

Title: The disease of discontentment - Numbers 11

Purpose: To show the symptoms of discontentment its underlying cause and the real remedy to tackle it.

INTRODUCTION

A CONTENTED MAN - no shirt

The story is told of a king who was suffering from a painful ailment.

His wise men told him that the only cure for him was to **find a contented man, get his shirt, & then wear it night and day.**

So, sure enough, messengers were sent through the king's realm in search of such a man, with orders to bring back his shirt. Well months passed, and after a thorough search of the kingdom the messengers returned, **but with no shirt!**

"Q. Did you find a contented man in all my realm?" the king asked.

"Yes, O king, we found one, just one in all thy realm," they replied.

"Q. Then why did you not bring back his shirt?" the king demanded.

"Master, the man had no shirt!" was the answer.

"DISCONTENT"!

Following on from this, a while back there was a newspaper cartoon showing two fields divided by a fence. Both fields were about the same size and each had plenty of the same kind of grass, green and lush.

Now in each field there was a donkey, and each donkey had his head through the fence eating grass from the other donkey's pasture. All around each donkey in his own field was plenty of grass, yet the grass in the other field seemed greener or fresher, although it was harder to get.

Not only this but in the process the donkeys were now caught in the wires and were completely unable to extricate themselves.

The cartoonist put just one word at the bottom of the picture—"DISCONTENT"!

This morning

This morning the title for our message is what I am calling: **"THE DISEASE OF DISCONTENTMENT"**.

As a topic it is certainly one that none of us can say that we are untouched by - and so this message is one which, almost necessarily, **finds us in its sights.**

As we go through the chapter that was read earlier - **Numbers chapter 11** -

I want us to ask **THREE QUESTIONS about this DISEASE OF DISCONTENTMENT:**

#1 Q. How does it show itself?

#2 Q. What really causes it?

AND #3 Q. Can we find "a contented man's shirt" to fix it?

1] Q. How does it show itself? (SYMPTOMS)

Discontentment - a superficial problem

The fact that **DISCONTENTMENT** does show itself is beyond question.

If you've been following along with us through our various messages in **the book of Exodus** then you will know that this is not the first time that we have come across words like: **COMPLAINING, GRUMBLING, QUARRELLING & MURMURING.**

And if you were to ask:

Q. So why does the Scripture preserve so many "similar sounding" episodes?

It is because we clearly need to learn something about this whole area of DISCONTENTMENT that we will not learn from just one or two episodes.

Now you might well feel that grumbling, or being a bit "**gripey**" from time-to-time - is really "**JUST A PART OF LIFE**". You might say that **because it is so commonplace** that **really it isn't any big deal**, that really it's just something rather superficial in the scheme of things.

But take **the common headache** - we've all had that BUT if it comes back again and again, not many of us would brush it off and just take another Paracetamol!

Verses 1-3 -> Taberah - A Cameo

The opening 3 verses are a bit like a **brief headline to the seriousness of DISCONTENTMENT**. I'll read the verses:

Numbers 11 verses 1-3: "Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the LORD, and when he heard them his anger was aroused. Then fire from the LORD burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp. When the people cried out to Moses, he prayed to the LORD and the fire died down. So that place was called Taberah, because fire from the LORD had burned among them."

Discontentment bubbles up, the LORD hears it and the fire of his displeasure falls upon them. People die. It takes an intercessor for the judgment to be held back in the form of Moses.

Theologically speaking - envy, covetousness

It helps sometimes to give something its proper designation.

It will therefore help here, I think, if we, right at the outset, put DISCONTENT into its theological setting - and see what other names it might go by - and I have two suggestions:

- the first is to call DISCONTENT - Covetousness

It is how COVETING shows itself.

- the second is to call DISCONTENT - Envy

And here I don't want to be too narrow in that definition - but to all ENVY to extend to wanting anything that is beyond what you currently have yourself.

Symptoms

OK - Q. So what are the symptoms of DISCONTENT?

One of the most obvious SYMPTOMS is that it **EVIDENTLY DESPISES WHAT IT HAS.**

This comes out in the next three verses - let me read Verses 4 thru to 6:

Numbers 11 Verses 4-6: "The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!"

Our souls are dried up

Notice what they say in Verse 6 there - the NIV has it as "But now we have lost our appetite..." - a better translation which keeps it literal is "But now our souls are dried up..." the word for soul in the Hebrew is '**Nepesh**' and it means their life-force, so they are saying, in effect, that because they don't have anything but this manna, their lives are just shrivelling up, they are **wasting away**, they are **dying a slow death**.

