



Enough Is Enough

Numbers 11 and 14

When I was young, Westerns were among the most common TV shows. Everyone knew the players: square-jawed hero, ignorant tenderfoot, feisty school-marm, grizzled mountaineer and unwashed troublemaker. They had several standard crises that created the drama: broken axle, stopped at a polluted water hole, attacked by Indians, mutiny against the trailmaster, held-up by desperados, or a conflict between two members of the company.

You always knew something was going to happen because of the music. You always knew when danger was lurking. Yet, the people in the show never knew, except one or two experienced veterans who would warn them. But mostly, the people wouldn't listen. They never heard the ominous music. But you knew disaster was about to strike. You sat forward on the edge of your seat, saying, "Circle the wagons!" or "Don't drink the water!" or "Why don't you listen?" And the expected calamity would fall. They hadn't seen the movie.

Good thing it was just a movie, right?

Too bad you can't say the same about the Exodus. They had about every calamity Matt Dillon or John Wayne ever had, some of them twice. But did they ever learn?

Listen to them: "Moses, we've been on the road for three days, Moses, we're running out of water, Moses, maybe we should go back to Egypt." It had only been 3 days since they'd crossed the Red Sea, hardly time to forget what God could do with water. Moses talked to God and God provided water. But do they learn their lesson?

Listen again: "Moses, its been 15 days, Moses, we're running out of food, Moses, maybe we should go back to Egypt." Back to Egypt? Slavery, forced labor, bricks without straw, and they want to go back! Moses talked to God again. God fed them manna. And he fed them. And he kept on feeding them.

They complain again. And God provides water again. They are attacked by hostile locals and they win. Moses consecrates them to God's service and God speaks to them from a cloud around the mountain, where thunder rolls, lightning flashes, trumpets blast and the earth trembles. The people made all kinds of promises and seal it with blood. And practically the minute Moses is out of their sight, what happens? They forget everything! They made an idol, got drunk and party. And now they decide they would rather try a different God, one more to their liking. Haven't they gotten it yet?

God is just about ready to try a different people. But Moses plead with him not to incinerate them. So about 3,000 died, instead of the whole caravan. Did it get their attention? For a while. They built the tabernacle, which kept them out of trouble for almost two years. But do they learn their lesson?

Listen again.

SECOND YEAR, SECOND MONTH

They complain about their “misfortunes.” Misfortunes! Yes, misfortunes!

And the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes, and when the LORD heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp (Numbers 11:1 ESV).

We are not told what they were actually complaining about. They just complain. Apparently, it was so insignificant, God did not even record the issue. So God sizzles them a bit around the edges, as a reminder. But do they learn their lesson?

“GRAVES OF CRAVING”

Listen again:

Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, “Oh that we had meat to eat! ⁵ We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. ⁶ But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” ... ¹⁰ Moses heard the people weeping throughout their clans, everyone at the door of his tent. And the anger of the LORD blazed hotly, and Moses was displeased (Numbers 11:4-6, 10 ESV).

A Jewish commentator, Rashi, pointedly asked, “Why did they cry out for meat when they were surrounded by their own sheep and cattle?” They are experiencing wilderness living with none of the “luxuries” they had known, and are sickened by the constant necessity to eat manna, a nutritious but boring food.

*“The anger of the Lord **blazed hotly** and Moses was displeased” (Numbers 11:10).*

The situation got to Moses; he is completely exasperated! Speaking to God, Moses said: “Why have you dealt ill with your servant? And why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? ... If you will treat me like this, kill me at once” (Numbers 11:11, 15 ESV).

And so, God decides to feed them quail. Not just a little either. God said, “You shall eat meat, for you have wept in the hearing of the LORD. ... ¹⁹ You shall not eat just one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, ²⁰ but a whole month, until it comes out at your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you (Numbers 11:18-20 ESV).

And the people rose all that day and all night and all the next day, and gathered the quail. Those who gathered least gathered ten homers. And they spread them out for themselves all around the camp. ³³ While the meat was yet between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD struck down the people with a very great plague. ³⁴ Therefore the name of that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had the craving (Numbers 11:32-34 ESV).

This is good meat. God provided well. Each person gathered about sixty bushels. In the words of one commentator, “This is frankly gluttonous.” They “spread them out,” presumably to dry out in the sun – a quail jerky – to have for future use. The term “craving” can be used positively or negatively. It refers to an all-consuming passion for something. In this case it had to do with the old life of slavery in Egypt. The poetic justice is that the Lord punished them by the fulfilling of their short-sighted desires.

