

GRUMBLING and COMPLAINING

So You Wanna Go Back To Egypt

by Keith Green



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"Now the people became like those who complain about 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." (Num. 11:1-2)

Grumbling and complaining is one thing we don't get too concerned about these days. I mean *everybody* grumbles about something, right? Husbands and wives complain about each other. Kids tell each other how terrible their folks are. Christians grumble about one another - even about their leaders!

The nation of Israel had a long history of grumbling and complaining. You can read about the misery it brought them in the first five books of the Old Testament. I have to confess, for a long time I didn't *like* those five books because I thought they were full of The Law. God's wrath could be pretty terrible. Sometimes He sent plagues or fire from heaven. In Numbers 16, you read about the "rebellion of Korah" when the ground opened up and 250 people who complained against Moses and the Lord were swallowed alive. That's heavy!

Now the New Testament - that seemed easy in comparison! We were given a new law to keep. The law of love and liberty. As a new Christian, I heard nothing but "love, grace, forgiveness, and mercy" which was great because without them I'd be dead as a doornail! Yet I kept running across scriptures in the New Testament that really turned my head around. Jesus *also* made some strong statements about obeying the laws of God.

In Matthew, Jesus rebuked the people of three cities where He'd taught and performed many miracles. He wasn't exactly trying to win a popularity contest when He said: *"Woe to you... For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes... (And) if the miracles had occurred in Sodom that occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless, I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you."* (Matthew 11:21-24) In other words, "If I don't judge you in light of all you know, I'm going to have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah!"

I'm not pointing out these scriptures to say, "You'd better listen or God's gonna get ya." That's not God's heart. He is *"slow to anger, full of lovingkindness and compassion."* (Ps. 145:8) What I *am* saying is that those who lived under the old covenant may have had a harsher *requirement* - but they'll have an easier *judgment* than we who live under the new covenant. Why is that?

During the old covenant, the Spirit of God only came to rest *upon* people, empowering them to do mighty deeds. But it never lived *in* them to help them fulfill the law. Today, under the law of love and liberty, the Holy Spirit lives *in* us, to help us keep the law. James says, *"...be ye doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves... But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty and continueth therein... this man shall be blessed in his deed."* (James 1:22,25 KJV)

I want to make this point strongly: Once God has led us out of our old sinful lives by His Spirit, we must be careful not to return.

I found an important warning sign while reading Old Testament books like Numbers. This signal can tell you if you're headed backwards where you're no longer led and controlled by the Holy Spirit. No longer walking forward with God. It seems like a little "insignificant" sin. *In fact, some people don't think it's a sin at all!* I'm talking about grumbling and complaining.

Three Common Complaints

The reason I wanted to lay a solid foundation before looking closer at the Israelite's complaining attitude is simple but important. As I said, we think God isn't going to be as hard on *us* as he was on *them*. "Hey, I'm under grace! God isn't keeping a list of my sins. Especially not something like a little complaining now and then!"

But the Israelite's wilderness journey exposes the attitudes *behind* their complaints - some really serious sins! Let's look at three complaints that will get us into big trouble. Be honest and see if you find yourself in these accounts in Numbers.

#1 Complaints Of the Flesh

Numbers 11 gives a concise picture of what God and Moses had to put up with while trying to lead the people out of Egypt into the Promised Land. *"Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the Lord..."* Not only did Moses have to listen to their complaints, but the Lord heard all their griping as well.

We often forget that the Lord hears everything we say. He even knows everything we *think*! As David said: *"Thou dost understand my thought from afar... Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold O Lord, Thou dost know it all."* (Ps. 139:2,4) You can't hide bad attitudes from God. It's better to get to the root and deal with it. What was the root of their complaint?

The Israelites began craving food other than what the Lord was providing. They wailed, *"If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost - also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic."* What breath they must have had! We could call it Egypt Breath. *"But now our appetite is gone. There is nothing at all to look at except this manna."* (Num. 11:4-6)

The root of their complaint was their *flesh*. They forgot that they didn't deserve anything! God was giving them bread they didn't even have to work for. It was free. All they had to do was go and pick it up! But their ungrateful response was, "What? Manna again? All we ever get is this crummy bread from heaven. Wonder-bread... ugh! We wanna go back to Egypt!"

The Bread Of Life

Now don't judge these people too quickly. In John chapter six of the New Testament, we find Jewish leaders complaining about Jesus. Even His disciples were grumbling at His words. He declared, *"I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger and he who believes in Me shall never thirst... Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died... if anyone eats of this bread, he shall live forever."* (Jn. 6:35,49,51) After this, *"many of His disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him anymore."* (Jn. 6:66)

A lot of people today pray the "sinners prayer" found in 3rd Corinthians. They say, "Jesus, come into my heart. Be my Savior. Amen." Then a few weeks later when the wife or the new car they prayed for hasn't arrived on their doorstep, they start looking back. They didn't realize the cross had two sides. The death side and the resurrection side. Many people want their resurrection right on the cross. Or worse, they want a padded cross with a pillow and a sun lamp. One that's real comfortable. No way. The cross hurts so they start thinking, "Gee, this peace is not only passing understanding, it's passing *notice*! I don't even see it! Where's my peace?!"

