

When Things Fall Apart

Numbers 11:1-15

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Randy Lovelace

As we turn to God's Word this morning, as we continue in this series of by faith—if you're joining us for the first time, this is our summer series. We've been going through the entirety of the Book of Hebrews, and we stopped at Hebrews 11, of which we will return in the fall. And we will continue when we are there in chapter 11. And it's an opportunity for us to be able to, together, understand a little more deeply how the Lord has called his people to live by faith since the beginning. But how do we—how can we look at it in a greater expression? And we want to take a break from Hebrews, and we'll come back to that. But now we find ourselves in looking at this life of faith or living by faith in Numbers 11, which I have titled "When Things Fall Apart." Because it's easy to relate to, is it not? When things fall apart.

When things fall apart, our minds play games with us, although we're not often aware of it. We are often given to nostalgia and memory collapse. We want to escape. But what we find in this text is not only do we find that—we find that it's hard all over. It's hard not only for the people of God—it's also hard for Moses. And the Lord is greatly angered. What does it look like for the people of God to live by faith when things are falling apart? What are things that we need to be aware of and to be careful of? May the Lord help us as we look to his Word together. Number 11:1-15.

And the people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes, and when the Lord heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. Then the people cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire died down. So the name of that place was called Taberah, because the fire of the Lord burned among them.

Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, "Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."

Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its appearance like that of bdellium. The people went about and gathered it and ground it in handmills or beat it in mortars and boiled it in pots and made cakes of it. And the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. When the dew fell upon the camp in the night, the manna fell with it.

Moses heard the people weeping throughout their clans, everyone at the door of his tent. And the anger of the Lord blazed hotly, and Moses was displeased. Moses said to the Lord, "Why have you dealt ill with your servant? And why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give them birth, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a nursing child,' to the land that you swore to give their fathers? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me and say, 'Give us meat, that we may eat.' I am not able to carry all this people

alone; the burden is too heavy for me. If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favor in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness.” [ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Pray with me.

Father, we now ask that you would open this your Word, that we might see wondrous things about your character and who you are. But help us to see deeper truths about ourselves and what it means for us, then, to follow you, to trust you when things around us seem to be going sideways, to be falling apart. Teach us, we ask, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

So as we look at this together, you will notice that we are looking at this text right in the middle, in the beginning of the Book of Numbers. The people of God have been journeying with Moses under his leadership, and they are headed to the land that God had promised them, the land of Canaan. But they had disobeyed the Lord. They had mistrusted him. And so now they are wandering. Yet in their wandering, the Lord had also provided for them. This whole idea of manna begins in Exodus 16, which, by way of context, is yet another place of God’s people complaining. And so the Lord provided manna for God’s people under Moses’s leadership, and they were to eat this manna while they were journeying in the desert until they came to a place where they could flourish as a people. But their strength, of course, over time, their patience, their trust in the Lord had waned. Their trust in Moses had waned. And so now we find them complaining again. And things are, as it seems, falling apart. Falling apart from Moses’s perspective. The Lord is angry. He’s ready to judge them. And they respond, and he responds, and Moses responds.

So what we’re going to learn here has application. It has application whether you are a lowly employee inside of a large organization. It has application whether you’re a parent, whether you’re a leader, whether you’re an elder in the church, a pastor in the church, whether you’re a congregant. All these things have application for us, because in various ways we see ourselves, perhaps in multiple positions, as we read this text. But the call to us is to live by faith.

But here’s something that has happened over time. Perhaps you’ve heard the passage drawn from 1 Corinthians where it says this: “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” It was one of the early verses that I learned as a believer. But over time, that verse has come to mean something else in the minds and hearts and mouths of many who believe. The word “tempted” has often been removed—not on purpose, just by sake of sharing the passage. And the following is uttered: “God will not allow you to be burdened beyond what you can bear.”

