “sons of Israel”. We aren’t really sure who this “rabble” is. Some have theorized that it is some Pagans who traveled with Israel because of their own discontentment with Egypt, others think that it refers to faithless Jews, but regardless of how we see them, it accentuates the symbol at the beginning. We know that God has oriented the camp to have fire burning in the center.

Whenever the nation stops for the night, the fire of God rested upon the tabernacle that we set at the exact center of the camp, and beyond that the fire of the altars were constantly burning in the middle of the camp. Symbolically this could refer to passion being in the “heart” of an identity and not on its edges. A simple way to understand this is with a group of people, but we will also apply this to ourselves.

“Fire in the center” of a group would mean that the people who love the group are motivated by fire, or passion that is propelling them forward. This would be like a sports team that is driven by the passion of the coaches or the captains of the team. Their passion and love are contagious and move the team forward to greater victory and accomplishment. Fire on the margins would refer to the “rabble”, those who are a part of the group but not really *for* the group. This would be discontent teammates who, for whatever reason, don’t actually want to be there.

If a group is “consumed” by this kind of fire, it is a passion of discontentment, a passion of complaint that seeks to undermine unity in the group and movement towards a unified goal. Over time, this attitude has a demoralization effect on the group itself and ends up moving the group towards destruction. This is what we see in the nation of Israel. The complaints of the few “rabble” “infect” the other Israelites and move them all to complain including Moses himself. This demoralization is so pervasive that it continues to destroy Israel throughout this book and ends up costing them their entrance into the promised land.

I think this is a pretty good way to understand our current culture. We are a culture “possessed” by the spirit of complaint. I am not saying that everything in our culture is

good, far from it, only that our present discourse is focused so much on the negative that we almost never speak with a spirit of praise or thanksgiving. And the strange thing is, that the cultures that have their needs met, are the ones most likely to complain about their wants being unmet.

The Israelites are not living in a paradise, but they had their needs met. They had food and water miraculously provided for them, and a clear path towards the land of promise. While this might sound like a small thing to us in our modern luxury, for most people groups in the world, their basic needs are not guaranteed. And yet, the cultures that have to fight for even their needs, tend to be more thankful for their wants being met. The ones that have their needs all met, tend to be most ungrateful.

It reminds me of the book “The Great Gatsby” which is all about the decadent culture of 1920s in New York. In the book, one of the most wealthy and blessed people in the book gives birth to a little girl and she says:

*‘You see I think everything’s terrible anyhow,’ she went on in a convinced way. ‘Everybody thinks so—the most advanced people.’*  
-F. Scott Fitzgerald - “The Great Gatsby”

Even though America was drowning in excess at the time, it wasn’t enough. The elites had nothing better to do than stand around and complain about all the things that could go wrong, or all the things that could have been better. And this spirit of complaint that was burning on the margins of the society, eventually consumed all the luxury of America and led us straight into the Great Depression and World War 2. It reminds me of a Proverb:

*“The spirit of a man will sustain him in sickness, But who can bear a broken spirit?”*  
-Proverbs 18:14

The “spirit” for the Hebrew had several meanings, but one meaning was the emotional vigor or vitality of an individual. This is fire burning in the center of a person. A clear passion and drive to move forward and succeed. A person with this can weather any storm and overcome any adversity, no matter how severe. A person like this doesn’t ignore problems or difficulties, they face them head on, they take responsibility for their circumstances and do their best to move forward. But without this fire in the center, any challenge is too difficult to overcome, no matter how small. It cultivates a defeatist attitude that is lustful, negative, hopeless, and irresponsible.

This is the effect of complaint on a society and an individual. By minimizing good things, it takes away from us any clear passion in our pursuit, and by maximizing the things that are wrong it makes us genuinely unhappy and self-destructive. This is why God has to judge this behavior so harshly. He has to cut out the complaints of His people like cancer, and we have to do the same thing.

This doesn't mean that we distance ourselves from those who are mourning. But when someone has revealed themselves to be a genuine complainer, we have to be cautious of the effect that they are having on us. We also have to recognize that some people aren't interested in fixing things, they are happy being unhappy. They don't want to be lifted up by others, they want to bring other people down.

