

Grumbling Against God

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Preacher: Andrew Price

[0 : 00] Why don't I just pray. Our gracious Father, we thank you so much for the Lord Jesus. We thank you that because of him we can have forgiveness. We thank you that because of him we can stand clothed in his righteousness and be right before you.

Our Father, we do pray that as we open your word again now and continue our series through the book of Numbers, you would help us to understand it and to live our lives in light of it. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, for those who are visiting, we've been working our way through the book of Numbers where Israel are on a journey to their promised land. But I want to start with these books.

Has anyone heard of the Mr. Men books or ever read them when you were little? A couple of people, they've got little Miss books out, like Little Miss Chatterbox. We've got one of those at our house. I won't say who.

But the Mr. Men books, the one I was going to show you today, we'll take a listen. Mr. Grumble by Roger Hargreaves.

[1 : 09] Mr. Grumble's name suited him well. Bah! He would grumble every morning when his alarm clock rang. It's the start of yet another horrible day.

And on it goes. We're not going to keep reading. But I'm sure we can all relate, can't we? We've had those moments where we've gone, bah! When things don't go right. And perhaps sometimes it's just because we've made a mistake or done something silly.

Or sometimes perhaps it's because we are being a bit like Mr. Grumble. I asked my Bible study group last week, when do people grumble? And someone very quickly said, all the time.

Another said, when it rains and when it doesn't. Michelle, as we heard today, always complains about, not Michelle herself, but adults complain about the weather. But of course, there's much more serious causes for complaining, aren't there?

Like when we face hardships or suffering. And yet even then, as we heard in our second reading, we're to do everything without grumbling and arguing.

[2 : 14] So the question is, how are we to handle hardship without grumbling? That is, are we to simply suck it up and internalize the pain and push on?

Or is there a better way? Well, before we get to that, last week we saw how on their journey, they were to do a few things. And the first thing was to remember God's salvation for them in the past by celebrating the Passover, you might remember.

And this was to reassure them that if God saved them out of hardship in Egypt in the past, then he can do so again in the future. And so Israel set out at the end of chapter 10 and they set up from the mountain of the Lord, Mount Sinai.

They traveled for three days before they set up camp and came to rest. And there where they set up camp, it seems they've already disregarded God's past salvation and started to complain because of hardship.

So point one, verse one. Now the people complained about their hardship in the hearing of the Lord. And when he heard them, his anger was aroused. Then fire from the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp.

[3 : 26] Now we don't know what these hardships were, but traveling for three days makes any of us a bit tired and grumpy, doesn't it? Especially if you're traveling with a massive group, which they were.

Verse 21 tells us there were 600,000 men on foot, plus women, plus children, plus livestock. Can you imagine going on a tour to Israel with that kind of size group?

Just trying to line up for lunch, trying to find a, join the queue to get the bathroom, or even just knowing where you were going. And so it's understandable there were hardships and no doubt they were real.

But their response was to complain in God's hearing rather than crying out to God for help. And so it already seems they've forgotten or disregarded God's salvation.

How he saved them out of hardship in Egypt already. And so he could save them out of this hardship now too, if they asked. Not save them from it.

[4 : 31] I mean, we all face hardships in this world, don't we? But save them through it, if you like. Perhaps by giving them patience with each other, or peace about the future, or providing for their needs.

If only they asked. And I wonder if we can fall into that same sort of trap sometimes. Like last week, we saw from Romans chapter 8, that God who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all. If he was willing to do that, and did do that, then hell will he not also? He will certainly, along with Christ, graciously give us all things so that we can get to our promised land of heaven and the new creation.

Whether it's giving us patience, or peace, or provision to help us through our hardships. But if we disregard that, if we forget God's salvation in the past through Jesus, if we fail to remember what he was willing to give, and therefore what he'll certainly continue to give us, then we won't ask for help to get us through hardship, will we?

Or just try and do it alone, or complain like Israel. And so we're to remember and reflect on God's goodness that gave his son for us.

[5 : 45] And so he's very willing to keep helping us, that we might ask for that help through hardship, and not try and go it alone, or complain like Israel.

And so verse 1, God's fire of judgment burned amongst them. Though notice, it seems to be just a warning. For we're told it consumed, at the end, the outskirts of the camp, rather than consuming anyone in the camp.

And so perhaps there were just lightning strikes that caused small spot fires amongst them in the camp, but the only thing that was really burnt up was like the outskirts of the camp.

And in fact, not even all of them, but it says some of the outskirts of the camp. And so here we see God's mercy in judgment, don't we? In fact, it seems to be a merciful warning to them not to complain.