Pretty soon they're thinking, "I thought this would be a joyful experience. *Before* I prayed to receive Jesus I could have anything I wanted - this is starting to be a drag!" Then they complain to the Lord. "I know you're supposed to be the Bread of Life, but I'm getting hungry for my old friends, my old ways, my old life."

It's not that God doesn't have enough patience when we pray complaining prayers. But sometimes He allows us to have exactly what we've been praying for! Yes, God sometimes answers prayers of the flesh. But I guarantee you won't like the results.

Be Careful How You Pray

The Israelites complained about manna and demanded meat and the Lord told them He would give them meat to eat. Now I can hear everyone saying, "Hey, complaining pays off! We oughta do it more often!" The Lord said, "*You shall eat not one day we but a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you - because you have rejected the Lord, who is among you ...saying, 'Why did we ever leave Egypt?'*" (Num. 11:19-20)

The Lord, knowing their hearts, knew they'd rejected Him for their appetites. So He gave them what they *thought* they wanted. God sent a wind to bring quail in from the sea and they covered the ground *three feet deep* for a day's walk in any direction. Quail City! Not to mention the other ... you know... the other things that quail bring. It must have been *quite* an answer to prayer! "*And the people spent all day and all night and all the next day gathering the quail (he who gathered the least amount gathered ten homers) and they spread them out for **themselves**...*" One homer equals 11 bushels so the person who gathered the least, gathered 110 bushels - for **himself**! God's people - flesh personified. (vs. 31-32)

"And while the meat was still between their teeth... the Lord struck the people with a very severe plague. So the name of that place was called Kibrothhattaavah, because there they buried the people who had been greedy." (vs. 33-34) The name actually means "the graves of greediness". God answered their complaining prayer abundantly and they added insult to injury. There was no praise, no thanksgiving, no trust, and no faith. Just greed. Many, many people died in that plague.

Are you restless in your faith because you haven't seen an answer to some important prayer? Have you been grumbling because you've trusted God for a need you don't feel He's taken care of? Have you been longing for the way things used to be? Have you been ungrateful for what the Lord *has* given you?

Don't allow your flesh to win over your Spirit, carrying you into a dead faith - or worse, into outright rejection of the Lord.

#2 Complaints Of Jealousy

Numbers reveals another dangerous complaint that's buried in each one of us like a ticking bomb.

In Numbers 12:1 it says, "*Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married...*" On the surface, their complaint seemed to be about Moses choosing a non-Jewish wife. But we know Moses was a praying man with a face-to-face relationship with God - and apparently God gave Moses the go-ahead to marry her. Actually, Miriam and Aaron were judging Moses and once they began to gripe, their *real* complaint came out. In the very next verse they said, "*Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?*"

You don't have to dig too deep to see the sin of *jealousy*. God had elevated Moses to a place of leadership, honor, and respect. And his own brother and sister couldn't stand it! Their complaint didn't come from physical appetite, like the people demanding meat. They complained because of *hungry egos*!

Unfortunately, egos didn't become extinct at the close of the Old Testament. New Testament Christians like us, have New Testament ego problems. By that I mean we sometimes get jealous and complain against our brothers and sisters in the Lord. I've seen this kind of jealousy between close friends who get involved in ministry at the same time. One of them is put in a leadership position and you'd expect the other one to be happy for him because Paul says, "*Rejoice with those who rejoice.*" (Rom.12:15)

But all too often the response is a bruised ego. Then the grumbling starts. "Why does *he* get to lead the Bible study? I've been a Christian longer than he has. *I* led *him* to the Lord! Last night he took five minutes to find Haggai!"

Sadly, one reason we get jealous of Christian preachers, teachers, or performers is because we see others idolizing them. We *should* be offended, but if some of us get honest, we'll admit we want that kind of respect and admiration too. Maybe you've never seen it in this way, but sometimes we want to be *idolized*!

Jesus had to settle this problem among his 12 closest friends the night before He was crucified. He'd already told them He was about to die, and they were grieving, right? Wrong. The week before they had watched Him hailed as King when He entered Jerusalem and now they were arguing over who would be the greatest in His Kingdom! (Lk. 22:24) I would've gone out and looked for 12 new disciples! But Jesus took a towel and a basin of water, and washed their feet one by one, like a common household servant. Then He said, "*Do you know what I have done to you? You call me teacher and Lord; and you are right; for so I am. If I then... washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.*" (Jn. 13:12-14)

Are you complaining because no one recognizes your gifts? Are you picking at the flaws in leaders? Are you murmuring because someone besides you is getting attention and praise?

Paul warned one group of Christians: *"But if you bite and devour one another, take care lest you be consumed by one another."* (Gal. 5:15) Jealous complaining is like a destructive cancer.

