

Numbers 11:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And when the people complained, it displeased the LORD: and the LORD heard it; and his anger was kindled; and the fire of the LORD burnt among them, and consumed them that were in the uttermost parts of the camp.

Analysis

This verse marks the beginning of a series of rebellion narratives that would characterize Israel's wilderness experience. The phrase 'the people complained' translates Hebrew 'mit'onenim' (מִתְּאַנְּנִים), suggesting murmuring or complaining with a sense of seeking pretexts for dissatisfaction. Their complaint 'displeased the LORD' (literally 'was evil in the ears of the LORD'), indicating that their attitude, not just their circumstances, was sinful. The content of their complaint isn't initially specified, suggesting the issue was the complaining spirit itself rather than legitimate grievance. God's response—sending fire that consumed the camp's outer edges—demonstrates divine intolerance for chronic ingratitude and unbelief. The people had experienced miraculous deliverance, daily manna provision, water from rocks, and visible divine presence, yet they complained. This reveals human depravity's shocking depth—even overwhelming blessings cannot satisfy hearts bent toward sinful discontent. The pattern of complaint-judgment-intercession-deliverance appears repeatedly in Numbers, illustrating both human unfaithfulness and divine mercy. Moses' intercession 'and the fire was quenched' anticipates Christ's greater intercession that saves us from the consuming fire of God's wrath against sin.

Historical Context

This incident occurred shortly after Israel departed Mount Sinai (Numbers 10:11-12), beginning their march toward Canaan. The location was named Taberah (תְּבָרָה, 'burning') to memorialize God's judgment (Numbers 11:3). This was the first of many rebellion incidents during the wilderness wandering, establishing a tragic pattern: complaint → divine judgment → intercession → partial deliverance → temporary repentance → renewed complaint. Archaeological evidence from the Sinai wilderness confirms its harsh, inhospitable nature—rocky terrain, extreme temperatures, scarce water, and minimal vegetation. Yet Israel's physical hardships don't excuse their spiritual rebellion; they had daily manna, God's visible presence, and recent memory of Egypt's bondage. The complaint pattern reveals that external circumstances don't determine spiritual faithfulness—hearts either trust God through difficulties or rebel against Him in them. This incident set the tone for Israel's wilderness experience, demonstrating that the generation liberated from Egypt would largely fail to enter Canaan due to persistent unbelief.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Study Questions

1. How does Israel's complaint despite overwhelming evidence of God's provision warn us against chronic discontent and ingratitude?
2. What does God's swift judgment on complaining teach about His view of attitudes versus merely external actions?

Interlinear Text

בְּאַזְנֵי בְּעֵד כִּמְתָא בְּנֵי יִם
H1961 And when the people complained it displeased H241

וְתַבְעֵר אֲפִי וְתַשְׁמֵעַ יְהִי הָרָא
and the LORD heard and the LORD was kindled it and his anger burnt

וְתַאֲכַל יְהִי הָרָא
H0 and the fire and the LORD among them and consumed

בְּלִיאָה בְּמִקְדָּשָׁה
them that were in the uttermost parts of the camp

Additional Cross-References

2 Kings 1:12 (Parallel theme): And Elijah answered and said unto them, If I be a man of God, let fire come down from heaven, and consume thee and thy fifty. And the fire of God came down from heaven, and consumed him and his fifty.

Numbers 16:35 (References Lord): And there came out a fire from the LORD, and consumed the two hundred and fifty men that offered incense.

Numbers 21:5 (Parallel theme): And the people spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread.

Exodus 16:9 (References Lord): And Moses spake unto Aaron, Say unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, Come near before the LORD: for he hath heard your murmurings.

Deuteronomy 9:22 (References Lord): And at Taberah, and at Massah, and at Kibroth-hattaavah, ye provoked the LORD to wrath.

Leviticus 10:2 (References Lord): And there went out fire from the LORD, and devoured them, and they died before the LORD.

Isaiah 30:33 (References Lord): For Tophet is ordained of old; yea, for the king it is prepared; he hath made it deep and large: the pile thereof is fire and much wood; the breath of the LORD, like a stream of brimstone, doth kindle it.

Psalms 78:21 (References Lord): Therefore the LORD heard this, and was wroth: so a fire was kindled against Jacob, and anger also came up against Israel;

Psalms 106:18 (Parallel theme): And a fire was kindled in their company; the flame burned up the wicked.

Job 1:16 (Parallel theme): While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The fire of God is fallen from heaven, and hath burned up the sheep, and the servants, and consumed them; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee.