

# THE FIRST TRAGIC FAILURE SEEN IN THE PEOPLE: DISTRUSTING GOD; COMPLAINING AND GRUMBLING, CRAVING AND LUSTING NUMBERS 11:01–35

## *Introduction*

This is an age of negativism — of complaining, grumbling and murmuring. No matter where we turn, people are being negative or complaining about something:

- work
- an employer
- sorrows
- personal hardships
- school
- an employee
- accidents
- despondency
- a wife
- food
- unemployment
- position or status
- a husband
- clothing
- foiled plans
- suffering
- a parent
- shelter
- frustrations
- disappointments
- a child
- failures
- rejection
- personal problems
- a manager
- ill health
- financial problems

Bitter trials are the normal experience of human life. They confront us all, and they perplex and puzzle us. We often ask, “Why has God let this happen to me?” Trials are common to all people (1 Cor 10: 13). When they strike us, the question is: How are we going to react? Are we going to trust God to help and strengthen us, or grumble and complain and perhaps curse God? Complaining, grumbling and murmuring hurt and cause pain for others. But more than this, complaining and grumbling show a great distrust in God:

=> They show that we do not trust God to meet our needs, to provide the necessities of life.

=> They show that we do not trust the goodness and power of God, that He will work things out and give us victory over the pitfalls and enemies of life.

This is the subject of this important passage of Scripture. It covers the first tragic failure seen in the people of God as they began their march to the promised land. Within three days after beginning their march, they demonstrated tragic distrust of God. They immediately began to complain and grumble against God. Moreover, the Israelites began to crave and lust after the food and appetites of Egypt. Keep in mind that Egypt is a type or symbol of the world and its enslavements. This is: *The First Tragic Failure Seen in the People: Distrusting God – Complaining and Grumbling, Craving and Lusting*, 11:1-35.

- I. Complaining and grumbling about hardships: not trusting God and losing sight of His guidance (vv. 1-3).
  - II. Complaining and murmuring about food: not trusting God, craving and lusting after the food and appetites of the world (vv. 4-35).
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## **I. *Numbers 11:01–03 Complaining and Grumbling about Hardships: Not Trusting God and Losing Sight of His Guidance***

There was the complaining and murmuring about hardships.

The people failed to trust God and they lost sight of God's guidance. Shocking! Inexcusable! For the people were only three days into their march. Remember, the Israelites had just left Mt. Sinai where they had been camped for eleven months. They had just begun their great march to the promised land, the day for which they had longed with great expectation. Yet within three days, they were complaining and grumbling about the hardships they were facing along the march. They were complaining to the LORD, questioning why He would allow such hardships and difficulties. Why would He not make their march to the promised land smoother and easier, with less difficulty and hardship? They were gripped by a spirit of discontentment with their lives, a critical spirit. They were complaining and grumbling about the bad things that were happening to them. Life was hard and toilsome, and they blamed God.

1. The LORD heard their grumbling and was angry. His judgment fell upon them: a fire was ignited and burned the outskirts of the camp (v. 1). Note that the fire was definitely from the LORD. This probably means that God caused a bolt of lightning to strike, igniting a fire that burned some of the property and tents on the outskirts of the camp.
2. The people and Moses cried out to God for help (vv. 2-3). Note that the LORD immediately heard their prayer and the fire was extinguished.
3. The place was named Taberah, which means *burning*. This was a place of awful judgment, a place that needed to stand as a warning to all people in the future. God judges those who complain, grumble and murmur against Him because of hardships.

**Thought 1.** The Israelites were immature believers: unspiritual, unstable and carnal (fleshly). Their carnal hearts of unbelief took over; and they complained, grumbled and murmured against God because of the hardships. This was a terrible sin of Israel, and it was a sin that was committed by them time and again. In fact, practically every time they faced a crisis of hardship, they complained and grumbled. Note these examples:

- (1) They complained and grumbled because they had no food.

