

### God's Promises: Do We Trust Them?

In the first ten chapters of Numbers, the Israelites are shown as being responsive and obedient to all of God's commands. In chapter eleven, however, tension, unease, and frustration begin to overtake the minds and hearts of God's chosen people. The Israelites are now in the midst of their journey to the promised land with God leading them in a cloud of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night. The time of preparation is over and the treacherous trek through the wilderness has begun.

Chapter eleven opens with the Israelites complaining about their situation and misfortunes in the wilderness.<sup>1</sup> What were they complaining about? The text does not specify. We can, however, imagine what their complaints might have been. The Israelites were spending twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week in the hot, dry, barren desert. With over six hundred thousand people (not including women and children) moving at once, the trip must have been excruciatingly slow and tedious. Also, with that many people, food and water were most likely the scarcest of resources. Now, imagine that you were in a hot, dry, barren desert with six hundred thousand other people all of whom were looking for the food and drink necessary to survive. Does that sound like a good time to you? Do you think you would cry out to God under those circumstances and ask God to improve your situation? I know I would.

When God hears the Israelites complaining, God becomes angry and burns an outlying part of the camp.<sup>2</sup> God's anger is fueled again later in chapter eleven when the

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<sup>1</sup> Num 11:1 (New Revised Standard Version)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Israelites complain that they do not have enough meat to eat. Why is God so angry? Are these not legitimate complaints of a people living in an unstable area under uncertain conditions?

The easy answer to the above question is, “Yes, the Israelites do have a legitimate right to complain about their situation in the wilderness.” The complaints themselves, however, are not what is fueling God’s anger. It is the implied meaning behind those complaints that have God infuriated with the Israelites. God is angry because the Israelites are losing faith in the promises God made to them at Mount Sinai. At Sinai, God promised to provide for and protect the Israelites in exchange for their obedience and worship. Throughout their journey, God has been present in the midst of the Israelites, leading them by cloud and fire and providing them with daily manna. God is holding up God’s end of the bargain. Through their complaining, the Israelites are not.

The Israelites are on the road to the “promised land,” the land flowing with “milk and honey,” yet all they can think about is their current predicament. They knew of the abundance and bounty that awaited them in the promised land, but they could not wait. They wanted to feast NOW! “Give us meat to eat,” they cried to Moses.<sup>3</sup>

If I were preaching on this text, I would explore the meaning behind the Israelites cry for meat in the wilderness and how it relates to us today. It seems to me that when we urgently cry out for more meat in our lives (i.e. money, food, clothing, cars, houses, etc.) we are really saying, “Give me my share now because I do not believe it will be there tomorrow.” Our American culture teaches us to “get what we can while we can” because tomorrow it will be gone. If we agree with or follow that motto, however, what does that say about the trust we place in God to provide for and protect us? I think if we

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<sup>3</sup> Num 11:13 (NRSV)

are honest with ourselves, we will admit that the way we act today resembles the actions of the Israelites in the wilderness. Today we covet and hoard resources for ourselves because we do not feel there will be enough to go around in the future. We ask the same questions of God that Moses asked: “Are there enough flocks and herds to slaughter? Are there enough fish in the sea?”<sup>4</sup> We ask God, “Will there be enough for me?” I believe, however, that if we truly trust in the promises of God, if we truly believe that God will provide us with daily manna, then that is a question we do not need to ask. For the answer will always be the same: “Yes, there will be enough, not just for you, but for all God’s people.”

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<sup>4</sup> Num 11:22 (NRSV)