

Title: By the Numbers
Date: August 28, 2022
Subject: We shouldn't test God or complain.
Scripture: Numbers 14:26 - 35

Leftovers are good, right? The flavors of the ingredients have more opportunity to mingle. Here's a couple leftovers from last week's study of Leviticus. The first is a play on words. Hopefully, you won't treat Leviticus as *leave*-iticus, but because of the theme, it would be *love*-iticus. The other is I forgot to mention Jean is going to keep doing her Bible reading project for the other five grandkids as well – one a year.

Though it wasn't as popular as Andy Griffith and Mayberry, Gilligan's Island was a hit TV show of the 60s and can still be seen in syndication. It featured a group of castaways marooned on an uncharted desert isle. The supposed "3 hour tour" turned into three years of TV shows.

Put their situation on steroids and we have what happened to the Israelites after they left Egypt. From Mt. Sinai, where God gave the people the 10 commandments and the ceremonial law, it would have taken 11 days to get to the edge of the promised land. Instead of entering, they embarked on a 40 year journey. Though there are a lot of numbers in the book of Numbers the main number is 40 with a big red circle around it because kept circling around the desert.

This is story of that fateful trip and the lessons we can learn from their unnecessary journey. The Israelites knocked on the doorstep of the promised land. Scouts were sent to see what the land was like. They returned after 40 days. Ten of the spies gave a negative report - the people are as big as giants, we're like grasshoppers, we can never take the land. Only Caleb and Joshua believed God would go with them and Israel would be able to conquer the land. The mob grumbled and wanted to go back to Egypt. The Lord told Moses to stand aside so he could wipe out the entire nation and begin anew with Moses. Moses plead for the people, begging God not to do that. The Lord said he would forgive but no one who had treated him with contempt would ever see the promised land. Then he gave orders to start making laps around the desert.

Read Numbers 14:26 - 35

1. The problem of losing focus

The people of Israel forgot a lot of things. They forgot what had happened to them: redeemed from slavery in Egypt, miracles performed in their behalf, plagues that afflicted the people of Egypt but didn't touch them, the people of Egypt bankrupted themselves by giving of their wealth as they plead for Israel to leave, the Red Sea opened for them to cross through on dry land and then closed to drown the Egyptian army, the pillar of fire by night and the pillar of cloud by day, the provision of food and water when they had nothing.

They lost their focus on the Lord who accomplished all these things for them. They looked away from the One who shared His name and person with them. The people of Israel forgot what God called them to be and what he wanted them to do.

Their calling has been described: “As the account of Numbers begins the Lord organizes Israel into a military camp. Leaving Sinai, she marches forth as his conquering army, with the Lord at her head, to establish his kingdom in the promised land in the midst of the nations. The book graphically portrays Israel's identity as the Lord’s redeemed covenant people and her vocation as the servant people of God, charged with establishing his kingdom on earth. God's purpose in history is implicitly disclosed: to invade the arena of fallen humanity and affect the redemption of his creation - the mission in which his people are also to be totally engaged” (NIV Study Bible intro to Numbers). They forgot all of this and lost their focus.

Sometimes followers of Jesus Christ do the same thing. They forget what the Lord has done. They forget they were sinners who were saved just barely from hell's clutches... No! They forget, we forget we were doomed to destruction and it's because of God’s marvelously magnificent grace, he rescued us and made us children of God, granted forgiveness of sins and bestowed upon us eternal life. Sometimes we forget why we're in the world and what life is all about. We think it's about ourselves rather than about what God's plans are.

Losing focus stems from

2. Desire to be own authority

The Israelites got to the promised land and got cold feet. They told God they weren't going to enter. They were like a petulant child: “We’re not going to do it and you can’t make us do it.”

From the earlier source: “Those whom God had redeemed from slavery in Egypt and with whom he had made a covenant at Mount Sinai responded not with faith, gratitude and obedience but with unbelief, ingratitude and repeated acts of rebellion, which came to extreme expression in their refusal to undertake the conquest of Canaan” (NIV Study Bible intro to Numbers).

These attitudes can be traced all the way back to the garden of Eden where Adam and Eve had a perfect environment. Then they were presented with an opportunity which seemed oh so good.

