

# Numbers 11:1-3

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/num/num-11/numbers-111-3/>

*Sometime during the three-day journey described in chapter 10, the Israelites began to complain. The LORD heard it and became very angry, and He caused fire to burn at the edge of the camp. Moses intervened and the LORD ceased causing the fire.*

Having departed from Mount Sinai in their journey to Canaan, *the people became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the Lord* (v. 1). Literally, the Hebrew text reads “and it was when the people complained, it was evil in the ears of the LORD.” The Hebrew for “complain” (“*anan*”) is quite rare, occurring only here and in Lamentations 3:39. Its use in the Lamentations passage implies unjustified or unfounded complaining, and that seems to be its sense here as well.

It is unclear what the complaining was about, but uses of this verb outside the Old Testament imply that it might have involved sighing and/or mourning. If this is the case, it could mean that some of the Israelites were sad to leave the relative security of Sinai and travel into the wilderness with its unknown dangers. It could also be connected with the work and trouble of picking up all their belongings and walking throughout the day. They were no longer fleeing the Egyptians, and had experienced relative comfort at Sinai. Also, this Hebrew word is in the Hithpoel stem, implying that their complaining was constant and repetitive.

In response, *when the Lord heard it, His anger was kindled*. Literally, “His anger burned.” Then *the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp*. The nature of this “fire” is unknown. If it was literal fire, it could have been in the form of lightning. This would make sense since the LORD’s presence was in the form of a cloud (Exodus 13:21; Numbers 9:16; Job 37:11). On the other hand, *fire* could be a symbolic reference to the LORD’s wrath. *Fire* is often used in scripture to indicate judgment.

The *fire* occurred on the *outskirts of the camp*. The fact that the fire was limited to the outer portions of the camp and not in the more populated inner part was yet another act of the LORD’s grace, because many more were involved in the complaining than were judged. It is also not clear whether people were killed by literal fire or something else.

In any case, the *fire* was frightening enough to where the *people therefore cried out to Moses* (v. 2). In his role as mediator between the LORD and His people, *Moses prayed to the Lord and the fire died out*. Moses’ intercession was successful, and the LORD graciously stopped His judgment by fire.

In order to mark the occasion, *the name of that place was called Taberah* (v. 3). The word “Taberah” means “burning.” The location was given this name *because the fire of the Lord burned among them*. The exact location of Taberah is unknown.

The complaining of the people here is in stark contrast to the willing obedience the people showed earlier in Numbers. Unfortunately, this pattern will continue, where Israel will follow obedience to commands to organize but exhibit disobedience to the LORD's moral commands. It will also be a pattern that Israel will become accustomed to the LORD's provision, and desire "more". They will develop a "what have you done for us lately?" attitude. The lack of gratefulness for the LORD's provision is clearly demonstrated in the rest of the book.

### **Biblical Text**

**<sup>1</sup> Now the people became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the Lord; and when the Lord heard *it*, His anger was kindled, and the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed *some* of the outskirts of the camp. <sup>2</sup> The people therefore cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the Lord and the fire died out. <sup>3</sup> So the name of that place was called Taberah, because the fire of the Lord burned among them.**