And pastors and elders and friends have all gotten phone calls or sat in the room with someone who says, “Why is this happening? For God’s Word says he will not allow anything to happen to you more than you can bear.” But nothing could be further from the truth. It’s just patently false. He routinely allows things to happen to us that are more than we can bear. Amen? But do you see why if you believe or come to receive that verse without the word “tempted,” how it can lead you to some very faulty theology on the one hand, it can lead you to a triumphalism that, well, beyond what I bear is not going to happen. Or it can lead you to despair—why is this happening? Is God angry at me? Have I sinned against him? How do I make sense of this?

Well, this is why we have passages like this, and why I’m grateful that it’s here. It’s not a pretty picture. But let’s look at it together: complaint and the problem of memory; the messiness of leadership; the cry of desperation. You can see where we’re going. All right. Complaint and the problem of memory. I’m a large fan of Malcolm Gladwell. Has anyone heard of Malcolm Gladwell? Famous author. He has a fabulous podcast called *Revisionist History*, where he takes very unique points in history that really interest him, and he goes back and does a deep-dive, and he comes out with something very Malcolm Gladwellian. Some of the things I agree with, some of the things I don’t, but that’s the kind of thing he welcomes.

He recently did a podcast—did two, actually—on the problem of memory. And specifically, one was called “Free Brian Williams.” Brian Williams, you’ll remember, recounted a story that he was on a helicopter taking live fire when he was in the Middle East doing reporting. But come to find out that over the years, he embellished that story. It was brought to his attention. He then tried to go back and retract it, and then they brought up tapes, and it just kind of went from there. So now he’s been taking to the back forty of the farm, and he’s now on some station that hardly anyone sees him anymore. Gladwell believes that Brian Williams should be freed to come back into the light again, because he believes it wasn’t a problem of lying; it was a problem of memory. I’ll leave that to you.

But he does deep-dive into the problem of memory, and we see that here in this passage. Notice what they say. They are tired of wandering, even though they knew that’s what God said they were going to do. They were tired of eating the manna. I can relate to that, as it is described here. It basically sounds like a drier version of cornbread. But what begins to happen is they add to it something which is really interesting and really human, and begs our attention, when they say this: “And the people of Israel also wept again and said, ‘Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing.’” Really? “The cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic.” I’m grateful for Mary Erickson, who sent me a link to a YouTube video, a Keith Green song. Those of you who are old enough to remember, I will not sing that, but—

So the beauty of it is that not only are they beginning to complain about what they have; they are doing something which is profoundly human, which happens to many of us. When we find ourselves in very uncomfortable circumstances, our minds and hearts often drift to spaces in the past that we remember when things were just a little bit easier. Some would call it memory. Some would call it nostalgia. Either way, there’s a problem. And that problem is exactly what we see here. It was free of cost, because they were slaves. And they were only given certain portions. And they make it sound as though it was a trip through the farmer’s market, but they were doing slave labor, building bricks for the sake of not a house—just a monument to a king who thought he was god, who forced them to worship, who refused to recognize their God, who refused to free them, and who oppressed them. But now when they are complaining, when they’ve been wandering for a little bit, all that tends to recede.

Why is that? As one psychologist says, there is ample amounts of literature that has now substantiated the fact and shows that our memories are more fluid and changeable with time than we like to believe. They are often colored by our emotions both at the time of the event and the time of recall, and often they contain details that never happened, but rather they were filled in at a later point to complete the memory by our poor, overworked brains which simply don’t have the attention span or processing power to constantly take in and record the entirety of a life going on around us. And oftentimes, there are particular events which are fraught with great meaning and personal or cultural meaning that psychiatrists and neurologists call flashbulb moments.

9/11 was one of those. Do you remember where you were when you heard about 9/11? So they’ve done several studies specifically with those who were alive and who remember 9/11. And they’re able to establish how, in many ways, that moment happens and everything around it freezes. And we attach those memories with great meaning. But then over time, we think that flashbulb moment freezes the details. But what has been found over and over and over again and established by the data is that, in fact, by and large the story is held, but we begin to fill in other things and attach other events to those moments which did not happen in that time. Maybe they happened two weeks later. Sometimes month later. But with the passage of time and whatever’s happening to us in the moment that we’re recalling it, we begin to change. Our memory is reshaped.

