**Faithful God and unfaithful Israel as seen in Ps. 106**

**Their craving puts God to the test.**

**Ps.106: 13-15, Num. 11:4-6 & 18-23 & 31-35, James 1:13-15**

The season of Lent, which has just started, is a time of self examination to see where we are falling short of God’s standards and wishes and to put right where we have been unfaithful to Him. This reflects our Series of “Faithful God and unfaithful Israel as seen in Ps. 106: 13-15”, which covers Israel’s rescue from Egypt, journey to the Promised Land and even the Exile “Many times He delivered them, but they were bent on rebellion..But He took note of their distress…for their sake He remembered His covenant…He caused them to be pitied by all who held them captive.” Ps 106: 43-46. It is a story of endless acts of unfaithfulness-failure to follow the Lord, with the Lord’s amazing faithfulness to Israel as a counterpoint. The four episodes we shall look at are narrated, mostly, in Numbers with comments from the Psalm. Today we look at the Israelites’ craving for familiar Egyptian food, which tested the Lord to see if He still loved and cared for them.

Do you remember the couplet “What’s the matter with Mary Jane?

O dear, it’s rice pudding again!”

Similarly, the Israelites seem to have got bored with the Manna, given by the Lord after all the excitement of crossing the Red Sea. They were, now, faced with an emotional anti climax and the hard grind of toiling through the desert to an unknown destination within an unknown timeframe. Unsurprisingly, they “complained about their hardships.”Num. 11: 1.

Four factors contributed to this situation. Firstly, their complaints were expressed as “wailing” NOT just once “again the Israelites started wailing and said ‘if only we had meat to eat.’ “Num. 11: 4 but FIVE times in all.

1. “Moses heard the people of every family wailing.” V. 10.
2. (Moses told the Lord) “they keep wailing to me, ‘Give us meat to eat!’” v. 13.
3. “the Lord heard you when you wailed, ‘If only we had meat to eat. We were better off in Egypt!’” v.18.
4. “they wailed before (the Lord), saying, ‘Why did we ever leave Egypt?’” v.20.

The noise and extravagance of such expressions is contagious, raises stress levels within both the community and for Moses besides spreading discontent.

Secondly, it was the ‘rabble’ Num. 11: 1 who started the complaint. Presumably, this refers to those fringe members of the community of Israel who were going along for the ride and were not as committed to the whole project as were Moses, the elders and those who had really seen the hand of the Lord in effecting their escape from the “hard bondage” of Egypt.

Thirdly, the nature of their complaints sprang from a craving for the familiar now that they were in the unfamiliar terrain of the wilderness “ we remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost-the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna.”Num. 11: 5-6. There is, often, a deep human desire for the easy way option, so Egypt seemed recognizable and familiar with slavery forgotten. There’s, also, a tendency for mankind to remember the good times, while the bad times fade away in the memory, somewhat. The sin of greed came into it, too. “All that day and night and the next day all the people went out and gathered quail. No one gathered less than 10 homers.” Num. 11: 32. This could mean each person collected 1,000 kgs of quails!! This craving, however, led them, to reject Him “who is always with you.” Num. 11: 20. This was the most obvious of their sins.

Fourthly, the remedy for their discontent was neglected. “But they soon forgot what He had done.” Ps. 106: 13. They forgot “He rebuked the Red Sea and it dried up.”Ps 106: 9 and led them to safety. They, also, forgot their first Passover since their escape “celebrated in the Desert of Sinai.”Num. 9: 15. They forgot the Tabernacle with the Ark, the Pillars of Fire by day and Cloud by night-all symbols of the Lord’s presence going with them. Worse still-they no longer “believed His promises and sang his praises.” nor did they “wait for His counsel.” Ps. 106: 12. They did not seek His help to get them out of this mess.

To sum up, their ‘wailing’ brought Moses to breaking point-he was “troubled” Num. 11: 10. He remonstrated with the Lord “What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me…why do you tell me to carry them in my arms as a nurse carries an infant?” Num. 11: 11-12. He could see no human remedy and even wished to die. The ‘wailing’ about their craving, also, led the Israelites into the sin of rejecting the Lord, which is a particular example of the general truth, outlined in Jas. 1: 13-15, about how we give way to temptation. The root of the problem is “this evil desire” within each one of us Jas. 1: 14. Jesus showed that it is from inside that evil desires come-“For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder....” Matt. 15: 19. Consequently, the craving “if only we had meat to eat!” Num. 11: 4 “dragged (them) away and enticed (them)” Jas. 1: 14. The crescendo of wailing, longing and regrets led to grumbles, brooded upon, till, like at conception ‘it (gave) birth to sin’ Jas. 1: 15-a sin of rejection and testing of the Lord’s love. What an object lesson for us!

The conclusion of this whole episode meant Moses was overwrought - at his wits’ end - “would they have enough, if flocks and herds were slaughtered for them?” Num. 11:23. In the next verse the Lord asked “Is (my) arm too short?” and promised in to do something that would remind him and the Israelites of His power. That meant empowering the elders with his spirit to take some of the burden of nursing the Israelites from off Moses’ shoulders. That meant, too, using a powerful East wind to drive quails on one of their twice yearly migrations from Europe and West Asia to Egypt and further South into the Israelites’ camp. In granting their desires the Lord allowed the consequences of the actions. As Paul wrote to the Romans “Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts “Rom 1: 22. There was such abundance of quails that they would have enough for “a whole month…till it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it” Num. 11: 20. “So He gave them what they asked for, but sent a wasting disease upon them.” is the comment in Ps. 106: 15.

In Num. 11: 33 the comment is “(the Lord’s anger) burned against the people.” His “anger was aroused” Num. 11: 1-“the Lord became exceedingly angry” Num. 11: 10 Does this imply the Lord is given to outbursts of temper? In fact, His anger or wrath means He cannot tolerate iniquity, as water cannot tolerate or mix with oil. “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.” Hab. 1: 13. Therefore, sinful actions are so intolerable to the holy Lord that the consequences of them are described as punishments. In James 1: 15 “sin, when it is full grown, gives birth to death”, as the Israelites discovered with the plague of Num. 11: 33-34. The rest of their dealings with the Lord as seen in Ps 106 shows that, though he could not tolerate their unfaithful and sinful acts in rejecting Him, He still loved them and was faithful to his promise to lead them to the Promised Land.

What does this whole tragic episode teach us? Firstly, it is our sinful desires that lead us into giving way to sinful acts. These desires are like fifth columnists within a besieged city seeking to find the right moment to open any gate, however small, to let in the encircling enemy. The Israelites’ wailings, complaints and brooding on what they were missing made their craving worse, so that instead of turning to the Lord for the help, He had given so often in the past, they rejected Him. For us now Jesus has promised that, if we believe in Him, he will give us a new heart-“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” Jn. 3: 3. Or as Ezekiel puts it in 36: 26-27 (the Lord says) “ I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you: l will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh, And I will put my Spirit in you and will move you to follow my decrees.”

Secondly, we, too, can so ignore or forget past deliverances and mercies that, as it were, we test the Lord’s faithfulness. Jesus’ second temptation reflects this. The devil urged Him to throw Himself down from the highest point of the Temple, for,” if you are the son of God”,…( His angels will) “lift you up in their hands.. (Jesus replied) ‘It is, also written “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’”Matt. 4: 5-7. Better by far to recall His past mercies, to bring our temptations to Him and to allow His Spirit in our new hearts of flesh to move us to follow His decrees. Thus He will deliver us.