**Exo 16:2-3** *In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."*

- (2) They complained and grumbled because they had no water.

**Exo 17:3** *But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?"*

- (3) They complained and grumbled because of the trials they were facing throughout their wilderness wanderings: they wished to return to Egypt.

**Num 14:2-4** *All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, “If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt?” And they said to each other, “We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”*

- (4) They complained and grumbled because they became tired of their leaders, tired of Moses’ and Aaron’s leadership.

**Num 16:3** *They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, “You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD’s assembly?”*

**Num 16:11** *“It is against the LORD that you and all your followers have banded together. Who is Aaron that you should grumble against him?”*

- (5) They complained and grumbled because of God’s judgment, because God executed justice upon the Israelites who sinned.

**Num 16:41** *The next day the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. “You have killed the LORD’s people,” they said.*

**Thought 2.** Complaining and grumbling are signs of distrust, of terrible unbelief in God. When we complain and grumble, we reveal a heart of unbelief and distrust. We reveal that we do not believe God’s power and goodness. We do not believe that God is in control, that He will work the situation and hardship out. A heart that trusts God will always pray, asking God to help. The trusting heart never complains nor grumbles against people and situations, especially against fellow believers — certainly not against God nor His servants. Note what Scripture declares about complaining and grumbling.

- (1) Complaining and grumbling are not against the hardships themselves nor against other people but against the LORD Himself.

**Exo 16:8** *Moses also said, “You will know that it was the LORD when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the LORD.”*

- (2) Complaining and grumbling are often due to a person’s lack of faith in God’s Word, his refusal to listen to God’s voice.

**Psa 106:24-25** *Then they despised the pleasant land; they did not believe his promise. They grumbled in their tents and did not obey the LORD.*

- (3) Complaining and grumbling are often due to the foolishness and sin of man.

**Prov 19:3** *A man's own folly ruins his life, yet his heart rages against the LORD.*

**Lam 3:39** *Why should any living man complain when punished for his sins?*

(4) Complaining and grumbling are to have no part in the believer's life.

**Phil 2:14** *Do everything without complaining or arguing.*

(5) Complaining and grumbling will be severely judged by God.

**1 Cor 10:10** *And do not grumble, as some of them did — and were killed by the destroying angel.*

**Jude 1:14-16** *“See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him.” These men are grumblers and fault-finders; they follow their own evil desires; they boast about themselves and flatter others for their own advantage.*

## **II. Numbers 11:04–35 *Complaining and Murmuring about Food: Not Trusting God, Craving and Lusting after the Appetites of the World***

The people complained and grumbled about their food. They did not trust God, and they craved or lusted after the food and provisions of Egypt (a symbol of the world).

How could the people conceivably be failing so soon after their rebellion and the correction of God at Taberah? Apparently, this rebellion took place at the very next camp-site, although this is not clearly stated. The fact that these two passages are linked together seems to indicate this. Whatever the case, the reader is again shocked and left wondering how a people could be so carnal and unbelieving. How could the Israelites be so unbelieving and stumble so often when God had done so much for them? Is the human heart that depraved? Or were their hearts that selfish and unbelieving, hard-hearted and stubborn, resistant to God?

1. The complaining and grumbling were stirred up by certain ringleaders, the rabble among them. This is a reference to the mixed group of people (non-Israelite) who joined God's people during the exodus from Egypt (see Exo 12:38; Lev 24:10). Note that it was the rabble who actually began to lust and crave after the food of Egypt, in particular the meat of Egypt.
2. The complaint focused upon their diet: they had only *manna* to eat (vv. 5-9). They craved and lusted after the meat and vegetables of Egypt. In Egypt they had been able to fish in the rivers and streams and grow fresh vegetables such as cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic (v. 5). Out in the desert, they were unable to plant gardens; and, of course, there were no streams or rivers from which to catch fish. The people were, as they complained, tired of “this manna.” They had lost their appetite for “this manna.” Keep in mind that the *manna* was the provision of God, a miraculous provision of food. It was also a delicious food (see notes, Exo 16:10-26).

