

INTRODUCTION

Last year when we completed the study on the book of Exodus, the Israelites were in the wilderness. God delivered them from Egypt and was about to lead them into Canaan, a land of abundance that God had promised to Abraham. It took the Israelites three months to arrive at the foot of Mount Sinai. God made a covenant with them, and He gave them the Ten Commandments and the Law. For the rest of the Exodus and the whole book of Leviticus, God's people stationed at Sinai. A year had passed when we come to the first chapter of Numbers. God ordered Moses to tally the number of men who were twenty years old and above in each tribe. They would be future soldiers to conquer Canaan. Then finally, God asked His people to move on to the next stop. We will pick up our study from chapter 11. Up to this point in Israel's history, everything seems to be ready for Canaan. There were leaders, the Law and a troop. But something important was missing. People did not have faith in God. The book of Numbers has a sad ending. The Israelites could not enter the Promised Land because they disobeyed the Lord. Verses 1 to 4 in our chapter is a microcosm of their rebellion. I call it a 4H cycle. First, there is the Hate. It is an expression of dissatisfaction like when you kids groan: "I hate to go to school. I hate to do chores." This time the Israelites complained about some unspecific reason. When people grumble, God responds by turning up the Heat. That is the second H. God burst out anger and sent fire to His people as a means of warning and discipline. Thirdly, people cried out for Help. In this case, they pleaded to Moses. Then finally, we see a Halt when God stopped His discipline. Keep these 4H in mind. We will see them over and over again in the wilderness journey. The Israelites did not like to go through troubles. Why not a direct chartered flight from Egypt to Canaan? The distance between the two places are closer than from here to Atlanta. It does not even take 2 hours. No one likes hardship. Why can't God give us a smooth ride from point A to point B? Our God is full of wisdom. He never does anything in random because He has a perfect plan for you and me. The lesson for us in this passage, and perhaps for the book of Numbers is this: God can use hardship as a catalyst to increase our faith.

EXPLANATION

1. Discontentment 人的不滿

Beginning in verse 4, the Israelites faced a new crisis. People showed discontentment in their current situation. Let us look at **verses 4 to 5**: 4 The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, "If only we had meat to eat! 5 We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost-also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic." The rabble were some non-Jews who followed along when God's people left Egypt. Those outsiders stirred up the Israelites to complain about food. We can make a quick application here. You will be affected by whoever's voice you listen to. Your spiritual life will grow rapidly if you are surrounded by mature Christians. They encourage you to read God's Word, attend church meetings and spend more time in prayer. On the contrary, if your mind is occupied by gossip, materialism or greed for money, then more than likely you will go after those things. Therefore, we need to have wisdom from God on whose voice we follow. The rabble gave the Israelites bad

influence. They remembered not too long ago they enjoyed free fish and all the goodies in Egypt. Now they had nothing to eat. Really nothing? Read **verse 6**: “But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!” Where did the manna come from in the first place? Was it an exotic plant species they discovered in the desert? Was it the success of the Israel Department of Agriculture? None of those! God dropped manna from the sky because His people were afraid that they had no food to rely on. It was also a test of their faith if they would continue to depend on God. This is a typical half-a-glass-of-water scenario. Some people are happy to have half-filled water, while others worry that half of it is gone. Whether people saw manna as God’s new grace every morning or a boring food is a matter of perspective. You see, joy in the Lord and thankfulness to Him is a choice. You can grumble over dirty dishes in the sink, or you can rejoice that family members gather for dinner. You can agonize about tough school assignments, or you can feel glad for the opportunity to pursue a bright future. You can complain about stress at work and deadlines to meet, or you can thank God for a steady income. You can have contrasting feeling about spiritual matters too. Bible reading and church meetings can be tedious. You feel that the songs we sing are lame. This bald guy’s preaching is uncreative. Or you can be grateful that we have freedom to worship God and we have a church family. Following the Lord takes some repetitive work. You need to keep a habit to read the Bible, pray every day and come to church meetings. Going back to the passage. There is a more serious problem in the complaint. The Israelites forgot they were slaves in Egypt! Did they really eat free food? No, they had to work their tails off before they could survive. They were under constant oppression from the Egyptian slave-masters. God set the Israelites free and made them His people. Did they really want to go back and remain as slaves - generation after generation? They were so absent-minded about God’s wonderful grace. God used the wilderness journey as a training ground to prepare them for the future blessing of Canaan. One pastor said it right: manna was not intended to be a long-term staple food. If the Israelites followed God’s guidance, it only took them a few weeks to travel to Canaan. But we shall see later that they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years because of their disobedience. Despite their lack of faith, God kept on providing manna to them daily. For us, there is always a temptation to go back to the old days. The devil whispers in your ears: “Remember all the fun you had before you became a Christian? Why tie your hands up with all those religious requirements? Why listen to God when you can become your own boss again?” Don’t believe in those lies! God saved you and He puts you in a training course. He wants to purify you and shape you to become more like Christ. Yes, life may seem monotonous and it may feel like a wilderness. Put your trust in the Lord. Be thankful every day for His grace. He will guide your way.