Of course, if lightning strikes throughout the camp and fire is burning at the edge, it would still be rather alarming. And so in verse 2, they cried out to Moses.

[6 : 52] And Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire died down. Here, Moses, intercedes or prays on behalf of the people. And so doing turns God's anger away from the people.

Which order kind of rings some bells for us, oughtn't it? You know, remind us of someone else who intercedes for us. As I've said before, starts with G's, ends with us.

Yeah, thank you. But that's why she's a warden. You know, she knows the answers. And so, as we saw from Romans 8 last week as well, Jesus, who died, more than that, was raised to life, is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

That is, every time we complain or grumble or do the wrong thing in any other way, he is saying to his father, my blood has paid for their sin so you can forgive them.

Good is it to trust in Jesus, knowing that we have ongoing forgiveness because he continues to intercede for us. But Israel was to remember this event as a warning, which is why the place is given a name.

[8 : 09] Teberah means burning, because the Lord had burned among them. But despite this warning, despite even naming this place that they might remember, it's not long before they grumble again.

And this time it's worse, because this time they end up despising God's salvation. Point to verse 4. The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, if only we had meat to eat.

Now notice there's a rabble with Israel, and it probably refers to those from the other nations who went up out of Egypt with them, as we're told in a number of places in the Old Testament.

But immediately a number of the Israelites joined them in craving and complaining too. In fact, it's not just straight out complaining.

The word there is wailing. They're wailing for this other food. It reminds me of a toddler throwing a tantrum, right? And it distorted their reality.

[9 : 11] Not only of their past life in Egypt, but also their present blessings from God. And so they go on to say in verse 5, we remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost, also the cucumbers and melons and leeks and onions and garlic, but now we have lost our appetite.

We never see anything but this manna. You know, they think their life back in Egypt was like a resort, don't they? And their food was rich and fresh and free, when in reality they were slaves. They were mistreated. And their food more than likely was old leftovers. But they've distorted their past, you see.

That's what this grumbling has done to them. And they also distort and even despise their present blessings from God, like this manna. They act as though it's terrible, when actually it's a good gift. And so the writer in verses 7 to 9 goes on to show it. In verse 7 he talks about how it looked like resin. That word resin there is used in Genesis to describe the good parts of the land around the Garden of Eden.

[10 : 22] And so the idea is that if it looks like resin, it looks good. It was attractive to eat. And then in verse 8 they could use it for different things. You know, they could cook it in a pot, you know, make some soup or make it into loaves of bread or cakes.

And it tasted good. It tasted something made with olive oil. Another Bible translation says it tasted like a pastry cooked with the finest oil. This is meant to be good stuff.

And in fact, it is. In Exodus chapter 16, we're also told that it tasted like wafers made with honey.

And so honey, olive oil, pastry, baklava maybe, something like that.

Either way, this was a good gift from God. And unlike the food in prison back in Egypt, verse 9, this came down with the dew every morning.

It was fresh every morning and it was literally free. But they distorted it and despised it. And what's more, they end up despising their very salvation and God himself.

[11 : 28] But God will say later, because you have rejected the Lord who is among you and have wailed before him saying, why did we ever leave Egypt?

You see, they wish they hadn't gone. They wish they weren't saved. They're despising their salvation and rejecting God himself. And again, I wonder if we can fall into this same trap.

Because that is where we grumble because of something we don't have and then end up distorting the blessings we do have as though they're not good enough.

And like the kids who come home from school and they open up the fridge or the pantry and there's the blessing of a full pantry full of food, but the one thing they crave, which is usually chips, not meat, is not there.

And so they distort the blessing of a full pantry they have and say, we never have anything good to eat. Or is that just my house? No, this is not ringing any bells. Okay.

[12 : 31] Or more seriously, when we don't have the thing we crave in life, like more money or a different job or better health, we can grumble and distort the blessings we do have.

Of course, part of the reason we can distort these blessings in Christ is because we're so used to hearing about them, aren't we? That we can take them for granted. Or in Israel's case, so used to eating them, eating the manna.

And so again, we're to remember and reflect, not just on God's goodness, which has saved us in the past and will give us what we need to get to our promised land, but on how good God's blessings in Christ really are.

Like eternal life. I mean, people spend oodles of money trying to look younger and live longer, don't they? And yet, God gives us life eternal for free.

Although it costs him greatly. And God willingly gave his son and Jesus willingly went to the cross to pay for our sin.

[13 : 36] To save us from judgment and give life eternal with him. And the more we reflect and remember on how good these blessings really are, the more likely we'll be grateful rather than grumble.

But Israel grumbled and distorted the blessings they had and even despised their salvation and rejected God, which would have been a real slap in the face for God, wouldn't it?

Given all that he's done for them. And so no wonder God is exceedingly angry in verse 10. Moses heard the people of every family wailing at the entrance to their tents. The Lord became

exceedingly angry and Moses was troubled.

Notice at the start of verse 10, by the way, how this wailing complaining has now spread to every family in Israel. That's what grumbling does.

It doesn't just affect us, it infects others, doesn't it? And drags them down too. And so the rabble and those Israelites who crave the meat back in verse 4 have now infected the whole nation here in verse 10.

[14:47] Which gives God even more reason to be exceedingly angry, doesn't it? And Moses is troubled, which sounds like he's not as bothered as God is, but it's literally, and in the eyes of Moses, it was evil.

Moses is also very upset by this. In fact, he's at his wit's end. And so he cries out to God in despair in verse 11 to 15 that we heard in the reading.

And the middle of that prayer is verse 13 where he asks where he can get meat for all these people who keep wailing to him to give them meat. In this way, he's kind of interceding for them again, but it's a very different tone, isn't it?

And scholars are divided over whether this is complaint or lament. And I think I'm going to actually disagree with some of the people on staff here.

And I actually think it's lament for three reasons. First, Israel complains to each other and to Moses, but Moses cries out to God, doesn't he?

[15:57] And by crying out to God, he's still expressing faith. He's still expressing a relationship with God rather than grumbling against God behind God's back.

Second, even though the language here in these verses sounds like complaint, it's also appropriate language for lament. And if we had more time, I would show you some of those things as well.

And thirdly, unlike Israel, God does not judge Moses, but answers his prayer. Verse 16 to 17. So we'll skip through the laments. Verse 16.

The Lord said to Moses, bring me 70 of the elders, Israel's elders, who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Make them come to the tent of meeting that they may stand there with you.

I will come down and speak with you there and I will take some of the power of the spirit that is on you and put it on them. They will share the burden of the people with you so that you will not have to carry it alone.

[16:56] Now some people think this is God's judgment, you know, taking some of the power of the spirit from Moses and giving it to others. But the spirit is not like that.

I left my visual aid. It's like a piece of pie that Moses has the whole pie and then when God gives some of the pie to the other elders, Moses is left with less.

Rather, the spirit is a bit like fire. Here we go. That you take it and then you can give some of it to another person and it's not diminished from the first candle, is it?

It's still the same. Anyone's birthday today? And so, I mean, just think Pentecost.

What's more, every Christian has the spirit. You know, it's not like we've got, you know, this bit of the pie kind of thing. And what's more, we'll see later and next week that God affirms Moses' leadership.

[18:04] But this is not judgment. You see, Moses' prayer about leadership actually stands in contrast. It kind of keeps chopping and changing between Israel and Moses. It stands in contrast to Israel's grumbling about food.

Moses laments to God, Israel grumbles against God. Either way, I think this is an important difference for us to learn because it's not as though God wants us to simply suck it up and internalize all our pain when we face hardship.

A far better way is to express it in lament. And so when we face hardship, we're to cry out to God, express our raw emotions to God as the psalmists do.

He's big enough to handle it. As the Bible says, we are to cast, hurl, throw all your anxiety on God. We're to bring our requests before God that we might find peace or patience or provision from God. Whereas to grumble against Him is to talk about Him, not to Him. And it can quickly infect others as well as distort and despise God's good gifts as though they're not good enough such that we may even walk away from Him.

[19:22] The first generation of Israel never recovers from this grumbling. They're the ones that end up wandering the desert for 40 years until they die off. And you may know people who've never

recovered from grumbling either and walked away from God.

I do. I know of people who've experienced incredible hardship like the loss of a sibling at a young age. And instead of lamenting to God, they grumbled against God.

Not talking to Him but about Him saying, how could God do this? Which quickly distorted the reality? He's no good God at all. He does nothing good.

And then that led to despising salvation. I no longer want to be a Christian. Whereas the parents of those same children lamented to God. They cried out to Him, sometimes literally, why has this happened?

How long must I be in pain? What are you doing, God? They wrestled with God and expressed their despair to God. And in time, they were able to resolve to trust God like the psalmists do and found peace from God.

[20 : 34] See the difference? We're to lament like Moses, not grumble like Israel. But because they did, because they despised God's blessings, indeed, their very salvation in God Himself, then they will face judgment.

