

The Story: Here There Be Giants
By Jason Huff
Psalm 78:1-8, Hebrews 3:12-4:1, Numbers 13:25-14:11

Our final readings are selections taken from Numbers 13:25-14:11. Listen now to God's Word. "At the end of forty days the spies returned from exploring the land. They came back to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran. There they reported to them and to the whole assembly and showed them the fruit of the land. They gave Moses this account: "We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large." ... Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it." But the men who had gone up with him said, "We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are." And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, "The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We even saw giants there, the descendants of Anak. We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them." That night all the people of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. 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 desert! 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." Then Moses and Aaron fell facedown in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there. Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes and said to the entire Israelite assembly, "The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them." But the whole assembly talked about stoning them. Then the glory of the LORD appeared at the Tent of Meeting to all the Israelites. The LORD said to Moses, "How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them?"

Here's a fact you might not know about me...I used to play the bagpipes. When I was younger, my parents decided I needed to play an instrument. I had no clue about instruments; I'd always been a singer. But I knew the coolest thing ever was on Easter Sunday when all the pipers would march into our church service playing at full blast. That was something I wanted to do. But there was a problem...it was a lot of work. I also turns out a bagpipe is a really uncool instrument if you want to play songs anybody knows. I worked at it for a while, but eventually I grumbled and complained about it enough that I stopped playing. I sold my bagpipes and I was done. About six years later, I was interested in learning how to play guitar. I wanted to lead music at my youth group – and I wanted to meet girls. My parents, on the other hand, said “no dice.” I'd quit one expensive instrument; they weren't going to buy another. It took several months of learning on a borrowed guitar on my own before they saw I was serious about playing. My years of grumbling about practice before nearly cost me something I now love and do today.

We all know about the big sins we talked about last week, murder and adultery and having other gods...but I think that grumbling and complaining may do us far more harm in our everyday lives than those “big” sins most of us are never compelled to commit. The Israelites knew the sin of grumbling against God, and it cost a generation their opportunity to enter into the land God had promised to Abraham. I want to quickly recap this week’s reading from *The Story* and see what we can learn from it for ourselves and our relationship with God.

This week is full of complaints from the Israelites. They are miserable. They complain about everything – their hardships, the lack of variety in their food, their leadership, you name it. The grumbling spreads to the upper echelons of the camp, to the point where Moses’ brother and sister, Aaron and Miriam, speak out against him, using the fact that his wife was a Cushite rather than a full-blooded Israelite against him. Their constant refrain is, “Why can’t we just go back to Egypt where everything was so much better?”

Dissension in the ranks eventually turns into the full-blown mutiny. They reach Kadesh-Barnea on the very edge of the promised land. At God’s command, Moses sends twelve men into the land to investigate. It’s perfect. There’s just one problem – it’s occupied. Joshua and Caleb stand up for God and say that the Israelites can certainly take it. The other ten, however, tell the Israelites that the land “devours” its inhabitants. By the time they are done stirring the pot, the Israelites are ready to stone Moses, Caleb, and Joshua and find someone willing to take them back to their slavery in Egypt.

God is incensed, and Moses pleads to God for them. God forgives them for sinning against Him, but there is a cost. God says that not one of them who has shown Him contempt will enter into the promised land. For forty years, the Israelites will wander in the desert until everyone twenty years or older – save for Caleb and Joshua – is dead. Then their children will inherit the land meant for Abraham’s descendents.

This decree doesn’t stop the Israelites from continually arguing with God and sinning against Him. God hands the kingdoms near to the promised land over to them, yet they still complain about their food. Eventually, they wind up getting lured into sexual immorality with the local women and begin to practice idol worship. God restores His relationship with them each time they turn away, but still, many die due to their rebellion.