*“Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned.”*

*-Titus 3:10-11*

## Careful what you Wish For

*“Now a wind went out from the LORD, and it brought quail from the sea and left them fluttering near the camp, about a day's journey on this side and about a day's journey on the other side, all around the camp, and about two cubits above the surface of the ground. And the people stayed up all that day, all night, and all the next day, and gathered the quail (he who gathered least gathered ten homers); and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp. But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the wrath of the LORD was aroused against the people, and the LORD struck the people with a very great plague. So he called the name of that place Kibroth Hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had yielded to craving.”*

*-Numbers 11:31-34*

*“Then I will come down and talk with you there. I will take of the Spirit that is upon you and will put the same upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, that you may not bear it yourself alone. “Then you shall say to the people, ‘Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wept in the hearing of the LORD, saying, “Who will give us meat to eat? For it was well with us in Egypt.” Therefore the LORD will give you meat, and you shall eat. ‘You shall eat, not one day, nor two days, nor five days, nor ten days, nor twenty days, ‘but for a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, because you have despised the LORD who is among you, and have wept before Him, saying, “Why did we ever come up out of Egypt?” ’ ”*

*-Numbers 11:17-20*

One of the biggest lessons that God teaches His people in this story is to be careful what they wish for. It isn't a mistake that manna here is, once again, likened to a type of seed in verse 7. A seed is something that we cultivate and nurture, and when it emerges from the earth it grows into something far greater than what we planted.

Complaints and praise work in the same way. By nurturing their complaints, the people of God have cultivated the seeds of their own destruction. The people of God have denied the sustaining bread that God had given them from heaven, and so they are free to leave the camp and gather the meat that reminded them of Egypt. While God judges many Israelites in this chapter, this same theme comes up over and over again. The seed of their complaint continues to grow until the people legitimately reject God's provision to allow them to enter the promised land, and they are kept in the wilderness until the entire older generation of Israel dies.

The same with Moses. In this chapter he denies his role of leadership for the people, and God recognizes this decision by giving the spirit of prophecy to seventy others. We will see the full fruit of this decision in the next chapter, but for now it's important to keep in mind that Moses will get what he wants. He won't have to lead the people of God into the promised land because he dies in the wilderness.

The things that we choose to tend to in our hearts are the things that will gain power in our lives. And what begins as a small seed will eventually grow up into full fruit bearing plants.

In the musical "Into the Woods" this is one of the main themes. In this musical a couple is asked to retrieve items from various people around them (who happen to be Jack, from Jack and the Beanstalk, Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, and Rapunzel") in order to reverse a witches curse. While the play goes in many interesting directions, some I like and some I don't like, one of the main themes that this play deals with is this idea of seeds and consequences.

It does this by really focusing on Jack and his magic beans. The beans in the play are a symbol for what the people are "cultivating" in their lives. It depicts all these people seeking their "wishes" through complaint and discontentment, and in the finale, all of their "happy endings" are taken away because of the rotten seeds that gave them birth in the first place. When the play comes to an end, a song is sung over the credits that has many profound lines in it:

*"Careful the things you say*

*Children will listen  
Careful the things you do  
Children will see  
And learn*

*Children may not obey  
But children will listen  
Children will look to you  
For which way to turn  
To learn what to be*

*Careful the wish you make  
Wishes are children  
Careful the path they take  
Wishes come true*

*Careful the tale you tell  
That is the spell  
Children will listen  
Steven Sondheim - "Into the Woods"*

The lyrics encourage us to see the long term effects of our actions, even on our children. That our wishes will come true, but maybe not in the way we want. And that our lives are telling a story that our children will learn from, good or bad. The complaints of today are sowing the seed of future turmoil, and if we are willing to take the attitude of our heart and our own speech seriously, we will understand this. Complaint might seem minor, but when we understand seeds that this complaint was planting in the nation, we will understand why God judges it so severely.

But the opposite is true. When we "sow" praise in our lives. When we seek what is good and not what is easy, when we take responsibility for our lives, live in accordance with hope instead of despair, think seriously about the consequences of our actions, and pursue God above all else, we will be amazed at what God has in store for us.

This is the message of the cross. Christ's sufferings are the seed of His resurrection, just as the mockery of the crowd are the seeds of their eventual destruction. Christ is "planted" in the earth for three days, and then emerges from the tomb our risen Lord. Even in the darkest distress and betrayal, Christ believed in what He was doing. The passion of His life led Him to His great act of self-sacrifice, and the "fruit" of that sacrifice redeemed the world.

God encourages His people to live in that kind of certainty, knowing that our lives have eternal meaning in Him. We are every day sowing our stories and our circumstances, and if we treat this process with respect and dignity, we will see the power of the resurrection throughout our lives.

*“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.”*

*-Galatians 6:7-9*