Note the people's reference to the manna as "this manna." A bitter, sarcastic complaint! A spirit of discontentment, of dissatisfaction with God's provision. An act of unbelief and rebellion against God. Just think how they had forgotten their real condition in Egypt: they had been slaves and mistreated with brutal savagery. As slaves they had known the horrors of abuse, torture, overwork, hunger, thirst, beatings and death. They were exaggerating the food they had in Egypt, looking back into the past with unwarranted optimism. This was tragic, for the manna was God's provision. The manna was one of the gracious provisions to keep His people alive as they marched to the promised land. Note the description of the manna, how delicious and sufficient a provision it was:

It was like coriander seed (a small spicy seed taken from a plant of the carrot family. It was used as seasoning and for medicinal purposes.)

- => It looked like resin from a plant or tree (v. 7).
- => It was gathered and ground in a hand-mill or crushed in a mortar (v. 8).
- => It was cooked in a pot or made into cakes.
- => It tasted like something made with olive oil.
- => It was miraculously given by God: it fell daily from the sky as the dew settled on the camp at night (v. 9).
- 3. The grumbling had a terrible and powerful influence: it spread rapidly throughout the whole camp. Note that every family began to complain, murmur and grumble (v. 10).
- 4. The response of the LORD and Moses was to be expected. The LORD became very angry and Moses was deeply troubled (vv. 10-17).
  - a. Moses questioned, poured out his heart to the LORD (vv. 11-13).
    - => Why had God allowed so much trouble?
    - => Why was God so displeased?
    - => Why had God put the burden of the people on him?
    - => Was it Moses who had conceived and given birth to the people? Was it not God who had conceived and given them birth?
    - => Why had God chosen him to carry the people in his arms — as a nurse carries a child — to the promised land?
    - => Where could he conceivably get enough meat for the people?
  - b. Moses cried for God to raise up others to help him (vv. 14-15). The burden was too heavy and was crushing him under its weight. He could not continue to lead the people by himself. At this point, Moses became intense and desperate: he asked God either to help him or take him. Why? Because he felt that he would die right there upon the spot from the intense pressure he was feeling.

- c. Note that the LORD met the need of His dear servant Moses (vv. 16-17). The LORD instructed Moses to bring seventy elders to the Tabernacle. God promised to anoint the elders with His Spirit, with the very same Spirit He had given to Moses. The elders would help carry the burden of the people, help deal with the problems of the people. As always, God met the desperate need of His dear servant. God had earlier appointed some leaders to help Moses in the administrative duties of the people (Exo 18:13f); now God was appointing seventy elders to help His dear servant in the spiritual ministry of the people (cp. Exo 24:9). The intense pressure and distress of Moses was being relieved by the LORD. The enormous weight of the ministry that Moses was sensing was being lifted. As stated, God was meeting the need of His dear servant.
5. Note the message of God's judgment to be given to the people by Moses (vv. 18-23).
  - a. The people were to sanctify or consecrate themselves (v. 18). They were to prepare to have their complaining and grumbling answered — the complaint that they were better off in Egypt.
  - b. The people were to know that the LORD was going to give them meat: not just for days, but for a whole month (vv. 18-20). They were going to receive just what they grumbled about: meat. In fact, they were going to receive so much meat that they would loathe it. This blessing — an over-abundance of meat — was to be a judgment. The people would have all the meat they had wanted and then some! They insisted that they simply had to have meat. So God was going to give them meat. They were going to receive so much meat and be so gluttonous about it that they would spew the meat out of their nostrils — loathing and despising it.
  - c. Note the reason why: because they had rejected the LORD. They had craved and desired to go back to Egypt (v. 20). Keep in mind that Egypt is a symbol of the world with all of its lusts and cravings. The judgment of God was bound to fall upon these unbelievers, these complainers and grumblers who were rejecting God and rebelling against Him.
  - d. Note the stressful questioning by Moses (vv. 21-22); Moses was shaken:
    - => How could God possibly provide meat for several million people?
    - => Would there be enough meat even if they slaughtered all their flocks and herds? Or if they had all the fish in the sea?
  - e. Note the LORD's rebuke to Moses: the LORD's arm (power) is not too short; He will do exactly what He says (v. 23). He has the power and the knowledge to do anything. Nothing is too hard for the LORD. The promise may be staggering and seem impossible to people, but He was the LORD God Himself (Jehovah, Yahweh).
6. Note the obedience of Moses (vv. 24-25).

