

TRAVELING WITH A HOLY GOD WHO SAVES BY GRACE NOT BY WORKS

Numbers 11:1-35

INTRODUCTION

The most difficult concept in the universe to understand is not string theory or quantum mechanics or the human genome or why women cannot follow a map or why men refuse to ask for directions or how teenagers can text message so fast. The most difficult concept in the universe for humans to grasp is this: being loved by God and welcomed into his heavenly kingdom is entirely by grace and not by any human work. The fact that God accepts me, loves me, rewards me with heaven not because of who I am or what I do or decide but he loves me entirely because he has freely decided to love me and accept me; this is the most incomprehensible idea in the universe. Grace is the opposite of justice. Justice says that people should be rewarded according to what they deserve. If I go the speed limit it would be unjust for a police officer to pull me over and give me a speeding ticket. However, if I break the speed limit then it is just if the officer pulls me over and gives me a speeding ticket. Grace is so incomprehensible because it is the act of being treated well when you deserve to be punished. For example it would be grace if when you break the speed limit the police officer pulls you over and, rather than give you a speeding ticket, he gives you season tickets for the Green Bay Packers paid for by the taxpayers of Rock County. That would not be justice but grace. Grace is by definition, unjust.

If there is one thing that the Bible is relentless in seeking to get us to see it is that God loves and accepts people because of his grace, not because of our own goodness or good behavior. This story in Numbers 11 is a clear example of this fact. Exodus 12 through Numbers 10 covers a period of 14 months from Israel's exodus from Egypt to Mt. Sinai where they receive God's law and then begin their march across the wilderness to the land of Canaan. Except for the incident of the golden calf the story of Israel has been mostly positive. God gives commands and the people do what he says, building the tabernacle, consecrating the priests and Levites, organizing the camp. From Exodus 34 through Numbers 10 the most common refrain has been that Israel did everything that the Lord commanded them to do.

Numbers 10 describes Israel marching across the desert in perfect obedience to God's directions with God leading them. Every tribe goes out when the trumpet sounds. The Levites carry the tabernacle and holy furniture just as commanded. A more idyllic picture could not be imagined: the obedient people of God marching across the desert, following their God; ready to set up camp or strike camp and march whenever they see the cloud move and hear the trumpets blow. If you were reading this for the first time, chapter 11:1 would come as a shock (Read it). Obedient Israel complains about how poorly God is treating them and therefore God sends his fire to burn up the edges of the camp. What this chapter clearly teaches us is that God saves people by grace, not by works. We will see four reasons why this is the way it is.

MAIN POINT

Safe travel to and entry into heaven is only by grace because...

I. Law brings wrath (vv. 1-3, 10, 20 & 33-34)

This chapter is written with the assumption that you and I have read everything that has been written prior to this. If you have read all that comes before you will be struck by how similar this sounds to other stories you have read. In particular, the story of Israel's complaint about the food and then God's response with the quail will remind you of a very similar story recorded in Exodus 16. Also, the story of God providing Moses with assistants will remind you of the story recorded in Exodus 18. However, while there are clear similarities in these stories there are striking differences. When we read this story and see the differences we are meant to ask: why the differences in these stories?

First, let's look at the ways these stories are similar. Exodus 16 takes place 1 month after Israel leaves Egypt. The whole congregation of Israel grumbles against Moses and Aaron because they have run out of food. They say, "Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." How does God respond to this outrageous complaint? He tells Moses to tell the people that he is going to provide them with meat that evening and with bread in the morning. That night quail came up and covered the camp and the next morning, after the dew had evaporated from the grass the people discovered, for the first time, manna, God's bread from heaven. There is no negative reaction to the grumbling of Israel by God or by Moses. God simply supplies the legitimate need of Israel for food. This story follows the story of the people complaining about the bitter water at Marah and God's showing Moses how to make it sweet by throwing a log into it. Then it is followed by another story of Israel complaining about no water and God providing water out of a rock. In all three of these stories the people complain but God is not upset, he simply solves the problem for them.

In Exodus 18 we are told the story of Moses meeting his father-in-law and celebrating God's deliverance with him. Then Jethro, after seeing Moses judging the people from morning to night tells Moses that he needs to appoint other men to help him do the work of arbitrating the inevitable disputes that arise in so great a company of people. Moses had no idea that he needed help. He did not feel burdened in any way by what he was doing. He needed to be informed that he needed help. At that time judges were appointed throughout Israel over groups of 10, 100 and 1000 people each, forming a judicial system with Moses acting as the final court of appeal. So note this: Moses does not lead God's people alone, rather he has hundreds of men helping him.

