

DEVOTIONAL READING

Philip Yancey Devotional

An Arm Too Short?

Numbers 11:4-23; 31-34

“The LORD answered Moses, ‘Is the LORD’s arm too short? You will now see whether or not what I say will come true for you’” (Num. 11:23).

The book of Numbers covers a journey through the desert that should have lasted about 14 days, but instead lasted forty years. When they first crossed into the Sinai Peninsula, the Israelites were bursting with a spirit of hope and adventure. Free at last from the chains of slavery, they headed toward the Promised Land. But the weeks, months, and then years of wandering in a hostile desert soon wore down all positive feelings.

With relentless honesty, Numbers tells what happened to change a short excursion into a forty-year detour. Petty things seemed to bother the Israelites most, as their constant complaints about food indicate. With a few exceptions, they ate the same thing every day: manna (meaning, literally, “What is it?”), which appeared like dew on the ground each morning. A monotonous diet may seem a trivial exchange for freedom from slavery, but read their grumbling for yourself in this chapter.

The rebellion portrayed here was typical of the whole journey. And the more childishly the people acted, the more their leaders were forced to respond like stern parents. As this chapter shows, Moses and God took turns getting exasperated by the Israelites’ constant whining.

True, conditions were rigorous: Facing a constant threat from enemy armies, the tribes had to march under a broiling sun through a desert region oppressed by snakes, scorpions, and constant drought. But the underlying issue was a simple test of faith: Would they trust God to see them through such hard circumstances? Would they follow the terms of the covenant He had signed with them and depend on His promised protection?

Life Question: Do you ever “grumble” against God? If so, what tends to make you do so?