Verse 18. God says to Moses, tell the people consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow when you will eat meat. The Lord heard you when you wailed. If only we had meat to eat. We were better off in Egypt.

Now the Lord will give you meat and you will eat it. You will not eat it for just one day or two days or five, ten or twenty days, but for a whole month until it comes out your nostrils and you will loathe it because you have rejected the Lord who is among you and have wailed before Him saying, why did we ever leave Egypt?

Now coming out your nostrils doesn't sound pleasant, does it? And yet just being so sick of it that it comes out your nostrils doesn't quite sound like a harsh judgment compared to God's exceeding anger.

I mean having too much chicken and chips for lunch such that you feel a bit sick from it and God's exceeding great anger doesn't quite seem to match. But as we'll soon see this loathing will not just be because they'll become sick of it but also because they'll become sick from it.

[21 : 57] But first Moses fails to do what the psalmist do and trust God. So verse 21 Moses kind of says well how am I supposed to get all this food for them? Verse 22 would they have enough if flocks and herds were slaughtered for them?

Probably not. Would they have enough if all God's arm represents God's power and it seems Moses has forgotten God's power like parting the Red Sea and everything else and so God rebukes him saying is his arm too short?

It kind of reminds me of a T-Rex you know this powerful being and God saying am I like a T-Rex with itty bitty tiny arms that can't reach the stars of course not my arm is not too short my power is not too petite and now Moses will see it and so verses 24 to 30 Moses tells the people the instructions firstly about the elders who are then anointed with the spirit to help him out we don't have time to go through that but we'll skip down to verse 31 and 32 where we find out about the people now wind went out from the Lord and drove quail in from the sea it scattered them up to two cubits deep all around the camp as far as a day's walk in any direction all that day and night and all the next day the people went out and gathered quail no one gathered two cubits is about 90 centimetres and someone in my

Bible study group who does a bit of running and walking Mr. Reid over there reckons a day's walk is 20 kilometres about 20 kilometres so can you imagine about a metre deep 20 kilometres in every direction that's a lot of quail right and if you don't think so then 10 homers towards the end of verse 32 10 homers is more than 1.5 tonnes and everyone gathered more than that I mean that's a ridiculous amount of meat isn't it no wonder they'll become sick of it but they also become sick from it verse 33 but while the meat was still between their teeth and before it could be all consumed anger of the Lord burned against them against the people and he struck them with a severe plague perhaps this is the first case of severe salmonella before they could get through it all at some point through their month of meat while it was still in their teeth seems

God allowed it to turn bad or something like that striking them! and some died verse 34 therefore the place was named Kibroth Hatavah because there they buried the people who had craved other food the name Kibroth Hatavah means graves of craving and so the people who died the people who were buried in a grave seem to be those who craved back in verse 4 you know the rabble and some of Israel those who distort and despise God's blessings and so God cut them off from his

salvation after all if you don't want God's salvation you know he won't give it to you but that means facing judgment and eternal death and so if you're here today or just inquiring and not yet a Christian then do believe in

[25 : 47] Jesus won't you because without Jesus you do not have God's salvation and you will have to face your own judgment for your own sin and for us who do believe in Jesus then when hardship comes firstly we're not to be a Mr.

or Mrs. Grumble for it can infect others distort God's good blessings to us and despise them as though they're not good enough it can even lead us to despise our very salvation and like some people even reject God himself but that doesn't mean we just have to suck it up and internalize the pain and soldier on or make light of our hardship I know rather we're secondly to lament to God to share our despair with God to cast our anxiety upon God and cry out to him for help during hardship that we might find patience or peace or provision that we might receive his grace which as Jesus says to the apostle Paul is sufficient for us and thirdly do also remember the goodness of God and how good our blessings in Christ really are keep reflecting on them that we might truly see them for how good they are so that even in hardship we might be grateful and not grumble

I was visiting someone last week who's just been told they have terminal cancer which was a bit of a shock to me and others and to say that this is a hardship is an understatement and while they'd naturally like to live longer and care for their loved ones this is what they said they said God has given me a good life and I know where I'm going I'm okay and so despite their understandable sorrow they did not grumble that's a great example to follow our gracious father we thank you for Jesus whose blood intercedes for us for the times we have grumbled please help us we pray that when we face hardship we might not grumble against you but instead lament to you and remember reflect on how good your blessings really are to us in Christ that even in hardship we might continue to be grateful we ask these things in Jesus name
Amen