And this is the problem. They’re using their memory and their proclamation of it, not just because they’re nostalgic. Not because they just desire to go back and eat some fish and some good vegetables. It’s the fact that now they’re angry. It’s not just fueled by desire. It’s fueled by the fact that they are complaining. And this is the second understanding of it. It’s not just that they have a problem with their

memory that it's now somehow magically dropped away the fact that they were an oppressed people and wanted to be emancipated. All they remember is the good stuff. But it's also coming wrapped in with a complaint about the present.

And what do they say? We know this when they say the following words. They say, "But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at." And yet that manna was a gift from God when they were complaining the first time that they had nothing to eat, and God in his grace allowed that manna to rain down under the dew of the morning. Because if it was dry, what happens to it? It floats away. But because it had a little bit of moisture in it, they were able to collect it. And then what God said is, "You're to collect it for six days, but on the sixth day you need to gather a double portion so that you don't have to do it on the seventh." And they praised God, because they were hungry. But now, not only did the memory collapse, but they're now turning and accusing God.

Now, here's what some commentators have done over history. They want to find that the problem is in their fleshly lust for meat and flavorful food. I don't think that's the problem. God made us for good flavor. Praise be to God. There's a reason why I love sugar and I love a little bit of salt. I love basil. I love shrimp and grits. It's not because I'm lustful and I'm a sinner that I desire really good food. The problem is not that they wanted these other things. The problem is that it was coming wrapped in with a complaint that is suggesting and, in fact, declaring that "God, you don't know what you're doing, and you are not good." That's really what's behind it. And this notion of, "Why have you done this? Why have you allowed it?" The whole question is, in the midst of this moment, that their collapse of memory becomes a foundation upon which they believe they can accuse God of not being good and faithful. And God's anger, it tells us, flamed up—so much so that they actually named the place "enflamed, on fire, anger, burning."

But Moses, it tells us here, he prayed to the Lord. What is he doing? Moses is mediating between God and his people. And he prayed that the Lord would have mercy. "Lord, have mercy." And the Lord has mercy. But the people of God are not doing complaining, are they? Look at the second point—the messiness of leadership. So now what we have is that we begin to see not only how they're responding to the present and how they're accusing God of not being good—now what they're doing is they're going after the one who is representing God in their midst. And they complain, verses 10 to 13. They're now coming to his door, as it were, leader after leader, person after person. And they're banging, they're calling his cell phone, they're leaving voice messages, they're personally messaging him on Facebook—I mean, they are hounding him. And now not only is God's anger rising up, but so is Moses's.

And here we learn something about the messiness of leadership. Now, in some sense, Moses is angry. He's angry, first of all, because quite frankly who wouldn't be? Who wouldn't be tired of receiving all these complaints? He's just the leader. They're blaming the messenger. And in some sense, his complaint forgets the role of leadership. And whether your leadership is one as a parent or in an organization, whether it is a small point of leadership, whether you're the conduit between the customer and the company, on the phone or in person, or whatever it is—we all have had to face a position that we are in when the people around us are mad, and they're choosing us as the communication point of their anger.

What happens in this moment to some degree is that Moses forgets that the problem is we are all broken in our hearts and find something to complain about. We are by nature a people who are given to unhappiness. Because of our sin, we find something else we want. We know that is not just a problem of the fall. We also know that our first parents were also tempted towards the same thing. Even though God had promised everything except *that*, it was *that* that they were tempted to go and take. And so they did. We want to be like God. We want what we want when we want it. Whether it is an enraged driver on the bumper at night shining their brights into our car, what do we feel well up within us? Exactly what I did last night on the way home from dinner. I'm on Cedar Lane, and this SUV is all over my bumper and flashing the brights. I'm way over the speed limit—don't tell anybody. And oh, I wanted to put on my brakes. And Kate was in the passenger seat. And I could feel the heat rising in my skin, right?

