

Lesson 20: Numbers 11-14 Grumbling in the Wilderness (Wandering, part 1)

Introduction

Numbers: Kingdom Rebellion		
Key Passage: 14:20-23		
1:1-10:10 Preparation to enter the land	10:11-25:18 Wandering in the desert	26-36 Preparation to enter the land
Census of the first generation	Death of the first generation	Census of the second generation

The book of Numbers divides nicely into three main divisions. In the first nine chapters we have a census of the first generation out of Egypt and laws dealing with entering the promise land. In the last 11 chapters we have a census of the second generation out of Egypt and more laws dealing with entering the promise land. In the middle 16 chapters, we have Israel wandering in the desert. That trip is marked by grumbling and death.

For our next three lessons, we will focus on this middle section of Numbers. We start with the grumbling in the wilderness, then in the next lesson I am going to consider the story of Moses being punished for striking a rock, and in the third lesson we will address the story of Balaam and the donkey.

Okay, so, in this lesson we consider the grumbling. I am going to give you the overall context of grumbling and then focus in on some specific examples.

Grumbling in the wilderness: a theme of the first generation

The author of the New Testament book of Hebrews wrote to first century Christian Jews experiencing pressure to walk away from Jesus and return back to the synagogue. In calling his audience to hold on to Jesus, he wrote this in Hebrews 3:14-19.

¹⁴ For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end, ¹⁵ while it is said,

“TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS, AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME.”

¹⁶ For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses? ¹⁷ And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸ And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹ So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief.

This is the legacy left by the first generation of Israelites to come out of Egypt. They were not the Great Generation. They became an illustration, a by-word for faithlessness, for unbelief. The words “Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked me,” are not original to the author of Hebrews. He is quoting Psalm 95. Grumbling is how that 1st generation out of Egypt was remember 500 years later by the psalmists of David’s era, and then also 1000 years after that at the birth of the church. And I guess, since we are still talking about it that legacy of unbelief has lasted another 2000 years to reach us. They are the *The Grumbling Generation*, the complainers. That’s not a legacy to be proud of.

After the Israelites fail to enter the promise land, Moses recalls God saying,

²² Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice, ²³ shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned Me see it (Numbers 14:22-23).

God says the people of Israel put him “to the test these ten times.” That makes you wonder, “What ten times?” The number ten might be just an expression to mean over and over again, so as a general

use of the number 10. But it might also mean 10 specific times that God has in mind. It's just not clear which ten times he is referring to. If we keep going to the end of Numbers and count up all the stories of complaint and grumbling, we get eight incidents, starting in 11:1 and ending in 21:5.

Grumbling in the book of Numbers					
No.	Ref.	Source	Complaint	Egypt comment	Punishment
G1	11:1	People	-		Burned
G2	11:4	People	Who will give us meat to eat?	We remember the food of Egypt.	Plague
G3	12:2	Aaron and Miriam	Has the Lord only spoken through Moses?		Leprosy on Miriam
G4	14:2	People	Why did God bring us here to die (at the hands of the Canaanites)?	Would that we had died in the land of Egypt.	Death of a generation
G5	16:2 16:13	Korah, Dathan, Abiram, On and 250 leaders	Why do you exalt yourself Moses & Aaron?	You brought us up from a land flowing with milk and honey.	The earth swallowed and fire consumed
G6	16:41	People	You caused the death of the Lord's people.		Plague killed 14,700
G7	20:2	People	No water.	Why have you made us come up from Egypt to this wretched place?	
G8	21:5	People	There is no food and no water and we loathe this miserable food.	Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?	Fiery serpents killed many

We can also go back and include incidents from the book of Exodus. The journey from Egypt to Sinai in Exodus 14-17 foreshadows the journey in Numbers and includes its own four examples of grumbling. That gives us 12 incidents total.