2. Discouragement 心的交瘁

The Israelites rose up to grumble about food. Poor Moses had to hear all their complaints. His heart was full of discouragement about his people and his role. How did he respond? From verse 11 to 15, Moses dumped all his frustration to God. Let me paraphrase what he said: “1. You gave me this tough job because You do not like me; 2. I am not a parent to the Israelites and so I am not responsible to guide them; 3. Where can I find enough meat to feed them? 4. This leadership role is too much for me to handle; 5. You may as well take my life.” Moses put the focus on the problem and himself. Granted, it is never an easy task to manage so many people. How did God deal with Moses’ grievances? God raised up some helpers. We shall talk about that in a moment. Besides, God reminded Moses who He was in **verse 23**: ... “Is the Lord’s arm too short? You

will now see whether or not what I say will come true for you.” Our God is powerful. It is more than a cliché. It is a conclusion we can draw from our past experience. Moses only saw himself versus two million people. But he forgot that God was above everything. God defeated Pharaoh and the Egyptian army. He divided the Red Sea. He rained manna from the sky. He also paved the way for Moses to become a leader. God preserved Moses when Pharaoh ordered that all the Hebrew new-born males be thrown into the river. God arranged Pharaoh’s daughter to adopt Moses as her son. Moses thought he was ready to deliver the Jews when he was 40 years old. But God sent him to Midian to take care of sheep for 40 years. Then God called Moses from a burning bush. Moses replied in **Exodus 3:11** - ... “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” Aha! Finally, Moses humbled himself. God encouraged Moses in **the next verse**: ... “I will be with you.” ... Then Moses admitted his incompetence in **Exodus 4:10** - Moses said to the Lord, “O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.” Once again, God strengthened Moses. Skip to **verse 12** of the chapter: “Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.” God will give power to the servants He calls. We will be afraid when we look at the problems and focus on our abilities only. We have to turn our eyes to the Lord. Most of you know Ron Chan, brother H.K.’s son. Ron graduated from seminary a year ago. Now he is serving as a pastor in California. At that time, I did not know Ron. After serving as a pastor for 11 years, I believed I had a tip or two to share with this young man. I wrote a poem titled “You Are Called” to encourage Ron. Let me read a few lines to you: There will be times when you are confused, wondering if you’re doing what you’re supposed to do, asking the Lord and yourself: “Why me, why this, why now?” Don’t you forget: you are called. When you feel lonely, remember He who said: “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” When you feel overwhelmed, remember He who said: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened.” There will be moments when efforts are not appreciated, truth diluted, godly advice comes to deaf ears, hardened hearts and numb souls. God’s grace is new every morning. Plug in, recharge and hit the road! Till that Day comes. All that matters is, when you are called. “Here, Lord!” “Come home. Well done, good and faithful servant!” The fact is, there is not much difference to be a leader in Moses’ time and the 21st century. We need to deal with adversity and difficult people. Keep in mind that we are only a tiny part in God’s Masterplan. Our job is to stay faithful to God’s calling. We may fail even when we try our very best. God will be responsible for the final outcome. What is God calling you to do today? God may call you to be a parent. It is tough to make a living to feed a few mouths. It is harder to instill godly values to the next generation in a secular world. God may send you to a particular company or college. There is a good prospect for your career or academic growth. However, it may be a hostile environment to your faith. God may put you in a nice neighborhood of a good school district. But you realize that your neighbors may not be that friendly because of your skin color. There will be ongoing challenges. You feel like quitting. Do not forget God’s calling. He is always with you. Look to Him for strength.