Andrew T. Walker describes what happened and the aftermath: “The serpent cast God’s rule as restrictive, unfair and petty: “God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God”... and so Eve ate of the tree she was instructed not to eat from. Of course, at that moment, it did not seem she was going down the wrong path - because why could denying someone the offer of pleasure and enlightenment be wrong?...Her decision was a rational, reasonable calculation, supported by what her feelings were saying to her. How could it be wrong when it seemed good, looked delightful and seemed wise? Especially when her husband agreed and shared the fruit with her...

“Isn't that our story, too? We do not cast our decisions to reject what God says as the actions of rebels. We really just see ourselves as owners and masters of ourselves. What could be so wrong?... *“You can be like God in your own life,”* Satan told the first humans. *“You can have the authority. You know what's best. You can't trust God - but you can trust yourself.* And the humans said, *“Yes.”*

“This was not just an accidental slip up; Eve’s choice was the choice of an alternative lordship. That is why a seemingly innocent solitary act of eating from the wrong tree put all of creation in a death-spiral. That is

why eating a fruit was an act of treason” (Andrews T. Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate*, pages 69 - 71).

Adam and Eve rebelled against God. They wanted to be their own authority in the cult of self.

Israel did the same thing. The first occurrence of the phenomenon on the promised land border. Their lack of trust and grumbling began before they exited Egypt as soon as when Moses presented God’s plan of escape. Then, when the Exodus took place and they felt the Egyptian army had trapped them against the Red Sea, they said it would have been better for them to serve in Egypt than to die in the desert (Exodus 14:12). Shortly after the miraculous crossing when God was going to provide manna and quail, Moses informed them they weren't grumbling against Aaron and him but against the Lord (Exodus 16:8).

There are several components to their disobedience. They didn't trust God and his word. The people didn't believe God possessed sufficient power to help them defeat the enemy. They questioned God's wisdom, abilities and love. The Lord declared those who didn't believe had treated him with contempt (Numbers 14:23). Doesn't sound like a good thing to do.

One of the main ways the lack of trust in God was evidenced centered on the sin of complaining. It didn't begin at the border of the promised land as we have seen, and it certainly didn't end at that point.

The back of the sermon notes lists the times when people complained and how God responded, often in judgment.

The first thought that came to my mind for a sermon from Numbers was to limit it to the subject of complaining. Possible titles included “How to Complain Like the Pros” or “Be a Complainer in 10 Easy Steps.”

In sermon preparation, I researched the causes of complaining. The most frequent included customer service, weather and temperature, technology related stuff like the inability to connect to Wi-Fi. I discovered there's a lot of opinions about why people complain. One man uses the anagram G. R. I. P. E. standing for Get attention, Remove responsibility, Inspire envy, Power, Excuse poor performance (Will Bowen in book *Complaint Free World*). A psychologist put the reasons in terms of “Emotional regulation, Mood, Personality, Social factors” (Elizabeth Scott, PhD, verywellmind.com/how-and-why-stop-complaining-3144882). Others add it's because people are pessimistic, don't get what they want, seek pity from people or they use complaining as a good conversation starter. Not sure how that works.

Complaining is more than just a statement of fact. For instance, when the weather turns cold, grey and dreary, it's not wrong to say we don't like the weather. Complaining comes with an accusing edge and attitude. There's an element of mistrust. It stems from discontentment. It looks at the world, people and God as if they owe us something, maybe everything. Negative Nellie in mood and outlook without trying to find solutions. Often irritable.

Complaining is extremely common. It's like a national right straight from The Constitution. We may meet someone and ask how they are and they respond, “I can't complain.” Some might wonder what's wrong

with the person, if they aren't aware of the news and the world situation? May feel sorry for them and offer to help them to complain. "I'll show you how to complain, just watch and listen to me."

A man ate his breakfast in the same diner, day after day, year after year. The waitresses did their best to serve him, but he always complained about something: The eggs were overcooked or undercooked; the toast was too light or too dark; the coffee was too strong or too weak. No breakfast was ever quite right. One waitress was determined to please him. She took extra-special care to make sure everything was perfect. His coffee was right on time and just right. His juice was exactly the right temperature and had just enough pulp. He ordered two eggs, one scrambled and one over easy. When she set the plate before him, he shook his head in disgust. *What could be the problem?* she wondered. "Is everything to your liking?" she asked. "Are the eggs okay?" "No," he complained. "You scrambled the wrong one."