Grumbling in the book of Exodus					
No.	Ref.	Source	Complaint	Egypt comment	No Punishment
G1	14:11	People	We are going to die (at the hands of the Egyptians).	Doesn't Egypt have enough graves that you brought us out here to die?	Israel crosses the Red Sea; the army of Egypt drowns.
G2	15:24	People	The water is bitter.		Clean water
G3	16:2	People	No food.	Would that we had died by the Lord's hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and ate bread to the full.	Manna and quail
G4	17:2	People	No water.		Water from a rock

If we take out the two occasions of grumbling that were instigated just by other leaders, not by the people as a whole, but just some leaders, first Aaron and Miriam, then Korah and the 250 with him, that would reduce it down to 10 incidents of grumbling by the whole people of Israel. That does not quite fit with the text, because we would have to include a few incidents that happen after God said, "[they] have put me to the test these ten times." The chronology does not match up perfectly. But it is interesting. And, at least looking through all these incidences, we see that there is a lot of grumbling going on.

When we look back at the book of Exodus, at that journey from Egypt, so from after the Red Sea up to Sinai, that yields some interesting observations. The first complaint in Exodus 14:11 is at the Red Sea. "We are all going to die. Why did you bring us here!" And God hears the complaint, and he saves the Israelites, and he crushes the Egyptian army. The second complaint in Exodus 15:24 is about a

lack of drinking water. The water at that place is bitter. God provides fresh water. The third complaint in Exodus 16:2 is over the lack of food. God provides manna. He also explains his intention in requiring them only to gather enough manna for one day at a time, “that I might test them, whether or not they will walk in my instruction (16:4).” The text does not say the Israelites test God, but, the first time we get this idea, it is God testing the Israelites. The language gets flipped around in the fourth incident in Exodus 17:2 when the people complain again about a lack of water. And in this case, we are told, “They tested the LORD, saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not (17:7)?’” Again, there is this testing language, and in this case, it is the same as in Numbers 14, “they put me to the test these ten times.” It is the Israelites testing God. It is the Israelites showing a lack of faith in God. They are testing his patience. They are testing his character.

God allows adversity in the lives of the Israelites to see if they will trust him; to see if they will continue to walk according to the commands he has given them. God saved Israel out of Egypt without any action on behalf of the Israelites. He brought Egypt to its knees solely through his own power, his own action. Now God has allowed adversity to come their way. And God allows things to get tough. God requires the Israelites to participate in the journey, to participate in the struggle. It is a classic picture of discipleship. Salvation is a free gift. We don’t do anything at the start. Often when a person comes to know the Lord for the first time, there is a joy and a peace that follows, that motivates obedience. Reading the Bible is exciting. Everything is new. Christian brothers and sisters are great. The leaders are so wise. It’s easy at the start because God is doing everything, and we have rose colored glasses or we have this excitement and joy to spur us on. But God allows the honeymoon to wear off. That is not all real. God is doing that for us.

There is a parallel to romantic relationships. Initial romantic love causes people to do crazy things, to stay up all night talking, to drive hours and hours to meet up, to sacrifice time and energy for each other. I remember talking with Brenda until two or three in the morning and then getting up and going to work or getting up and going to class. And you cannot live that way. You do not have the energy through life to live the way you live when you start dating. But in reality, it is not much of a sacrifice. The initial chemical excitement, often mistakenly translated as unconditional love, is a romantic euphoria that makes the sacrifice fun. It’s not really sacrifice. It’s a joy. The guy suddenly loves shopping and avocados. I danced and started watching chick-flicks. Whatever she loves, he loves. Once the guy gets the girl or once the girl gets the guy, that initial euphoria that made sacrifice so easy begins to fade away. Romantic love is great. It gets you started, but it cannot carry you through. It is like throwing gasoline on a fire. It flames up quickly, but it dies down quickly. If the wood does not catch and start to burn, the fire goes out. What you want in a relationship ultimately are these deep burning embers. At times it may not even look like there is a fire, but if you stir it around a bit, you see this deep, warm, intense glow burning within. That glow, that heat, indicates a deeper intimacy, care, respect, trust, and commitment. It is what you want in a marriage relationship. But it takes adversity. It takes commitment through the mundane to get to those deep glowing embers.