When we compare those stories with this one there are obvious similarities. However, there is a very marked difference between God's reaction to the complaints here and a very marked difference in Moses' attitude here as compared with the Exodus stories. Here when the people complain of their misfortunes in v. 1 God is not sympathetic in the least. Rather he is furious with them and sends his fire to begin burning the edges of the camp. Tents and possessions go up in flames from the same fire that burned up Nadab and Abihu. After the people complain about not having meat, rather than interceding for the people, Moses attacks God himself for leaving him all alone to lead these whiners and tells God to kill him because he cannot take it anymore. God tells him that he is going to remove some of the Spirit's power and gifts from him and give his power and gifting to seventy other men. While these Spirit filled men are a help to Moses the removal of some of the power and gifting of the Spirit from Moses is also a diminishment of his authority. It is noteworthy that following this story Moses' authority is regularly challenged by people within the community, something that never happened prior to this.

God responds to the people's complaint about their diet by angrily telling them he is going to send them so much meat that they will eat it, not just for one day but for 30 days, until they vomit it up because they will be so gorged with it (v. 20). He sends so many quail that they cover the desert for a day's journey in every direction piled 3 feet deep. It is deeply significant that in Exodus the quail fell within the boundaries of the camp while here the quail are outside the camp where the unclean are sent. As the people gorge themselves on the quail God again is furious and sends a plague and kills all those who lusted after meat (v. 33).

What happened between Exodus 18 and Numbers 11 that causes God to react so violently to the people's complaints and exposes Moses as such a rebellious person himself? What happened was that God gave Israel the Law. The Law of God is based upon the principle of justice. The Law announces God's commands and then what he will justly do in response to how a person responds to his commands. People will be blessed if they obey but cursed and killed if they disobey. The law only informs you of God's standard it cannot do anything to help you do what God says as it is external to you. Thus knowing what God requires is not a benefit unless you obey it and the sad fact of human existence is that we do not like God's commands and thus we do not obey them. The beautiful way of life described in the law of a society in which people love God and one another always remains a dream, never a reality because, as this chapter shows, people do not do what God says

and thus the law is always an instrument of condemnation for human beings. The law is never a source of blessing but cursing to humans because we do not obey it.

Paul makes very clear in his letter to the Romans the function of God's law in our lives. In Romans 2:13 he announces the principle of justice upon which the law is based: "it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified." Romans 3:20, "by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." The only thing the law does is announce to you that you are a sinner deserving God's judgment. Romans 4:13-15, "For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith... For the law brings wrath..." What the law brought to Israel was not salvation but the wrath of God as this chapter so clearly shows. Knowing God's requirement does nothing good for you but announce and increase God's anger against you for not doing what you know you should do. Because of the Law Israel knew God and knew God's will and yet they openly curse him and accuse him of not loving them. Moses joins in the rebellion by accusing God of not keeping his promises. Every person in Israel treats God's name with scorn and contempt. Thus, God responds in anger, just as he told them he would do in his Law. He acts with perfect justice against their sinful rebellion against him just as he promised in his Law.

My friend, the commands of God are wonderful and beautiful and good but they are not your friend because you cannot keep them perfectly because you are a sinner. God never blesses a human being because they have obeyed his law. The law only brings condemnation to you because it is based on justice and thus blessing can only be given to those who perfectly obey it and you do not obey it. God, on the basis of his law can only condemn you. So you must never make the mistake of thinking that God is going to be good to you because of your obedience to his commands. The law always brings God's wrath to sinners like us.