Do they learn their lesson?

EXCEEDINGLY GOOD LAND

And so it goes. They’ve been wandering about in Sinai, with their own personal shepherd seeing to their welfare, and nothing’s ever good enough, and nothing’s ever their fault, and God is unreasonable, or stingy, or unfair.

They arrive at the edge of the Promised Land. The promise is about to be fulfilled. Moses sent spies to check out the land. What they learn is the land was not just good, but exceedingly good (14:7). How good? They needed two people to carry the oversized grapes (13:23). The land was rich, but the distraught spies failed to appreciate the milk-producing livestock, eye-popping produce and mouth-watering honey. The land was fertile; it was fabulous.

But, the ten brought a bad report. The ten spies moaned, “The Amalekites dwell in the land of the Negeb. The Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the hill country. And the Canaanites dwell by the sea, and along the Jordan” (Numbers 13:29). They claimed that the highlands were taken, the lowlands were occupied and the shore was populated.

To the ten spies, the land was a mysterious. They said, “The land we explored devours those living in it.” All they could focus on was the size of the inhabitants. “Compared to them, we are like grasshoppers.” Their assertion was ludicrous and irrational.

Open Rebellion

Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. ² And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. 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 a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” ⁴ And they said to one another, “Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt” (Numbers 14:1-4 ESV).

The Israelites wore their sour attitude and uncooperative spirit on their sleeves. They wept out loud.

Battles are won or lost in the heart. The Israelites defeated Pharaoh’s army without lifting a finger; they routed the Amalekites in their first battle (Ex 17:8-15). But this time, they lost to an invisible army they had never met or fought.



Murder Is on Their Mind

Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the people of Israel. ⁶ And Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes ⁷ and said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, “The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. ⁸ If the LORD delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. ⁹ Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them.” ¹⁰ Then all the congregation said to stone them with stones. But the glory of the LORD appeared at the tent of meeting to all the people of Israel (Numbers 14:5-10 ESV).

How are optimists and pessimists different? The classical answer is that the optimist considers a half glass as half-full and the pessimist considers it half-empty. The optimist sees opportunity in every obstacle and the pessimist sees obstacles in every opportunity. It’s been said, “When a pessimist has nothing to worry about, he worries why he has nothing to worry about.” An optimist is someone who goes fishing for a blue whale in a rowboat and carried the tartar sauce with him.

Joshua and Caleb were steadfast in the face of an outright threat. They acted from faith in God, not from blind faith or positive thinking. The ten based their assumption on human factors. They did not mention the Lord once (Numbers 14:8-9).

Joshua and Caleb said the land’s inhabitants were “bread” for food (NIV translates it as “swallow them up”). Instead of fearing they would be squashed like grasshoppers, Joshua and Caleb said they would flatten the inhabitants like pancakes!

CONSEQUENCES

Then the LORD said, “I have pardoned, according to your word. ²¹ But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD, ²² none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, ²³ shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. And none of those who despised me shall see it (Numbers 14:20-23 ESV).

The Israelites saw the land and breathed its air but missed the door. They were in the wilderness of Paran (Num 13:26), south of the Promised Land, on the last stop before moving into the Promised land. But, they had tested God again. The Israelites tested God ten times (Num 14:22). It was enough. Their testing of God had reached the maximum. Previously, God had overlooked their stubbornness, tolerated their immaturity, but His patience is exhausted.

Enough is enough.

Conclusion:

Remember the TV audience always knew the danger long before the people in the story do. The people never seem to notice, in spite of the warnings, in spite of good advice. They never noticed until it was too late.

Let's remember the lessons of Israel's history:

“The earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord. ... The men who have seen my glory and my signs ... have put me to the test ten times ... and now note of those who despised me shall see it. ... What you have said in my hearing I will do ... your dead bodies shall fall ... you shall know my displeasure”
(Numbers 14:21-23, 28-29)

Israel never seemed to know the danger. We sat on the edge of our seats, wondering, “Will they ever get it?” And they do not. They remain stiffnecked and hardhearted. God would keep his covenant. He abounds in steadfast love – covenant loyalty. Israel will be forgiven, so God can fulfill his promise. But the people, will reap what they have sown.

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. ⁸ For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. ⁹ And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up (Galatians 6:7-9 ESV).

Never forget, our God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29). We must learn to balance the two very important truths:

The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty (Numbers 14:18 ESV).