That deeper intimate commitment is also what you want in a relationship with God. You build it by walking through adversity with God and staying committed through the mundane, after the initial euphoria has worn off. So, many potential disciples of Christ flame out when the winds and rain come, and the weeds grow up. They have no root. They are choked out. It is all great at first. It is interesting to me how many people stop reading the Bible after those initial days of euphoria wear off because they do not get the joy and peace they got at first when they were reading the Bible. It is as though the only purpose of the Bible is a quick emotional fix, like eating cake and ice cream. You know, that is why I come to the Bible. And if I don’t feel great after I read it, then why would I read it. Really, there is no point in studying the Word of God, God’s perspective of reality unless it happens to give you a good feeling in the moment? So much value in life comes from doing challenging tasks that do not give an immediate emotional benefit. Studying the bible, attending a home group, prayer, going to church, maintaining integrity in relationships and in your choices of entertainment,

initiating spiritual conversation, addressing conflict, forgiving and asking for forgiveness, trusting God when life sucks. Doing it when the joy is high and doing it when the joy is absent. That's how disciples are made.

The journey to Sinai is a God-tailored discipleship course for beginners. The first generation out of Egypt fails to embrace that challenge. They see barriers as reason to complain and turn back. And they complain their way through the journey. And you wonder, "Are they getting anything out of this?" And they even start longing for slavery in Egypt. They have no vision for what could be. Moses sees a promise land. They only see what was, what we left. And they do not even see that correctly. How often do you hear people wish themselves backwards. And there is this imaginary past that was so great. "If only we could return to the communist days under Tito. Those were the days."

God does not punish the Israelite people at all during this initial journey described in Exodus. He gives them everything. He saves them at the Red Sea. He gives them water. He gives them food. He gives them more water. God has great patience with these young disciples. He keeps providing for them and keeps giving them opportunities to step up and trust. His name is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, full of lovingkindness and truth." But notice, it is "slow to anger", not "never angry." On the other side of Mount Sinai, after the golden calf and the restoration of covenant, after the indwelling of tabernacle, God's slowness in anger comes to an end with this unbelieving generation. To call them disciples is being way too generous. The majority are never going to yield in the stubbornness of their hearts. This is the sad legacy of The Grumbling Generation. Let's consider some specific incidents. And as we do, let's consider not only what we learn from the people but also the lessons of leadership that we see in Moses.

Chapter 11: The burden of a leader revealed the midst of grumbling.

The first complaint of Numbers comes in 11:1-3. This is also the first complaint followed by punishment. Fire from the LORD burns among the people. It is a literal demonstration of the language of Exodus where God's anger is said to burn. The appearance of his glory on the mountain was a consuming fire. He is the fire on the bush. This is not a people that has yielded in dependence to the him. They continue to turn in mass away from God. The potential result is not only a loss of the physical promise land, but also the loss of the eternal promise land. When sin continues to slowly lead a community of people further and further from God, both the most just thing and also the most loving thing might be a harsh punishment that can have the result of awakening at least some to their need for the Lord. This punishment does not have that effect on these people. They are a truly a stubborn people. After the fire, they quickly turn to complaint again. Let's read the second complaint. This is a bit longer. This is Numbers, we will start in 11:4-6.

⁴ 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?" ⁵ We remember the fish which we used to eat free in Egypt [they were slaves, but they ate the fish for free], the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic, ⁶ but now our appetite is gone. There is nothing at all to look at except this manna. [Which by the way they do get free from heaven, it just falls down and they pick it up.]"

The people show no vision for a future promise land and no appreciation for the miraculous provision God is giving them on the way there. They are not prepared to suffer even for a little while for the freedom that lies ahead. They begin to dream of the slavery they left behind. They have no sense of where they are going. They only see the dark clouds of the present day, and they don't even see that clearly. They have all they need in God's provision of manna. But they want more. Are we ever like that?

Moses sees clearly what they left behind, and he sees what lies ahead. But the complaining of the people weighs him down heavily. The people are pushing him over the edge. And he unloads his frustration on God in Numbers 11:10-15.

¹⁰ Now Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, each man at the doorway of his tent; and the anger of the LORD was kindled greatly, and Moses was displeased. ¹¹ So Moses said to the LORD, "Why have You been so hard on Your servant? And why have I not found favor in Your sight, that You have laid the burden of all this people on me? ¹² Was it I who conceived all this people? Was it I who brought them forth, that You should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries a nursing infant, to the land which You swore to their fathers'? ¹³ Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me, saying, 'Give us meat that we may eat!' ¹⁴ I alone am not able to carry all this people, because it is too burdensome for me. ¹⁵ So if You are going to deal thus with me, please kill me at once, if I have found favor in Your sight, and do not let me see my wretchedness."