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- *And because...*

II. We believe God owes us more and better (vv. 4-9)

In v. 2 we are only given a general description of the complaints of Israel. They complain about their "misfortunes" or "hardships." The word translated this way is literally the word for evil. It is the opposite of the word "good" which Moses told Hobab, at the end of chapter 10 is what God promised to Israel. So God has said he is going to do good to Israel but Israel, marching through the desert complains that their lives are full of evil. They call God a liar. Then in vv. 4-6 the non-Jewish people who came out of Egypt with them begin to complain about the quality of the food that God is providing. This provokes a widespread, public outcry or complaint about God's provision for them. They declare that they had it better when they were slaves in Egypt. They say that the Egyptian slave masters treated them better than God is treating them. They claim they ate for free in Egypt and that their diet was fit for a king. Free fish and tasty salads is what they ate in Egypt, they claim. They are like petulant children who turn up their nose at the tasty, healthy meal their mom sets before them and throw a temper tantrum, wailing that they want to go to McDonalds. But it's even worse than that. They describe their present condition to be that of a person dying of hunger. Their strength is dried up the way a person who is malnourished is weak and unable to function.

Their complaint is in the face of God's provision of manna each and every morning. Manna is a free, tasty and nutritious food. That is the point of the editorial insertion of vv. 7-9. It has a pleasing appearance, like bdellium which was a prized substance connected with the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2. It can be prepared in a variety of ways, ground, boiled or baked. It tastes like a sweet pastry cooked in oil. In other words, it tastes like dessert. Israel has left behind a land of slavery and misery and they are on their way to a land flowing with milk and honey. They ate in Egypt at the cost of their freedom, not for free. They eat now, for free and their food is varied and tasty. What they are doing in their complaining is calling God evil and a liar and declaring that the Egyptian gods are better gods than the true and living God. They are treating God's name, his

reputation with scorn and contempt. Like Adam and Eve before them they prefer forbidden food to the free food God has abundantly provided.

What is at the root of their complaint? At the root of their complaining, indeed of all complaining, is the belief that we deserve more and better. We are people who naturally operate upon the premises of justice. We deserve to be treated well. We have earned the right to have more and better. But to approach God on the basis of justice is madness. These people, as all people, have what they have as a gift. They escaped Egypt and have been made God's people by God's free grace and for no other reason. They forget that they should be dead because of their building and worshipping the golden calf. For them to demand to be treated fairly is like the convicted murderer standing before the judge at sentencing and demanding to be treated with justice. If a convicted murderer complains that he doesn't like his cell that he deserves to live in an ocean front resort and he doesn't like the food and the judge owes it to him to give him his own private gourmet chef, what will the judge do? If it is justice you want, the judge will say, then I will give you justice, death by lethal injection. What the murderer should be asking for is mercy and grace, not justice. The only way that God can bring us safely to heaven is if he ignores our demands to be treated with justice and deals with us according to his grace. Complaining is always a sign that you believe you deserve more and better. It is always a denial of who you really are and what you really deserve. It is always calling God a liar. We should always thank God for the overwhelming evidence of his grace in food and clothing and life and family and to beg him to not treat us as we deserve but to treat us according to his grace.

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III. We think more highly of ourselves than we do of God (vv. 11-15, 21-22)

Grumbling is a highly contagious disease. It not only spreads throughout the whole camp of Israel but infects Moses as well. Moses, instead of interceding for the people as he has every other time they have complained, joins the accusations against God. He accuses God of being the author of the rebellion. He says that God has done him evil by making him the leader of Israel. Then he asks several pointed, rhetorical questions by which he declares that these are not his people therefore they are not his problem. He didn't give them birth so he cannot be held responsible for them. He claims that God has commanded him to carry them, like a mother carries a nursing child, all the way to the land of Canaan. He claims that God has required him to find meat for all these whining Israelites. Then in his utter disgust and despair he demands that God show him favor by killing him. "I'd rather be dead than be the leader of these crummy people who are nothing to me but who belong to you God."

Then after God says that he is going to provide meat to feed the 600,000 men plus the women and children for a month, he says, "Yah right! We'd have to kill every animal we own to feed this multitude for a month. We'd have to gather all the fish in the sea to feed them for a month. Where are you going to get meat for this multitude?" Moses does not believe that God can do what God says he is going to do. He is full of unbelief regarding the promise of God and calls into question God's power. He, like Israel, is calling God a liar and treating his name with scorn and contempt.