You see **DISCONTENT** is a condition which deeply poisons us & renders us unable to enjoy what we have right in front of us. One person put it this way: (Tim Keller)

"Back there, over there, out there I could be happy, but what I have right now is not good enough....

Over there: If I had **that condition**, if I had **that situation** I could be happy.

Back there: I could be happy if it was **like it used to be**.

Out there: **If only things could happen in this way**, but right now, the way it is right now, it's not good enough."

The poison of DISCONTENT is such that they have a **very distorted way of thinking** - and maybe you can see yourself in this.

See **what a crooked way of thinking** they have adopted. Egypt was good and Sinai is bad. They remember that the fish in Egypt was free and so were the vegetables. However they are not even asking for fish - in fact they seem to want meat which was not the plentiful thing in Egypt.

It is obvious to us (though seemingly not to them) that they have somehow forgotten:

- the slave-drivers
- the bricks without straw
- the whips
- the death of their baby boys eaten by crocodiles in the Nile River etc. etc.

Their complaint answered - The manna - actually precious

We do well to notice the fact that **the Scripture here actually answers their complaint** - I don't know if you saw that - see what Verses 7-9 says:

(Verse 7-9) "The manna was like coriander seed and looked like resin (bdellium). The people went around gathering it, and then ground it in a handmill or crushed it in a mortar. They cooked it in a pot or made it into cakes. And it tasted like something made with olive oil. When the dew settled on the camp at night, the manna also came down."

It looked like resin, literally it looked like what is literally called "bdellium" - and this word comes only in one other place in Scripture in Genesis chapter 2 verse 12 where it speaks about a good land called **Havilah** where there is **gold** and it also in

the same breath mentions that there is also **onyx** there and **bdellium** (which the NIV renders as "aromatic resin").

The point is that Scripture is showing us that **this manna**, even in its appearance, was something **very attractive & very desirable**.

DISCONTENT had made it look very drab and undesirable.

Not only this we see that **manna was very flexible**:

- it could be boiled - maybe something like potatoes
- OR it could be baked into cakes
- AND AGAIN it had a pleasant taste - like something made with olive oil.

And **just for completeness** - the Scripture reminds us in **Verse 9** that **the provision of the manna was without fail** - the supply never varied it always arrived on time and always in sufficient quantity for the people's need. No doubt there would have been seasons in Egypt when certain foods were less plentiful and when they did not get as much fish as they had wanted - the Egyptians were not favourable to the Israelites - but DISCONTENT had blinded them to that memory.

A 2nd Symptom - CONTAGIOUS ->DISCOURAGEMENT

Now DISCONTENTMENT is a poison and it DISTORTS how we see things - it makes us feel that our lives are shrivelling up & that everything is very bad. It makes us unable to appreciate what we have right in front of us.

In effect it **steals today from us** while we long for things of the past OR for things that perhaps we might have one day.

Another symptom of DISCONTENT is that it is **highly contagious** - it spreads to others pretty quickly:

- It spreads to the Israelites in general - **Verse 10** describes "every family wailing, each at the entrance to his tent" - it's a pretty **dismal** and **discouraging** picture.
- BUT this is not the worst of it though because **even Moses himself gets affected**.

We see this because the whole middle section of **Numbers 11** from around **Verse 11 to 23** we see Moses just full of questions that he pours out to God (about 10 of them).

Moses has really been rocked by the poisonous effects of this DISCONTENT.

At the peak of his DISCOURAGEMENT he says (**Verse 14-15**) "I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. **If this is how you are going to treat me, put me to death right now...**"

So hopefully you are beginning to see how common, how deep-rooted is this poison of DISCONTENT, of COVETING, of raw ENVY.

We find fault, we despise the things that God has provided, we see everything else as better, as more desirable & we drag down others into the whole bargain.

There is a second, a deeper question that we really need to ask, and that is:

2] Q. What really causes it? (ROOT CAUSE)

We've seen the various tell-tale symptoms thus far - Q. But what cause can we locate?

And obviously we can't just say SIN - that clearly is not specific enough.

(If the doctor were to tell you that you have a long-running persistent headache BECAUSE, in his opinion, you are SICK - that will not be any very great use! You will not thank him!!)