"Just kill me now!" that is what Moses is saying. And what leader can't relate in some way to the emotion spilling out of Moses. Moses, honest with the emotional burden, blames God. "Why did you make me do this? These are your people. You thought them up. You are the one who promised the promise land to their fathers. Why did you call me to this role? Why did you give me this unfaithful, unbelieving, ungrateful rabble? I can't do it. I can't take it anymore. They want meat. Where am I going to get them meat? What am I going to do? Kill every last sheep that we have? Where am I going to get meat?" This is so easy for me because I have done this so often in my ministry. And unfortunately, Brenda, not the Lord, is the one who has had to listen to it. You get pushed over the edge and emotionally you just can't take it anymore. And you just spill it all out on God. And I have also been there when other leaders have done it. And I have had to go around and say, "Don't worry, don't worry. He will calm down. Just give him a moment."

So, how is God going to respond to Moses. Remember, one of the principles of biblical interpretation I mentioned way back in Genesis when we were talking about Abraham is that even though biblical narrative rarely tells us directly the state of a person's heart, we interpret the state of the heart according to the dialogue they have with God. How does God respond to the person? What happens in the person's life following this? God's patience with the Israelites during the Exodus journey could have left us wondering about their spiritual state. They were complaining, but God is not punishing them. Were they simply young, immature believers? Are they going to grow out of the grumbling? Or was this early complaining evidence of stubborn hearts that would just refuse to give in. If we have any doubts, we are now be justified in recognizing, "No, this is not maturing believers. These are stubbornly, unrepentant people.

But even while we more and more lose faith in the people as they continue to complain, we also observe growth in Moses. He was rash and overconfident way back in the beginning of Exodus, when he killed the Egyptian taskmaster at the beginning of the story while he was still in Pharaoh's household. He became humble in the wilderness with the Midianites, so much so, that he developed a sense of inferiority. And when God called him to go tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go, there was no ounce of idealistic passion in him at all to motivate him. He knew he could not do what God was asking, and he kept telling God. But he went in the end. And from that point until now, we have seen the confidence of Moses grow as a leader, but it has grown along with a humble dependence on God. The Moses here who is unloading his emotional burden on God is a faithful servant-leader. Listening to God's response to Moses is going to give us insight both into how God views the heart of Moses and how God views the hearts of the people.

¹⁶ The LORD therefore said to Moses, "Gather for Me seventy men from the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and their officers and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. ¹⁷ Then I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit who is upon you, and will put Him upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you will not bear it all alone. ¹⁸ Say to the people, 'Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wept in the ears of the LORD, saying, "Oh that someone would give us meat to eat! For we were well-off in Egypt." Therefore the LORD will give you meat and you shall eat. ¹⁹ 'You shall eat, not one

day, nor two days, nor five days, nor ten days, nor twenty days,²⁰ but a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you; because you have rejected the LORD who is among you and have wept before Him, saying, “Why did we ever leave Egypt?””

We see God’s response both to Moses and to the people. To Moses God doesn’t even say anything about his emotional unburdening. This is God remaining completely calm. He is not taking it as sin, as stubbornness, as rebellion on the case of Moses. He realizes that Moses is emotionally overwhelmed. And he actually just goes ahead and gives Moses a solution. He is saying, “You are right. You are overburdened. And what I am going to do is I am going to take 70 men of Israel, and they are going to share the burden back with you.

And when we read what Moses then says back to God, we still hear some of his dismay. God has responded back to the emotional statement with a solution. And Moses is still kind of worked up a bit.

²¹ But Moses said, “The people, among whom I am, are 600,000 on foot; yet You have said, ‘I will give them meat, so that they may eat for a whole month.’” ²² Should flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, to be sufficient for them? Or should all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, to be sufficient for them?” ²³ The LORD said to Moses, “Is the LORD’s power limited? Now you shall see whether My word will come true for you or not.”

And that is not again a strong rebuke on Moses for questioning the Lord. It sounds to me like a slight rebuke, but it is a reminder to Moses who he is talking to. And if God says he is going to give meat for a month, then he is going to give meat for a month. And Moses receives that, and he goes on with the command of the Lord. He goes ahead and tells the people what God said, and he gathers together 70 elders.