The grumbling has more repercussions. After the Israelites again complain about not having water, God tells Moses to go with Aaron over to a rock and speak to it, and water will flow out of it. But Moses is so incensed that he says through Aaron, “Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?” He pounds the rock with his staff twice. Water indeed comes out. But the problem is, Moses defied God’s command and gave Aaron and himself the credit. For their disobedience, neither of them is allowed to enter into the promised land either.

Eventually, a census is taken. The generation that complained in the desert is gone. All that’s left is Moses. He gives the people his final words of instruction; in fact, he repeats much of what God has said to them before so they will fully obey. God takes Moses up on the mountain and shows him all of the promised land, far more than what one could see by the naked eye. And that’s where Moses dies at 120 years of age. The wanderings are finally over.

So what can we learn from this week's reading? It's ironic that the week of Thanksgiving, we're learning about the opposite from the Israelites. But perhaps when we understand the true nature of complaint, we can understand why giving thanks is so important. There are three thoughts I have on the Israelites' grumbling I have this morning: *discontent is a form of covetousness, it creates giants, and it can spread like wildfire, leading even the best of us astray into sin.* We can also see how turning each around brings us closer to God.

Now I want to start with a caveat: asking for justice is not discontent. You buy a new washing machine and it breaks the week after you buy it, when you ask for a new machine or your money back, you aren't complaining. You are asking for justice. Justice is about receiving something that is rightfully due you. When God charges the Israelites with wrongdoing, He isn't complaining – they have broken their covenant with Him. When corruption or greed leads to injustice, then we should speak out. But complaint is a different story altogether.

And that's where our first point begins: *discontent is a form of covetousness.* How is it that when we complain, we break one of the Ten Commandments? It's like this...when we complain, we are arguing that we don't have something we want. If we complain because we don't have the latest gadget or own the most fashionable clothes or whatever, we are coveting what someone else has. We want it for ourselves.

Now we are discontent about a lot of other things that have nothing to do with owning something physical. But it's still covetousness at its root. Let's take an example, say the child complaining about homework or an adult complaining about work or family or whatever. What is being coveted is the ideal. The ideal is the perfect job where you work just enough hours to feel like you've accomplished something and you get paid a truckload to do it. The ideal is to not ever have any homework, to be able to learn everything you need to know instantaneously. We all know that the ideal doesn't truly exist, but we're willing to covet the next best thing, and it leads to anger. We grumble against the kid who doesn't have to work so hard to learn the new material. We resent the person who appears to have the perfect family and the perfect job. We squabble with one another because we don't get our way.

This is where thankfulness can save us from a life of jealousy and bitterness. If we are thankful for what we do have, then we can be thankful that others have been blessed as well. We live in a fallen and broken world, where the best of us still suffers, where the easiest job is still a lot of work, where we make mistakes and miscommunicate and hurt one another even when we intend to help. When we practice thankfulness, we realize all of this but choose to be grateful. As Paul says in Ephesians 5, "Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

I don't want to ignore the fact that the Israelites were discontent about very real issues in their lives, not an iPod or a new car to drive. They were worried about things like food and water. I know I would have gotten tired of manna every day; I like variety in my diet just like the Israelites did. I would have been worried whether or not my family would survive. But at the same time, nobody was starving. There was always food. God provided manna every single day for forty years. God appeared right in their midst. What were they so worried about? Why did God's presence not convince them to obey Him?

It goes to the second problem of discontent: *it creates giants*. In the case of the Israelites, complaining created literal giants in their minds. The spies saw that there a lot of people in the promised land and that some of them were big – tall warrior types. But by the time the story disseminated in the camp, these were the giants of legend – the descendents of the Nephilim. It didn't matter that all the Nephilim died in the flood in Noah's day...the story became bigger than the truth. By the time that story is put to bed, an entire generation of Israel misses out on the opportunity of the promised land.