And so finally, I'd had enough. Right there next to APL, just before I passed their last softball field. I pull over, yank it over, and I let them go by. And this person goes by, and they've got a huge American flag coming out the back of their car. I'm like, "Oh, yeah?" And so I get back in the lane, and I speed up. And I'm like—okay, okay. I slowed down. I'm like, "All right—I don't want any part of that." But I feel it. Something as small as the fact of somebody getting on my bumper. I'm indignant. Why am I indignant? Because I think I deserve better. I forget. I forget that we are a people of complaint. And I bet there have been plenty of people who have complained about me doing the very same thing.

The problem of leadership is that we often forget that leadership is—whatever the position is—is not getting on the ship of happy-go-lucky and everything is going to go well. And we find ourselves going, "What have I done to deserve this?" And we get angry at other people's brokenness. And we feel indignant. And we feel disrespected. And then we're off to the races of broken relationships, dysfunctional institutions, broken neighborhoods—it can't all be reduced to that. But the reality is this is something profoundly human, whether it is on the part of the people of God or on the part of Moses, his instructed leader. And so he turns to the cry of desperation, verses 14 to 15.

Now, I believe that verses 14 to 15—and if you begin even at the beginning of his complaint—should not be read ironically. Meaning, he's not saying it in a way that is sarcastic, though he's still struggling with why God has allowed this to happen. But now it turns to where he is looking to God, and he's crying out in desperation. And he says in verse 14, "I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me." Ladies and gentlemen, if anyone ever says to you, and you're a believer and they're a believer, and if they say to you, "God will not put more on you than you can bear," please take them to this verse. Please. Because nothing could be further from the truth.

Moses is precisely allowed to experience something beyond what he can bear. The people of God are allowed to experience something that is beyond their capacity to grapple with for the sake of the fact that what is underneath complaint, what is underneath with our problem of making memory as a place of hiding when we're feeling uncomfortable, is because we don't fundamentally trust God. And we go in cycles of trusting him and falling out of trust, going to him and then trusting right back in ourselves again. And the Lord allows this not because he's angry at us, not because he is not good to us—it's because he's reminding us, "You cannot depend on that which your hands produce. You cannot depend on the eloquence of your leadership. You cannot depend on your position. You cannot depend on your intelligence. The only place you have is me." And the Lord allows this in Moses's life so that Moses can cry out in desperation.

Because it's saying to us who can hear it throughout the generations, regardless of our position—whether you're a child or you're an adult, regardless of what organization or whatever it is that you do—we can all see this here to remind us, who else are we to cry out to? Because the Psalms are the cry-book of God's Word. The Psalms are full of David and the people of God crying out, "Lord, hear my prayers. Why have you seemingly turned your face from me?" Is it because the Lord has turned his face? No. It's because he longs for his people to cry out to him. Because he's reminding us, we cannot trust in ourselves. What's beautiful about this verse 13, he says, "Where am I to get meat to give to all this people?" Does that sound familiar to you? Let me repeat it again, verse 13, "Where am I to get meat to give to all this people?" Take the word "meat" away. What word could we fill in there? Fish and bread. Hmm. Another group of God's established leaders, at Jesus's instruction, with a group of 5,000-plus who are hungry and need something to eat.

Why does the Lord allow his disciples to experience that? Notice Jesus doesn't go around the disciples and say, "Hey, I'll feed them." No, he looks to them and enables—multiplies his blessings and places in their hands so that they can distribute the blessing and grace to these people. In other words, the theme which we see in the New Testament is similar to the theme here. The cry of desperation is always, always, always meant to be a sign and a symbol of God saying, "Come unto me all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." And so when we feel we are way beyond our capacity, and even

when we start feeling it coming on in the earliest parts, what are we called to do? We are called to get on our knees and say, “Lord, help me. This is more than I can bear. Give me the grace to trust in you today.”