²⁵ Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him; and He took of the Spirit who was upon him and placed Him upon the seventy elders. And when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do it again. ²⁶ But two men had remained in the camp; the name of one was Eldad and the name of the other Medad. And the Spirit rested upon them (now they were among those who had been registered, but had not gone out to the tent), and they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷ So a young man ran and told Moses and said, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.” ²⁸ Then Joshua the son of Nun, the attendant of Moses from his youth, said, “Moses, my lord, restrain them.”

I love the loyalty of Joshua here. I think he is concerned for the honor and authority of Moses who he faithfully serves. He is nervous about these two men in the camp who did not come out to the tent like they were supposed to. We do not know why not. But he is worried they are infringing on Moses’ role as the prophet and the leader of Israel. “But Moses said to him,” this is verses 29 and 30,

²⁹ But Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them!” ³⁰ Then Moses returned to the camp, both he and the elders of Israel.

Moses came to God with a burden. He was emotionally overwhelmed. God answered Moses’ need with wise guidance and with spiritual provision. He tells Moses that he needs help. He then validates the spiritual ministry of the helpers through a one-time gift of prophecy.

God has been patient with Israel, but their hearts are far from him. This is how he answers their complaint, Numbers 11:31-33,

³¹ Now there went forth a wind from the LORD and it brought quail from the sea, and let them fall beside the camp, about a day’s journey on this side and a day’s journey on the other side, all around the camp and about two cubits deep on the surface of the ground. ³² The people spent all day and 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. ³³ While

the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the anger of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD struck the people with a very severe plague.

Patient love has not worked. God has turned to justice, which is also a form of tough love. There is hope for restoration if the people can be shaken awake by the plague. If they connect this plague to the plagues on Egypt, they might just come to see how wicked they have been, and they just might just turn in repentance to the Lord.

Four lessons of leadership highlighted in the midst of grumbling.

I see four lessons of leadership in the narrative.

First, **criticism comes with the role.** Leaders have to hold on to a vision of the future and leaders have to make difficult strategic decisions to help a community realize that vision. A wise person told me early on, “Even though you serve people in ministry, you are ultimately not serving them. You serve God. You seek his pleasure, not theirs.” We can imagine how Moses felt, having led this people out of Egypt and knowing he is leading them to a good place, and knowing he gave up his life in Midian to do this, and yet, they have continually resisted and complained.

Even harder for Moses, the grumbling of the next chapter involves his sister Miriam and brother Aaron. They speak out about his wife. The verb to “speak against” in 12:1 is in the feminine form, suggesting that Miriam is the instigator, which might also explain why she is the one who gets punished, not Aaron. The criticism is against Moses’ wife. She is referred to as a Cushite. We would think that refers to a woman from Cush, which is below Egypt, so is not Zipporah. But scholars argue that the term could apply to a Midianite for various reasons. Whether it is Zipporah or not, the criticism likely has to do with the command Moses gave to the Israelites not to marry foreign wives when they enter the promise land. The reasoning is that marriage to pagan women will lead Israelite men from the worship of Yahweh. And this is another one of those cases where the details of the law still need to be worked out. We might ask, “What about foreign women who are already married before the command is given?” Or, “What about foreigners who join the community, foreigners are allowed by mosaic law to join Israel, to put themselves under the reign of God, and live under the covenant law of Moses. Ruth, the Moabitess, is an example of a foreign woman who lived out faith in Yahweh and was accepted as the bride of Boaz. So, even though there is a valid question about Moses’ wife, it is a question that has an appropriate answer in the law, especially when we consider how Zipporah circumcised their son, joining herself to the God of Israel.

But the criticism is not really about Moses’ wife, is it? And this is often the nature of criticism. The top-level issue being voiced might be real, it might be a criticism, but it is often an emotional expression or attack being made because of a more fundamental, sometimes unspoken issue. In this case the underlying issue is not left unspoken. Miriam the prophetess and Aaron the priest ask rhetorically, “Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us as well?” And they think the answer is, “Yes, God has spoken through us.” So, we think, look at that issue, “What does that have to do with Moses’ wife?” Well, nothing. The complaint has to do about the credibility of Moses. They are complaining about something very different than their real hearts’ desire, which is a desire to have more influence over Israel. Miriam and Aaron want the same level of authority as Moses who holds a unique position of covenant mediator.