A superficial cause - the Rabble

Now one possible contender, for the root of the trouble with DISCONTENTMENT, is this particular group of people mentioned at the start of Verse 4: "The rabble with them began to crave other food...".

Remembering back to when the Israelites actually marched out of Egypt in haste following that first Passover, and the death of the Egyptian firstborn - we see that there was a contingent of non-Israelites that also took the opportunity to go with them:

Exodus 12 verse 38 (ESV) says that "A mixed multitude went up with them..."

And there is **little doubt that this was where things had their FIRST CAUSE**.

Notice that the fire which fell at the opening verses of the chapter began in the outskirts of the camp (presumably where these mixed multitudes, who did not belong to any of the tribal groupings, would have had their tents pitched).

HOWEVER - this is really only a **FIRST CAUSE** *and not* a **ROOT CAUSE**.

The ROOT CAUSE

The **ROOT CAUSE** is, I would suggest, that they fundamentally, when push came to shove, **DID NOT ACTUALLY TRUST GOD**.

Remember what it was they were saying (Verse 6) "Our souls are dried up for we never see anything but this manna!"

Q. Do you see what they are saying?

If we take ONLY WHAT GOD HAS GIVEN US (i.e. this manna) THEN, it's not going to be enough for us - we are going to dry up, we are going to find that our life just dwindles to nothing, it is going to progressively kill us!!

Q. Have you ever seriously pondered what image YOU have of God?

- You should not be **too hasty to conclude** that you truly see **God as a wonderful generous heavenly Father**
- You should not be **overly quick to believe** that when you picture **Jesus** in your mind that you see Him as **one full of abundant grace and truth**

The thing is that these Israelites were being tested and this was showing up what was formerly hidden inside - it is now coming up to the surface.

It is easy to be relatively content when you are not having to trust in God alone, when all your own props are taken away. It is at these times when what we really think about God comes to the fore and is exposed.

Low water level on the Sea of Galilee

It was **back in the 1980's** that there was a **severe drought in Northern Israel** such that the waters of **the Sea of Galilee** receded to such a point that the hull of an ancient boat (what some people now call **the Jesus Boat**) became exposed.

And sometimes it takes a severe drought of some kind in our lives to expose to us what we really think about God, to

expose how easily we take up a very drought-like view of God and His wonderful goodness.

Adam and Eve

If you think that is *not* you OR that it couldn't happen to someone like you - then just cast your mind back to the beginning of the Bible and to Adam and Eve.

Remember that for them EVERYTHING was just perfect, EVERYTHING was wonderful, abundant and glorious.

BUT EVEN THEN, in those pristine and paradisiacal days - EVEN THEN they were only one step away from believing the lie that Satan whispers that God is not altogether good, God is not altogether on your side, if you put your whole trust on Him then only trouble and basic unhappiness is what you are going to get!!!

Parable of the Talents - A hard man

Perhaps you know the parable of the talents that Jesus tells in Matthew 25 and there are 3 people one gets 5 talents of money given him another one 2 talents and the third just a single talent. Well the one with 5 does well - gets another 5. The one with 2 does equally well and gets another 2 - BUT and here's the rub - the one with the single talent just does nothing at all - he is lazy and he then explains his laziness by virtue of his view of God his master and says:

Matthew 25 verses 24-25 "Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'"

Manna *not* enough

So going back to the Israelites, and by extension, ourselves - their complaint was:

Numbers 11 Verse 6 "...; we never see anything but this manna!"

In other words - to rely upon you, O God, is *not* enough!

If we centre ourselves on you alone, then we will inevitably be placed in a straightjacket and we will find our lives, our souls ebbing away. WE DO NOT TRUST YOU!!

And maybe, if you are a bit honest at this point, quietly to yourself, you might admit that this is not actually so far off the mark. You do, in an unspoken way say to yourself: "If I cast myself TOTALLY ON GOD ALONE, then the reality is that I will find my life will become dull, and lifeless, dessicated, dried up!"

It is a deep-seated trust issue that is at the root of our DISCONTENT, our COVETING other things, our ENVY that drives the sentiment that:

"Back there, over there, out there I could be happy, but what I have right now is not good enough!!"

Their feet did not swell up

Earlier we showed that the manna was actually precious, flexible and desirable - Q. Was it actually sufficient?

Deuteronomy 8 verse 4 comments on their 40 years of travel and says:

"Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years."