Steven J. Cole points out Christians' acceptance of complaining and what's at the base of it: "Complaining is probably one of the sins most tolerated by Christians. We tolerate it and perhaps don't even think of it as sin because we're all so prone to do it...In the context (Philippians 2), he is especially exhorting us against grumbling and disputing against one another in the church, because he has been urging us to adopt the humble, self-sacrificing, servant ways of the Lord Jesus. But to grumble against any person or any circumstance is really to grumble against the sovereign God who wills and works all things in our lives (2:13)" (bible.org/seriespage/lesson-14-grumble-grumble-not-philippians-214-18).

3. consequences

There were sad and devastating consequences for Israelites. According to vv. 34 and 35, they would suffer for their sins by wandering as a nation for 40 years and those who had treated the Lord with contempt would die in the desert as indicated by v. 29. There were other times when God punished the people for their lack of trust and complaining.

Wandering in our spiritual lives might include a lack of spiritual growth, a poor testimony for and about Jesus Christ, a lack of joy (Philippians 2:15 – 18). Wandering includes losing focus from the main issue which is going into the world to tell people about Jesus Christ and becoming sidetracked with other issues as our main purpose. Ever notice how the word "Go" is in the Gospel but "come" isn't. It's not Comespel. That's because we are to "Go" with the Good News.

Gregory Brown gives a sad analysis: "Many people in the church are in a wandering experience in their spiritual life. They are not progressing; they are not going anywhere. And the reason is because there is a bitter root destroying their harvest and inviting the chastisement of God on their lives. It also might be bringing God's chastisement on others' lives as well. Maybe this bitterness is an anger against somebody that harmed them. Maybe it's simply discontentment with their circumstances or lack of trust in God's goodness. Whatever it may be, it must be known that this complaining spirit is a very dangerous sin that brings God's discipline...Some Christians, because of a tendency to complain, are constantly under God's discipline. God, like a loving parent, is seeking to turn them away from their petty tantrums and their distrust of him.

Complaining is like telling God he doesn't know what's best and that he doesn't care. It is an affront to God. Therefore, Christians must forsake complaining and arguing because it is forbidden by God" (bible.org/seriespage/9-beware-complaining-and-arguing)

4. how to regain focus and conquer complaining

Dig deeply into the thought the world doesn't revolve around us. We're here to serve others. Work on learning to trust God more by acknowledging he is sovereign and in control in all situations. Cultivate an attitude of contentment and a satisfied spirit with the understanding that God himself is what is important.

Sometimes it seems like *The Andy Griffith Show* should have been called *The Barney Fife Show* with the diminutive deputy taking center stage. One story line had ol' Barn giving advice to Sheriff Andy about a new kid in town who'd gathered boys around him. They became a ring of terror as they stole stuff from the grocer and broke streetlights. Barney told Andy he needed to "Nip it. Nip it in the bud!"

Some guy who calls himself *The TV Professor* said of Barney: "Look, Deputy Barney Fife got a lot of things wrong on *The Andy Griffith Show*. OK, most things wrong. But if you really think about it, "nip it in the bud" might be the best advice a TV series has ever offered. It may be among the best advice out there -- ever... Barney is right that it's better to fix a problem early on, rather than let it go unchecked" (thetvprofessor.com/nip-it-in-the-bud-possibly-the-best-advice-ever).

In the New Testament we're told to do everything without complaining or arguing (Philippians 2:14). Sounds like "nipping it in the bud."

The opposite of complaining is often noted as gratitude, praise, thankfulness and adoration of the Lord. It isn't simply to write three things down a day and then forget them. We shouldn't treat it as a trite exercise but view it as truth to live by and dive deeper into the practice.

5. Hope

One of the more remarkable stories of the Bible is when the prophet Balaam is summoned by a king to place a curse on the people of Israel who are ready to come through his land. Balaam can't because the Lord won't allow him and he can only pronounce a blessing on Israel. But the prophet is sneaky. He counsels the king to use the women of his kingdom to seduce the Israelite men away from worshipping the Lord.

Prior to that Balaam gives a prophecy about Jesus Christ's coming. What we can learn is no matter what anybody tries to do, God's purposes will be fulfilled.

As someone has written about the blessing pronounced by Balaam: "Though the immediate enjoyment of this blessing will always depend on the faithfulness of his people, the ultimate realization of God's blessing is sure - because of the character of God. Thus Numbers reaffirms the ongoing purposes of God... His grace is renewed as surely as is the dawn and his redemptive purpose will not be thwarted" (NIV Study Bible introduction to Numbers).

We need to place and replace and replace our hope in the Lord. We need to renew and renew and renew our trust in him.