This brings us to a second principle of leadership. **Leader’s must allow God to vindicate them.** We are told at this point in the text that “Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth.” I can immediately think of a long list of things Moses could say to Miriam and Aaron. I know that’s how I would respond. I do not take criticism well. I am quick to become defensive and quick to state my case, too quick. With this comment about the humility of Moses right here in the narrative, I think we are supposed to notice that Moses does not say one word. And that is being connected to his humility. Moses does not respond to the criticism. He doesn’t defend himself. Moses puts himself in the hands of God. There are times when a leader just needs to stay completely silent. There are other times when a leader needs to appropriately state his case before

the appropriate authorities, before other leaders in the community. In either case, whether it is staying silent or appropriately voicing a case, vindication comes from God. Leaders have to trust God to vindicate them. We serve at his pleasure. If God truly gave the call, if you really believe God called you to a role of leadership, then you trust God to keep you in that position of leadership. It is not yours to grasp. If the criticism is outside the community by someone who has no hand in the solution, no relationship to the people involved, I think we let it go. We don't even respond. We just focus on what God has called us to do. We ignore it as we continue to pursue the vision God has given us. If the criticism is in the community or comes by a partner or a friend of the community, we must be slow to speak, slow to become angry, and address the situation through the right system of authority. In this case, there is no right system of authority because these are the top three leaders in Israel. There really is no one to talk to. Moses leaves it in the hands of God. God vindicates Moses.

First was the lesson that criticism comes with the role. You cannot lead without being criticized. Second, when criticized trust God to vindicate you. But your honor in his hands. Third, **because delegation is necessary, leaders must learn to share power and authority.** This is the primary leadership lesson I see from our story in chapter 11. It is really two lessons together. The first is, delegation is a must. The burden was too much for Moses. Moses had already received similar advice to share the load back in Exodus 18. Apparently, it is a tough one for him, and he is still growing in this principle of delegation. He does have a special unique role, he cannot share. He is the one who gets to direct revelation from God, only him, not Aaron, not Miriam. But there is a lot that he is doing that he could share. And this is so typical of so many leaders that they take so much burden on them, just because they know how to do things well, and they see the vision, they think they have to do it. And they have to learn to delegate. Not only because they need to pass off responsibility, but other people do not grow if they do not have the chance to step in and serve and sacrifice and lead.

But to truly delegate, and here is the second lesson, leaders have to give away power. They have to give away real responsibility and authority. God says, "Spread it out." To do that, Moses is going to have to share power. Younger leaders did to have real authority to act, whether they succeed or whether they fail. And if they fail, they do not need to be beaten down by older leaders. And Moses seems to get this. He does not have to control everything. Joshua is really concerned by what is happening out of sight without Moses present, these two guys in the camp. So, when the young man runs to Moses, Joshua is quick to criticize these two leaders who are prophesying in the camp. But Moses says, "Let it happen. Let the Spirit work." It is mark of Moses' humility that he is able to let go of control, and he is able to let others exercise their spiritual gifts in the community without his oversight.

Fourth lesson, **God's people need leaders.** Leadership involves a vision of where the people need to go and the heart and the will to help them get there. These people desperately need Moses, and they need other leaders working with Moses, or they are going to lose Moses. He can't do it alone. All God's people have the ability to sit back and criticize. That is not a unique spiritual gift. Not a lot of people are able or available or willing to step up and lead others forward. It is not an easy job. And unless we are in the game, contributing, serving, praying for our leaders, helping our leaders, we really should keep our criticism to ourselves. We need leaders. And we need to pray for them. And we need to encourage them. And we need to help them. Let's look at one more incident of grumbling. And it is a big one.

Chapter 14: The heart of a leader revealed in grumbling.

In chapter 13 of Numbers men from each tribe are sent to spy out the land. Chapter 14 does not begin well. This is verses 1-4.

¹ Then all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. ² All the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! ³ Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our

little ones will become plunder; would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?" ⁴ So they said to one another, "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt."

Joshua and Caleb speak up in faith to support the original vision of taking the land. "We can do it!" The people pick up stones to kill them. God intervenes manifesting his glory to all Israel. Then God expresses his desire to Moses to destroy Israel and start over with Moses. In a way very similar to the golden calf incident, God's revealing his just anger draws out a response from Moses. And here is that response. This is Numbers 14:12-19.