If you remember ancient mariners found on long voyages that they got swelling limbs - and it was all because they did not have a proper diet, they didn't have enough fruit and veg. and so their diet lacked vitamin C and scurvy was the result.

We should realise that God ensured that their diet was comprehensive, and life giving.

So we are seeing that the root cause of this DISEASE OF DISCONTENTMENT is really that we don't trust God any further than we can throw Him!

A final question then:

3] Q. Can we find "a contented man's shirt" to fix it? (Q. IS THERE A REMEDY?)

The quail - a false answer

Well, once again, let me start by seeing what is *not* the proper answer - let's see the superficial response or remedy.

God provides for them a month's worth of quail MEAT.

God allows their clamouring and their craving to find its fulfilment. God says, fine - you have insisted on going down that road, having that thing, so I will allow you to prevail.

Q. Are we really right to shake our fists at God and say why did you allow that bad thing to come into my life, when all along it is us that has been clamouring for it?

It is the worst thing when God grants us our demand - when we give God the ultimatum and say:

"*NOT* Thy will be done *BUT* my will be done!!" and He says, as the gracious Gentleman that He is - OK then as you say and we find that it bring a terrible curse, that it is our base craving that actually brings what we feared that God would bring. Our souls, our very lives become dried up and we begin to die!

Notice a contrast - Moses brings it to God and blessed

Notice here a contrast between the way the people approach things and how Moses approaches things and how different the end result is.

Moses, although he has been infected by this POISON OF DISCONTENT, he still comes to God and brings his problems to God.

And God, in His graciousness attends to Moses struggle and He gives Him extra help in the form of 70 helpers who will also have a portion of the Spirit. (Verse 26 - the Ruach rested upon them).

In verse 31 we have the same Ruach ("Now a wind went out from the LORD and drove quail in from the sea...") but now this is, if you like, a DISCONTENT SPIRIT going into operation.

The Israelites are not coming to God to find His gracious answer, they are instead giving full reign to their CRAVING and they are DEMANDING something from God and so his JUDGING SPIRIT goes out and they become shrivelled up rather than having God's SHALOM, His peace.

Q. So what is the remedy?

Well the answer is in the very thing that they so evidently despised.

Remember that Jesus Himself helpfully explains the manna to us there in the gospels - this is what he has to say in **John chapter 6** where the people having just witnessed the miraculous feeding of the massive crowd of 5,000 people say:

"What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

"Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread."

Then Jesus declared, "**I am the bread of life**. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, **you have seen me and still you do not believe.**"

Painfully alike to the approach of the Israelites wandering through the wilderness with the daily provision of the manna, (as **Psalm 78** calls it the "grain of heaven", "the bread of angels"). They simply DESPISE IT, they will not RECEIVE IT as it is.

This was the Jews response: "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know.."

Maybe you **still are not content** with God's manna in the Lord Jesus given for you.

Maybe you **still despise him right deep down inside** if the truth be known.

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude with two thoughts:

- **MAYBE the gospel**, the good news of Jesus is **not really very clear yet in your understanding**.

For you Jesus is still an example that you need to emulate, that you need to somehow live up to. But this will crush you, this will strangle the life out of you, this will make you feel terrible, full of failure and crushing guilt.

You see Jesus is the bread of life AND **bread that is not broken *cannot* make you whole**. If the bread stays whole you starve and Jesus says: "I am the bread of life... this bread is my flesh, which I give for the life of the world."

He goes on: "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."

Until you see Jesus as having been despised for you, paying for the fact that you are a DESPISER, then you will never have life, you will never be free from the POISON OF YOUR CRAVING, the PERMANENCE CLAMOUR OF YOUR DISCONTENT.

- **ALTERNATIVELY** - you do know the gospel, you have been appreciating the fullness of the TABLE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER just moments earlier on.

Yet you still find that CONTENTMENT IS ELUSIVE and that EVIL DESIRES ARE TOO RAMPANT.

Then the truth is that your heart has been influenced, your heart has drifted, it has - like Moses - it has been affected by others around, by the rapid currents of this world - and you have begun to forget, to no longer appreciate the true manna.

The apostle Peter helps us - he says that we can "escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires"

- and Q. How is this we say? He goes on to say that we need to make every effort in areas like FAITH and GOODNESS and our KNOWLEDGE OF THE LORD JESUS.

He finishes with these words:

(2 Peter 1 Verses 8&9) "For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has

forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins."

Let's Pray ... AMEN