Moses declared the LORD's message to the people, then he summoned the seventy elders to the Tabernacle (v. 24). As soon as Moses proved his obedience, the LORD

was faithful (v. 25). The LORD came down in the cloud of His Shekinah Glory and spoke with Moses. Furthermore, He did just what He had promised: the Spirit of God came upon the seventy elders and they prophesied. But note, this was a one-of-a-kind experience. They never again prophesied.

7. Note the true spirit of Moses, the spirit of a humble minister, of a true servant of God (vv. 26-30).
  - a. Two elders had remained in camp and not responded to Moses' summons to come to the Tabernacle. However, the Spirit also came upon them and they prophesied (vv. 26-28). A young man witnessed the experience and ran to tell Moses. Joshua, who was Moses' aide and standing close by, insisted that Moses stop the two elders from prophesying. Why? Perhaps Joshua felt that the two men had disobeyed by not accepting the summons of Moses; therefore, they should not be appointed as assistants to him. Or perhaps he felt the two men might be personal threats to Moses. If they had received the gift of God's Spirit outside the Tabernacle and away from Moses, this would downplay the gift of Moses. People might begin to feel that God could raise up someone else to be their leader and turn to either one of these two elders or other elders for leadership.
  - b. But note the spirit of Moses, the spirit of a true servant of God. This was just what he wanted: he prayed for the LORD's Spirit to come upon all believers, for all believers to be prophets (v. 29). He wanted all believers to be filled with the fullness of God, to experience the full presence and provision of God.
  - c. Moses and the elders then returned to the camp (v. 30).
8. Note the judgment of God: the complaint of the people was granted (vv. 31-33).
  - a. A wind drove quail in from the sea. Miraculously, the quail were three feet deep and extended a whole day's walk in every direction — enough quail to feed two to four million people (v. 31).
  - b. The people gathered quail for two days and one night. Every person gathered no less than ten homers (almost 60 bushels). A staggering amount of meat! God provided far more quail than the people could possibly eat (v. 32).
  - c. Note the animalistic, uncivilized and savage behaviour of the people. The people acted like gluttons: they gorged themselves (v. 33). *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* describes it well:

*The scene must have been similar to a riot: people screaming, birds flapping their wings, everywhere the pell-mell movement of a meat-hungry people in a sea of birds. Dare we picture people ripping at the birds, eating flesh before cooking it, bestial in behaviour? (The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 2. Frank E. Gaebelin, Editor, p. 795).*
9. Note the anger of the LORD (vv. 33-34).

His anger was aroused and burned against the people. He struck them with a severe plague. Note when: “while the meat was still between their teeth” (v. 33). Obviously, a plague of choking on the meat struck the people. Before they could swallow the meat, they choked. They were choking on their craving, their lusting, their gluttony. They had cursed and rebelled against the name of God, craving and lusting after flesh to eat. Consequently, God gave them up to their craving and lusting (see Rom 1:24-28). They received just what their flesh craved and lusted after: meat. Their fleshly appetite had run wild. As a result, they were given up to their fleshly appetite. And the very thing they had craved and lusted after choked them to death. They had brought the judgment of God upon themselves. Note that the place was named Kibroth Hattaavah which means *graves of craving* (v. 34).