¹³ But Moses said to the LORD, "Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for by Your strength You brought up this people from their midst, ¹⁴ and they will tell it to the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that You, O LORD, are in the midst of this people, for You, O LORD, are seen eye to eye, while Your cloud stands over them; and You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. ¹⁵ Now if You slay this people as one man, then the nations who have heard of Your fame will say, ¹⁶ 'Because the LORD could not bring this people into the land which He promised them by oath, therefore He slaughtered them in the wilderness.' ¹⁷ But now, I pray, let the power of the Lord be great, just as You have declared, ¹⁸ 'The LORD is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generations.' ¹⁹ Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness, just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now."

This is the prayer of a leader. This is a guy who gets the glory of God. And be careful here. Moses' is not playing up to the vanity of God. Moses is not trying to manipulate God by bringing up his glory. "God, you care so much about your glory. Don't destroy the people." No, Moses cares about God's glory. Moses cares about the fame of his name. That burns in Moses' heart. That's the heart of a leader. He cares first and foremost about the glory of God. He loves the Lord God with all his heart, with all his mind, with all his soul, with all his strength. Moses second concern is the life of the people. He also loves the people. The sinful, rebellious people. Did you notice how Moses connected the two by calling on the name of God. When God agreed after the golden calf incident to dwell among the people, Moses asked to see his glory. "How can you, a holy God, dwell among a sinful people without killing them? How can holy fire rest on a flammable bush without burning it up?" The request to see God's glory is a request to see his true character, to see his being. "Who are you?" And God reveals his glory, his character, by proclaiming his name. Moses here quotes that name back to God. It is here in verse 18. Did you hear it? "The LORD is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but he will by no means clear the guilty." On that basis, the basis of his character, Moses pleads, "Pardon their iniquity even as you have done from Egypt up to this day." This is the way to pray to God. The concern is for God's glory and for compassion on the people. And the basis for that compassion is not the goodness of the people, but the character of God expressed in his name. Moses is saying, "Please God, based on who you are, show your glory through compassion."

For Moses it is a sacrificial plea. The people are going to be forgiven the penalty of their sin. They are not going to be destroyed. But they are still going to have to live with the consequence of their sin. That is part of the name Moses quoted, "But he will by no means clear the guilty."

²⁰ So the LORD said, "I have pardoned *them* according to your word; ²¹ but indeed, as I live, all the earth will be filled with the glory of the LORD. ²² Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice, ²³ shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned Me see it."

We do not know the individual state of each Israelite heart. Taken as a whole, this generation proved a faithless generation from the sin of the golden calf to the end of the 40 years in the wilderness. They continue throughout to grumble and complain. I imagine there was a remnant of true believers

like Moses, Joshua, Caleb. But they don't stand up with Moses, Joshua, and Caleb. They don't speak out. If they believed, they will enter into the eternal promise land. But while on earth, they must find peace with God, accepting the consequences of their own sin and the sin of their generation. Now this is a reality for us as well. Grace does not mean that God will always erase the effects of our sin. Sometimes he does. Sometimes he does not. Sometimes he requires that we walk through a dark road of our own making before we enter into the rest of eternity. This generation has to walk that dark road of their own making. We do not know how many may have entered into true rest in the end.

Unfortunately, it's not going to get better in our next lesson. More rebellion follows. Even Moses will experience the discipline of the Lord. We will pick the story up again next time in Numbers 15-20.

Reflection Questions

1. When you scan back over the grumbling that occurred on the journey from Egypt to Sinai in Exodus 15:22-17:7, what stands out to you? (You may want to also look at the chart on page 2.)
2. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing when you read about the grumbling in Numbers 11?
3. What do you observe about God in his responses to the people and to Moses?
4. In the four lessons of leadership provide above on (pages 7-8) which one speaks most to your own experience?
5. What stands out to you in Moses' prayer in Numbers 14:11-19?
6. How does the prayer reveal the ongoing change in Moses as a leader who is walking with God? (Think all the way back to the burning bush in Exodus 3-4.)
7. What aspects of Moses' prayer could serve you as a model when you pray? What seems helpful to you?