Israel made every issue into a giant. We have food, yes, but no meat, and that means we're starving. They claim they ate fish in Egypt at no cost – so soon they forget the backbreaking labor they did in order to get that free fish! Each time they lack something, they don't turn to God. Instead, they turn to Moses and say, "Why did you bring us into this wilderness only for us to die here?" These issues are nothing for the LORD. God provides so much quail that it rots before they can eat it all. He eventually gives them the land of the Amorites in battle, and many of the Israelites settle there permanently with its abundant water and fields and food. There is nothing God cannot provide for them, but they refuse to ask in faith. They prefer their giants.

We have our own giants as well. I have a habit of wanting to work in my own strength, with my own abilities, and that's when the giants spring up. Suddenly, I find myself worrying about the sermon, worrying about this thing and that, and making mountains out of molehills. In the church, we have our giant of evangelism – it's too scary to ask a friend to church, let alone a stranger. We have our giant of church membership and finances – do we have too few members to keep the church open? There are others. We have them in our personal lives too, giants of family and friends and co-workers, all wanting more than what we can give.

But there's one place we can always turn. God is our giant-slayer. No problem is beyond His solving. No temptation is beyond His grace to save us from it. No sin is beyond His redemption. We have reason to be thankful because there is nothing God cannot handle. As we head into Thanksgiving, there may be bills to pay and dinners to cook and relatives to see. Holidays can become a huge ugly ball of stress. But God intends for you to have joy and have it abundantly. Let go of those things because you can't handle them in your own strength...and you don't have to. God will cut those giants down to size. He will supply all your needs as you remember Him and ask Him in faith to provide.

This leads us into the last problem with complaint: *discontent can spread like wildfire, leading even the best of us astray into sin*. The initial complaints about the food started, according to the text, with just the "rabble," but it spreads into the entire community. The stories about the giants in the land began within only ten men, but eventually over a million people were ready to stone Moses. Even Moses fails in this regard. When Moses sinned in the incident at Meribah, he got so fed up with the Israelites himself that *he* complained about *them* – and wound up hitting the rock and taking the credit for supplying the water God had provided.

None of us is immune from discontent. In our natural selves, we are discontent because we lack a firm foundation on God and His presence in our lives. But turning to Him takes more work than getting on board the bandwagon. It was an issue even amongst faithful believers in the early church. In Philippians 4, Paul deals with a situation brewing within a loyal church. He writes, "I plead with Euodia and Syntyche. Please, because you belong to the Lord, settle your disagreement. And I ask you, my companion, to help these women, for they worked hard with me in telling others the Good News. And they worked with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are written in the Book of Life." If it affected the early church, it will affect us, and so we must be on guard against it.

And once again, the best defense is a good offense...active thankfulness. Just like discontent spreads, so does thanksgiving. When one person is thankful and shares their joy, it can change everything. It can change a holiday gathering, it can change a congregation, and it can change a country. Of 102 passengers on the Mayflower, only 53 were left by the autumn of 1621...there was plenty of suffering and grief and hardship in their midst. Yet those pilgrims and 90 Native Americans gave thanks together for a successful harvest. Nearly 400 years later, we still celebrate Thanksgiving as they did, remembering that God is the giver of all good gifts. What they did still resonates today and gives us a model for sharing our joy in the LORD.

I want to end with a final thought on discontentedness and Moses' final plea to the Israelites. In his final address to them, Moses said, "I set before you today life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life."

When we think about the first generation of Israelites out in the wilderness, we've got to recognize that what they received was no more than what they wanted. They didn't want to take the promised land. They were ready to stone Moses rather than to go. They would all die within 40 years in the desert, but they got what they wanted...a pass from entering the land. When we choose our own way rather than God's way, He often forgives. But we should remember, they may be no greater curse, no greater hell in this life or the next, than getting exactly what we think we want if what we want does not include God.

My call today to you is Moses' call. Choose life. Choose thankfulness. Choose the LORD and serve Him. You may not have much in the way of earthly things or an easy life, but in God, you will have all you need, and you will find true and everlasting contentment.