It’s not a prayer that the Lord will suddenly make the tunnel or the difficulty or the complaints or the challenge to suddenly be removed. That is not the Lord’s promise. But what his promise is that while we may not see the light at the end of the tunnel, we know that the Lord is with us in the midst of the tunnel. We know that the Lord will give us grace that is enough for that moment, and that he longs for us to cry out, because the cry of dependence is the cry for salvation. It is the cry for the Lord’s grace and strength to be made manifest. And to pray that. It doesn’t mean that we will be healed. It doesn’t mean that the days looking forward will come that are suddenly going to be better. These are our friends the Shoemakers have experienced a second flood along with many other business people in Old Ellicott City—regardless of the reasons. Really? More rain?

We can’t know what the future will be, but we can know that the Lord is with us. And so Moses cries out, and he says, “If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favor in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness.” It is a desperate cry for a thread of grace. Show me, Lord, that you are with me. Either help me to solve it, or give me the grace to see that you are with me. Directly after these verses, God heard Moses’s cry. He chose not to destroy the people of God. He had mercy. He then raised up elders from all twelve tribes to assist Moses in the work of caring for God’s people. God demonstrated his love for his people, so he’s provided adequate leadership so that they could walk with the people, pray for the people, enabling them to see the Lord in the midst of the desert. He also demonstrated his grace to Moses and said, “You’re right; you’re not meant to do this alone. I’m going to give you others that are going to come alongside to help you.” This is where eldership even began. This is the Lord’s small way of saying—he didn’t remove them from the desert. He didn’t magically transport them into the land of Canaan. But he gave them grace to depend on him for the next day.

So does the Lord put more on us than we can bear? Yes. But when we are tempted, does he provide a way out? Yes. Are we called to give a cry of desperation? Yes. Is it a statement of weakness? Yes, in ourselves—and an acknowledgement of the strength of the only One who can provide for us. Many of you in this room, I know, have been on your knees for various seasons and even now, crying out to the Lord. I encourage you to share that with someone else in this body, so that we can go to the Lord with you. Some of you are feeling as though you’re entering a season of desperation. May this passage call you to the One who is able to be with you in the midst of it. But also know he’s given you others around you so that you might not be alone.

But this is what we learn from this passage—that though they complain, throughout the whole thing, the glory and majesty and mercy and the goodness of God is maintained. The Lord is good, and he does meet us. And his mercy and compassion are made new every morning. And the Lord has given us the grace of the bread of heaven, which is Christ. He’s given us the bread of life, which is his Word. He’s given us the blood of Christ, which is our drink. He’s given us the Holy Spirit, which is his presence with us in the midst of our own journeys. How he will manifest it is the Lord’s work in your life. What we are called to do is simply, “Lord, I feel things are falling apart. Have mercy.” Let’s pray.

Lord, hear our prayer. I pray on behalf of those who are feeling overwhelmed, who are feeling that they cannot bear it any longer. Father, I pray you would hear their cry of desperation. But I also ask you, Lord, send others alongside them, that their arms in prayer might be lifted up. Father, we pray even this morning for our brothers and sisters who have suffered as a result of the second flood in Old Ellicott City. The Shoemaker family—Lord, may you uphold them and provide for them, and so many others. Father, we pray for Debbie and Wayne Koch as they’re ministering in Cameroon. Thank you, Lord, for providing for them. Thank you for giving them grace, giving them safety, giving them the blessing of ministering in your name in a desperate situation.

And Father, there are seasons of illness here. There are seasons of hurt in relationship. Lord, you know the hurt of your people. I thank you that this passage teaches us not to leave them at home, but to bring them into your presence. Lord, I ask on behalf of this your people, give them grace enough today. Give them your goodness. Give them your mercy, that they might trust in you by faith for this day. Do not allow their foot to slip. Maintain the goodness of your name, the glory of your grace, against the onslaught and accusations of the evil one who would whisper at your children that God is not good. Lord, may the gates of hell not prevail against your church, and may the whisper of your grace—the still, small voice of your Spirit and your Word—may it drown out the false accusations of the evil one. And may you bind up wounds. And may you give grace. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.