So what happened to our faithful, praying prophet? Why does he respond this way? Moses has fallen into one of the most common traps that those who are given authority and leadership in the church or home can fall. Everyone who has been given the task of helping others to follow God, whether a pastor or elder or small group leader or a parent faces the danger of taking responsibility for things for which you are not responsible. When you take responsibility for things you are not responsible for you end up taking responsibility away from God. God has said that he is going to carry the people of Israel from Egypt to Canaan. He never told Moses to do

that. He has promised to provide meat for Israel, he never asked Moses to have anything to do with it. Moses has forgotten his place in the work. He is responsible for communicating God's word and for interceding for God's people, that's all. It is not his job to get them to Canaan or to feed them along the way, that's God's job. His anger is caused by his pride. He is sure that God's whole program would fall apart without him. He is the main man in getting the job done. Moses is angry because he views himself as god and the people are not treating him with the respect he is due as their god. This is the reason for most of the anger you experience as well. We are mad that people don't treat us like God.

If God is going to save a man like Moses who naturally views himself as more adequate than God himself, then God will have to do it on the basis of his grace not on the basis of the humility of the man. Our angry outbursts because of and against those for whom we have been given responsibility is merely evidence that we have proudly thought of ourselves more highly than we have thought of God. We view our work as more important and more dependable than God's work. God knows all about your disobedient child, your combative small group member, your disrespectful church member and he is more than able to deal with them. Your job is to keep telling them the truth and keep praying for them. It is not your job to be God to them and thus you cannot be angry when they do not treat you like God. Our pride and anger, like Moses', merely shows that we cannot be saved by anything but the grace of God.

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IV. God freely saves through a mediator (vv. 2, 16-19, 23-32)

As we've already seen God reacts to both of these complaints, Israel's and Moses', with judgment. He takes away some of Moses' authority and gifting and he kills all those original cravers after meat. However, we also see in both the provision of quail and the provision of the 70 elders the evidence of God's grace, his unmerited favor. Every human being in this story deserves to be dead for their unbelieving, proud, lust filled blasphemy against God. God killed Nadab and Abihu for what appears to be a far smaller crime. Not only does he not wipe out all the complaining Israelites and arrogant Moses but he does provide them with meat and he does provide Moses with lots of help. The story ends with the people continuing their journey across the wilderness with the Lord leading them by the cloud.

How is it right for God to be gracious to these people? While we can recognize that a police officer giving a speeder season tickets to the Packers instead of a speeding ticket is an act of grace, we also know that it would be wrong for the police officer to do that. It is unjust for criminals to be rewarded rather than punished. We call government officials corrupt when they do good to criminals, so how is it that God is not corrupt when he continues to have Moses lead and he continues to feed and lead these blasphemous Israelites? Moses points to the answer in vv. 28-29. God had Moses gather 70 men from among the elders of Israel to the tabernacle where he took from the Spirit that was upon Moses and put it upon them. When God did this, all 70 of them prophesied this one time as evidence that the HS had been given to them and that they now shared in the authority of Moses. But in addition to these 70 God also, according to the pleasure of his own will, gave the HS to two other elders of Israel who were not chosen as part of the 70. When the fact that these two men also received the HS is reported to Moses, Joshua is alarmed. He understands that the unique authority of Moses will be greatly diminished if unappointed men are given Moses' authority. It is bad enough that the 70 are given of the Spirit but at least they are officially sanctioned as leaders but these other two "freelance" elders are not and thus he tells Moses to intervene and stop them from prophesying.

Now Moses, speaking as God's prophet recognizes in this event a foreshadowing of the saving work of Christ. He prophetically announces what will one day be true: all God's people will be filled with God's HS, just like these two unsanctioned elders (v. 29). Jesus told his apostles in John 16 that the best thing that was going to happen as a result of his dying on the cross was that the HS would be given to them. He announced in John 7:37-39, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.' Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified." Just as the HS was taken from Moses and graciously placed upon these 2 men so the day was coming when God would pour out his Spirit on all of his people because of that prophet greater than Moses who lived and died and rose from the dead in order to make it just for God's Spirit to be poured out on all God's people. We see the fulfillment of this prophetic word in Acts 2 when the HS is poured out on all 120 believers gathered in that upper room and they all on that occasion prophecy. We are saved not because of our obedience to God's law for we have never obeyed and thus can only be condemned by the law. We are saved because God, contrary to what we deserve, because of Jesus' life and death, sends his HS to give us life, to wash our hearts clean so that we respond by trusting in Christ and not our own works. We are saved by God's free grace, by a sovereign, free work of the HS and not because of any work that we ever have done or will do because we have a prophet better than Moses, who never complained but always has interceded on our behalf.

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