

# The Failure of the Flesh

by John Nelson Darby

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*The Bible is the history of God's grace and faithfulness, and man's failure, which is exemplified in the story of Israel's dissatisfaction with their portion in Christ and Moses' loss of confidence in God's presence.*

**Scripture:** Numbers 11:1

**Topics:** "Reliance on God", "Spiritual Struggle"

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## Description

John Nelson Darby discusses 'The Failure of the Flesh,' emphasizing the struggle between the Spirit of God and the flesh as illustrated in the journey of the Israelites. He highlights that the dissatisfaction and complaints of the people stem from their failure to recognize God's presence and provision, leading them to long for the comforts of Egypt. Darby points out that true communion with God prevents murmuring, while reliance on the flesh leads to spiritual failure, as seen in Moses' moment of doubt. The sermon underscores that despite human shortcomings, God's grace and faithfulness remain constant, and the Holy Spirit is present to guide believers through their wilderness experiences. Ultimately, the message calls for reliance on God's love and the power of the Spirit rather than the cravings of the flesh.

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## Transcript

In chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9 we have had the energy of the Spirit of God in us while passing through the wilderness, and in the tenth the ark going before the children of Israel to seek out a place of rest for them - the only journey of which the Lord in this way was the conductor. In this eleventh chapter we have the history of the failure of the flesh. The whole Bible is just the history of the grace and faithfulness of God, and of the failure of man. The very purpose for which the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt was, that He might dwell among them; and if difficulties arose, then it was, "Rise up, Lord: let them that hate thee flee before thee;" or resting "Return, O Lord, unto the many thousands of Israel." But there was nothing in this to satisfy the natural man; flesh cannot feed on the manna. "It is the Spirit that quickeneth, the flesh profiteth nothing." "The people complained." (v. 1) Whenever there is complaint in the heart the flesh is at work. "It displeased the Lord." God being present with us, it is evident we are not satisfied with Him when there is complaining of heart. God has now sent down the Holy Ghost, that "He may abide with us for ever." But the flesh has all sorts of cravings which are contrary to the Spirit, nor can it find anything in the Spirit of God to satisfy it. If, therefore, we have murmuring and complaining of heart, we are not satisfied with what is of the Spirit of God. The heart has got away from God, and has not Him for its portion. Then the flesh is at work. A soul feeding on the Lord will not complain. It may be tried; then it will cry to the Lord. "They cried unto thee, and were delivered." But complaining is just saying to God, "You are not enough for

me." Trial of heart does not produce complaint; it may bring forth humiliation. "The Lord heard it, and His anger was kindled." At first it was only a partial chastening, consuming those who were in the uttermost part of the camp. They had got away from the consciousness of His presence, and if they would not know His presence in joy, they must know it in judgement and chastening.

The mixed multitude (v. 4) had no possession in Canaan; they "fell a lusting." When the saints are associated with the world many thereby are defiled. "The children of Israel wept again." They were looking for present ease and comfort, good things here, not longing for Canaan. We remember (v. 5); now they were lusting like the mixed multitude. "Evil communications corrupt good manners." They had in heart turned back to Egypt, and, the flesh working in them, could recount all the good things which the flesh had in Egypt; and when Satan is thus drawing us back to the world, we never remember the deliverance, but what we lost by the deliverance. Then Pharaoh is most bountiful. Instead of crying out by reason of hard bondage, we remember the fish we did eat in Egypt freely. This was deception; for they ate it in bondage. We can remember the things of the flesh, but not the things of the Spirit. I may remember that I was happy in communion yesterday, but I must be under the present power of the Holy Ghost to remember what Christ is. The food of yesterday will not do for to-day. When under the power of present communion, we are sometimes ready to say, "My mountain stands strong; I shall never be moved." When we've lost that communion, all the joy we had in it is gone. It is a constant life of faith in present exercise by the Spirit. When the saint gets into the world all things appear lovely, but then their souls are murmuring and unhappy. But now our soul is dried away; there is nothing at all besides manna.( v 6) They did not say that the manna was not there, but there was nothing else. So with us. It is not that Christ is not there, but saying that He will not satisfy us now in the wilderness, where we have nothing at all before our eyes but Christ to feed upon.

"The anger of the Lord was greatly kindled." (v. 10) Moses said (v. 11), "Wherefore hast thou laid this burden upon me?" Wretched me! Here his faith broke down. Nor does he now say "thy people," but lays the burden on his own shoulder and breaks down; for when "I," proud flesh, did not count upon the Lord's love, but he began to make himself of importance, he failed. It was true Moses had been sent to deliver Israel, but it was God still; and when Moses got in the flesh, and thought it was his work and strength, he did not count on God's love. "Have I conceived all this people?" Now in the matter of the golden calf he identified God with the people. Then he did not fail. And when they first murmured (v. 2) he prayed unto the Lord, but now in the general failure his own faith failed. The Lord pitied His servant, and provided for it by putting some of his honour on others and taking it from him. When the heart gets off the ground of love it counts on sorrow. "Let me not see my wretchedness." (v. 15) Then (v. 17) God takes from the proper honour of Moses (the life of faith), and puts it on others to share it with him. Himself alone in immediate communion with God, such is the proper honour of the life of faith. In the Church, it is to bear others' burdens. So with the Lord. "All the vessels of His Father's house laid on Him." True honour is to suffer, bearing others' burdens without comfort from any but God. How different the mind of Moses when alone with God's counsels, but now "not thyself alone." (v. 17) In the matter of the spies he said, "Thou broughtest up this people." "And the Lord said, I have pardoned according to thy word" (Num. 14:20), because he referred it all to God's glory. There was chastening of the people and merciful dealing with Moses, but with loss of honour, because of the want of the energy of faith. It was not lust in him, but despising the competency of God to guide and help. Though the Church may have lost the honour of the first glory, the Spirit is competent to bless and guide it now. The Lord may not "restore counsellors as at the first;" and though He will not bear with present evil, yet present evil does not put the Lord away. If we are saying, "Is the Lord among us?" it is despising the presence of the Lord among His people, and arises

from losing the joy of His presence, and then forgetting the power of His presence.

When Moses' faith fails, then he begins to reason. (vv. 21, 22) In this he limited the Holy One of Israel; for, whatever Israel's sin had been, the Lord's hand was not shortened. No matter what the difficulty, we must not limit the present power of the Holy One to carry us through the wilderness.

Eldad and Medad prophesied; it was outside the order God had set up. So when some preached Christ of contention, Paul was glad of it because Christ was preached. "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets!" Whenever the Lord acts by the holy power of truth, let us say, "The Lord glorify Himself." It is God's prerogative to act contrary to His set order, and for us to bow to it. In the midst of failure, the energy of the Spirit of God will act spite of the failure.

In verses 31-33 there is a further testimony that the Lord was among them. It was love gave the quails, and they ought to have said, "How could we ever doubt the love of God?" but such was their persevering lust, that on they go to gratify it. It was this brought the anger of the Lord; for while the flesh was yet between their teeth the anger of the Lord was kindled against them, and He smote them with a great plague. Thus we have the failure of Israel, their dissatisfaction with their portion in Christ, their complaining, and the heart going back to the world. Then the failure of Moses; losing the sense of the Lord's presence, with want of confidence in the energy of the Lord to bear all the burdens of His people.

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