10. The people then departed and renewed their march to the promised land. But tragically, their hearts were still hard and stubborn, still filled with unbelief and grumbling. This will be seen in the next three chapters, especially chapter 14. But for now they marched on and camped at Hazeroth (v. 35).

**Thought 1.** Note several strong lessons in this passage (vv. 4-35).

- (1) Seeking to fulfil one’s appetites — craving and lusting after the things of the world — is wrong. Giving way to the lusts of the flesh arouses the judgment of God against us.

**Rom 1:24-25** *Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator — who is forever praised. Amen.*

**Rom 1:29-32** *They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.*

**Gal 5:19, 21** *The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

- (2) Seeking to fulfil the appetites of the flesh — lusting and craving after the world and its things — is not the call of God. The call of God is to a life of separation from the world. The believer is to live a life that is holy, righteous and pure. He is to live a life that is totally separated to God, separated from the lusts and evil of this world.



**Luke 21:34-35** “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap.”

**Rom 12:1-2** Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.

**2 Cor 6:17-18** “Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters,” says the Lord Almighty.

**Eph 5:11** Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.

**2 Tim 2:4** No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs — he wants to please his commanding officer.

**1 John 2:15-16** Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world — the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does — comes not from the Father but from the world.

**Isa 52:11** Depart, depart, go out from there! Touch no unclean thing! Come out from it and be pure, you who carry the articles of the LORD’s house.

(3) Complaining and murmuring because of food is wrong. It is sin. Why? Because God promises to meet our needs, to give us all the necessities of life. But there is one condition: we must seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

**Mat 6:33** “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

**Eph 3:20** Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.

**Phil 4:19** And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

**Exo 23:25** Worship the LORD your God, and his blessing will be on your food and water. I will take away sickness from among you.

**Deut 30:9** Then the LORD your God will make you most prosperous in all the work of your hands and in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your land. The LORD will again delight in you and make you prosperous, just as he delighted in your ancestors.

**Psa 68:19** Praise be to the LORD, to God our Saviour, who daily bears our burdens.

**Psa 81:16** *But you would be fed with the finest of wheat; with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.*

**Psa 132:15** *I will bless her with abundant provisions; her poor I will satisfy with food.*

**Isa 30:23** *He will also send you rain for the seed you sow in the ground, and the food that comes from the land will be rich and plentiful. In that day your cattle will graze in broad meadows.*

**Mal 3:10** *“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.”*

(4) Seeking to fulfil the appetites of the flesh — craving and lusting after the things of the world, complaining and grumbling about food — is wrong for one clear and fundamental reason: man shall not live by bread alone. Man has to have spiritual food. He must be fed by God. He must eat, partake of the *manna* from heaven, the Word of God.

**Mat 4:4** *Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”*

**1 Pet 2:2-3** *Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.*

**Deut 8:3** *He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.*

**Job 23:12** *I have not departed from the commands of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread.*

**Psa 119:103** *How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!*

**Jer 15:16** *When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight, for I bear your name, O LORD God Almighty.*

(5) Seeking to fulfil the appetites of the flesh — craving and lusting after the things of the world, complaining and grumbling about food — is sin for one clear and obvious reason: man shall not live by bread alone. He must have and partake of the bread that God sent down *out of* heaven. The bread that God sent *out of* heaven is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He is the Bread of Life. A person must eat or partake of Him in order to have his appetites satisfied and fulfilled. Jesus Christ alone can satisfy the hunger of man.

**John 6:32-35** *Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it was 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.”

**John 6:48-51** “I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

**John 6:58** “This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever.”

(6) Seeking to fulfil the appetites of the flesh — craving and lusting after the things of the world, doubting, complaining, grumbling and murmuring — is the tragic failure of Israel. It has been recorded in Scripture for one undeniable purpose: to teach us not to lust after evil things as they lusted.

**1 Cor 10:1-11** For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: “The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.” We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did — and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test Christ, as some of them did — and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did — and were killed by the destroying angel. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. ■