3. Discernment 新的領悟

God’s people complained and so did His servant Moses. Even though Moses was sick and tired of his leadership role, God was not done with him yet. The Lord wanted Moses to gain new discernment about who God was. Our focus today is on how God helped Moses. Next week we will study how God dealt with the grumbling people. God’s solution for Moses is found in **verse 16-17**: 16 The Lord said to Moses: “Bring me seventy of Israel’s elders who are known to you as

leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the Tent of Meeting, that they may stand there with you. 17 I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit that is on you and put the Spirit on them. They will help you carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone.” God was gracious. He acknowledged that it was too much for Moses to care for all the people by himself. He asked Moses to gather seventy men to share his workload. They were recognized leaders among the people. Now they would serve in a more prominent role as Moses’ direct assistants. God also told Moses that He would share the Spirit that was in Moses to those leaders. That Spirit was God’s Spirit. We see an evidence in **verse 25**: Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took of the Spirit that was on him and put the Spirit on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied, but they did not do so again. What did they prophesy about? The passage does not give us any further detail. The word “prophesy” can mean predicting about the future. But the general sense is to act like a prophet. Those seventy men received power from God to say something out of the norm. God found some helpers for Moses. I can think of another Biblical example where people were appointed to participate in God’s work. In the book of Acts, someone complained that some widows were being neglected when food was distributed. The apostles responded in **Acts 6:3** – “Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them.” They found seven coworkers who were spiritually mature. To do what? They were assigned to run a food bank. The apostles even held a hand-laying ceremony to publicly install the seven brothers. That was the first group of deacons in the church history. The Greek word for “deacon” simply means “attendants.” For those of you who aspire to serve as church coworkers you need to start from the kitchen! In both instances, we see that God relived the burden of the leaders by gathering more people to serve. Grumbling may not be the best way to express our needs and emotions. But God loves us enough to allow us to vent our frustration. Some of the prophets and psalmists did that. They questioned why God did not seem to care about their personal and national needs. They were afflicted by enemies. They saw injustice in the society and foreign countries attacked their homeland. They asked where God was and how long they had to wait before God would come to their rescue. The take home lesson for us is that God knows our hearts. We do not need to hide our feelings from Him. Whether you are anxious, afraid or lack of faith, just tell Him so. Moses was overwhelmed by the needs of His people. Our church has many needs too. We have many brothers and sisters serving faithfully in the same roles for a long time. Leaders are crying for help. With the limited manpower we currently have, we need to prioritize ministries. We also need to pray that God will send us mature Christians to join us as coworkers. That can be you! From a management standpoint, we need to more openly share the ministry needs, actively recruit and equip potential new coworkers. Just like the Biblical examples we see above, those who serve in ministries should be humble people that rely on God’s Spirit.

CONCLUSION

In this passage God want us to learn that He can use hardship as a catalyst to increase our faith. Problems are part of the process to refine us, so that we can be more like Christ. When we understand the sinfulness of human nature, we know that people have unlimited desires that we cannot fulfill. When we accept our weaknesses, we realize that we need help. But when we humbly turn to God, then we can experience His power and grace. Just like the Israelites, our journey has not been completed. Every day is full of learning opportunities.