God allowed Miriam and Aaron to feel the cancerous effect of their complaints against Moses. In anger, the Lord struck Miriam with leprosy - the cancer of that age. (Num. 12:10) Though He cleansed her of the leprosy, she and Aaron were later forbidden to enter the Promised Land "because of rebellion." (Num. 20:24)

The message is clear. Sometimes our complaints come from hungry egos we haven't surrendered to the Lord. If you've been complaining because no one's recognizing your gifts, surrender your ego to God before it becomes like a cancer, devouring your brothers and sisters in Christ, and consuming your own Spirit.

Your complete surrender will allow God to cleanse you. Then you will be ready to take your position in His Kingdom.

#3 Complaints Of Unbelief

In Numbers 13, we find that the complaints against Moses and Aaron have really heated up. What's key for us is the way they handled it.

At the Lord's command Moses chose 12 men to go spy out the land of Canaan. He didn't send flunkies, but the leaders of the tribes. Joshua and Caleb led them across the Jordan to see if the land was fertile and how hard it would be to conquer. They returned with a cluster of grapes so big it took two men to carry it. They also returned with two different reports. Caleb was full of faith. He said, *"We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it."* (vs. 30)

But the other men who went with Joshua and Caleb *"gave out to the sons of Israel a bad report we saying, 'The land... devours it's inhabitants; and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great size.'" They dragged out some old wives' tale about a tribe of giants called Nephilim and said they were like mere grasshoppers in comparison. They totally lost sight of God and brought back a bad report about the Promised Land.*

Well, one thing the Israelites knew how to do by now was complain and they spent all night doing it. By morning everyone was grumbling against Moses and Aaron. They wanted to kill them, and appoint a new leader, and return to Egypt. How stupid. Did they think God would open the Red Sea for them again? Or that the Egyptians would be happy to see them after they had drowned their whole army?

Anyway, the people went to kill Moses and Aaron and just before the stones began to fly *"the glory of the Lord appeared... to all the Israelites"* (Num. 14:10). God offers to take care of the problem for Moses, saying, *"I will smite them with pestilence and dispossess them, and I will make you into a nation greater and mightier than they."* (vs. 12) God was offering Moses the same covenant He'd made with Abraham! This was Moses' big chance!

But what did Moses do? He prayed for those complaining, rebellious people! He said, *"Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Thy lovingkindness, just as Thou also hast forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now."* (vs. 19) Moses did just what Jesus commands us to do when He said, *"But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven we..."* (Matt. 5:44-45)

Remember Saul? Who do you think was praying for him on the road to Damascus? Saul was the most vicious Christian-killer in the land and the Christians were probably on their knees crying out on his behalf. God made Saul into a new man with a new name. And on the cross, when Jesus had been scourged, spat upon, and deserted by His closest friends, He prayed, *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."* (Luke 23:34)

There's a big difference between people who say they're followers of Jesus and people who follow Jesus. Moses asked God to forgive the people of Israel, and reminded Him of His compassion. In other words, "This won't be too good for Your glory or fame throughout the world if you kill these people." Here's a man unselfishly reasoning with God. Does God need to be reminded about His nature? No. But God needs to be reminded we believe His nature. God didn't strike the people dead, but Joshua and Caleb were the only ones of that generation He let into the Promised Land.

When you step out into the Wilderness of Faith, it's a one way ticket. You either die in the wilderness, or you enter the Promised Land. You can't go back to the world.

Many people think they can, but they're never the same. They are jaded, cynical, sarcastic. Some turn reprobate. I'm not talking about backsliding, I'm talking about completely turning away from the Lord and denying Him. They spiritually die out in the wilderness.

Let me ask you this: Are you willing to forgive those who hurt you? Or do you complain, gossip, and backbite? Do you ask God to "get them" or do you pray for mercy? Moses' prayer saved the people of Israel from instant destruction. Our prayers can change the hearts of our enemies. They can even change their eternal destiny.

We can obey God, or act according to our flesh. The greatest plan for victory over our enemies is prayer. Prayer shows our belief in the mercy and power of God. If we reject God's Word, we reject Him. When we complain about the one who has wronged us instead of praying for him, we end up being the loser. Grumbling and complaining is evidence of our *unbelief* in God's sovereignty and His ability to work things out for His glory and our good.

In Closing

Let's take a "relationship inventory." Are you holding on to hurts? Bitterness? Are you in competition, or a battle with someone? Are you walking in unbelief? Maybe your flesh has opened the door to an ungrateful spirit. Ask God's forgiveness for your grumbling and complaining right now. He can soften your heart and give you a spirit like His, willing to do battle in prayer - even for your enemies.

Thank you Lord for giving us Your own Spirit which doesn't only come upon us, but lives inside of us by Your Word. Lord Jesus, help us to believe in You and in others. Help us give a good report of all men and of all ministries. And Lord we ask forgiveness for grumbling and murmuring and complaining because we know You hate it. It's the greatest proof of our unbelief. God we want to be believers, not just in word, but also in deed. Spank us quickly if we murmur and complain before it grows into the sin of Israel - and send Your blessing of believing faith upon us. We love You Lord Jesus.

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